

Maple Syrup & Icy Mints.

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Maple Syrup & Icy Mints.

by [MirandaRights2481](#)

Summary

After four years of silence and a thousand unanswered questions, Ilya finally gives voice to the one that has been tearing him apart. In a quiet room thick with tension, he asks in a raw, fragile whisper,

"Is she mine?"

Ilya didn't need the words. He could already smell the truth in the sudden spike of Shane's scent, the sharp, tangy fear of a cornered animal, layered with the deep, unwavering love of a parent. He could see it in the way Shane's shoulders slumped, the fight draining out of him, replaced by a profound, bone-deep weariness. Shane looked at Ilya, his eyes glistening with unshed tears, and took a shaky breath, the admission ripped from him by a force stronger than his own fear.

"Yes," he whispered, the word a surrender. "She's yours."

Notes

this is my first time drafting an MPREG fic. Be kind. :.)

This fic is completely written now as of 03/04. I'm going to release a chapter or two every couple of days after proofing.

Chapter 1: Everybody's comin' for you, wake up.

Chapter Summary

Shane Hollander lives by routine and control. Every morning is measured, every movement precise, every answer to the media carefully neutral. Labeled a Late Beta after years of inconclusive tests, he has built his NHL career on being scentless and unremarkable in a league ruled by Alphas. He survives by invisibility.

During a brutal game in Boston, that control shatters. When Ilya Rozanov slams him against the boards, something ignites inside Shane. Heat floods his body and a sweet, unmistakable scent pours from his skin for the first time. Rozanov smells it instantly. What the team doctor calls an acute endocrine event is something far bigger. Shane has presented, and the world he carefully constructed is about to unravel.

The alarm clock, set to 5:30 a.m. exactly as it had been for six years, sliced through the pre-dawn stillness of Shane's downtown Montreal apartment. No snooze button existed in his world. His eyes opened immediately, pupils adjusting to the dim glow filtering through the blinds. Thirty seconds passed—precisely thirty—before he sat up, the motion fluid from years of repetition. His fingers found the watch on his nightstand, thumb pressing to display his resting heart rate: 48 bpm, exactly where it should be. Weather: 3°C, light snow falling. Training schedule: 7 a.m. skate, 10 a.m. conditioning, team meeting at 2 p.m. The familiar data points anchored him in the present, keeping the quiet anxieties at bay.

He moved from bed to the yoga mat positioned three feet from the left wall, the exact spot it occupied every morning. As he flowed through sun salutations, muscle memory guided him while his mind catalogued every sensation. 5'10" frame solid, thighs powerful from years on skates, core tight, shoulders broadened by relentless training. In the wall-length mirror of his living space, he observed himself clinically, noting the freckles scattered across nose and neck like constellations, the hair falling into brown eyes. His gaze settled on the skin at the junction of neck and shoulder, where most players bore visible scent glands. There, nothing. Just smooth skin, pale in the morning light. The body of someone who should have presented years ago, yet remained stubbornly, frighteningly, undefined.

By twenty, Shane had undergone more tests than he could count. The medical files were conclusive: hormones stable within beta parameters, no alpha surges, no omega cycles. Provisional classification: Late Beta. He'd accepted it as the only path forward, the only narrative that allowed him to remain in hockey. But sometimes, in the sterile silence of early mornings, the truth whispered that something essential remained dormant, unseen. In the locker room, he navigated carefully through the thick miasma of alpha musk and beta neutrality. He noticed how opponents sometimes sniffed mid-faceoff, brows furrowed in

confusion. How teammates occasionally glanced at him with unreadable expressions. How the equipment manager once asked what cologne he wore, unable to comprehend that the absence of scent was exactly that—an absence, not a masked fragrance.

He stepped onto the ice at 7 a.m., blades cutting clean grooves into the surface as cold air filled his lungs, sharp and familiar.

For the next ninety minutes, Shane existed only as motion and instinct. The puck adhered to his stick as if magnetized, each pass finding its target with surgical precision. His teammates flowed around him like planets in a well-ordered system, drawn into his orbit by the simple certainty of his play. The coach's whistle blew, echoing sharply in the cold arena, signaling a line change. Shane glided toward the bench, chest heaving slightly, steam rising from his overheated skin. As he sat, the rookie center beside him—a nineteen-year-old Alpha who had presented with dramatic flair at sixteen—shifted uncomfortably, nostrils flaring. "It's weird," the kid muttered, adjusting his helmet. "I can't smell you at all, Hollander. Not even like, laundry detergent." Shane didn't respond, just reached for his water bottle, throat working as he swallowed. He'd heard variations of this comment since junior hockey. Each mention was a small stone added to the wall he'd built around himself.

The media scrum after practice was another carefully choreographed performance. Cameras flashed, reporters shouted questions about the upcoming road trip, about his point streak, about the team's playoff chances. He answered each query with the same measured neutrality he applied to everything: respectful but detached, professional to a fault. A reporter from a sports blog leaned in closer than necessary, an Alpha with a predatory gleam in his eye. "Shane, any truth to the rumors about your late designation? The fans are curious." The question hung in the air, violating the unspoken agreement that such matters were private. Shane's expression didn't change, but something cold and sharp settled behind his eyes. "My medical information isn't relevant to how I play the game," he responded, voice even. "Next question." The silence lasted only a beat before another reporter, more professional, jumped in with a query about power play strategies. Later, walking to his car, the invasive question echoed. They're curious. The public fascination with designations was a constant hum beneath the surface of professional sports.

That night, after consuming exactly 900 calories of grilled chicken and steamed vegetables, Shane found himself scrolling through medical forums on his laptop. The blue light illuminated his face as he typed search terms he would never admit to using: "late presenting omega," "suppressed designation in athletes," "asymptomatic alpha omega spectrum." Articles and forum posts loaded, filled with anecdotal evidence and conflicting medical opinions. He read about rare cases of individuals presenting well into their twenties, triggered by extreme stress or hormonal events.

November 21, 2011

The unease from the night before lingered through the next day's travel, a dissonant hum beneath the roar of the jet engines. The team was flying to Boston for a divisional matchup against the Raiders. In the close quarters of the plane, the air was thick with the mingled scents of the roster: rich Alpha musk from the top line, the clean, neutral aroma of the Beta

trainers, the faint chemical sting of energy drinks. Shane sat by the window, noise-canceling headphones on but not playing music. He was an island of sensory absence in the sea of pheromones. The flight attendant, a pleasant-smelling Beta, offered him a drink. "Just water, please," he said, his voice barely a whisper. As she leaned in, her brow furrowed almost imperceptibly. She was looking for a scent, the one she'd been trained to register to tailor her service. Finding none, she moved on, her smile a little less certain. To Shane, this invisibility was a familiar, hollow ache.

The pre-game ritual in the visitors' locker room at TD Garden was always faster, more perfunctory. This wasn't their ice, their territory. He went through the motions, taping his stick with the same methodical precision as always, but an odd tremor started in his hands halfway through. He frowned, gripping the roll of tape tighter. Fatigue? Dehydration? He ran through a mental checklist. Water intake was optimal. Sleep was good. Eight hours, exactly. He dismissed it as pre-game adrenaline, something he normally channeled, not resisted.'

He shook out his hands, finished taping, and forced the tremor down with sheer willpower, burying it beneath layers of practiced composure. The team surged to its feet, a wave of predatory energy rolling through the room as they headed for the tunnel. Shane followed, a single, orderly step in a current of aggression. The roar of the crowd hit him like a physical force, the familiar scent of ice, popcorn, and thousands of excited bodies filling the air. He breathed it in, the chaos of the arena a strange comfort compared to the unnerving quiet of his own biology. This was a world he understood. This was a world where his performance, not his scent, defined him.

The game was a brutal, back-and-forth affair. Two minutes into the third period, tied 2-2, Shane found himself tangled up with Ilya Rozanov behind the Boston net. Rozanov was a force of nature, all raw, unchecked Alpha power and a scent so potent it was almost a physical blow—sharp like winter ice and something darker, like old leather and whiskey. They'd clashed before, a history of heated battles and mutual, grudging respect. Rozanov shoved him hard against the boards, the glass rattling.

"How is my favorite Canadian Golden Boy?" Rozanov growled, his breath hot against Shane's ear. It was a standard taunt, one they'd both traded a hundred times. But this time, as Rozanov's body pressed flush against his back, a jolt went through Shane, electric and utterly foreign. A strange, warm heat bloomed low in his belly, a response so deep and instinctual it bypassed thought entirely. He pushed Rozanov away with more force than necessary, his own breath catching in his throat. What the hell was that?

He skated away, legs pumping, trying to outrun the strange sensation. He told himself it was just the intensity of the game, the proximity of an aggressive Alpha. His body was reacting to a threat, that was all. A purely physiological response. But the heat didn't fade. If anything, it seemed to settle, a low thrumming under his skin. His focus, normally a laser-sharp point, began to fray at the edges. He took a shift, missed a pass he should have caught in his sleep. The coach's glare from the bench was piercing. Shane skated back to the bench, grabbing a towel and pressing it to the back of his neck, trying to cool a flush he couldn't explain.

He felt a ghost of a touch on his wrist and flinched, dropping the towel. The team doctor, a stoic Beta named Markov, was looking at him with an expression that was carefully blank,

but his eyes held a clinical curiosity. "You feeling alright, Hollander? You look a little flushed." Markov's gaze drifted to the pulse point on Shane's wrist, a gesture so quick Shane might have imagined it. "Just... got my bell rung a bit," Shane lied, the words feeling clumsy in his mouth. "I'm fine." He could feel the scrutiny of his teammates, a subtle shift in the air as they noticed the doctor's attention. Alphas, he realized with a jolt of pure panic, were always sensitive to any perceived weakness in their hierarchy. For the first time, he felt exposed, not invisible.

The final minutes of the game were a blur of frantic energy. He played on autopilot, muscle memory taking over where his concentration had failed. The Raiders scored with forty seconds left. The game was over. The handshake line was a test of endurance. He avoided Rozanov's eyes, focusing instead on the gloved hands he was claspings. But as he reached the end of the line, Rozanov was there, waiting. The Russian captain's grip was bruisingly tight. When their eyes met, Rozanov's nostrils flared. His confident smirk faltered, replaced by a look of profound, bewildered shock. He leaned in, his movement almost imperceptible, and inhaled sharply, right beside Shane's neck. The scent of trees, impossibly sweet and potent, bloomed from Shane's skin, filling the small space between them. He watched as Rozanov's pupils dilated, as the aggressive Alpha posture of his body suddenly softened, giving way to something else entirely. Recognition. And terrifying, immediate possession. Shane pulled away and fled, the roar of the crowd chasing him into the sanctuary of the tunnel.

Back in the visitors' locker room, the illusion of control was a shattered mirror. Shane leaned against his stall, the metal of the bench digging into his palms. He could feel it now, not just as a foreign heat, but as a thrumming energy building just beneath his skin, a strange, sweet scent blooming from him with every shallow breath he took. It was the scent of spring, of impossible life in the dead of winter, and it was pouring from his pores. He pressed the heels of his hands hard against his eyes, trying to force the world back into its proper shape. This isn't real. The thought was a desperate mantra against the sensory evidence flooding his system. His body wasn't just reacting; it was broadcasting, sending out a signal he had no name for and no desire to transmit.

Dr. Markov was suddenly there, a solid presence in the chaos. He didn't touch Shane, but he boxed him into the stall, shielding him from the prying eyes of the team. "Shane," he said, his voice a low, urgent command. "Look at me. Breathe." Shane forced his eyes open, focusing on the doctor's face. Markov wasn't smelling him. He was just looking, a clinical assessment in his gaze. "What did you feel? On the ice. Exactly." The question was so specific it cut through the panic. "Heat," Shane rasped. "A jolt. And then... my skin felt too tight. And I could... I could smell Rozanov. More than usual." Markov nodded, his expression grim but not panicked. "And this scent now?" He gestured vaguely around Shane's head. "This is new. Started when?"

"Just now," Shane said, a wave of dizziness washing over him. He gripped the bench to steady himself. "It's getting stronger."

"That's enough," Markov said, his decision instant. He grabbed a spare tracksuit from a nearby hook and thrust it at Shane. "Get dressed. Leave the gear. Now." He turned, intercepting the team's captain, Hayden Pike, a seasoned Alpha who was approaching with a look of wary concern. Markov spoke to him in a low, firm tone, too quiet for Shane to hear,

but the captain's posture changed instantly. He gave a curt nod, turned, and began herding the other players toward the bus, shooting Shane one last, unreadable glance over his shoulder. Markov returned to him.

"Put this on," Markov ordered, shoving the blocking patch into Shane's hands. "And keep this on you." He pressed a small medical inhaler into Shane's palm. "Beta-blocker. For the adrenals. It will dampen the pheromone response. Not eliminate it, but it should bring it down to background levels. Barely." Shane fumbled with his clothes, his fingers clumsy and uncooperative. The simple act of pulling off his sweaty jersey felt monumental. Every brush of fabric against his skin was a new, overwhelming sensation. He managed to pull on the tracksuit, the material feeling both too soft and too abrasive. He didn't question the inhaler, just followed the doctor's instructions, taking a deep, shaky puff. The effect was immediate, a cool chemical wave that washed over the heat, pushing it down, muffling it. The sweetness in the air receded, becoming a faint, almost imperceptible note.

"You're having a delayed-onset hormonal cascade," Markov explained in a low rush as he efficiently packed Shane's bag. "Your body is producing secondary gender pheromones for the first time. It's unstable. The stress, the contact with a high-dominance Alpha like Rozanov... it was a catalyst. We're calling it an acute endocrine event. Dehydration. That's the official story. You had a bad reaction to something, and I'm taking you to a private clinic for observation. Got it?" Shane nodded, the words washing over him. Acute endocrine event. It sounded clinical. Manageable. It wasn't a diagnosis, not really. It was a placeholder, a lie to buy him time. He clung to it.

The walk to the private car Markov had arranged was a gauntlet of anxiety. With every step, he expected a Boston fan, a reporter, or another player to stop and sniff the air, to point and shout. But the inhaler and patch were working. The world smelled the same as it always had: exhaust fumes, cold night air, the faint greasy aroma of pretzels from a nearby vendor. He was just Shane Hollander, leaving the arena. Invisible again. He slid into the back of the sleek black sedan, Markov beside him, and the tinted windows sealed them in a bubble of artificial calm. The drive to the private airport was silent, the city lights blurring past. Shane felt the adrenaline crash, leaving him hollowed out and trembling with exhaustion.

The flight back to Montreal was a different kind of torture. Every slight change in cabin pressure, every stray scent from the flight attendants' coffee cart, sent a jolt of paranoid anxiety through him. He kept the inhaler in his pocket, a cool, reassuring weight. He sat apart from the team, claiming a lingering headache, and no one questioned him. They were lost in their post-game analysis, their relief at getting home. He was an island, again, but this time the isolation felt fragile, like a sheet of ice over a deep, dark ocean. He spent the two-hour flight staring at a spreadsheet on his laptop, meticulously tracking his stats from the previous season. Numbers were predictable. Numbers made sense.

Back in the sterile quiet of his condo, the routine was a lifeline. He unpacked, put everything in its exact place. He went through his mail, sorted it into bills and junk. He scheduled the next three days with the same precision he used to plan his shifts on the ice. The next morning, he woke at 5:30 a.m., as always. He did his yoga, his stretches, his breathing exercises. He checked his heart rate, the weather, and his training schedule. He was himself

again. Almost. In the middle of it all, his agent called with a welcome distraction: *a last-minute commercial shoot for the CCN network in California.*

Chapter 2: Let's Run With It.

Chapter Summary

In Los Angeles for a commercial shoot, Shane is blindsided when he learns his co-star is Ilya Rozanov. Wearing a scent blocker to avoid further scrutiny after their last encounter, Shane is surprised to find their rivalry softens into easy banter and genuine connection on set. But when he removes the blocker in the studio shower, Ilya catches the faint sweetness of his true scent, and the fragile sense of normalcy between them shatters.

Drawn by instinct and confusion, Shane later goes to Ilya's hotel room, where their tension erupts into an intense, impulsive encounter. In the early morning, panic replaces desire as Shane fears what the night means for his identity and career. He quietly leaves before dawn and flies back to Montreal, while Ilya wakes to an empty bed and realizes Shane has run, determined not to let him disappear so easily.

November 22, 2011

The Los Angeles studio buzzed with the controlled energy of a production in motion. Shane arrived fifteen minutes early, a deliberate habit, and moved through the set with the easy confidence of someone who belonged. He was here to shoot a promo spot for the upcoming CCN broadcast schedule, a routine obligation. A harried production assistant with a clipboard glanced up, her smile strained. "Great, you're here. We're just waiting on the other player. He should be here any minute." Shane nodded, already mentally mapping out the shots. He assumed it would be a local junior star, or maybe one of the veteran Betas from another Canadian team for cross-promotional appeal. He was adjusting the collar on his team-issued jersey when a familiar, deep voice cut through the studio noise.

"So this is where Canada's Golden Boy comes for fun in his off time." Shane froze. He turned, and there was Ilya Rozanov, leaning against a lighting rig, looking entirely too relaxed and far too handsome in a simple black t-shirt that did nothing to hide the breadth of his shoulders. Shane's stomach dropped. His heart rate monitor, had he been wearing one, would have spiked.

After the confusing incident in the handshake line, Shane had quietly started wearing a light, neutral scent blocker patch at the base of his neck. Rozanov's teasing comments during the commercial about him smelling like "Canadian trees" had gotten under his skin but he knew that Rozanov couldn't really smell anything. He was just being annoying. *Per usual.*

The blocker wasn't to hide anything, he'd told himself, just to neutralize the weird curiosity, to make the space between them feel less examined. Today, it was working. Without the biological static, the charged animosity that usually defined their interactions fizzled out, replaced by a surprising, easy camaraderie. They laughed at the director's ridiculous direction

during a stickhandling scene. They competed playfully, seeing who could hit a corner target with a puck during downtime. They even shared a water bottle during a break. Shane found himself relaxing, seeing Ilya without the filter of rivalry. He was sharp, observant, and possessed a dry wit that caught Shane off guard. For the first time, being around Ilya (not Rozanov) felt... normal.

Throughout the day, however, Shane noticed small fractures in the illusion. Ilya (*again, not Rozanov*) would occasionally pause mid-sentence, a faint frown creasing his brow as he looked at Shane, as if trying to place a half-remembered scent. He'd shake his head slightly and the moment would pass.

When the shoot wrapped, they found themselves lingering by the craft services table, the last two people on set. The conversation had drifted from hockey to childhood summer camps, and Shane was so engrossed he hadn't noticed the crew packing up around them. "I should go," Shane finally said, the words feeling wrong as he spoke them. He needed his routine, the solitude of his hotel room to reset. "Yeah," Ilya agreed, but made no move to leave. The silence that followed stretched, filled with an unspoken curiosity that neither of them could name. Shane broke it first, turning toward the private shower facilities attached to the studio. "I need to shower." He needed to get back to himself.

The steam was a welcome cloak, muffling the world and soothing the lingering tension in his shoulders. Shane stood under the hot spray, letting the water sluice away the day, the gel from his hair, the faint residue of makeup. He scrubbed at his neck, and his fingers caught on the small, square edge of the scent blocker patch. He peeled it off without a second thought, dropping the spent patch onto the tiled floor. He didn't wear it at home, only when he anticipated Rozanov's specific brand of intrusive curiosity. It was a preventative measure, like taping his ankles. With the patch gone, he was just Shane again, clean and unshielded.

The shower door clicked open. Shane didn't startle; he simply turned, expecting a crew member who'd made a mistake. But it was Ilya, standing there in a towel, his expression not aggressive, but openly, intensely curious. He took one step into the steam-filled room and then stopped dead, his whole body going still. The warm, moist air carried the faint, sweet scent from Shane's skin, unimpeded for the first time in the other man's presence. It was barely there, a whisper of maple syrup and damp earth, but it was undeniable. Ilya's nostrils flared, and the easy camaraderie from the set evaporated, replaced by something raw and instinctual.

"You know," Ilya said, his voice a low rumble that seemed to vibrate through the steam. "I always thought you were scentless." He took another step closer, the tiles slick under his bare feet. "I was wrong."

His eyes traced the lines of Shane's body, water sluicing down the muscular planes of his back. The steam might have obscured some details, but not the powerful arch that tapered to a truly spectacular ass, nor the deep dimples bracketing his spine. Something primal tightened in Ilya's gut, a sudden, fierce wanting that had nothing to do with rivalry and everything to do with the man in front of him.

The scent was confusing, maddeningly so. It wrapped around him like a ghost—something warm and sweet, familiar yet impossible to place. Pancakes? No, too light. Blueberries?

Closer, but not quite. It was breakfast, the scent of the best damn breakfast he'd ever woken up to, but what was it? The sweetness deepened as he moved closer, and his mind, already spiraling, finally snagged on it.

Maple. Of course. It was the scent of maple syrup, warm and rich and so distinctly Shane it made his teeth ache.

Shane felt a jolt, a spike of panic that was quickly followed by a different kind of heat, low and deep in his abdomen, under the weight of that intense, searching stare.

The accusation hung in the humid air, thick and inescapable. "You're wrong," Shane said, his own voice surprisingly steady despite the frantic thrum of his pulse. "It's just the steam. The soap." He turned off the water, the sudden cessation of noise making the silence feel vast. He didn't wait for a towel. He pushed past Ilya, a move born of pure, unadulterated panic, and strode out into the main locker room, water dripping from his naked body onto the concrete floor. He headed straight for his stall, fumbling for his clothes, needing armor, needing distance. He could hear Ilya's bare feet padding behind him, not chasing, just following, a silent, looming presence.

Ilya stopped a few feet away, leaning against the opposite bank of lockers, watching him dress with an unnerving stillness. He was no longer smirking. The playful arrogance from the set was gone, replaced by a deep, focused intensity that made the fine hairs on Shane's arms stand up. "So that's it? You're just going to run away?" Ilya's voice was low, a rumble that seemed to vibrate through the floor.

Shane yanked on his jeans, his movements jerky and clumsy. He finally managed to speak, the words bursting out of him in a rush, a desperate attempt to reclaim some semblance of control. "I shouldn't come to your hotel room. You might actually like me and I'd actually have to consider being your friend." It was meant to be a barb, a final, cutting dismissal.

Instead of being insulted, Ilya let out a soft, breathy laugh, a sound of genuine amusement that was somehow more unsettling than any taunt. "And that would be so terrible, wouldn't it, Golden Boy?" he mused, pushing off the lockers. He slowly approached Shane's stall, closing the distance between them until they were standing mere inches apart.

The scent of him filled Shane's senses—sharp like wintergreen, clean like freshly Zambonied ice. It was overwhelming, intoxicating. Ilya's gaze dropped to Shane's lips, then back to his eyes. "You're afraid," Ilya stated, his voice barely a whisper.

Ilya reached into his gym bag and pulled out a small hotel notepad, his movements deliberate. With a pen from his pocket, he scribbled something on the top sheet, tore it off, and held it out to Shane. "Room 1410," he said, his voice returning to its normal register. "In case you change your mind about how terrible friendship would be."

Fear was a cold, sharp needle in Shane's gut. He didn't answer. He just grabbed his hoodie and pulled it over his head, the fabric a flimsy shield against the weight of Ilya's gaze. He shouldered his bag and walked away, not running, but every step was a controlled act of escape. He didn't look back. He could feel Ilya's eyes on him all the way to the door, a palpable weight that clung to him even after he was out in the cool, sterile hallway of the

studio. The drive back to the hotel was a blur of city lights and internal chaos. His mind replayed the scene in the shower, the look on Ilya's face, the impossible scent, the heat in his own body. It was all wrong.

Back in the sanctuary of his hotel room, the silence was deafening. He paced the length of the carpet, a caged animal. He tried to watch TV, but the flickering images were meaningless. He tried to read, but the words swam on the page. He was agitated, restless, a low hum of energy vibrating just beneath his skin. He kept catching phantom scents on the air, the ghost of wintergreen and ice. He told himself to go to bed, to reset, to pretend this day never happened. But at 9:30 PM, he found himself standing by the door, his keycard in his hand, his heart hammering against his ribs.

He didn't know why he was doing this. It was a stupid, impulsive, reckless decision. It violated every rule he had ever made for himself. But he couldn't stay in that room another second. He needed to know. He needed to understand. He walked out into the hallway, the plush carpet muffling his footsteps. The hotel was quiet, the only sound the distant hum of the ice maker. He turned toward the elevators, his feet moving with a will of their own. As he stepped out onto the fourteenth floor, he smelled it. It was faint at first, a whisper on the recycled air, but it was there. Mint. Icy, sharp, clean. The scent was stronger than anything he had ever smelled before, a beacon in the sterile hallway. He followed it, his steps quickening, his breath catching in his throat. God. He needed it.

He stopped in front of room 1410. The scent was overwhelming here, pouring from under the door like a living thing.

Inside room 1410, Ilya was a knot of restless energy. He'd showered, changed, and was now pacing, the plush carpet doing nothing to absorb the agitation thrumming through him. He could smell it. Faintly, but it was there. That impossible sweetness, that maple and warmth that was purely Shane. Ilya knew, with a certainty that settled cold and heavy in his gut, that Shane wasn't wearing a scent blocker. The knowledge was terrifying. A primal, instinctual part of him, the Alpha he'd always been, wanted to hunt that scent down, to find its source, to claim it. But he fought it down, clenching his fists. He wouldn't overstep. He wouldn't be that predator. He had given Shane the room number; the rest was up to him. He had to give Shane the space and the choice.

Then, a soft knock. Three firm, decisive taps on the door. Ilya's heart hammered against his ribs. He took a deep breath, trying to steady himself, and pulled open the door. There was Shane, standing in the hallway, looking lost and determined all at once. He was wearing a blue Metro's hoodie and gray sweatpants, his hair slightly disheveled, and his eyes wide and dark. The sweet scent rolled off him in waves, so potent it made Ilya dizzy. For a second, Ilya felt a surge of pure, predatory instinct, a red haze at the edge of his vision. But it was nothing compared to the look on Shane's face. It was feral.

Before Ilya could even say his name, Shane was on him. He grabbed the front of Ilya's shirt, his grip surprisingly strong, and pushed him into the room. The door slammed shut behind them. Then Shane was attacking his lips, walking him backward, a desperate, unspoken urgency in every movement. Ilya went, letting himself be guided, his hands coming up to rest

on Shane's waist. "Shane..." he started, but Shane cut him off. "Shut up, Rozanov." His voice was rough, strained. He maneuvered Ilya until the back of his legs hit the bed, and then he gave a final, decisive shove. Ilya fell back onto the mattress, looking up at the man standing over him, a chaotic mix of fear and awe coursing through him. He saw a primal need in Shane's eyes, a raw vulnerability he'd never witnessed before.

"Shane," Ilya managed, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through the mattress. "What do you want?" He tried to sound calm, to be the steady anchor, but the scent of him, of need, was filling the room, making it hard to think. He'd had plenty of experience, with Betas, with Omegas, but this was different. This wasn't about a simple hookup; it was about a fundamental, biological pull he couldn't ignore. He saw the fear warring with the desire in Shane's eyes, and a fierce, protective instinct rose in him. He wouldn't hurt him. He would take care of him.

Shane didn't answer with words. He climbed onto the bed, straddling Ilya's hips, the worn fabric of his sweatpants a thin barrier between them. He leaned down, his breath ghosting over Ilya's lips. "I want you to shut up," he growled, and then he was kissing him again, a messy, desperate clash of teeth and tongues. Ilya responded instantly, his hands gripping Shane's hips, pulling him down, grinding against him. He could feel the hard line of Shane's cock against his own, a matching rhythm of need. They were a tangle of limbs and desperate sounds, their hands roaming, tearing at clothes. Ilya bit at Shane's lower lip, tasting blood and the overwhelming sweetness of him. He spat into Shane's mouth, a filthy, intimate gesture, and Shane moaned, a deep, guttural sound that went straight to Ilya's cock. He was burning up, his skin flushed, his body arching into Ilya's touch. Ilya had never felt anything like it, a desperation that bordered on pain. He didn't know if this was Shane's first time, but he knew, with a bone-deep certainty, that this was important. That he had to get it right.

He flipped them over, pinning Shane beneath him, the blue hoodie a splash of color against the white sheets. He worked the hoodie up, over Shane's head, tossing it aside. He paused, looking at the man beneath him, his chest heaving, his eyes dark with need. "You're so beautiful," Ilya whispered, the words feeling inadequate. He dipped his head, tracing a line of hickies down Shane's throat, biting at the sensitive skin of his collarbone. Shane bucked up against him, his hands fisted in the sheets, a litany of curses and pleas falling from his lips.

Ilya's control was a fraying rope, each of Shane's desperate sounds another thread snapping. The scent of maple syrup and slick heat was an intoxicating fog, eroding all reason. He shoved Shane's sweatpants down, followed by his own, and the moment their bare skin met, it was like completing a circuit. Shane was impossibly wet, more than any partner Ilya had ever been with, and he gasped against Shane's neck, burying his face there. "Jesus, Shane," he gritted out. "Tell me if this is... if you..." He couldn't finish the sentence, couldn't bring himself to question the miraculous, desperate reality of the body writhing beneath him. "Just do it," Shane demanded, his voice a ragged tear. "Now, Ilya, fuck, now."

He pushed inside, and the world dissolved into pure sensation. It was a tight, searing heat that gripped him, pulling him deeper into an impossible, welcoming warmth that made his vision blur at the edges. Shane cried out, not in pain but in pure, unadulterated relief, a guttural sound that was almost a sob as he arched his back, his body instinctively moving to take

more, to take all of him. The scent of maple intensified, thick and sweet, mingling with the coppery tang of blood where Ilya had bitten his lip.

Their movements became frantic, a primal rhythm of thrust and retreat that was both familiar and entirely new. Each withdrawal was met with a desperate pull of Shane's legs wrapped around his waist, each thrust answered with a sharp, demanding thrust of Shane's hips. Bites marked their shoulders and chests, sharp, claiming stings that only fueled the fire burning between them. Ilya's teeth grazed the tendon in Shane's neck, and Shane shuddered, his nails digging deep red crescents into Ilya's back. They spat into each other's mouths, the act so raw and possessive it made Ilya's head spin, a filthy confirmation of a need that went beyond simple lust.

Time lost all meaning; it could have been minutes or hours, the room shrinking to just the slick slide of skin on skin, the frantic beat of their hearts, the desperate sounds tearing from their throats. Ilya was lost in the slick heat of Shane's body, in the way he moved with an instinctual grace, in the sounds he made that were a perfect counterpoint to his own. He felt a pressure building at the base of his spine, a tightness he'd only ever experienced with an Omega in heat, a biological imperative that was both terrifying and intoxicating. He tried to pull back, a flicker of confusion cutting through the haze, a moment of lucidity where his mind registered the impossibility of it all. "Shane," he gasped, his voice raw. "I have to..."

But Shane's legs locked around his waist, holding him in place. "Don't you dare," he snarled, his eyes wild. "Don't you fucking dare stop." And then it happened. The base of Ilya's cock swelled, locking them together. A wave of pure, possessive triumph crashed over him as he felt the knot catch, holding fast, binding them. He spilled inside Shane with a guttural roar, a release so absolute it felt like it would tear him apart. And Shane... Shane shuddered, a scream tearing from his throat as his own orgasm ripped through him, his body clenching around Ilya's knot, milking him for everything he had.

Ilya collapsed, his full weight pressing Shane into the mattress, his knot locking them in an intimate, inescapable embrace. He was gasping for breath, his heart a frantic drum against his ribs. But when he finally managed to focus, he was met with a sight that stopped his breath all over again. Shane was smiling. Not just a small, satisfied curve of the lips, but a wide, brilliant, unguarded smile of pure, unadulterated bliss. His eyes were closed, his face flushed, and he looked... happy. A cold knot of dread formed in Ilya's stomach, a stark contrast to the warm satisfaction still humming through him. Protection. The word screamed in his head, a fill of panic that threatened to shatter the fragile peace of the moment.

He tried to push the panic down, to bury it under the overwhelming reality of the man in his arms. He shifted slightly, trying to ease his weight, to make them both more comfortable. "We'll get the pill in the morning," he said, his voice a rough whisper, the words a clumsy attempt to soothe both Shane and himself. He didn't know if Shane was on suppressants, if this was even a possibility, but he had to say something, had to offer some kind of solution.

Shane's arms tightened around him, pulling him closer. "Okay," he murmured, his smile never wavering. He nestled against Ilya's chest, his breathing evening out into a soft, steady rhythm. Ilya found himself stroking Shane's hair, the soft strands slipping through his fingers. He'd never felt this way before, this overwhelming urge to protect, to cherish.

He thought of Sasha, the coach's son in Russia, their clumsy, angry rutting fueled by teenage hormones and a shared, desperate loneliness. That had been a hate fuck, a transactional release of tension. This... this was different. This was something he hadn't known he was capable of feeling, a tenderness that was both terrifying and exhilarating. He was fucked. Completely and utterly fucked. And as he held Shane, feeling the steady beat of his heart against his own, he realized he wouldn't have it any other way.

A dull, persistent throb in his hips and the unfamiliar weight of an arm draped over his waist pulled Shane from a deep, dreamless sleep. The hotel room was dark, bathed in the pale glow of the city filtering through the heavy curtains. The red numbers on the clock read 2:30 AM. Panic, cold and sharp, lanced through him. This wasn't his room. He wasn't in his own bed. He was wearing his sweatpants but the t-shirt clinging to his chest was too big, smelling faintly of laundry detergent and something else, something clean and minty. Ilya. The events of the evening crashed back into him with the force of a physical blow: the shower, the scent, the desperate flight to this room, the mindless, primal need, the impossible, binding knot. He looked over. Ilya was asleep, his face relaxed in slumber, a soft snore escaping his lips. This can't be real, Shane's mind screamed. This can't be happening.

A creeping horror began to replace the initial shock. His research, all those secret, furtive hours spent reading about Omegas and their heats, had described days of debilitating need, of fevers and insatiable cravings. His... episode had lasted hours. A few hours of blisteringly hot, mind-blowing sex, and then... nothing. He was sore, yes, and exhausted, but the fever had broken. The desperate need was gone. He felt strangely normal. Which meant it wasn't a heat. Which meant it was just... him. Shane Hollander, the Beta, who had lost all control and fucked his greatest rival in a fit of... what? Lust? Instinct? It didn't matter. What mattered was getting out. Now.

With a surgeon's precision, he carefully lifted Ilya's arm from his waist, holding his breath until the other man just grumbled and rolled over. He slid out of bed, his movements silent and economical. He found his wallet, his phone, and his key, grabbing the discarded Metro's hoodie from the floor. He didn't dare put it on, clutching it in his hand as he slipped out of the room, not looking back. The elevator ride down was a descent into his own personal hell. In the sterile quiet of the hotel lobby, he pulled out his phone, his fingers flying across the screen. He found the airline app, opened his itinerary, and changed his 2:15 PM flight to a 6:00 AM flight back to Montreal.

The bed was cold beside him. Ilya's eyes fluttered open, the lingering scent of maple and sex a fading ghost on the pillows. He reached out, his hand meeting only empty, tangled sheets. A jolt of pure, unadulterated panic shot through him, sharp and immediate. "Shane?" he called out, his voice rough with sleep, but the silence that answered was deafening. He sat up, the room spinning for a moment as reality crashed in. Shane was gone. He'd left. A bitter, metallic taste flooded Ilya's mouth. He should have given him his number. He should have made him promise to stay. He knew he'd see him again—their teams were destined to meet, their rivalry a fixture in the league—but when? The thought of facing him on the ice, of not knowing where they stood, was a fresh hell.

Then a colder, more profound fear gripped him: the league's ironclad policy against Omegas playing. If Shane was... if this was real... it would be a disaster. His career would be over. And Ilya, the one who had triggered it, could only stand by and watch. His Alpha instincts screamed at him to protect, to shield, to find him.

He threw back the covers, pulling on the jeans and t-shirt he'd worn yesterday, not bothering with anything else. He was about to give up, to sink back into the despair of the empty room, when he caught it. A fleeting whisper of sweetness, barely there, but undeniable. Maple. Shane's scent. It was a trail, leading from the bed, to the door, out into the world. He grabbed his wallet and key, shoving his feet into his sneakers, and was out the door in seconds, moving with a predatory grace, every sense honed in on that fading trail. He couldn't be far behind him. Maybe thirty minutes.

The scent led him through the lobby, out into the cool pre-dawn air. It was stronger here, a clear path. He followed it, a man possessed, the scent of wintergreen and ice a dull counterpoint to the overwhelming sweetness he was chasing. He pushed through the crowds of early morning travelers, his eyes scanning, searching. And then he saw it. The trail ended at a chaotic line of yellow cabs. He looked up, and a large, illuminated sign above the stand glowed in the darkness: "Taxis to LAX". Shane hadn't just run. He had flown.

Chapter 3: This is who I am.

Chapter Summary

Shane returns to Montreal determined to reclaim control through routine and focus, but when he enters the locker room before a game, his teammates immediately react with disgust to the strong maple scent marking him as an Omega. Realizing he forgot his scent blocker, he is exposed and vulnerable. Captain Hayden Pike publicly confronts him, shoves him out of the locker room, and makes it clear he is no longer welcome. Within hours, management declares him medically unfit, forcing his abrupt retirement under the guise of a “career-ending hormonal condition” and silencing him with a severance agreement. Shane’s hockey career ends not because of injury, but because of what he is.

A week later, Ilya learns of Shane’s sudden retirement through a breaking news alert and is overwhelmed with rage and guilt, believing he triggered the change. After manipulating Pike into giving him Shane’s contact information, Ilya travels to Shane’s Montreal address only to find the house completely emptied, as if Shane has erased himself. Panicked and desperate, he sends a message into the silence, finally receiving a brief reply: “Who is this?” With everything unraveling, Ilya answers simply, asking Shane to call him.

November 23, 2011

The familiar roar of the arena, the comforting weight of his gear bag on his shoulder, the crisp, cold air of the rink—this was Shane's world, the one he understood, the one that made sense. The flight back to Montreal had been a frantic blur, a desperate attempt to outrun the events of the past twelve hours. He had thrown himself back into his routine with a vengeance, the meticulous order of his life a shield against the chaos threatening to consume him. He was happy that he took back the earlier flight. They had an evening game the day after the photoshoot with CCN against Toronto starting at 8:00 PM. Most importantly, he was Shane Hollander, star center for the Metros. He was a Beta. He was in control. He walked into the locker room, a confident smile on his face, ready for the familiar camaraderie, the easy banter with his teammates, the quiet authority of his captain, Hayden Pike. "Morning, fellas," he called out, but the words died in his throat.

The room went silent. Not the comfortable silence of pre-game focus, but a heavy, charged quiet that was immediately and deeply wrong. His teammates, the men he'd bled with, celebrated with, called his brothers, turned to look at him. And their faces... their faces were a gallery of confusion and revulsion. They recoiled, some subtly, taking a half-step back, others more overtly, wrinkling their noses in disgust. "Jesus, Hollander, what is that smell?" one of the younger wingers muttered, turning away. "Smells like a fucking pancake house in here," another grumbled, shoving his gear into his bag with unnecessary force. The sweet, cloying

scent of maple syrup, once a private, terrifying discovery, now hung in the air like a death sentence. It was the scent of an Omega, a scent of perceived weakness, an intrusion of the feminine into their sacred, masculine space. They couldn't concentrate, couldn't look at him without their instincts screaming wrong, wrong, wrong.

And then it hit him, a wave of ice-cold dread. The patch. In the frantic escape from Ilya's hotel room, in the panicked rush to catch an earlier flight, he had forgotten to put on a new scent blocker patch. He was exposed. He was vulnerable. He was fucked. He was done. He was screwed. His breath hitched, a small, pathetic sound that was lost in the sudden, hostile murmur of the room. He felt a prickle of tears behind his eyes, a helpless whimper building in his throat. He tried to say something, to explain, to deny, but his voice was gone.

The air in the locker room had gone from electric with pre-game energy to something sour and predatory. Before Shane could even form a denial, a large, familiar figure blocked the light from the doorway. It was Hayden Pike, the captain, a mountain of a man whose usual demeanor was a quiet, steady leadership. But now, his face was a mask of disgust and fury. "Get out," Hayden's voice was low, vibrating with an Alpha's aggression. "Get your... stench... out of this room." Shane stumbled back, his hands coming up in a weak, placating gesture.

"Hayden, wait, I don't—" His plea was cut short as Hayden's hand shot out, shoving him hard in the center of his chest. The force sent him staggering back into the hallway, his gear bag crashing to the floor.

"I said get out," Hayden snarled, following him into the corridor, his presence an overwhelming, suffocating force. "You think we don't know? You think we can't smell it? That weakness?"

He shoved Shane again, harder this time, his shoulder connecting with the concrete wall with a sickening thud. Pain flared, sharp and bright. Shane tried to push back, to defend himself, but his body felt leaden, unresponsive. The sheer, raw Alpha pheromones rolling off Hayden were paralyzing, a biological command to submit. "You're a fucking omega, Hollander," Hayden spat, getting right in his face. "You're a distraction. You're not one of us anymore." He raised a hand, not to strike, but to point, a final, damning gesture. "And you're not touching this ice ever again." He turned and walked back into the locker room, slamming the door shut, leaving Shane slumped against the wall, the sound of the lock clicking into place echoing the final, brutal death knell of his career.

After what felt like an eternity, the door opened again, and Coach Thierault stepped out. The coach's face was a storm cloud of fury and profound disappointment. He didn't say a word, just grabbed Shane by the upper arm, his grip like a vise, and hauled him down the hall toward his office, not giving Shane a chance to retrieve his fallen bag.

Coach's office was a small, cluttered space smelling of stale coffee and old leather. He shoved Shane into a chair and immediately began pacing, his phone already pressed to his ear. "No, you don't understand, it's a PR nightmare," he barked into the receiver, ignoring Shane completely. "A full-blown catastrophe... Yes, an Omega... On my team... I know the protocol, but this is Hollander we're talking about..." The next two hours were a blur of frantic phone calls, hushed, urgent conversations with the league, the GM, lawyers. Shane sat frozen, a

statue in the eye of the hurricane, the words "medical development," "competitive safety," and "hormonal condition" washing over him like toxic sludge. He was being discussed like a defective piece of equipment, a liability to be contained.

Finally, Coach hung up, slumping into his chair with a heavy sigh. He looked at Shane, and for a moment, a flicker of something akin to regret crossed his features. "They've made their decision, son. Effective immediately." He recited the words with the detached finality of a doctor delivering a terminal diagnosis. Shane was deemed medically unfit, a permanent injury. The official statement would praise his achievements, wish him well in his "recovery."

Privately, they were offering him a five-year severance package, full salary, insurance, all tied up with a neat little non-disclosure agreement. "It's the business, Shane," Coach said, his voice softer now, but no less cutting. "We have to move on."

Shane didn't respond. He didn't want the severance, the hush money, the sanitized sympathy. He wanted to play hockey. But as he sat there, a disassociated calm settled over him, the stillness of a man whose world had just been systematically dismantled. The most potent feeling wasn't anger or sadness; it was the smell. Omega. Strong. Undeniable. Inescapable. It was coming from him. He could smell the fear-sweat on his own skin, the cloying sweetness that had branded him a pariah. The Montreal Metros moved on within days. His stall was cleared out, his nameplate removed, his equipment bag packed and sent to an address he no longer felt was his own. Shane Hollander: twenty years old. Rookie of the Year. Career over. Not because of a torn ACL or a concussion, but because of what he was.

November 30, 2011

A week felt like a lifetime, a void of radio silence that gnawed at Ilya. His team had flown from Boston to Denver, the sterile hotel rooms and bland arenas blurring into a monotonous landscape of travel and practice. But every spare moment was consumed by thoughts of Shane. The lingering scent of maple in his memory was a constant, taunting reminder. He'd half-expected a text, a call, even an angry email. Nothing. He tried telling himself that Shane needed space, that he was processing, but a cold knot of unease tightened in his gut with each passing day of silence. He was scheduled to be in Montreal in a week to play the Metros, but that felt like an eternity. He needed to know now. He needed to know that Shane was okay.

He was sitting on the bench in the visitor's locker room in Denver, scrolling mindlessly through hockey news on his phone, when he saw it. A breaking news alert from a major sports outlet. The headline hit him like a brick, the words blurring, then sharpening into a horrifying reality:

"METROS STAR SHANE HOLLANDER RETIRES DUE TO 'CAREER-ENDING HORMONAL CONDITION'".

He clicked the link, his heart pounding in his ears, the article a sterile, clinical dissection of a life's ambition being systematically destroyed. "Medical unfitness," "competitive safety," "sudden and unexpected development." They were using all the right words to say all the wrong things. They were talking about Shane being weak. Ilya knew better. Hell, Shane was

the only person who ever forced him to be a better player. Now, he was being kicked out? For what? For being an Omega? This was bullshit.

Rage, hot and immediate, surged through him, followed by a wave of profound, soul-crushing guilt. He did this. He was the catalyst for this catastrophic hormonal condition. He sank onto the bench, the phone slipping from his numb fingers. He had to contact him. He had to tell him... what? That he was sorry? That he'd fix it? He didn't know. He just knew he had to do something. He fumbled for his phone, frantically searching for a contact, a number, anything, but he came up empty. He didn't have Shane's number. He had no way to get it. He was miles away, completely helpless, forced to watch the fallout of one night unfold in the headlines, a silent spectator to the ruin he had inadvertently caused. The thought of facing Shane's team in a week, of stepping onto that ice without him, was suddenly unbearable.

Ilya then came up with a plan. A plan to ask his former teammates for his number during warm-ups.

December 8, 2011

Pike's eyes narrowed, a cruel glint replacing the initial hostility. He leaned in closer, his voice a low, conspiratorial growl that was barely audible over the scrape of skates on the ice. "A text? That's kid stuff, Rozanov." He spat Shane's name like it was poison. "He fucked us. Fucked this whole season. Showing up smelling like... that. Distracting everyone. Making a mockery of this team." A few other Metros players, burly defensemen, had drifted closer, their expressions grim and predatory. They were Alphas who felt their territory had been violated.

Pike looked around at his teammates, then back at Ilya, a dangerous idea taking root. "You want to give him a retirement gift? We'll give you more than that. We want to give him a little... roughening up. A reminder of what happens when you lie to everyone. A message for being a fucking pansy Omega who couldn't keep his shit together." Ilya's blood ran cold. This had spiraled far beyond a simple request for a phone number. He saw the raw, violent intent in Pike's eyes, and for a terrifying second, he thought they might see through his ruse. But he had no choice but to play along. A slow, predatory grin spread across Ilya's face, a mask that concealed the horror coiling in his stomach. He gave a short, sharp nod. "I'm in."

"Good, we thought about going ourselves but I think it would be too obvious and we don't want the drama from the league. I'll meet you after the game in the tunnel with his information." Pike grunted, satisfied.

The game was a slaughter, a 6-0 blowout that felt more like an execution than a competition. The Metros played like a team possessed, but not with skill. They played with a vicious, impotent rage, their movements jerky and disconnected without Hollander to center their offense. Ilya could feel it from across the ice, the collective fury of a pack betrayed. As the final buzzer blared, signaling the end of the humiliation, Ilya peeled off towards the tunnel, his heart a frantic drum against his ribs. Pike was already there, waiting in the shadowed corridor, his face a granite mask of resentment. He didn't say a word, just shoved a crumpled slip of paper into Ilya's hand. The numbers and letters were smudged, but legible: an address and a phone number.

"You know what to do, I owe you one Rozanov." Pike growled, his voice thick with satisfaction and walked away.

The drive to the address was a silent, anxious affair. The rental car felt alien, the city lights blurring into meaningless streaks of color. Ilya's hands gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white, the crumpled piece of paper with Shane's address and phone number feeling like a lead weight in his pocket. He'd programmed the number into his phone immediately, deleting the evidence of Pike's handwriting. He couldn't lose it. It was a lifeline. The house was a modern, monolithic structure in a quiet, affluent neighborhood, all sharp angles and dark glass. It was imposing, a fortress, but as Ilya cut the engine, he could smell it. That scent. Maple. But it was different now, tainted with a sharp, acrid note of distress that made the hair on his arms stand on end.

He approached the front door slowly, not wanting to scare him, the crunch of gravel under his shoes unnaturally loud in the stillness of the night. The house was dark, not a single light on, and for a moment, he thought Shane might be asleep. The thought of him there, alone and vulnerable, sent a surge of protective fury through him. Maybe he would appreciate a strong Alpha to soothe him, to tell him it was okay. He raised a hand to knock, but before his knuckles could touch the wood, the door swung inward, silent and inviting on its own. A shiver of unease ran down Ilya's spine. He stepped inside, the silence of the house swallowing him whole.

"Shane? Hollander?" he called out, his voice a low murmur that was swallowed by the cavernous space. The silence that answered was heavy, oppressive, pressing in on him from all sides. The house was huge, a monument to architectural coldness, but it felt empty, abandoned in a way that went beyond mere vacancy. He moved through the downstairs, his footsteps echoing on the polished concrete floors with a sound that seemed too loud, too invasive. Everything was spotless, sterile to the point of being unsettling. Not a single book on a shelf, not a picture on a wall, not a stray cushion out of place. It was a house, not a home.

The air carried no scent of recent cooking, no hint of the lived-in messiness that defined a real residence. Even the faint maple note he'd detected outside seemed to be fading, as if the very memory of Shane was being erased by the sterile environment.

He made his way upstairs, his senses on high alert, straining to catch any sign of life. The stairs were cold beneath his feet, the banister unworn. The upstairs hallway stretched before him, a tunnel of darkness punctuated by doorways leading to empty rooms. The faint trail of maple was stronger here, a ghost of a scent leading him forward. The rooms were all the same: empty, pristine, devoid of any sign of life. Not a piece of furniture, not a rug, not a curtain on the windows. It was as if the house had been professionally cleaned out, every trace of its occupant methodically removed. Until he reached what must have been the master bedroom. There, in the center of the vast, empty room, illuminated by the sliver of moonlight filtering through the large, bare window, was a single, black t-shirt. It was crumpled, as if dropped in haste, the fabric dark against the pale floor. It was the one he'd put on Shane, the one that had carried his scent, his warmth. The only thing left behind.

The sight of the t-shirt, a lonely piece of evidence in a cavernous void, was the final crack in Ilya's composure. He fumbled in his pocket, his fingers clumsy and shaking as he pulled out his phone. The screen glowed, a cold, sterile light in the oppressive darkness. He brought up the contact he'd saved earlier, just a string of numbers labeled with a question mark. A wave of something hot and painful rose in his chest, choking him, making it hard to breathe. He typed with frantic desperation, his thumbs jabbing at the glass.

Where are you?

He hit send, the whoosh of the message disappearing into the digital ether feeling like a physical loss.

Hollander, I need you. I need to see you. I'm in Montreal.

He stared at the screen, waiting, praying for those three little dots to appear, for a sign. But nothing. The emptiness of the house was mirrored by the emptiness on his screen. He couldn't breathe. He felt like he was suffocating, the sterile air burning in his lungs. He spun around, a choked sob tearing from his throat, and ran. He fled the house, stumbled down the steps, and threw himself into the driver's seat of the rental car.

The door slammed shut, trapping him inside the small, dark space. He was overwhelmed, a storm of grief and rage and guilt that had no outlet. He slammed his hands against the steering wheel, the dull thuds punctuated by his ragged breaths. He did it again, harder, the plastic creaking under the force of his blows. "Fuck!" he screamed, the word swallowed by the car's interior. He rested his forehead against the cool leather, his body trembling with the force of his emotions. And then, a faint chime. The phone, lying on the passenger seat, lit up. It was a message from the unknown number.

Who is this?

Ilya snatched the phone, his heart pounding in his chest. His fingers flew across the screen, a desperate plea.

It's Ilya. Please call me.

Chapter 4: Leave me be.

Chapter Summary

Shane retreats to his family's quiet Ottawa cottage, trying to rebuild his life after the abrupt end of his hockey career. Supported by his mother, he considers new possibilities, even thinking about following in his late father's footsteps as a nurse. When Ilya texts him, however, anger and humiliation resurface, and Shane firmly tells him never to make contact again. Weeks pass in uneasy calm until Shane begins experiencing sudden, intense nausea triggered by everyday smells. Alongside the sickness, his scent subtly shifts, deepening with a new sweetness he cannot ignore.

As the physical symptoms worsen, a terrifying possibility takes hold. Despite insisting it is impossible, Shane buys multiple pregnancy tests in a haze of dread. Alone in the cottage bathroom, he waits in suffocating silence for the results. All three tests come back positive. Shocked and overwhelmed, Shane realizes he is pregnant. With his future once again shattered and uncertain, he calls the only person he trusts completely, his mother.

Chapter Notes

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

December 9, 2011

The Ottawa cottage was a world away from the sterile monolith in Montreal. Tucked away on a secluded, tree-lined shore, it was a small, weathered structure of log and stone, filled with the comfortable clutter of a life well-lived. The air smelled of pine needles and the damp earth of the forest floor. Shane sat on the worn wooden dock, his feet dangling over the edge, the cool water of the lake lapping gently at the pilings. He was trying to build a new life from the ashes of the old one. His mother had been his rock, helping him silently and efficiently erase his presence from Montreal, her support a quiet, unwavering constant.

He thought of his father, who had passed just before his own NHL draft in a car accident, a kind, hardworking nurse who had dedicated twenty-five years to the emergency room. Shane used to love hearing his father's stories, the chaos and the compassion, the way he could bring order to the most desperate of situations. Maybe he could do that too? Be a nurse, like his dad. It was a nice thought, a small spark of possibility in the overwhelming darkness. But then he looked at his phone, left forgotten on the weathered planks beside him. The screen was lit with a new message.

An unknown number glowed on the screen, obliterating the small spark of hope he'd just nurtured. Unadulterated rage shot through him. Who was it? A reporter who'd somehow gotten his new number?

Nope. It was Ilya Rozanov. The name surfaced in his mind unbidden, followed by a cascade of suspicion. What did he want? To gloat? To twist the knife, to embarrass him with the knowledge that he was the Alpha who had triggered this catastrophic change? Was he here to collect on some perverse Alpha's claim? No. He wouldn't let him. He wouldn't be anyone's victim, not again. He had been through enough. His fingers flew across the screen, a torrent of all the pain and fury he'd been suppressing for a week.

Don't ever contact me again. Leave me alone. I've been through enough.

He hit send, the finality of the words a small, satisfying stab of defiance. He threw the phone down onto the dock after turning it off, not caring if it bounced into the dark water. He was done. He was so done.

A month had passed, a blur of quiet days and sleepless nights at the Ottawa cottage. The initial, searing rage had cooled to a dull, persistent ache of loss. Shane was trying, genuinely trying, to find a new path. He and his mother, Yuna, were at a small, quaint restaurant they both loved, tucked away on a side street downtown. The sun streamed through the large front window, glinting off the silverware. For a brief moment, Shane felt a flicker of something resembling normalcy. "See? This is nice," Yuna said, her warm hand covering his on the table. "Just us." Shane managed a small, genuine smile.

Then the server placed the Eggs Benedict in front of him. The rich, buttery scent of the hollandaise sauce, the delicate aroma of the poached eggs, the savory Canadian bacon—it all hit him at once. His stomach twisted into a violent, painful knot. A wave of nausea so intense it stole his breath washed over him. The color drained from his face, the bustling restaurant sounds fading into a distant hum. He broke into a cold sweat, his body trembling uncontrollably. "Shane? Honey, what's wrong?" Yuna's voice was sharp with alarm, her eyes wide with concern as she saw him go pale. He couldn't answer. He stumbled back from the table, knocking over his water glass, the shatter of it on the floor a distant, irrelevant noise. He bolted for the restroom, clapping a hand over his mouth, the world tilting on its axis.

He barely made it to a stall before he was violently, painfully sick, his body wracked with heaving spasms. He collapsed to his knees on the cold, tiled floor, forehead pressed against the porcelain, shaking like a leaf. It wasn't just food poisoning; it felt like his body was attacking itself, rejecting everything, a war being waged inside him. After a few minutes, the retching subsided, leaving him weak and disoriented, the metallic taste of bile in his throat. He leaned against the stall door, trying to catch his breath, when he smelled it. Faint, but unmistakable, cutting through the stench of sickness and disinfectant. Maple. And underneath it, something else... a new, subtle sweetness, like warm honey and summer rain. He was deathly sick, and something inside him was changing again.

That week became a cascade of small, terrifying betrayals by his own body. The smell of brewing coffee in the morning sent him racing for the bathroom. The rich aroma of the stew his mother simmered on the stove had him gagging, his stomach clenching in violent protest. Even the clean, simple scent of fresh laundry on the line was enough to make him break into a cold sweat. These weren't just instances of nausea; they were full-body rebellions, a visceral rejection of the world around him. The pattern was undeniable, a horrifying correlation that

he tried to dismiss, to rationalize away as stress or some lingering illness from the restaurant. But a dark, terrifying thought began to take root, a possibility so monstrous he could barely bring himself to think it.

He was in the kitchen, staring blankly at a carton of milk in the fridge, when the thought solidified into an undeniable imperative. *Maybe... you should get a pregnancy test.*

Just to see. The idea was absurd, impossible, a denial of biology. He was a man. He was an Omega, yes, but this... this was the stuff of fever dreams and internet horror stories. But the wrenching sickness, the strange new sweetness layered beneath the maple, the week of bodily mutiny—it all screamed a truth he was terrified to acknowledge. He had to know. He couldn't live in this limbo of suspicion and dread.

Shane didn't even bother to grab his jacket. He just walked out of the cottage, his movements stiff and robotic, and got into his car. The drive to the local mart was a blur, his hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles were white. He walked through the automatic doors, his gaze fixed, ignoring everything but the aisle with the pharmaceuticals. He grabbed three different boxes, not wanting to take any chances, his hands trembling as he placed them on the counter. The cashier gave him a curious, knowing look, but he didn't care. He just paid, the plastic crinkling in his grasp as he shoved the bag into his pocket and all but ran back to the car, back to the quiet solitude of the cottage, back to a truth he was no longer sure he could outrun.

He locked the door behind him, the small boxes clutched in his hand like a damning evidence. He went straight to the bathroom, his heart a frantic, wild thing in his chest. He tore open the first box, his fingers clumsy and uncooperative. He read the instructions, then read them again, the words swimming in front of his eyes.

He fled the confines of the bathroom, the ticking of the timer in his mind louder than any clock. The cottage suddenly felt suffocatingly small, the familiar walls closing in on him. He paced the length of the living room, his bare feet silent on the worn wood floor. He tried to focus on anything else: the way the afternoon sun slanted through the window, dust motes dancing in its beams; the distant cry of a loon on the lake; the comforting scent of pine that usually calmed him. But it was no use. His entire world had shrunk to the size of that bathroom, to those three tiny plastic sticks that held the power to either shatter his reality or confirm his deepest, most terrifying fear. His mind was a chaotic storm of what-ifs, a spiraling vortex of panic. He felt like he was going to be sick again, but he fought it down, forcing himself to walk, to breathe, to wait.

The three minutes finally ended, the chime on his phone sounding less like an alarm and more like a death knell. He stood frozen for a long moment, his heart a frantic drum against his ribs, before forcing his legs to move. He walked back to the bathroom, each step an agonizing effort. He pushed the door open and stepped inside, bracing himself against the doorframe for support. He forced himself to look at the counter.

Three stark, pink plus signs stared back at him.

Positive. Positive. Positive.

The air rushed out of his lungs in a choked gasp. He staggered back, a strangled cry escaping his lips. He wanted to scream, to smash the plastic sticks against the wall, to tear down the entire world around him. He wanted to run, to disappear, to wake up from this nightmare. But he couldn't move. He was rooted to the spot, a prisoner of the damning evidence on the counter. He was pregnant. The word echoed in the silent room, a brutal, undeniable truth. He was pregnant, and the father was a man he had told to never contact him again, a man who had ruined his life and now, it seemed, had irrevocably remade it.

His phone was still in his hand, a lifeline in a sea of despair. His fingers, still trembling, scrolled through his contacts until he found the one name he knew he could always count on, the one person who had never let him down. He pressed the call button, the phone ringing, each tone an eternity. His mother finally picked up on the fourth ring.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, David. :(

Chapter 5: Hello, Boston.

Chapter Summary

Four years after leaving hockey, Shane has rebuilt his life as a nurse in Boston, raising his daughter Elena in secret while keeping Ilya firmly in the past. When the Boston Raiders visit his oncology ward for a charity event, Shane is blindsided to find Ilya among them. Their unexpected reunion is charged with shock, hurt, and unresolved feelings, especially as Shane witnesses Ilya's quiet tenderness with a young patient. Unable to fully avoid each other, Shane reluctantly agrees to dinner, reopening a door he had kept locked for years.

Over dinner at Ilya's home, long-buried truths surface. Shane admits he left partly to protect Ilya's career from the fallout of being linked to a male Omega, while Ilya reveals he searched for Shane and never stopped thinking about him. Old wounds clash with lingering desire, and despite fear and secrecy, they agree to see each other again. After Shane leaves, Ilya discovers the wallet Shane accidentally dropped, along with a photo of a little girl with unmistakably familiar blue eyes, hinting at a life-changing revelation yet to come.

Chapter Notes

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

September 30, 2016

Nearly five years later, the sterile scent of antiseptic had replaced the smell of the rink. Shane had poured what was left from his severance into nursing school, a grueling, relentless program that had given him a new purpose. He'd given birth to a daughter, Elena, in a quiet Ottawa hospital, his mother by his side, the secret kept locked away behind a wall of fierce, protective love. Elena was the center of his universe, a tiny, vibrant force with his own long, dark hair, but her eyes... her eyes were the color of a winter sky, a piercing, unforgettable blue that was a constant, living reminder of Ilya. He thought of him often, a phantom ache in the quiet moments of the night.

Two years ago, he'd seen a *People* magazine at the checkout, Ilya's grinning face next to Rose Landry's, the two of them a vision of perfect, glossy happiness. A surge of hot jealousy and cold fear had shot through him, and in that moment, he had made a decision. He would block the name from memory, would sever the last, fragile thread connecting them. He would never let that NHL star, that playboy, into his life.

After graduation, the job offers came in, a steady stream of opportunities from hospitals across the country. He was determined to leave Canada, to build a new life for himself and Elena somewhere he wouldn't be a footnote in someone else's story. He sifted through the

offers, looking for a place big enough to get lost in, a city where he could be just another face in the crowd. One program kept reaching out, persistent and compelling: Dana-Farber Brigham Cancer Center in Boston, Massachusetts.

He knew Ilya was in Boston. He knew it was a risk. But the program was prestigious, the work meaningful, and the city was a sprawling, chaotic metropolis of millions. It had to be big enough for him to never cross his path. He accepted the offer, a leap of faith into the unknown, a gamble he prayed he could win.

He and Elena moved into a small apartment in a quiet neighborhood, a world away from the gleaming towers of downtown Boston. He threw himself into his new job, the long, demanding hours a welcome distraction from the quiet hum of anxiety that never quite left him. He was good at it, the same focus and determination that had made him a star on the ice now making him a compassionate, capable nurse. He was building a life, a new identity, one that had nothing to do with hockey.

About a month into his new life in Boston, the past he'd meticulously built walls against came knocking.

He was in the bustling oncology ward, the rhythmic beeps of machines a familiar soundtrack to his days, when his charge nurse, Dana, a woman with a kind smile and eyes that had seen too much, pulled him aside. "Hey, kiddo," she said, her voice warm. "We have the Boston Raiders coming in today for Make-A-Wish. They come in once a year to play games with the kids, and let me tell you, these kids love this one guy. He's so good with them, comes in weekly sometimes just to visit, brings them toys."

She didn't give a name, and a cold dread washed over Shane. He prayed it wasn't him. Maybe he could just... hang out in the cafeteria for his lunch hour, miss the whole visit completely. He tried to sound casual as he asked, "Around what time are they coming?" Dana's smile widened. "Right about now," she said, just as a deep, familiar, heavy Russian accent cut through the ward's noise. "Dana! How have you been?"

Shane froze, every muscle in his body locking up. He didn't need to turn around. He knew that voice. "I've been good, sweetie. How are you? The kids have been so excited to see you all today. Robby in room twelve has been training for a Mario Kart rematch from last year, as much as we'll let him," Dana replied, her fondness for the visitor evident. A deep laugh echoed, followed by another, more reserved one. Cliff Marleau. Shane felt a primal urge to flee, to melt into the linoleum floor, but he was rooted to the spot. He forced himself to turn, and there he was.

Ilya Rozanov, larger than life, holding a giant stuffed bear and a stack of video games. For a second, their eyes met across the chaotic ward. The gifts slipped from Ilya's hands, the thud of the plush bear hitting the floor unnaturally loud. He was looking at Shane like he'd seen a ghost. Then, the scent hit him, a phantom limb of a memory made real—maple syrup, sharp and sweet, laced with the subtle honeyed note of something new. "Shane?" Ilya breathed, the name a fragile, disbelieving whisper in the sudden, deafening silence.

The world narrowed to the space between them, the bustling ward, the beeping machines, the excited children, all fading into a distant, irrelevant hum. Cliff Marleau glanced between Ilya and the strange nurse he was staring at, a flicker of confusion in his eyes. "Roz? You good?" he asked, but Ilya didn't seem to hear him. His entire being was focused on Shane, his expression a chaotic storm of disbelief, shock, and something deeper, something that looked like raw, unvarnished pain. He took a half-step forward, his hand rising instinctively, then falling back to his side, as if he'd thought better of it.

Shane's heart hammered against his ribs, a wild, frantic bird trapped in a cage of bone. He felt a surge of pure, unadulterated panic, an overwhelming urge to turn and run, to get as far away from this man as humanly possible. But his feet were rooted to the floor, his body betraying him. He could feel Dana's curious gaze on him, could sense the other nurses and patients starting to notice the strange, tense tableau unfolding in the middle of the ward. He had to say something, to do something, to break the spell that held them both captive. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. He just stood there, a ghost from Ilya's past, a living, breathing reminder of a night he'd tried so hard to forget.

"Shane?" Ilya said again, his voice rougher this time, a desperate plea wrapped in a question. He took another step, closing the distance between them, his blue eyes, the same blue that stared back at him from his daughter's face every single day, searching Shane's, looking for an answer to a question he hadn't even had the chance to ask. The air between them was thick with unspoken words, with four years of silence, with a truth that was too big, too terrifying to be voiced in the middle of a hospital ward.

Shane finally found his voice, a thin, reedy thing that was barely a whisper. "You can't be here," he said, the words a desperate, futile prayer. He looked away, breaking the eye contact that felt like a physical touch, and saw the concerned face of a little girl in a wheelchair watching them, her brow furrowed in confusion. He was a nurse. He was here for these kids. He couldn't do this.

"I have to work," Shane choked out, the words feeling brittle and hollow. He forced his feet to move, turning away from Ilya's stricken face. He needed to create distance, to put a wall of professional duty between himself and this catastrophic collision of worlds. He focused on the chart in his hands, a meaningless jumble of numbers and notes, but it was an anchor in a sea of chaos. He could feel Ilya's gaze on him, a physical weight that made the hairs on his arms stand up. He could hear Dana's gentle, questioning tone as she spoke to Ilya, trying to smooth over the awkward tension, but the words were just noise. All he could hear was the frantic, desperate pounding of his own heart.

"Shane, wait," Ilya's voice was closer now, a low, insistent rumble that cut through the ward's ambient sounds. He had followed him, heedless of the curious stares, of Cliff Marleau's confused expression, of the dropped gifts still lying on the floor. "Please. Just talk to me. For one minute." His hand brushed Shane's arm, a fleeting, electrifying touch that sent a jolt through him, a dangerous spark of the old connection they once shared. Shane flinched away as if he'd been burned, his head snapping up to glare at him.

"We have nothing to talk about," Shane hissed, his voice low and venomous, a stark contrast to the calm, professional demeanor he usually projected. He looked around, acutely aware of

their audience, of the vulnerability of being exposed like this. He saw a flicker of hurt in Ilya's eyes, a quick, raw flash of emotion that was gone as quickly as it came, replaced by a mask of stubborn resolve. He wasn't going to let this go.

"You disappeared," Ilya said, his voice barely above a whisper, but the words landed with the force of a physical blow. "I went to your house. It was empty. You were just... gone. I looked for you. I tried to find you." There was a desperation in his tone that Shane hadn't expected, a raw, unfiltered pain that twisted something deep inside him, a knot of resentment and something else, something he refused to name. He had spent four years building a life on the foundation of Ilya's indifference, of the belief that he had been nothing more than a fleeting conquest. But the look in Ilya's eyes, the ragged edge in his voice, threatened to shatter that foundation, to expose the lie he had been telling himself for so long.

"Shane," Dana's voice cut through the charged silence, firm but not unkind. "Robby in room twelve. Could you go check and make sure the Nintendo is all set up for them?" It wasn't a request. It was a lifeline, a professional command that gave him a legitimate reason to escape. He shot her a grateful, desperate look before turning on his heel and walking away, his back ramrod straight. He didn't dare look back at Ilya, but he could feel the weight of the other man's stare on him all the way down the hall, a physical presence that promised this was far from over.

The rest of the day became a silent, exhausting battle of wills. Shane threw himself into his work, focusing on the children, on their needs, their laughter, their pain, anything to drown out the memory of Ilya's face. But Ilya was a persistent ghost. He seemed to be everywhere, a looming presence in the doorway of every room Shane entered. He'd find Shane gently changing a dressing on a young girl's arm, and there would be Ilya, sitting on the floor with another child, braiding colorful ribbons into her hair, his blue eyes occasionally flicking up to meet Shane's, a silent, unanswered question in their depths.

He'd be administering medication, the rhythmic beeping of the IV pump a familiar comfort, and Ilya would appear, offering to read a story aloud to the room, his deep, accented voice doing strange things to the carefully constructed walls around Shane's heart. He was a constant, maddening distraction, a pestering quest for answers Shane refused to give. Every shared glance was a reminder of the past, every silent confrontation a fresh wound. He was trying to force him out, to make him leave, but Ilya was immovable, a stubborn, unyielding force of nature, and Shane was beginning to realize he couldn't outlast him. Not here.

A collective cheer echoed down the corridor as the Raiders' visit concluded, the team moving in a loud, jovial pack of oversized athletes and staff. Shane watched from the nurses' station, a knot of tension in his stomach slowly loosening as he saw them file toward the elevators. Cliff Marleau, a few other recognizable faces, even the team's public relations liaison. But not Ilya. He scanned the departing crowd, a frown creasing his brow. He hadn't seen him leave. A fresh wave of anxiety washed over him, a premonition he tried to dismiss. He took a deep breath, the sterile air filling his lungs, and forced himself to focus. He had a job to do. He walked down the hall to Robby's room, a small smile on his face. Robby was an orphan, a sweet, resilient kid fighting a slow, relentless battle with brain cancer, and Shane had developed a soft spot for him.

As he pushed the door open, the familiar upbeat theme music of Mario Kart filled the room. He saw two figures hunched over the Switch, their backs to him. One was Ilya, broad and unmistakable. He was still here. The other was small, frail, wearing the familiar beanie Robby never took off. Shane's shoulders tensed, the fragile peace he'd been trying to reclaim shattering. He was about to clear his throat, to make some excuse and leave them to their game, when he noticed something was wrong. The cars on the screen were idling on the starting line, the countdown frozen at three. No one was playing. He moved quietly around the foot of the bed to get a better angle, to see their faces.

That's when he saw it. Robby wasn't playing. His head was lolled to the side, nestled against Ilya's shoulder, his breathing soft and even. He was fast asleep. And Ilya... Ilya wasn't playing either. His controller lay discarded on the blanket. One of his large hands was gently stroking what was left of Robby's hair, his touch impossibly tender, a stark contrast to the aggressive, forceful player Shane knew on the ice. With his other hand, he was scrolling through his phone, the screen's glow casting a soft blue light on his face. He looked... peaceful. Content. A guardian watching over a sleeping child. The sight was so unexpected, so profoundly at odds with the image Shane had built in his head, that it disarmed him completely, leaving him standing in the doorway, breathless and utterly confused.

Shane's training took over, pushing aside the emotional turmoil. He moved further into the room, his footsteps soft on the linoleum. "Okay, superstar, visiting hours are over," he murmured, reaching to gently disentangle Robby from the solid warmth of Ilya's side. He expected the boy to stir, to loosen his grip, but Robby's small fingers only tightened, clinging to the fabric of Ilya's sleeve like a lifeline. He was a dead weight, a peacefully sleeping anchor holding the two men together. Shane tried again, a little more firmly, but the child wouldn't budge.

Ilya shifted, looking up from his phone, and their eyes met in the dim light. The icy blue of Ilya's gaze was intense, almost luminous against the flickering screen. "He won't let go," Ilya stated, his voice low. Then he added, a quiet, desperate bargain, "I'll help you. But only if you go to dinner with me. Let me talk to you. You need to talk to me, please." The words hung in the air, a raw plea that stripped away all the anger, all the resentment, leaving only the stark truth of the last four years. Shane fought it, a silent war raging behind his eyes. Every instinct screamed at him to say no, to protect the fragile life he had built.

He looked from Ilya's desperate face to Robby's peaceful, sleeping form. He saw the way Ilya's large hand rested on the boy's head, a gesture of such unguarded tenderness it made something inside him ache. And then he looked back at Ilya, at the icy blue eyes that were now pleading, begging for a chance. He saw not the NHL playboy, not the Alpha who had upended his life, but just a kind man. And in that moment, Shane folded. "Okay," he breathed, the word a surrender.

The tension in Ilya's shoulders seemed to evaporate, a subtle release of breath that Shane felt more than heard. "What time are you done here tonight?" Ilya asked, his voice steady, but the relief was palpable. Shane glanced at the clock on the wall, the numbers a blur. "Eight," he said, the word feeling heavy, final. He had just agreed to dinner with Ilya Rozanov. He had just agreed to open the door to the past he had spent four years trying to lock away.

With a gentleness that seemed at odds with his powerful frame, Ilya helped Shane ease Robby back against his pillows, tucking the thin hospital blanket around the boy's small shoulders. Robby stirred only briefly, a soft sigh escaping his lips as he settled deeper into sleep, his grip finally loosening. They worked in a silence heavy with unspoken history, a quiet, efficient team born of a single, shared goal. Once the boy was settled, Ilya rose, giving Shane one last, searching look before quietly slipping out of the room and disappearing down the hall. The scent of mints in the air lingered in his wake, a ghost of his presence that made Shane's pulse stutter.

Shane finished his rounds, his mind a tangled mess, and finally sought the refuge of the break room, desperate for a moment of peace. He was pouring a cup of coffee when the door swung open and Dana walked in, closing it firmly behind her. She crossed her arms over her chest, her expression a mix of professional concern and unabashed curiosity. "Alright, kiddo. Spill," she said, her tone leaving no room for evasion. "What the hell was that out there? The look on your face... you two know each other."

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it, the coffee cup trembling in his hand. Dana took pity on him, leaning against the counter. "Look, I'm not trying to pry into your personal life, but that's Ilya Rozanov. He's been coming here for the five years he's been a Raider. Christmas, Thanksgiving, you name it, he's here with gifts. He disappears over the summers, which we've always figured is for training or whatever, but otherwise, he's a constant." She paused, her expression softening. "He's taken a real shine to Robby the past two years. He even got special permission to take him to a game last season, cleared it with the hospital and the state. That kid has been through enough; Ilya's the one bright spot he has." Dana looked at him, her gaze direct and knowing. "So you can see why I'm a little concerned about you looking like you've seen a ghost when he walked into the room."

Shane set the coffee mug down with a clatter, the ceramic rattling against the counter. He leaned his head against the cool cabinet above, the fight draining out of him. He couldn't lie to Dana, not after her unwavering support and the genuine concern in her eyes. "We knew each other from hockey," he started, his voice low and strained. "Before... all this. We played for rival teams." He let out a shaky breath, the confession feeling like a physical weight being lifted. "He's the one. The Alpha who... triggered my presentation."

Dana's sympathetic expression sharpened with understanding, a quiet "Oh" escaping her lips. She didn't interrupt, just waited, giving him the space to continue.

"I haven't seen him in over four years. Not since that night," Shane continued, finally looking at her, his own reflection distorted in her concerned gaze. "I left. I started over. And then he shows up here, today. And tonight... he asked me to dinner." He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of pure exhaustion. "And I said yes."

Dana was quiet for a long moment, processing the information. She reached out and placed a comforting hand on his arm. "Well," she said, her voice gentle but firm. "That's a hell of a story, kiddo. But you're not going through it alone. And you need to know... he's a good one."

Dana's professional demeanor evaporated, replaced by the wide-eyed excitement of a best friend on the verge of a major gossip session. "Okay, hold up," she said, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "You're going on a date with Ilya Rozanov tonight. What are you

going to wear? And who is watching Elena? You can't just show up to a date with a four-year-old in tow."

Shane's stomach dropped. He hadn't thought that far ahead. He had been operating on pure instinct, a tangled mess of panic and a dangerous, undeniable pull he hadn't been able to resist. "Oh God," he muttered, dragging a hand down his face. "Elena. I didn't even..." He pulled out his phone, his fingers flying across the screen as he texted Sveta, his Russian-speaking neighbor who was a godsend. He paid her for groceries, a small token of his immense gratitude for the way she'd welcomed Elena into her home with her own two kids.

Sveta's reply came back almost instantly, a string of emojis followed by a text that made him laugh out loud, the tension in his shoulders easing for the first time all day. *Oh hell yes! it read. But you are bringing home wine because we are going to talk about this. Now go enjoy yourself and have a good time!*

Shane looked up at Dana, a small, genuine smile on his face. "Sveta's got her. She says I have to bring home wine for the debriefing." Dana let out a triumphant whoop, grabbing his arm and shaking it playfully. "Okay! Crisis averted! Now, let's figure out this outfit. We have four hours are you going home first?"

Shane let out a short, humorless laugh, a surprising surge of defiance cutting through his anxiety. He looked down at his faded blue scrubs, the comfortable, worn fabric a second skin after a long shift. "You know what?" he said, the thought solidifying into a decision. "I'm not going home first." Dana's eyebrows shot up, a silent question on her face. "If he can't handle me in scrubs on a date after a twelve-hour shift," Shane continued, a newfound resolve hardening his tone, "then he can't handle the real me. And he doesn't deserve to."

Dana stared at him for a beat, then a slow, approving grin spread across her face. "Damn, kiddo," she said, her voice filled with admiration. "I like it."

As Shane walked out of the break room, the fluorescent lights of the hospital corridor seemed to brighten, the familiar sounds of the ward no longer feeling like an escape, but a part of who he was. He was Shane Hollander, a nurse, a father, a survivor from the abuse of the NHL. And he was about to walk into a date with Ilya Rozanov wearing the same clothes he'd worn to save a life. It felt right. It felt like taking back a little piece of the power he'd lost four years ago.

Well, maybe he'd at least change into his clean scrubs that were a little more traditional and not covered in unicorns and sweat from throughout the day.

At exactly eight o'clock, he pushed through the heavy glass doors of the hospital entrance, the cool night air a welcome shock to his system. He scanned the cars idling at the curb, his heart a frantic drum against his ribs. He spotted him immediately. A sleek, black SUV was parked a little ways down, the engine humming quietly. And standing beside it, leaning against the passenger door, was Ilya. He had changed out of his team gear and was wearing a simple, dark sweater and jeans, but he looked just as formidable, just as out of place in this world of scrubs and antiseptic as he had inside.

As Shane walked toward him, he was struck by an unexpected sight: Ilya Rozanov, the NHL star, the untouchable playboy, looked nervous. He was shifting his weight, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, and when their eyes met, a flicker of vulnerability passed over his features. A tiny, traitorous part of Shane felt a surge of satisfaction, a quiet thrill at having this effect on him. He stopped a few feet away, the hospital's automatic doors sliding shut behind him with a soft whoosh, cutting him off from his sanctuary. "So," Shane said, his voice cool and even. "Where are you taking me?"

Ilya seemed to gather himself, a slow smile spreading across his face, chasing away the last traces of his nervousness. He stepped forward and opened the passenger door of the SUV, a gesture that was both old-fashioned and surprisingly chivalrous. "It's a surprise," he said, his voice a low rumble that sent a shiver down Shane's spine. He hesitated for a moment, then nodded once, a silent agreement, and slid into the plush leather seat. As Ilya rounded the front of the car, Shane caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window, and he was smiling, a genuine, unguarded smile that reached all the way to his eyes.

The city lights blurred as they drove, the comfortable silence of the car a stark contrast to the chaotic energy that always seemed to surround them. Ilya broke it first, his tone hesitant, as if he were treading on sacred ground. "So," he started, "nursing. That's... a big change. I always wondered... what happened after you left." And so Shane found himself talking, the words coming more easily than he'd expected. He told him about the severance money, about the grueling hours of nursing school, about the quiet satisfaction of finding a new purpose. He painted a picture of the life he had built from the ashes of the one they had shared, carefully omitting the most important piece of the puzzle.

Ilya listened, his gaze fixed on the road, but Shane could feel the intensity of his attention. He didn't interrupt, just let him talk, absorbing every detail. When Shane finished, a heavy silence settled between them. "I'm glad you're happy, Shane," Ilya said, his voice soft, a genuine sentiment that caught Shane off guard. "But I'm not going to lie. It killed me that you were gone. That I didn't know where you were. If you were okay." He glanced over at him, the streetlights catching the raw emotion.

"I texted and called you. Every month. For a year. I got your number from Pike. I just... I needed to know you were okay. But I always got the same response back. 'Message not delivered'. When I was in Montreal, I would go to your old house just to see if you decided to come back."

He glanced at Shane, a flicker of old hurt in his eyes. "Then you changed your number." The accusation hung in the air between them, a ghost of a long-ago fight. "I had to," Shane shot back, a surge of defensiveness rising in him. "Reporters were hounding me after I left. My phone was blowing up. I was scared. I didn't know..." He paused, the unspoken words threatening to spill out.

About me being an Omega. About what that meant to you. He fought with the idea of telling Ilya about Elena, the secret a heavy weight on his tongue. He could see Ilya's profile, the strong line of his jaw. He was about to do it. He was about to shatter the careful peace he had built.

But just as he opened his mouth, the car turned off the main road, gliding smoothly onto a private driveway with a massive, wrought-iron gate. It swung open as they approached, revealing a sprawling estate bathed in soft, warm light. Shane's jaw dropped. He was completely, utterly confused. "I thought we were going to a restaurant," he said, his voice barely a whisper.

Ilya parked the car in front of a grand, modern house, turning off the engine. The sudden silence was deafening. He turned to Shane, his expression unreadable. "I know," he said, his voice soft. "But I figured that after a long day, you'd want to be somewhere more private. Somewhere you could actually decompress. And we could... talk. Without anyone staring." He looked at Shane, a silent plea in his eyes, a desperate hope that he had made the right call.

The house was a testament to a life of unimaginable success, a sprawling expanse of glass, steel, and gleaming white marble that seemed to absorb the soft lighting. Ilya led him through a grand foyer, their footsteps echoing on the polished floor, into a vast, open-plan kitchen that looked out onto a perfectly manicured backyard, the shimmering water of a swimming pool catching the moonlight. It was beautiful, intimidatingly so. While Ilya moved with an easy confidence, pulling ingredients from a massive stainless-steel refrigerator, Shane perched on a stool at the kitchen island, feeling like an imposter in this world of clean lines and cold luxury.

He watched Ilya chop vegetables with a practiced, rhythmic motion, the muscles in his back flexing beneath the thin fabric of his sweater. He was so beautiful, it was almost painful. And every time their eyes met in the reflective surface of the appliances, Shane saw her. He saw Elena's piercing blue eyes, a perfect, undeniable echo of the man standing in front of him. A wave of panic washed over him. How do you even begin to have that conversation?

Hey, remember that one night? Well, surprise, you have a four-year-old daughter. I ran because I was scared, and I didn't want to ruin your career, and I named her after her Russian lienage because I thought maybe one day she'd want to know her roots. Fuck. He was so incredibly screwed.

"Your day," Ilya's voice cut through his frantic thoughts, startling him. "How was it? How was Robby when you left?" He continued cooking, not looking at him, but the questions were pointed, deliberate. "How long ago did you move to Boston? Are you... are you alone? Did you get married? Did you find an Alpha?" The questions came in a rush, a barrage of anxieties he'd clearly been holding in for years. Shane's heart hammered against his ribs, the walls he'd built around himself crumbling under the weight of Ilya's quiet vulnerability. He took a shaky breath, the answer slipping out before he could stop it, a raw, unvarnished truth issued by a nerve he didn't know he had. "I've never been with anyone else," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "Just you."

The silence stretched, thick and suffocating. Ilya slowly set the knife down, turning to face Shane, his expression a storm of disbelief, hope, and something deeper, something that looked dangerously like awe. But Shane's brief, raw vulnerability was already being replaced by a familiar, bitter armor. He'd spent years seeing it all online—the carousel of beautiful women, the proud posts from influencers tagging Ilya and Cliff after a night out in Boston, the public display of a life he had no part in. He had broken his own vow to himself a

thousand times, scrolling through those pictures, a masochistic ritual of jealousy and pain. He couldn't just let this moment be.

"Was I the only one, Ilya?" he asked, his voice sharp, the question a weapon. "Or were there others? Omegas?" He watched Ilya's face, searching for the lie he was sure was coming. "Because surely... surely I wasn't the only one. You can't tell me that you waited all of those years for me." The words were cruel, a deliberate twist of the knife. He was testing him, pushing him, trying to find the cracks in the facade, to prove to himself that this was all a game, that the man in front of him was the same carefree playboy he'd seen in those pictures. He needed to believe it, because the alternative—that Ilya had been waiting, that this meant something—was a truth he wasn't sure he was ready to face.

The smirk on Ilya's face faltered, the asshole armor crumbling at the sound. Shane, usually so defiant and strong, seemed to shrink under the weight of the confrontation. A small, choked sound escaped him, a whimper that was pure, unadulterated pain.

"I hope you waited," Shane whispered, the words barely audible, a fragile confession that shattered the tense silence between them. "But I don't know if that's true. I want it to be, but things are... they're really complicated now. This isn't just about us anymore."

He looked away, his gaze fixed on the marble countertop, unable to meet Ilya's eyes. "There are others that can get hurt. Your career..." He trailed off, the implication hanging heavy in the air. "If you're dating a male omega, you're fucked. The press, the league... they would crucify you. So excuse me for trying to protect you from the same pain I was trying to face in the NHL." His voice cracked on the last words, the carefully constructed walls crumbling completely, revealing the terrified, vulnerable man beneath. He was still being vague, still guarding the biggest secret of all, but he had given Ilya a piece of the truth, a glimpse into the fear that had driven him away for four long years.

Ilya stared at him, the smartass facade completely gone, replaced by a look of stunned, heart-wrenching understanding. He took a hesitant step forward, his hand reaching out, then stopping just short of touching Shane's arm, as if he were afraid of breaking him. "Shane," he breathed, the name a raw, desperate prayer. "You did that for me? You left... for me?" The realization hit him, the weight of Shane's sacrifice crashing down on him, and all he could do was stand there, speechless, overwhelmed by a love he had never known he had lost.

"Not just for you," Shane corrected, his voice barely above a whisper, but the words were firm, a declaration of a truth he had lived with for four years. "But yes. A big part of it was. I couldn't... I couldn't put you through that. Not after what I went through. You were the best player then, and you still are now. I couldn't watch you destroy yourself, your career, for... for me." He finally looked up, his eyes pleading with Ilya to understand, to see the twisted, painful logic that had dictated his life for so long. "I couldn't let you get hurt."

A muscle in Ilya's jaw twitched, a storm of conflicting emotions warring across his face. There was pain, a deep, visceral hurt at the implication that he was too fragile to handle his own life, and a flash of anger at the sheer, unadulterated stupidity of Shane's reasoning. "That's the most idiotic thing I have ever heard," he shot back, his voice rough with emotion. "You think I care more about hockey than I do about you? You think I'd let them win?" He took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down, to see it from Shane's perspective.

"But... I get it," he admitted, the words a reluctant concession. "I understand why you did it. The league, the media... they can be brutal. But you didn't give me a choice, Shane. You made that decision for me. For us." He reached out again, and this time, his fingers brushed against Shane's arm, a tentative, grounding touch. "And I can't let you do that again. I fucking marked you Shane and I spent many nights laying in bed just thinking about you."

He flinched at the contact, a full-body shudder that was part fear, part something else he didn't want to name. Shane's mind snagged on Ilya's last sentence, replaying it over and over. I fucking marked you Shane and I spent many nights laying in bed just thinking about you. He had spent so long convincing himself that their night together had been a fleeting, meaningless mistake for the Alpha, a consequence of a rut and proximity. He had built his entire life around the assumption that he was alone in his turmoil. But Ilya had been thinking of him. The thought was staggering, a dizzying revelation that threatened to unravel everything.

But fuck, there was Elena. The thought of her was an anchor, a terrifying, beautiful weight grounding him in reality. He needed to know. Before he could even consider letting Ilya back in, before he could risk her heart, he had to know if Ilya could handle this, if he could handle a child. Was he the kind of man who would embrace a pup, or would he see it as a burden? He needed to test him, to gauge his reaction to the possibility, without revealing the truth.

Ilya, seeming to sense the need for a shift in the atmosphere, turned back to the stove. The rhythmic sizzle of garlic in butter filled the silence. "Broccoli alfredo," he said, his tone casual, as if they hadn't just been tearing each other's hearts out. "Hope that's okay." He tossed the bright green florets into a pan, the domesticity of the gesture a stark, surreal contrast to the emotional minefield they were navigating. Shane watched him, his mind racing. He had to find a way to ask, to plant the seed without giving everything away. "It's... it's fine," he managed, his voice still shaky. "Ilya, do you... do you ever think about kids? Like, in the future?"

Ilya paused, a piece of broccoli midway to the pan. He turned, a smirk playing on his lips, the smartass mask slipping back into place with infuriating ease. "Why?" he asked, his tone light and teasing. "You planning on making one with me tonight?" The joke landed with a thud, clumsy and cheap, and all the fragile hope that had been building in Shane's chest evaporated. He just stared, utterly deflated.

This. This was the Ilya he remembered, the one who used jokes to deflect, who couldn't take anything seriously for more than a minute. This was not a man who could be a father. Elena was too smart, too fragile, and needed a stability that Ilya Rozanov, in this moment, seemed fundamentally incapable of providing.

With a sigh that felt heavier than a boulder, Shane pushed the stool back, the screech of its legs against the marble floor a protest in the quiet room. "Forget it," he muttered, pulling out his phone to call an Uber. He couldn't do this. He couldn't sit here and pretend this was a normal date, pretend this man wasn't a walking, talking catastrophe.

He made it two steps before a hand clamped down on his arm, spinning him around. Ilya's grip was like iron, his blue eyes blazing with a fury that made Shane's heart drop into his stomach. A low growl rumbled in his chest, a purely Alpha sound of possessiveness and

command. "Please stay," Ilya said, the words a raw, desperate plea that was at odds with the ferocity of his grip. "Eat the food." The look in his eyes was so intense, so full of a primal, wounded need, that Shane's fight just... drained away. He felt his legs move, carrying him back to the stool as if of their own accord.

Ilya released his arm, his shoulders slumping as the anger bled out of him, replaced by a deep, weary resignation. He ran a hand through his hair, looking suddenly older, more exhausted. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice quiet. "I'll stop. I'll stop being an asshole." He looked at Shane, his gaze earnest, pleading. "I want to hear about you. About your life. I want to know why you became a nurse."

An hour melted away as Shane spoke, Ilya listening with an intensity that was almost unnerving. He talked about the challenges of nursing school, the satisfaction of a hard-won diagnosis, the quiet moments of connection with patients who had no one else. He carefully curated his stories, omitting any mention of a small, blue-eyed girl, but it was exhausting. Finally, he glanced at the clock, the reality of the night crashing back in. "I have to go," he said, the words a relief and a regret all at once. "I promised my neighbor that I'd bring her a bottle of wine while I was still out."

Ilya's shoulders slumped, a clear disappointment etched on his face. "Okay," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "But I'll see you on Tuesday." Shane paused, his hand on the back of the door. "Tuesday?"

"Yeah," Ilya said, his brow furrowed slightly. "I'm going in to see Robby on Tuesday. Watch the replays from last week's games with him."

A knot formed in Shane's stomach. Robby loved hockey, a fact Shane was acutely aware of. But they never talked about it. He never let it get personal. He'd made a point of keeping that part of himself buried, afraid that even a flicker of recognition might unravel the anonymity he'd so carefully constructed at the hospital. The thought of Ilya and Robby, huddled over a screen, dissecting plays he used to live and breathe, sent a jolt of panic through him. It was too close. Too much.

"I don't work on Tuesdays," Shane said, the words coming out sharper than he intended. "I'm off Saturday through Tuesday. On Wednesday through Friday."

Ilya's face fell, the disappointment a tangible thing in the air. "Oh. Right. Okay."

Shane turned to leave, the awkwardness of the moment a physical weight between them. But before he could take a step, Ilya was there, a hand on his arm, spinning him around and pressing him against the door. The kiss was sudden, deep, and overwhelming, stealing the breath from his lungs. Shane froze, his mind a whirlwind of panic and desire. He was screwed. He wanted this, wanted him, so badly it hurt.

But the fear was a cold, sharp stone in his gut. What if he found out about Elena? What if he rejected her? For a moment, he pushed the fear aside, letting himself melt into the kiss, into the familiar warmth of the alpha he'd never been able to forget. Then, he heard something

thud softly at his feet. He ignored it, assuming it was a shoe, or maybe Ilya's keys, too lost in the sensation of the alpha's tongue tangling with his own to care.

Shane finally managed to push gently against Ilya's chest, breaking the kiss with a gasp. He needed air. He needed space. He fumbled for the doorknob, his mind reeling. "When can I see you again?" Ilya asked, his voice a low, husky rumble that sent shivers down Shane's spine. The words were out before Shane could stop them, a desperate, hopeful suggestion. "How about Monday? We could... hang out during the day. You don't have a game until Wednesday, and I'm sure you don't have practice." As soon as the words left his mouth, he froze, a cold dread washing over him. He had just quoted Ilya's practice schedule. From memory.

Ilya's eyes widened, a slow, knowing smirk spreading across his face. "You know my schedule?" he asked, the question a gentle, teasing accusation. Shane was caught. There was no denying it. Of course, he kept up with the Raiders. He was screwed. So utterly, completely screwed. Before he could stammer out a pathetic excuse, Ilya leaned in and kissed him again, a quick, possessive press of lips that was both a promise and a claim. "See you Monday then," he said, his voice soft but firm.

As they parted ways, Ilya held out his phone, the screen glowing in the dim light of the entryway. "Your number," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. "The new one." Shane took the phone, his fingers trembling slightly as he typed in the digits, a silent acknowledgment of the fragile, terrifying, and exhilarating new beginning they had just stumbled into. He handed the phone back, and with one last, lingering look, he walked out the door and into the cool night air.

Ilya watched the taillights of the Uber disappear down the long, winding driveway, the red glow a final, fleeting glimpse of the man who had just turned his entire world upside down. He closed the heavy front door, the click of the latch echoing in the cavernous silence of the house. That's when he saw it. A brown leather wallet lying on the marble floor, right where Shane had been standing. He bent down to pick it up, the scent hitting him instantly. Maple syrup and honey, the same sweet, warm aroma that had been clinging to Shane, a fragrance so soothing and relaxing it settled something deep and restless inside him, a feeling he hadn't experienced in years.

He flipped open the wallet, a morbid curiosity driving him. There was Shane's hospital ID, a photo of him looking tired but determined, and a Massachusetts driver's license confirming what he already knew. But tucked behind the license was a small, faded photograph of a little girl with a wild mess of dark curls and the most startlingly familiar blue eyes. *Who is this?* Ilya wondered. A niece? A cousin's kid he dotes on? He dismissed the thought as quickly as it came, a smirk playing on his lips. He had Shane's wallet. He had an excuse. He wouldn't have to wait until Monday to see him again.

"You'll see me Saturday, moya lyubov'," he murmured to the empty room, a thrill running through him. "You're definitely going to need this before Monday."

Robby & Dana?! What are you doing here??? Everyone is watching the Pitt while waiting for more HR content, right?

Chapter 6: Kent Street.

Chapter Summary

Ilya tracks down Shane's apartment using the wallet Shane dropped and arrives with roses, using scent blockers to avoid overwhelming him. With help from Shane's neighbor Sveta, he finds the door and is stunned when a little girl answers, calling Shane "Daddy" and staring up at him with Ilya's unmistakable blue eyes. Inside, Elena's cheerful invitation to pancakes forces them into the same room, and Shane finally admits the truth. Elena is his daughter, and she is also Ilya's.

Shane breaks down, terrified Ilya will take Elena away, and explains the fear and trauma that made him disappear. Ilya reels, then returns determined to protect them both and proposes that Shane and Elena move into his home so they can build a safe life together. Shane agrees, and Ilya bonds quickly with Elena before leaving for his game. After a dominant win, he skips the celebration to rush back, and the night ends with Shane accepting help, the two of them committing to a shared "nest," and falling asleep together as a family.

October 1, 2016

Ilya didn't have to be at the rink until six that evening, which gave him a whole day to orchestrate what was quickly becoming a borderline stalker-level mission. He knew exactly where Shane lived: *191 Kent Street, Apartment 4G*. Thank you, Massachusetts driver's license. He dressed with a care that bordered on obsessive, choosing a dark grey cashmere sweater and well-fitting jeans, then meticulously applied his scent blockers. He wanted the element of surprise, not a cloud of Alpha posturing announcing his arrival. By 8:45 AM he was in his black Tahoe, a huge, preemptive bouquet of deep red roses riding shotgun, their cellophane crinkling with every turn. Just about twenty minutes later, he pulled up in front of the aging but well-kept brick building.

The lobby was a confusing warren of hallways and mismatched number plates. He found the elevator and pushed '4', confident in his logic. The doors opened onto a corridor that smelled overwhelmingly of detergent and fabric softener. A quick scan confirmed his mistake; the entire floor was a communal laundry room. His shoulders slumped. Just as he was about to retreat in defeat, a woman with a riot of huge, fluffy red curls pulled from a dryer, a mountain of colorful toddler clothes balanced in her arms. She looked up, her warm brown eyes widening slightly at the sight of him and the enormous bouquet he was clutching like a shield. Maybe she could help him.

"Sorry to bother you," Ilya began, pitching his voice to be as non-threatening as possible. "I'm a little lost. I'm looking for apartment 4G?"

The woman's friendly expression immediately shifted to one of knowing amusement. She let out a small, delighted huff. "Oh, you are in the wrong place. This is the laundry floor. You want the '4' in the other building. There's a bridge that connects the two through that door." She pointed a thumb over her shoulder towards a door he hadn't noticed. "G is the one in the back at the end of the hall. You can't miss it. It's the one with the worn-out mat and the little drawing of a sun taped to the door." Her eyes twinkled.

"Wait a minute. Are you here for Shane?" Ilya's breath hitched as the woman's eyes widened in dawning recognition. "I'm Sveta!" The name clicked, Shane mentioning a neighbor he was getting wine for. "Wait, were you his date last night?" And then her jaw went slack.

"Wait, you're Ilya Rozanov. Holy shit." A flicker of something akin to patriotic pride crossed her features, a fellow Russian spotting a national hero on her doorstep. A torrent of questions was clearly building behind her lips, but she took in the determined set of his jaw and the flowers he was clutching, and her expression softened into one of pure, unadulterated mischief.

She dropped the pair of tiny jeans she was folding onto a nearby table. "I can take you," she said, a conspiratorial grin spreading across her face. "Forget these. They'll be here later." They walked down the connecting corridor together, the silence broken by Sveta's cheerful chatter about how much she loved the smell of roses.

Ilya could clearly detect her Alpha scent, warm and strong, but it was layered with at least three other distinct, smaller fragrances—cinnamon, lavender, and milk—the unmistakable scent of children. She led him to the end of the hall, stopping in front of a door with a worn-out mat and a crayon drawing of a sun taped to it. This was it. 4G.

Sveta turned to him, her eyes sparkling. "Have you met Elena yet?" Ilya stared, the name hitting him like a physical blow. *Who was Elena?* Was Shane paired with another Alpha? Had he lied about being alone? The thought sent a cold, possessive fury through him, but before he could process it, Sveta gave him a wink that was equal parts encouragement and sabotage.

"Good luck," she whispered, and then she knocked on the door herself—a sharp, deliberate rap—and bolted down the hall, disappearing into her own apartment as if she'd just lit a fuse.

From inside the apartment, a small, clear voice piped up, "I got it, Daddy!" The sound was impossibly familiar, echoing the exact cadence of Sveta's excited chatter. Ilya's world screeched to a halt. His heart, which had been beating a frantic rhythm against his ribs, stopped. Daddy. The word echoed in the silent hallway, a deafening accusation that shattered every assumption he'd made about the last four years.

The lock clicked with a sharp, metallic report, the sound unnaturally loud in the sudden silence of the hallway. The door swung inward, pulled by a small, determined hand, revealing a little girl. She had Shane's dark hair, but they were in unruly curls, a wild, beautiful tangle that bounced around her shoulders as she moved. But when she looked up, it wasn't Shane's warm, thoughtful eyes that met Ilya's. They were a startling, deep blue, the exact same shade as his own, wide with curiosity and framed by thick dark lashes. His vision blurred. It was like looking in a time-traveling mirror, seeing a reflection of the boy he once was, a perfect,

heartbreaking echo. The scent hit him at the same moment, a powerful wave of Shane's maple syrup, the comforting aroma that had haunted him all night. But layered with that familiar sweetness was something else, something fresh and new and undeniably his. Mint. It was faint, almost buried under the warm, parental scent of her father, but it was there, a cool, crisp note that was like breakfast on a crisp Christmas morning. He was in heaven, and he was utterly, completely screwed.

The little girl looked up at the giant Alpha blocking her doorway, completely unafraid. "Who are you?" she asked, her voice a small, clear bell. The sound triggered a flurry of movement from inside the apartment. Shane came running, a frantic energy in his steps, and he skidded to a halt behind her, his body instinctively curving around the small figure, a protective shield. His eyes locked with Ilya's, and the shock in them was so profound it was almost painful. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Ignoring the silent, desperate plea in Shane's eyes, Ilya slowly crouched down, bringing himself to the little girl's level. He held the bouquet of roses to the side, a peace offering. "Hello," he said, his voice a low, gentle rumble that he barely recognized as his own. "My name is Ilya." He then looked up, past the child's shoulder, his gaze meeting Shane's, the tears already welling in his own eyes, a wave of overwhelming, primal love crashing over him. He spoke the words in a choked whisper, a raw, desperate plea for confirmation that would change everything. "Eto moya doch'?"

The raw, emotional Russian words hung in the air between them, a question Shane couldn't pretend he didn't understand. "What?" he breathed out, the word a fragile thing. His mind was racing, a chaotic mess of panic and a terrifying, undeniable sense of rightness. He couldn't do this here, in the hallway where any neighbor could walk by. He stepped back, his hand still resting protectively on Elena's shoulder, and gestured with his head. "Come in," he said, his voice tight. He closed the door behind Ilya, the soft click sealing them in a space suddenly too small to contain the truth.

"What are you doing here?" Shane demanded, his whisper harsh and urgent, but he was interrupted by a tiny, insistent tug on his jeans. Elena, her gaze fixed on the bouquet Ilya was still holding, pointed a small finger. "Did you bring those for daddy?" she asked, her innocent question landing like a bomb. Ilya, completely mesmerized by the little girl, had seemed to have forgotten he was even holding the flowers.

A heavy sigh escaped Shane's lips, a sound of pure, bone-weary resignation. The cat was out of the bag, and there was no putting it back in. He looked from Ilya's stunned, tear-filled eyes to his daughter's curious face, and knew the moment of truth had arrived. "Ilya," he said, his voice shaking slightly, "this is Elena. My daughter."

Tears pricked the back of Ilya's eyes, hot and sharp, but he fought them back, a monumental effort of will. He knew he needed to ask the question that was burning a hole in his chest, the one that would shatter the last couple of years into a million pieces, but he couldn't do it in front of her. His gaze flickered from her face to Shane's, a silent, desperate communication passing between them. How did you find me? was the unspoken question in Shane's panicked expression. Ilya wordlessly reached into his own pocket and pulled out the brown leather

wallet, holding it out. The familiar maple syrup scent was a dull ache in his senses now, overwhelmed by the fresh, minty scent of the child.

"Oh my god," Shane breathed, the words barely escaping his constricted throat as he reached out with trembling fingers to grab the wallet from Ilya's outstretched hand. The worn leather felt familiar and alien all at once as he clutched it to his chest like a lifeline, his knuckles white with tension. "I... I didn't even know I dropped this last night. Thank you." The gratitude was genuine, but his voice was strained, colored with the shock of Ilya's sudden appearance and the terrifying realization that his carefully guarded secret had been discovered. The mundane act of returning a lost item seemed laughably trivial against the monumental implications of this moment. Shane's mind raced, replaying the previous night's events, trying to pinpoint when and how the wallet had slipped from his pocket, but his thoughts were scattered like leaves in a hurricane.

But before the suffocating tension could rebuild in the small space between them, Elena's small voice cut through it, bright and hopeful, slicing through the thick silence like a ray of sunlight. "Can Ilya stay for pancakes? We made enough for three!" Her innocent question hung in the air, completely oblivious to the seismic shifts occurring beneath the surface. She looked up at Ilya with those damn eyes—his eyes, he now realized with a gut-wrenching certainty—and he felt his resolve, his carefully constructed plans, his entire world, dissolve into a puddle at her feet. The mention of pancakes, so domestic and normal, felt both comforting and surreal in this moment of revelation.

Shane looked at Ilya, a silent plea in his own eyes, a mix of fear and something that looked terrifyingly like hope. "Okay," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "Only if he wants." Ilya was too stunned to speak, to even nod. Before he could form a coherent thought, a small, warm hand wrapped around his much larger one, and he was being tugged towards the kitchen, led by the little girl who held the power to completely destroy him. He let himself be pulled, his mind a blank slate, all his focus on the feeling of her tiny fingers in his.

Oh, Ilya was completely and utterly fucked. He had walked in here planning a grand, romantic gesture, a chance to reclaim what he'd lost, and instead, he'd been ambushed by a four-year-old with his eyes and an arsenal of Disney-themed memorabilia. Elena, a tiny whirlwind of energy and unfiltered joy, dragged him around the small living room, holding up her prized possessions with the gravity of a museum curator. "These are my pins from Disney World," she declared, before moving on to a collection of Barbies arranged in a complex social hierarchy on the coffee table. She pointed to a faded photo on the wall, a picture of a much younger Shane on a dock, holding a swaddled infant. "That's me and Daddy at the cottage in Ottawa! And that's Grandma!" Shane, watching from the kitchen, was visibly shocked by his daughter's courage, her complete lack of stranger danger in the face of a massive, intimidating Alpha.

They finally sat down at the small, cluttered table, plates of pancakes steaming in front of them. The silence was heavy, thick with all the things that couldn't be said. Shane was a bundle of raw nerves, and Ilya could smell the sharp, acidic tang of his anxiety from across the table. Without a word, Ilya reached under the table, his large hand finding Shane's knee and giving it a firm, reassuring squeeze. It's okay, the gesture said. Just enjoy this. We'll talk

soon. The contact sent a jolt through Shane, and some of the tension in his shoulders seemed to release, just a fraction.

But any attempt at quiet contemplation was immediately shattered by the motormouth sitting between them. Elena, it turned out, did not believe in awkward silences. She chattered non-stop, her small voice a constant, cheerful stream of consciousness about her favorite cartoons, the little boy at preschool who ate glue, and her very serious plans to become a princess-astronaut when she grew up. She was so excited, so full of life, that it was impossible for either of them to feel anything other than a strange, overwhelming sense of wonder. Ilya found himself smiling, a real, genuine smile that reached his eyes, as he watched her, a feeling of profound, terrifying love blooming in his chest.

The cheerful chatter suddenly ceased, the silence that fell was jarring. Ilya glanced over to see Elena's plate was half-finished, and the little girl was now still, rocking gently back and forth in her small chair, her hands tucked neatly beneath her thighs. The vibrant energy from moments before had vanished, replaced by a quiet, focused withdrawal. Shane was on his feet in an instant, moving to her side with a practiced, gentle ease. "Baby," he murmured, his voice soft and soothing, "why don't you go put on your headphones and play with your dolls?"

Elena nodded without a word, her movements fluid and deliberate. She slid from her chair and padded over to the couch, retrieving a pair of bulky, child-sized noise-canceling headphones. Once they were securely in place, she settled amongst her collection of Barbies, her world shrinking to the small, quiet space she had created for herself. Ilya watched, a knot of confusion and concern tightening in his chest. As Shane returned to the table, he could feel the Alpha's questioning gaze on him.

"She has sensory problems," Shane explained quietly, his eyes never leaving his daughter. "When she gets too excited, she gets overstimulated. She needs about an hour of quiet, concentrated time to reset. I... I think she got a little too excited having you here." The guilt hit Ilya.

He had overwhelmed her. He had been so caught up in his own emotional turmoil that he hadn't even noticed he was distressing the little girl who was, in all likelihood, his own daughter. His shoulders began to shake, and a single, hot tear escaped, tracing a path down his cheek.

Shane reached across the table, his hand landing on Ilya's shoulder, a firm touch.

"Hey, it's okay," he said, his voice gentle but firm. "You couldn't have known." The comfort was too much, a kindness he didn't deserve.

The question that had been burning a hole in his gut, the one that had brought him here in the first place, finally burst forth, raw and fragile, a desperate whisper in the quiet room.

"Is she mine?"

Ilya didn't need the words. He could already smell the truth in the sudden spike of Shane's scent, the sharp, tangy fear of a cornered animal, layered with the deep, unwavering love of a

parent. He could see it in the way Shane's shoulders slumped, the fight draining out of him, replaced by a profound, bone-deep weariness. Shane looked at Ilya, his eyes glistening with unshed tears, and took a shaky breath, the admission ripped from him by a force stronger than his own fear. "Yes," he whispered, the word a surrender. "She's yours."

The confession was followed by a rush of words, a desperate, torrential explanation of four years of terror. "I'm so scared," he choked out, his hands gripping the edge of the table so hard his knuckles were white. "I'm so scared you're going to take her away from me. That you'll think I'm an unfit father, that you have lawyers, that you can... that you can just take her." He looked from Ilya's shocked face to the small, quiet figure on the couch, and his expression crumpled. "I don't want to lose her, Ilya. She's everything. But I'm not trying to hide her anymore. I was wrong. I just... I need you to understand. I need you to see everything." He was laying himself bare, not just the truth of their daughter, but the raw, vulnerable terror of a parent who had spent years living in fear of losing the most precious thing in his life.

The scent of Ilya's anger was sharp and sudden, a cold, metallic tang that cut through the cloying sweetness of the pancakes and the warm, domestic haze of the morning. It was the smell of a predator, betrayed. "Explain," Ilya commanded, his voice dangerously low, the single word a whip-crack in the sudden silence. His gaze was fixed on Shane, the tears gone, replaced by a chilling, icy fury that made Shane's blood run cold.

He had to make him understand. He had to make him see that it wasn't about a lack of trust, but about a desperate, all-consuming fear. "Just like I said last night," Shane began, his voice trembling. "I had to protect myself. And I had to protect you. From the pain. From what the league did to me." He took a deep breath, the words tasting like ash in his mouth. "I never told you what happened with the Metros, did I? About Hayden Pike?" He saw the flicker of confusion in Ilya's eyes, and he knew, with a sickening certainty, that Ilya didn't know. He didn't know about the taunts, the vandalism, the way the entire team had turned on him, how they'd locked him out of the locker room, how they'd made it clear that a male Omega had no place in their world. He had to tell him. He had to make him understand the horror he had been trying to spare him from. So, he did.

Shane pushed forward, his words gaining a desperate momentum, as if he feared he would be stopped at any moment. "But it wasn't just them," he said, his gaze fixed on Ilya's face, searching for any sign of understanding. "I did research. About Russia. About how they handle... things like this." He swallowed hard, the memory of the late-night scrolling, of the horror stories he'd uncovered, making his stomach clench. "I read about Alpha-Omega M/M couples. They call you 'faulty'. They disappear, Ilya. The government... they kill you."

His voice broke on the last word, the fear he'd held for four years finally spilling out into the open. "I saw stories on forums, on Reddit, from people who had family members just... vanish. I read about Alphas being stripped of their legal status, of their families, of their very lives for being 'defective'. And I knew," he said, his voice barely a whisper now, raw with emotion. "I knew that if your career ever ended, if the NHL ever turned on you the way they turned on me, you'd have nothing. They would send you back. And they would kill you." He looked at Ilya, his eyes pleading. "Like hell was I going to let you die because of my own stupid, selfish mistake of going to your room that night."

A raw, guttural sob tore from Shane's throat, the sound of a dam finally breaking under an unbearable weight. It was a sound of pure, unadulterated terror, the culmination of years of hiding, of lying awake at night, of every "what if" scenario that had haunted him. He crumpled in on himself, his body shaking with the force of it. In an instant, Ilya was there, moving with a speed that defied his large frame. He didn't speak. He just grabbed Shane, pulling the Omega into a crushing embrace, a silent, unyielding anchor in the storm of his breakdown. He said nothing, just held him, letting the waves of grief and fear crash against him.

After a long moment, Ilya gently pulled back, his own face a mask of turmoil. His gaze darted to the couch, to the small, oblivious figure still lost in her own world. The conflicting instincts were tearing him apart—the primal, desperate need to protect, to claim, to shield his Omega and their pup from any and all harm, and the suffocating, crushing weight of the truth. He was hyperventilating, the air in the small apartment suddenly thin and unbreathable. He had to get out. He turned and fled, not away, not abandoning them, but to the only place he could think of to find a sliver of space to breathe.

He stumbled down the hallway, his movements erratic, and pushed open the door to the laundry room. The room was empty now, the scent of Sveta and her children faded, replaced by the clean, sterile smell of detergent and the low hum of the dryers. He sank to the floor, leaning against a cold metal washer, and buried his face in his hands, trying to force air into his burning lungs. His entire world had just been upended, and the Alpha in him was screaming to go back, to stand guard, but he knew, with a terrifying clarity, that he needed a moment. Just one moment to pull himself together before he broke completely.

The sterile calm of the laundry room lasted for all of ten seconds. A snarl ripped from Ilya's throat, a sound of pure, unadulterated fury and frustration. He rose to his feet in a single, fluid motion and drove his fist into the side of a nearby washing machine. The metal screamed in protest, buckling inward with a deafening crunch as the entire unit shuddered on its frame. A loud growl echoed through the room, a raw, primal release of the storm raging inside him. He stood there for a moment, chest heaving, knuckles throbbing, the wreckage of the appliance a small, physical manifestation of the chaos in his soul.

Then, he took a long, slow breath, forcing the air deep into his lungs. The rage receded, replaced by a cold, steely resolve. He turned on his heel and walked back down the hall, his steps measured and deliberate. He knew exactly what he was about to fucking do. He needed Shane to go along with the plan, or he was going to lose his mind. He stopped in front of 4G, then pushed the door open.

Ilya stepped back into the apartment, the scent of their interrupted breakfast and the lingering aroma of family hitting him. Elena was still on the couch, lost in her own world with her Barbies, but Shane was gone.

A soft, muffled sound led him down a short hallway to a room he hadn't seen before. The door was ajar, and through it, he saw Shane. He was on the floor, curled into a tight ball in the middle of a small, pink-themed bedroom, his body wracked with silent, gut-wrenching sobs. He was clutching a ragged, pink blanket to his face, and even from the doorway, Ilya

could smell it—the comforting, intertwined scents of maple syrup, honey, and the faint, cool hint of mint. It was her baby blanket, a security object that now smelled of their entire little family.

Ilya moved without thinking, crossing the room and sinking to the floor beside him. He gently grabbed Shane's shoulders, pulling the trembling Omega into his arms. "I thought you left us forever," Shane choked out, his words muffled by the blanket. "Or at least until you came back to take her from me." Ilya held him tighter, a fierce, protective growl rumbling in his chest. "No," he said, his voice firm, leaving no room for doubt. "I'm never going to do that. She loves you so much, and I want to be a part of that love." He looked down at Shane, his expression softening. "But some things have to change."

He took a deep breath, the words pouring out of him, a torrent of need and desire. "I want to know my daughter. I want to be with you. I want us to learn how to do this together. I want you, as soon as possible, to move out of this apartment and move into my home with Elena. Let us make a nest there, a place for us to protect her and love her. I need it. My instincts aren't going to let me leave this apartment except for work, and I need to be at home, where the gym is, but I am not leaving this grungy apartment anytime soon. I need you to consider how much time we have to make up for, for missing her growing up to this point. I am not missing another day, another big moment. You move in with me, and we figure this out together. You can continue to work at the hospital. I'll pay for a nanny, and we make this work. Shane, I can't breathe without you or Elena now."

A small, distressed whimper escaped Shane's lips, a sound of pure fear and overwhelming confusion. He was distraught, terrified, but beneath it all, a flicker of something he couldn't quite name—maybe hope, maybe just exhaustion—fought to the surface. He struggled against Ilya's embrace, a half-hearted, instinctual attempt to push away the overwhelming Alpha presence, but his arms felt like lead. He was scared, terrified of the Alpha's rules, of the sheer force of Ilya's will. A part of him, the part that had survived on his own for years, screamed at him not to comply, to fight, to protect Elena at all costs. But another part, a smaller, more desperate part, was tired of fighting.

He looked up at Ilya, his eyes wide and glistening, and saw the raw, unfiltered emotion there. He saw the desperation, the need, the possessiveness, and something else, something softer, something that looked an awful lot like love. He didn't know if Ilya would really take Elena away if he refused, but the fear was real, a constant, gnawing presence in the back of his mind. But maybe, just maybe, this wasn't about control. Maybe Ilya really just didn't know how to not take care of everything himself, to not fix every problem with a grand, sweeping gesture. And damn it, if that kiss last night hadn't given him a spark again, a tiny, flickering flame of hope that he had long since extinguished. He wanted to try. For Ilya. For Elena. For himself.

A long, shaky breath escaped Shane's lips, the fight draining out of him completely. He looked up at Ilya, his eyes still wide with a mixture of fear and a fragile, nascent hope. "Okay," he whispered, the word a surrender, a promise, a lifeline. "We'll do it. We'll start packing tomorrow. Will you come help?"

A low, rumbling laugh escaped Ilya's chest, the sound vibrating through Shane's exhausted body. "Why don't I just hire someone," he countered, a rare, genuine smile touching his lips. "And then we spend tomorrow with her in the park or something, while we still have some warm weather." The thought of it, of a normal, happy day with the two of them, was almost too much to bear.

"Can I stay here tonight?" he asked, his voice suddenly raw with need. "I don't think I can be without either of you ever again." He paused, the reality of his obligations crashing down on him. "I have a game tonight, but I really don't think I can do anything until then." Shane replies, "of course. But you have to join us for bedtime books after you game."

That immediately dropped a new scent that Shane had never smelled from Ilya. Cinnamon. A heart felt cinnamon smell of warmth. Ilya laughed and said, "I will never miss it, again."

A pair of small, socked feet padded silently into the room, followed by the rest of a tiny figure. Elena stood in the doorway, her noise-canceling headphones now hanging around her neck, her brow furrowed in concern as she took in the scene: her father curled on the floor, wrapped in the arms of the giant man. "Daddy, what's wrong?" she asked, her small voice cutting through the heavy emotional atmosphere.

Shane quickly wiped at his eyes, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Nothing, honey," he said, his voice hoarse. "But Mr. Ilya is going to stay with us for a while, and we're going to move starting tomorrow. Do you think you'll be okay with that?" He rushed to reassure her, painting a picture of their new life. "We'll still live in Boston, but we'll be closer to your daycare, and Sveta can come visit if Mr. Ilya allows, and we'll live with him for a while." He added the final enticement, a small, hopeful plea. "He does have a pool, if that matters."

It all mattered. A slow smile spread across Elena's face, a spark of excitement lighting up her features, but it was quickly followed by a shadow of sadness. "A pool!" she exclaimed, before her gaze drifted around her room, taking in the familiar pink walls and the carefully arranged Barbies. "But I love my Barbie room," she said, her lower lip trembling slightly. "It has to be just like this one." Her little face was a mixture of thrilling possibilities and heartbreaking loss, the enormity of the change suddenly becoming real.

In that single, charged moment, Ilya's mind shifted from crisis manager to personal interior designer. He offered a litany of suggestions, a rapid-fire list of everything a little girl could want. "We can get you a canopy bed, or one with a slide! We could do purple walls, or maybe a unicorn theme! We can even get you a TV for your room!" But Elena, with a surprising amount of authority for a four-year-old, sat right between Shane and Ilya on the floor, her small body a bridge between them. She looked right into Ilya's eyes, ignoring every single one of his suggestions, and instead launched into her own definitive list.

She wants a cotton candy pink room, filled to the brim with squishmallows of every size and shape. Not paintings, but framed drawings of her and her dolls, hung all over the walls in a messy, happy collage. She also wants a big bed, not a canopy, with Princess Mulan and Mushu on the sheets, and she's very specific about the design. She continued on and on and on, her motormouth back in full force, detailing the exact shade of pink, the specific types of squishies she wants, and the placement of her nightstand. Ilya listened, utterly captivated, and

pulled out his phone, his thumb flying across the screen as he started to take notes, a look of intense concentration on his face.

"Baby, we can't do all of those things," Shane interjected, a gentle attempt to temper expectations, but Ilya instantly shushed him with a look, a sharp, commanding glare that brooked no argument. He turned his full attention back to Elena, nodding along as she continued her list, a small, genuine smile playing on his lips. He was going to give her the world, one cotton candy pink squishmallow at a time.

By late afternoon, the golden light slanting through the windows signaled the end of their stolen hours. Around four o'clock, Ilya had to tear himself away to beat the traffic to the arena, the thought of leaving a physical ache in his chest. In just a few short hours, he had bonded with Elena so much. *So fucking much.* They'd hugged over a meticulous tea party where she insisted he wear a tiara, and she had fallen asleep on his lap on the couch, her small body a warm, trusting weight against him, while reruns of SpongeBob SquarePants painted the room in colorful, underwater light.

Shane had watched it all happen from just a few feet away, a silent, observant figure. Ilya had wished, with a primal longing, that Shane would just hug up to him, would join them on the couch, would be a part of the simple, perfect moment. But he understood the hesitation, the years of conditioning that kept him at a distance. Instead, Shane had moved, a quiet, restless energy propelling him around the small apartment. He'd cleaned, he'd organized, and perhaps subconsciously, he'd started to pack. He'd neatly fold a stack of Elena's too-small pajamas and place them in a box, only to stare at it with a confused expression before putting it back in the drawer. He didn't realize that he was already moving, that he had already started the process of letting go, of making a new home, without ever taking a single step out the door.

He set Elena down gently, his thumb stroking her cheek one last time before he forced himself to turn towards the door. Every instinct screamed at him to stay, to scoop them both up and take them to his house that very second, to erase the last four years of struggle and replace them with security and comfort. But he couldn't. There was a game to play, a contract to honor, a life to orchestrate. With a final, lingering look at Shane, who was now leaning against the kitchen counter with an expression of dazed wonder, Ilya stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind him, the click of the latch sounding impossibly loud in the quiet building.

The drive to the arena was a blur. He wasn't thinking about the opposing team, or the plays they'd run, or the shots he'd need to make. His mind was a whirlwind of pink walls, squishmallows, and the incredible, soul-crushing weight of Shane sleeping on a couch. He thought of the scent of maple syrup and the way Elena's small body had fit so perfectly in his arms. The fierce, protective Alpha in him was howling, a constant, demanding presence in the back of his mind, urging him to turn the car around, to forget hockey, to just go back and guard what was his.

By the time he pulled into the players' parking lot, he had composed himself, shoving the overwhelming emotions down into a deep, dark place where they couldn't interfere with the game. He was Ilya Rozanov. He had a job to do. But as he walked through the familiar corridors of the arena, the scent of ice and stale beer a comforting constant, he felt a

fundamental shift in himself. The game wasn't just a job anymore. It was a means to an end. Every hit, every goal, every check he cashed was for them. For Shane, for Elena, for the family he was going to build, no matter what it took.

The locker room was a haze of sweat, victory, and the deafening roar of the crowd that still echoed in Ilya's ears. They had smoked the New York Admirals, an absolute demolition. Ilya himself had been a force of nature, a madman on skates, scoring a hat-trick that had left the other team reeling. He remembered the third goal with perfect clarity, the way the puck had soared into the net, a black streak against the white ice. He had immediately looked up, his eyes finding the center-ice camera, and blew a loud, theatrical kiss right into the lens, a silent message sent out into the ether, a desperate hope that Shane or Elena would see it.

He finally made it back to the loud of the locker room, peeling off his sweat-soaked gear and grabbing his phone. His hands were still shaking from the adrenaline, but he managed to unlock the screen. A text from Shane was waiting for him, and his heart stuttered in his chest.

The first picture that Shane sent was of Elena, curled up on the couch, her mouth slightly open, fast asleep. The caption read: She fell asleep in the second period.

The second picture made his breath catch. It was their small TV, the screen frozen on the image of him, mid-kiss, and in the foreground was a hand, Shane's hand, fingers outstretched as if to catch it. The caption was simple, but it hit him with the force of a check into the boards: So proud of you. See you soon. I made pasta salad for us to eat when you get here.

The adrenaline of the game evaporated, replaced by a wave of something so much more powerful. It was a feeling of home, of belonging, of a future he hadn't dared to let himself imagine. The pasta salad, the small, domestic gesture, meant more to him than the hat-trick, more than the victory. It meant he was coming home to them.

As Ilya stared at the phone, a wide, foolish grin plastered on his face, a raucous chorus of wolf whistles and catcalls erupted behind him. "Rozanov! Three goals, man! We're painting the town red!" Cliff yelled, clapping him hard on the shoulder. "You're buying the first round!" Another chimed in, a chorus of agreement rising from the half-dressed players.

A feral, possessive snarl ripped from Ilya's chest before he could stop it. He slammed his locker shut, the sound echoing like a gunshot. "Not tonight," he growled, his voice low and dangerous, a clear warning that silenced the room. He didn't wait for a reply, just grabbed his bag and stalked out of the locker room, leaving a stunned silence in his wake.

He was in the car before he even registered he was moving and he sent a quick text: *On my way home.*

Thirty minutes later, he was standing in front of Apartment 4G, his heart pounding a frantic rhythm against his ribs. The door opened on the first knock, Shane's silhouette a welcome sight against the warm light of the apartment. Ilya practically fell into his arms, the exhaustion from the game and the emotional whiplash of the day finally catching up to him.

"I'm so tired," he murmured into Shane's hair, "but I have to see her." He could smell her, that sweet, unique scent of maple syrup and mint, but he couldn't see her. "She's already tucked in," Shane whispered back, gently extricating himself from Ilya's grip. "I didn't want to wake her."

A wave of disappointment washed over Ilya. "I missed story time," he said, a note of sadness in his voice. Shane gave him a small, knowing smile. "Truthfully, she didn't even get story time. She had a full day of playtime with you. She's been asleep since eight o'clock." Ilya chuckled, the sound soft in the quiet apartment, and quietly pushed open the door to Elena's room. He could hear her soft snores from the doorway, a tiny, rhythmic puffing sound that made his chest ache with a fierce, protective love. He watched her for a long moment, a small, peaceful form in her pink bed, before gently closing the door and returning to the small kitchen.

Shane was at the small kitchen island, carefully spooning pasta salad onto a plate. The domesticity of it, the simple, quiet act of being cared for, hit Ilya like a Zamboni falling from the sky.

Fuck, this was it. This was day one of the rest of his life.

The thought was crazy, terrifying, and absolutely right. He took the plate, the cold pasta a welcome relief, and looked at Shane, who was leaning against the counter, watching him with those deep, expressive chocolate brown eyes. "I know you wanted more time here before the move," Ilya said, his voice low and serious. "But you can't stay here any longer. I have this urge to take care of you, and I haven't stopped thinking about how you sleep on this tiny couch because you don't have a bed. You deserve more, Shane. I'd like for you to move in tomorrow."

Shane's composure crumpled. A choked sob escaped his lips, and he buried his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking with the force of his breakdown. Ilya, mid-bite of the exceptional pasta salad—he really needed to tell Shane how good it was later—dropped his fork and rushed across the small island, pulling Shane into a fierce, protective hug. "It's going to be okay," he murmured, his arms wrapped tightly around the shaking Omega. "I've got you now."

Shane clung to him, his face pressed into Ilya's chest, the words tumbling out of him in a rush. "I've been doing everything I can," he sobbed. "I'm just starting my job at the hospital, I love my work, but the pay is terrible. Even my mom had to send money for rent this month because I couldn't afford it. I know my time will come, but I thought I would always have to do this alone." The admission was raw.

Without a word, Ilya scooped Shane into his arms, lifting him effortlessly from the kitchen floor. He kissed him, a deep, tender kiss that was different from all the others. This time, as their lips met, he could actually taste maple syrup, sweet and warm and utterly intoxicating.

He had heard about this from his mother when he was young, a rare phenomenon spoken of in hushed tones by the lucky ones. When you kiss your soulmate, you can taste their scent. *Holy shit.* It was like an amazing breakfast in his mouth, and fuck, there was no other way to describe it than orgasmic.

He moved them to the couch, laying on his back with Shane draped over his body, a perfect, heavy weight that felt more like home than any house ever had. He grabbed the blanket draped across the back of the couch and threw it over them both, creating a small, warm cocoon in the middle of the small living room.

"How are we going to make this work?" Shane asked, his voice quiet, a small tremor of fear still clinging to the words. Ilya smiled, rubbing a hand up and down Shane's back. "I already hired someone to do Elena's room," he said, his voice a low rumble in Shane's ear. "I made the phone call on the way to the rink today. I also had someone take one of the spare bedrooms and make it into yours."

This made Shane sad, and he pushed himself up, his hands on Ilya's chest. "No," he said, his voice firm. "I'm not moving in with you if we don't have the same nest." Ilya laughed, a low, rumbling sound. "Good," he said. "I didn't want to presume." Shane's eyes softened, and he leaned down, his forehead resting against Ilya's. "There's no way you're letting anyone else in our nest either," he whispered. "So you better be committed to me too. I don't want to share you with anyone else, ever again. This is all I've thought about for years, and I can't have you dangle it in front of my face and then share it with others."

Ilya's smile faded, replaced by a look of serious, unwavering devotion. "That's not what this is," he said, his voice a low, possessive growl. "I'm all in, Shane. For you and Elena." Shane's body relaxed, the tension draining out of him.

"I don't want another bed," Shane murmured, the words vibrating against Ilya's chest. "We can have it set up for guests, but never again are we sleeping outside of the nest without each other."

The declaration was a promise, a seal on their new reality. As Shane lay across him, Ilya let his hand drift down, tracing the line of Shane's spine until it rested on the small of his back. He could feel the hard press of Shane's cock against his groin, an undeniable, life-affirming pressure that sent a jolt through him. His own body responded in kind, a hard, insistent heat that mirrored Shane's.

They both let out a soft, breathy laugh, the sound a shared memory of a night years ago, a single, frantic coupling that had felt more like a homecoming than a one-night stand. But that was then, and this was now, and the exhaustion of the day, the emotional toll of the past few hours, was a heavy blanket, smothering any immediate desire.

"Tomorrow," Ilya whispered, the word a promise and a prayer. "In our new home." Shane just nodded, his head tucked under Ilya's chin, the rhythm of their breathing slowly syncing in the quiet of the apartment. The future was a terrifying, unknown expanse, but in this small, crowded living room, wrapped in each other's arms, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. They had a long way to go, a lifetime of learning and loving and building, but they had a start. A real one. And as the last of the adrenaline from the game faded, replaced by the quiet hum of contentment, Ilya knew, with a certainty that settled deep in his bones, that this was it. This was their beginning and they both fell asleep in each other's arms.

Chapter 7: Good morning, Sunshine.

Chapter Summary

Ilya wakes to find Shane asleep on his chest and Elena curled against his side, and the sight of them together breaks him open in the best way. Elena insists Daddy kisses will fix Mr. Ilya's tears, shattering the careful distance Shane and Ilya have been keeping, and the three of them stumble into a chaotic, joy filled morning that feels dangerously like a family.

Ilya takes them out for breakfast and a full day in the city, brushing Elena's hair, riding the train, and slipping naturally into fatherhood in ways that leave Shane shaken by what they lost.

By evening, Ilya is ready to take them home. Shane says yes. Elena's new room is perfect, and her tearful gratitude cements what they have been circling all day. Later, as Shane spirals over the conversations still to come, Ilya puts Elena to bed with ease and offers the simple truth that matters most: Shane and Elena are home.

Chapter Notes

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

October 2, 2016

Ilya woke to a profound, unfamiliar warmth. Shane was still asleep, a solid, trusting weight on his chest, his soft snores a gentle rhythm against Ilya's ear. His right arm, having gone numb hours ago, was still tucked under the worn t-shirt Shane had fallen asleep in. But it was his left arm that registered a new, delicate sensation. A small, bony body was curled beside them, a miniature skeleton threatening to tumble off the edge of the couch. *It was Elena.*

At some point in the night, she had woken and crawled into their makeshift nest, her small head now nestled into Ilya's armpit. His arm instinctively tightened around her, holding her close. The sight of them, his family, curled together on this too-small couch, was a punch to the gut. He stared at the ceiling, at the cheap, crumbly spackle, trying to compose himself, but the tears came anyway, silent, hot tracks down his temples. For ten long minutes, he lay there, overwhelmed by a love so potent it was a physical pain. A small, choked sob escaped him, a full-body jerk of emotion he couldn't contain.

The soft sound was enough to stir Shane, who lifted his head from Ilya's chest, blinking sleepily. He saw Ilya's tear-streaked face, then followed Ilya's gaze to the small girl tucked between them. Shane's breath hitched, a wave of emotion so strong it was almost painful. He wanted to kiss him, to wipe away the tears and offer the comfort they both craved, but he couldn't, not with Elena right there. They hadn't told her yet. She couldn't find out like this.

He searched for something to say, some way to bridge the gap, but all he could do was meet Ilya's gaze. He offered a small, watery smile, a silent affirmation of everything they had found again in each other. The sight of it only made Ilya's tears fall faster, and Shane's own eyes began to well, a careful, silent dance of joy and restraint. Unfortunately for them both, their little angel was not asleep. She had been watching the whole thing. From her spot pressed against Ilya's side, a small hand reached up and patted clumsily at his wet cheek.

"Don't cry, Mr. Ilya," she said, her voice small and serious. "Did you have a nightmare? Daddy gives me kisses when I have nightmares." Shane gasped, his mouth falling open. "Daddy give Mr. Ilya kisses, it'll make him feel better!" Elena's request stayed in the air, a perfect, innocent command that shattered all of their carefully constructed hesitations. A deep, rumbling laugh erupted from Ilya's chest, so forceful that it nearly bounced Shane right off the couch.

"Yes, daddy," Ilya managed, his voice thick with tears and laughter. "You should give me kisses." Shane's eyes widened, a flicker of panic warring with the overwhelming love swelling in his chest, but then he saw the pure joy on Ilya's face. He giggled, a light, airy sound that was full of relief, and leaned down, pressing three quick, firm kisses to Ilya's cheek, his forehead, and then, finally, his lips.

He pushed himself up after the last kiss, and Ilya immediately felt the cold where Shane's body had been, a sudden, stark emptiness. The feeling lasted only a second before a small, energetic missile launched itself onto his chest. Elena, with a spectacular case of bed hair that stuck out in every direction, landed on him with a soft "oof." She beamed down at him, her gap-toothed smile impossibly wide. "Didn't that make you feel better!?" she chirped, her hands planted firmly on his shoulders. Ilya looked from her triumphant face to Shane, who was standing by the couch, watching them with an expression of pure, unadulterated love. He reached up, gently brushing a stray curl from Elena's forehead. "Yes," Ilya said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "Much, much better."

Ilya scooped her up from his chest, her small body fitting perfectly in the circle of his arms, and spun them in a slow, careful circle around the cramped living room. Elena's delighted shrieks filled the small apartment, a sound so full of pure joy it seemed to push against the very walls. Shane stood by the kitchen island, mesmerized by the scene, a painful ache blooming in his chest.

God, it hurt. To know that Ilya could have been here, spinning their daughter in these circles for years. The weight of all the missed moments, of the loneliness he had endured, settled on him. He had kept them apart, and the guilt was a bitter taste in his mouth.

"How about I take you and Daddy to get some breakfast?" Ilya broke Shane's horrible thoughts, setting Elena back on her feet but keeping a steadying hand on her back. "Then we can go to the park and play. Maybe we can go play with some dogs! What do you think?"

Elena's "YES!" was a joyous explosion, and she immediately turned to Shane, her hands clasped together in a plea. "Can we, Daddy? Please?" Shane knew this was a bad routine. He was meticulous with their schedule, their finances, creating cheap, predictable meals on a tight budget. He had gone without more times than he could count just to make sure Elena had enough. Letting Ilya just sweep in and take control of their morning was a battle against

every instinct he had honed over the past four years. But he had to try. He owed this to Ilya, and to the hopeful little girl now vibrating with excitement beside him. He had been the domestic, scheduled partner for so long, the one who had to whip everything into a strict calendar, but he had a feeling it would take some time before Ilya would even let him offer any direction in their new life. So, for now, he would take the joy being offered, a gift from his Alpha and his Pup in the same room, a moment of pure, unadulterated happiness. He gave a small, slightly tremulous nod. "Yeah," he said, his voice soft. "We can go."

The morning became a whirlwind of motion, a small, chaotic ballet of three people trying to navigate one tiny bathroom. Showers were taken, clothes were selected from a limited supply—Elena insisting on a bright pink tulle skirt that clashed horribly with her dinosaur shirt. Ilya emerged from the steam-filled bathroom, basketball shorts drawn low on his hips, water still beading on the solid expanse of his chest. He crossed the living room, Shane's makeshift bedroom, to rummage through the duffle bag he'd brought from the arena. He grabbed a clean shirt, the familiar action feeling foreign without the comfort of his own dresser, of his own space. He needed to get back to his nest. He needed Shane and Elena in it, filling the quiet spaces with their life and their love, but he knew, without telling Shane, that the house he'd left yesterday morning was a construction zone.

He'd hired the best people less than 24 hours ago, a whirlwind of contractors and decorators who were working tirelessly to transform it into a home for a four-year-old, but it wouldn't be ready for at least another eight hours. The thought of Elena's room not being perfect made him feel sick to his stomach. He had to be in the moment, to stop worrying about the small things, but it was hard. They needed to have those conversations, to unpack the years of silence, to talk about how they really felt. He knew it was more than physical attraction. Shane had this way of making him feel like he was the center of the universe, a gravitational pull that had kept him pining for years. Shane didn't even know the real reason he'd been at that CCN commercial shoot all of those years ago was because Ilya had his agent request it, that he had been the one to unlock the door and let Shane walk through. He hated to admit how badly he had needed Shane then, and how badly he needed him now.

As these thoughts swirled through his head, he caught sight of Shane in the kitchen, pointedly trying not to watch him as he pulled the shirt over his head. Heat formed in Ilya's stomach, a primal, possessive fire at the sight of Shane's covert glance. He wanted to jump him right there, to press him against the counter and—

"Mr. Ilya, will you help me with my hair?" Elena's small voice cut through the haze of desire.

Shane's head snapped around, his expression one of pure, unadulterated confusion. "She won't even let me touch her hair most days," he said, the disbelief clear in his voice.

Ilya laughed, the sound warm and confident, as if he'd been handed a glorious challenge. "Alright, printsesssa" he said, abandoning his shirt for the moment and striding towards the room that was a riot of pink plastic and shimmering tulle. He glanced back at Shane, a playful glint in his eyes. "Don't go anywhere." Shane could only shake his head, a bewildered laugh escaping him as he leaned against the kitchen counter. What the hell was happening? His daughter, who would rather have a nest of hornets in her hair than a brush, was willingly

asking a near-stranger to tame her unruly curls. He added it to the ever-growing list of confusing-as-fuck developments in his life, but for the first time, the confusion was laced with a thrilling, undeniable sense of rightness. He watched Ilya disappear into the bedroom, feeling a strange mix of relief at being off hair-duty and a sharp, unexpected pang of jealousy at how easily Ilya had stepped into a role Shane had fought for years.

Inside the pink haven, Ilya found Elena sitting on her small stool, a pink brush held out to him like a sacred offering. He took it, kneeling behind her. His huge hands looked comically large against the delicate brush and her small head. "Okay, little bug," he murmured, his fingers gently testing the knots in her hair. "Let's see what we can do." He started at the ends, working with a patience that seemed to come from some deep, instinctual place he never knew he had. Elena sat perfectly still, her reflection in the small plastic mirror watching him with rapt attention. Each gentle tug was met with a small sigh of contentment, and in the quiet of the room, Ilya felt a profound sense of peace settle over him. This was it. This was the life he had been craving, the simple, domestic moments that felt more significant than any hat-trick or sold-out game.

Shane couldn't stay in the kitchen. He drifted to the doorway of the pink room, leaning against the frame, watching in complete and utter shock. Through the small, distorted vanity mirror, he saw Ilya see him watching, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that Ilya had somehow managed to comb through the entirety of Elena's chaotic, knot-filled hair and secure it with a small, pink bow in what looked like less than three minutes. It took Shane a solid fifteen minutes on a good day, usually when her hair was still damp and cooperative. "How did you do that?" he asked, his voice a hushed whisper. Ilya just pointed to his own head of thick, dark hair. "We have same hair."

Then, without thinking, Ilya bent over and kissed Elena's cheek. "Daddy! Mr. Ilya kissed me!" she giggled, the sound echoing in the small room. Shane laughed at the look of sheer panic that crossed Ilya's face, a blush creeping up his neck. "Yes honey, he did! He loves kissing!" Shane walked past Ilya, scooping Elena into his arms.

"Wow, I don't think I've ever seen you blush," he said over his shoulder as he walked out of the room, a giggling Elena in tow. "This is not blush," Ilya called out, his muffled voice following them. "Russians do not do this."

Ilya followed them out, shrugging on a jacket and bending to tie his shoes. "Is everyone ready to go on a trip?" he asked, looking between Shane and Elena. "I have a big car!" At the mention of a big car, Elena's eyes went wide, and she hopped from Shane's arms directly into Ilya's, her small hands wrapping around his neck. As they walked out into the narrow hallway towards the elevator, they encountered their final hurdle of the morning. Shane's neighbor, Sveta, was just coming out of her own apartment, a bag of garbage in her hand. Her mouth fell agape at the sight of the huge, Ilya Rozanov holding Shane's daughter while Shane locked the door behind them. "Oh! Sveta," Shane said, fumbling for words. "Uh, this is Ilya." Ilya gave a small nod. "We met yesterday morning. You showed me where to find Shane." Sveta still hadn't said a word, but her smile stretched from ear to ear, a knowing, delighted look on her face.

"Sveta, we're going to get some breakfast. Can I text you later?" Shane managed, feeling a blush creep up his own neck now. She only nodded, her wide, unblinking smile never leaving her face as she continued on her way, presumably to the garbage chute. Ilya watched her go, then looked back at Shane. "She seems nice." Shane let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "I think that's the quietest that I've ever seen her."

They reached the parking lot, the morning air cool on their faces. "We should invite her for dinner with her pups when we get settled in," Ilya suggested, the idea sounding so natural, so domestic. "I think that's a great idea!" Shane agreed, and without thinking, he put his arm around Ilya's waist. It felt surprisingly natural, the way their bodies fit together, the casual intimacy of the gesture feeling more right than anything had in years.

They reached Ilya's sedan, a sleek, dark car that seemed to stretch for miles. Ilya went to the back door, ready to lift Elena inside. "Ilya, wait," Shane said, a note of urgency in his voice. "We don't have a booster seat. She can't sit in a regular seat yet, it's not safe." Oh. Ilya froze, the reality of their haphazard plan crashing down on him. He hadn't thought this through. He wasn't a single dad who had to remember these things; he was a hockey player who lived alone. "Shit," he muttered under his breath, immediately pulling out his phone and opening the Amazon app, his fingers already flying across the screen. "I can get one here in two hours. Prime." Shane reached out, placing a hand on Ilya's forearm, stilling his frantic typing. "How about," Shane said gently, "Elena and I show you the green line?"

The idea of the train was a novel one, a slight pang of disappointment hitting Ilya as he locked the car. He'd made secret brunch reservations at a place called "Sunny's Toast," picturing a quiet, perfect corner table where they could talk. But as they descended into the station, Elena's excitement was infectious. "We get to go on the choo-choo, Mr. Ilya!" she chirped, bouncing on the balls of her feet as the train rumbled into the station. Ilya had never been on public transport in his life, a car and driver always at his disposal. He found himself holding Shane's hand as they stepped onto the crowded green line car, the smell of damp metal and too many people filling the air. "How long to downtown?" he asked Shane, leaning close to be heard over the screech of the wheels. Shane gave him the directions, and Ilya did the mental math. They'd be late. He had wanted the perfect day, but he was quickly realizing that a perfect day with Shane and Elena wasn't about a specific place; it was about being with them, right here, in the rattling belly of a Boston tram.

They found a small space to stand, Ilya a solid wall of muscle behind them, one hand curled around a pole, the other resting lightly on Shane's back. As the train lurched forward, Shane stumbled back slightly, pressing against Ilya's chest. He looked up, a small, apologetic smile on his lips, but Ilya just tightened his grip, pulling him infinitesimally closer. In the noisy, anonymous crowd, it felt like they were in their own small world. He leaned down, his lips brushing Shane's ear. "You smell good," he murmured, the words a private declaration. A flush crept up Shane's neck, and he turned his head just enough to meet Ilya's gaze. It was in that exact moment of quiet intimacy that a flash of light went off from across the car. Ilya's head snapped up, his eyes narrowing. He saw the phone, angled discreetly, but unmistakably pointed at them. A cold, protective rage shot through him. He wanted to stride over there, to snatch the phone and crush it in his hand.

A new, cold calculation settled over Ilya, a shift from instinctual fury to deliberate action. He couldn't make a scene, not with Elena right there, her small body a fragile, trusting weight against Shane's side. This was a new facet of his world, a vulnerability he had never considered: the need to protect them not from a physical threat, but from the insidious, probing lens of the public eye.

What if Shane wasn't ready? What if he didn't want their life, their daughter's face, splashed across the internet for strangers to comment on?

The thought was a punch to the gut. Without a word to Shane, Ilya shifted, turning his broad back to the phone, effectively becoming a living, breathing shield. He angled himself, using his sheer size to block the view of Shane and Elena, creating a small, safe pocket for them within the crowded car. He kept his expression neutral, his gaze fixed on the grimy window, but every muscle in his body was coiled tight, a silent, territorial warning.

Shane, unaware of the near-miss, glanced up at him, a curious question in his eyes at the sudden change in position. Ilya just gave a subtle shake of his head, a tiny gesture that said, *Not now*. The automated voice crackled over the speaker, announcing their stop. Relief washed over Ilya, sharp and potent. He kept himself positioned as a barrier as they shuffled towards the doors, herding Shane and Elena out onto the platform. Once they were on solid ground, away from the prying eyes inside the train, he finally let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He looked down at Elena, who was already pointing excitedly at a street performer, and then at Shane, who was watching him with a faint frown of confusion.

"Everything okay?" Shane asked, as they stepped onto the bustling street, the city noise a sudden roar after the enclosed rattle of the train. The momentary tension from the train dissolved in the bright morning sun that felt warm on Ilya's face, a stark contrast to the cold knot that had formed in his stomach. Ilya forced a smile, pushing the incident from his mind, the image of the camera flash buried beneath the weight of Shane's concerned gaze. "Perfect," he said, and for the rest of the day, it was. They found a small table at Sunny's Toast, tucked away in a corner, and Ilya got his perfect brunch after all. The air inside was thick with the sweet scent of coffee and breakfast foods, and he watched, mesmerized, as Shane cut up pancakes for Elena, the syrup glinting in the light like liquid gold. After they ate, they wandered through the South End, the city a vibrant backdrop to their small, happy bubble, the brick-lined streets and colorful townhouses blurring into a kaleidoscope of contentment.

At some point, as they were walking, Shane reached out and grabbed Ilya's hand, intertwining their fingers, a silent promise that spoke volumes. He didn't let go. Ilya wasn't going to complain. It sent an electric shock through his system, a current of pure, unadulterated joy that settled deep in his bones, a warmth that spread through his chest, a feeling so right, so undeniably home, that it almost hurt. They spent the afternoon at the Boston Children's Museum, Elena's laughter echoing in the cavernous halls, then marveling at the shimmering tanks of the New England Aquarium, Ilya carrying Elena on his shoulders for a better view of the penguins, her small hands gripping his hair, her excited gasps a symphony in his ears.

By the time they made their way back to the green line to go home, the sun was beginning to set, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink. Elena was a dead weight in Ilya's arms, passed out with her head tucked into his neck, her small snores a soft rhythm against his skin. He shifted her slightly, his arm muscles burning with a sweet, welcome fatigue. As the train swayed, Ilya pulled out his phone, a silent notification lighting up the screen. He glanced at it, then at Shane, who was watching him with a tired, contented smile. "I just got a text from the contractors," Ilya said, his voice a low rumble. "The house is ready." He took a breath, the words feeling huge and monumental in the quiet space between them.

"Are you ready to... go home? I know this is fast but I can have your apartment packed up tomorrow. I already had someone buy a closet of clothes for Elena. I just... I know I'm being a lot but I need you. In my nest. I need our pup there. I need my home to smell of you. I'm sorry. I just..."

Shane stared at him, the hum of the train fading into a dull thrum in the background. He watched Ilya's face, the raw, unguarded vulnerability in his eyes, a desperate plea that mirrored the longing Shane had carried in his own heart for years. But as he stood there, something else shifted in the air around them. Ilya's scent, usually that cool, sharp mint that made Shane's mouth water, had changed again. It was the cinnamon—definitely coming from Ilya this time, warm and spicy, wrapping around them like a hug. It only happened one other time yesterday when all three of them were together, when Ilya was near both him and Elena simultaneously. The mint was still there underneath, but this new note of sweet spice was undeniable, intoxicating.

Shane looked down at their intertwined hands, at the sleeping child in Ilya's arms, a perfect, beautiful chaos that he wouldn't trade for anything. He let out a slow, shaky breath, a lifetime of fear and uncertainty dissolving in the warm, steady glow of Ilya's gaze—and that incredible, impossible scent that was somehow now their combined signature. "Okay," he said, the word a soft, whispered promise. "Yes, Ilya. Let's go home."

A wave of relief so profound it was almost painful washed over Ilya, and he let out a breath. He pulled Shane closer, their foreheads resting together in the swaying car. "Okay," he repeated, the word a balm on his soul. "Okay." He held Shane's gaze, a silent conversation passing between them, a thousand unspoken words of love and gratitude and hope. "You're not being a lot," Shane added, his voice a low, steady murmur. He reached up, gently brushing a stray curl from Elena's forehead, a small, tender gesture that spoke volumes. "We're ready." Ilya closed his eyes, a single, hot tear tracing a path down his cheek, a silent testament to the overwhelming joy that filled him to overflowing.

The train ride back felt different, the air thick with a new, buzzing energy. Ilya kept one arm wrapped securely around Shane's shoulders, the other holding a sleeping Elena, while Shane's hand remained firmly in his. They walked from the station, the cool evening air a welcome balm after the long, emotional day.

The quiet of the apartment building was a stark contrast to the noise of the city, the familiar trek up the stairs now feeling like a final farewell to the life Shane had built alone. As they reached the door of apartment 4G, Shane's key felt heavy in his hand. There, sitting in front of the door, was a large brown box with the Amazon smile printed on the side.

Shane couldn't help but smile, a small, breathy laugh escaping him as he shook his head. Of course Ilya had ordered it, of course it had already arrived. Ilya saw the look on his face and let out a deep, rich laugh, the sound echoing in the quiet hallway. "Now we're in business," he said, shifting Elena's weight slightly. "Go grab your things and let's get out of here." Shane's smile widened as he unlocked the door, pushing it open to reveal the small, empty apartment that had been his refuge for so long. It felt hollow now, a space waiting to be vacated. He looked back at Ilya, at the sleeping child in his arms and the hopeful, love-filled look in his eyes, and knew, with a certainty that settled deep in his bones, that he was finally, truly, going home.

The drive to Ilya's house was a blur of streetlights and quiet anticipation. Ilya navigated the familiar streets with a single-minded focus, the car filled with the soft, even breaths of the two people who had somehow become his entire world in less than twenty-four hours. When they finally pulled into the driveway of a large, dark house, it was the smell that hit Shane first. Beneath the familiar, comforting scents of Ilya and Elena was a new one, sharp and acrid: the stench of fresh paint, new carpet, and something else, something that made the fine hairs on his arms stand on end. It was the smell of fear, and it was coming from Ilya. This startled him; Ilya, the confident, commanding Alpha, was terrified. His own nervousness melted away, replaced by a fierce, protective instinct. He needed to be strong for Ilya, to be the steady presence that Ilya was so desperately trying to be for them.

Ilya carried Elena inside, his movements stiff with a tension that Shane could feel from across the room. The house was beautiful, transformed in a way that felt both overwhelming and deeply personal, but Ilya barely saw any of it. He strode down the hallway, his heart running a marathon, and stopped before a closed door. This was it. The moment of truth. He took a deep breath, the fear a horrible taste in his mouth, and pushed it open.

Inside, the room was exactly as she had described, a cotton candy pink paradise that took his breath away. The walls were painted the perfect shade of bubblegum, not too bright, not too pale, and covered in a happy collage of framed drawings—Elena with her dolls, Elena with crayons, Elena making funny faces, each one captured in her childish hand. Against one wall stood the big bed, no canopy, just as she'd requested, dressed in vibrant Princess Mulan sheets with Mushu grinning from the pillows. In the corner, a mountain of Squishmallows of every size and shape tumbled together in a colorful heap, from tiny keychain-sized ones to a giant rainbow-striped one that was nearly as big as Elena herself. A small white vanity with a heart-shaped mirror stood nearby, a brush and comb laid out perfectly, and the closet door stood slightly ajar, revealing rows of brand new clothes.

He gently laid Elena down on the plush Mulan comforter, her small body sinking into the softness. As if on cue, her eyelids fluttered open, her sleepy gaze taking in the room with a slow, dawning wonder.

"Daddy?" she whispered, her voice thick with sleep. Shane knelt by the bed, a lump forming in his throat as he watched her take in her new surroundings. Then, a spark of recognition ignited in her eyes, and she was off, a blur of pink and energy. She bounced on the bed, her giggles filling the room, then hurled herself into the pile of Squishmallows, emerging with a giant, glittery unicorn. She ran to the closet, her small hands pulling out brand-new dresses,

each one more sparkly than the last. "Daddy, look!" she cried, dragging him towards a small, white vanity adorned with a brush and a tiara.

Elena chattered non-stop, pulling a sparkling tulle dress from the closet and holding it up to her chest. "And this one, Daddy! And look at the shoes!" She pointed to a tiny rack of sandals and sparkly sneakers before her attention finally drifted from her father, her small head turning towards the bed where Ilya had been standing frozen. He hadn't moved a muscle since laying her down, a silent, anxious statue waiting for a verdict. Seeing him there, a still, huge presence, Elena's excited bouncing slowed. She dropped the dress she was holding and ran, her small feet padding silently across the new carpet. She stopped right in front of him, wrapping her little arms as far as they would go around his kneecaps, clinging to him with all her might.

"Thank you, Mr. Ilya," she said, her small voice muffled against the denim of his jeans. Then, her small shoulders began to shake, and a quiet, heartbreaking sob escaped her. "It's perfect." A single tear tracked down Shane's cheek as he watched, a raw, overwhelming emotion clogging his throat. He had never seen her cry like this, not from sadness or pain, but from pure, unadulterated joy.

Ilya seemed to freeze solid, looking down at the small, crying child latched onto him, and a low, shaky breath escaped him. "O, moy milyy angel," he murmured, the Russian words a raw, husky prayer.

And then it hit Shane, a physical wave of scent so potent it was like being struck. The mint, the cinnamon, the honey—all of it swirling together into a single, overwhelming aroma of home and belonging. He never wanted to smell anything else ever again. He moved without thinking, closing the distance and wrapping his arms around both of them, pulling them into a fierce, protective group hug right there on the floor of the perfect pink room.

For a long moment, they just stayed there, a tangle of limbs and quiet, happy tears on the floor of a room built on hope. This was it, the feeling Shane had been chasing for years, a sense of peace so profound it felt like coming up for air after drowning. But even as he savored the warmth of Ilya's arm around his shoulders and the small, solid weight of their daughter between them, a familiar, frantic energy began to prickle at the edges of his consciousness. The quiet was temporary.

There were conversations to be had, a mountain of them, looming like an avalanche once Elena finally succumbed to sleep in her new bed. How were they getting her to preschool tomorrow? Would Ilya even know how to navigate the drop-off line? More importantly, when would they tell her? When would they explain that Ilya wasn't just "Mr. Ilya," but her other father, her Alpha? What did that even mean for them? Sure, they were living together now, but was Ilya prepared to tell the world? To face the media, the team, the scrutiny? And oh, fuck, his mom. He hadn't even told his own mother he was moving. His brain spun, each question birthing two more, a tangled web of logistics and emotions he desperately wanted to unravel now.

Later, nestled into the deep, unfamiliar comfort of a leather couch in the cavernous living room, Shane sipped a ginger ale and watched hockey highlights flicker across a TV screen

the size of a small car. It seemed to be the TV's default setting, a constant loop of checks and goals that Ilya probably didn't even notice anymore. He wanted answers now. But he knew his daughter; after a day like today, she'd be wired, a tiny pink duracell bunny who would fight sleep with every fiber of her being. A sudden quiet in the house made him pause, and he realized the soft murmur of voices from the back of the house had stopped. Where was she? He'd just seen her, her small nose pressed against the glass as Ilya pointed out the twinkling lights in the pool.

Shane started to rise, a new wave of parental panic setting in, when he heard the soft click of a bedroom door shutting. Ilya rounded the corner a moment later, a wide, unguarded grin on his face, the look of pure, unadulterated happiness that made Shane's chest ache

"She's so cute when she snores," Ilya said, the words soft and filled with a wonder that seemed to light him from the inside out. Shane stared, his jaw slightly slack. He was so confused, so completely blindsided. He'd been steeling himself for an hour-long battle of wills, for stories and songs and promises of tomorrow, for the slow, agonizing process of wearing down a child running on pure adrenaline. And yet, there Ilya was, looking as relaxed as if he'd just waved a magic wand. "How... how did you do that?" Shane finally managed, setting his glass down on the coaster. "I was expecting a cage match."

Ilya shrugged, a small, almost shy gesture that was completely at odds with his massive frame. He walked over to the couch and sat down, leaving a careful space between them. "I just told her a story," he said, looking at his hands. "About a strong bear who was lost in the woods and found a little bird who sang the most beautiful song. The bear was so lonely, but the bird's song made him feel warm. He followed the sound, and it led him to a new nest, a place he could call home, with the little bird and her father." He paused, glancing up at Shane, his dark eyes unreadable.

"I think she just needed to know she was home."

Chapter End Notes

This fiction came out of a three day weekend where my brain apparently decided it was moving in permanently with Shane, Ilya, and Elena. I have a full, twenty chapter outline for this fic and I genuinely have not stopped thinking about these three taking on the world together.

There are going to be ups and downs. The world is not going to stay this soft or this easy. There will be complications, conversations, public pressure, family adjustments, and some growing pains as they figure out what being a family actually looks like.

But I love Shane and Ilya far too much to break them without putting them back together again.

There will be a happy ending. It might take some work to get there, but they are going to get it.

Chapter 8: Let's Talk About (Sex, Baby).

Chapter Summary

Late one night, Shane and Ilya finally have the uninterrupted time they have avoided for years. Over a simple late-night meal, they begin asking each other difficult questions about the past.

The conversation leads to a life-changing moment when Ilya makes it clear he wants a real future with Shane and Elena, with no more distance or secrecy between them. Their emotional reunion turns into a powerful reaffirmation of the bond they never truly lost.

The next morning brings a glimpse of unexpected domestic happiness until Ilya's best friend suddenly walks in and discovers far more than he expected.

The clock on the oven read 10:30 PM, and the house was settled in a profound quiet that felt both foreign and deeply right. Shane, still perched on the massive couch, felt a strange sense of disbelief settle over him. He didn't have to be up for an early shift, and Ilya's only obligation tomorrow was a mid-afternoon footage review. Pre-school could wait a day; a simple call in the morning would handle it. The perfect, uninterrupted space for a conversation stretched before them.

"Hey," Ilya's voice cut through the low hum of the refrigerator, "come help me with a late-night snack." He was standing at the entrance to the kitchen, a soft domesticity in the invitation that made Shane's heart ache. He loved this. The simple, everyday feeling of it. In the kitchen, Ilya pulled out tuna, mayonnaise, and bread. "How do you like it?" he asked, a focused intensity in his gaze as if this were the most critical question of the night. "Just tuna and mayo, a little pepper," Shane said, leaning against the island. "Grilled, not just toasted." Ilya nodded, a look of serious consideration on his face as he meticulously mixed the ingredients. As the sandwich sizzled in the pan, Ilya didn't look up from the stove.

"Before we get into everything," he said, his tone suddenly careful, "you should know... I've been seeing someone." The words hit Shane like a punch to the gut. He saw red, a hot surge of betrayal and anger rising in his throat. Another omega? After all this? After asking his daughter to move in? "What the fuck, Ilya?" he snarled, his hands clenching into fists on the countertop. "Are you kidding me? You bring us into your house and you're seeing someone else?"

Ilya turned from the stove, his eyes wide with alarm at Shane's fury. He held up his hands, a placating gesture. "No, no, Shane, not... not like that. I'm seeing a therapist. Her name is Galinda." The anger drained out of Shane as quickly as it had appeared, leaving him feeling foolish and shaky. Ilya let out a small, breathy laugh. "Friday," he explained, turning back to

flip the sandwiches, "I had a telehealth call with her while I was waiting for our date. I went way over our time because I'd just found you again. She knows me. She knows I make... rash decisions. She knew you would be trouble." He grabbed plates from the cabinet in preparation.

He pushed one plate toward Shane, the smell of warm tuna and toasted bread filling the space between them as they waited for their melts to finish. "And well," Ilya gestured vaguely around the pristine kitchen, "here we are. A new home, a daughter she didn't know existed... in three days." He took a pause. "Galinda suggested something to make up for lost time. A back and forth. No secrets, no holding back. Just honest answers to fill in the gaps. If you'd agree to it."

The concept settled in Shane's chest, solid and comforting. It wasn't just talking; it was a structure, a way to navigate the minefield of their past. "Yeah," he said, a small smile touching his lips. "I love that." Ilya's shoulders seemed to relax. He wiped his hands on a napkin, his expression growing serious as he looked at Shane from across the island. "Alright," he began, the first shot fired in their quiet war of silence.

"Did the Metros throw you out because you presented as omega?"

Shane let out a humorless laugh. "It's a little more pathetic than that," he admitted. "The official reason was a 'mutual parting of ways due to medical condition,' but the unofficial one... yeah. The team said they couldn't concentrate, said that the locker room 'smelled like a pancake house' and it was a distraction. Hayden Pike, who I thought was a friend, was the worst. Tossed me to the curb without a second glance. The NHL gave me a five-year severance to keep my mouth shut, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough to raise a kid on your own in a city like Montreal" He looked up, meeting Ilya's intense gaze. "So yes. When I came in that day, smelling exactly like the pancakes they were all making fun of... that was the end. My turn," he said, his voice firming.

"Why did you look for me?"

Ilya took a long drink of water, setting the glass down with a quiet click that echoed in the stillness of the kitchen. He stared at the condensation trickling down the side, gathering his thoughts. "I saw the news. The early retirement announcement. I had to know if you were okay. What we shared in that hotel in LA... it wasn't just a hook-up for me. I couldn't stop thinking about you. But I didn't want to push, not until you were ready to come back, to be what you deserved. Then I saw that press release, and I said fuck it. I had to find you. I wanted to hold you and protect you, but when I got to your address, there was nothing. An empty house, and one of my old t-shirts left on the floor." His voice was rough with the memory, and he shook his head slightly. "It drove me crazy."

Shane swallowed hard, the image of Ilya finding that empty, lonely house hitting him with unexpected force. Ilya's next question came quickly, as if he was afraid to lose his nerve.

"Did you think about calling me after you found out you were pregnant?"

This one was harder. Shane pushed his half-eaten sandwich away, his appetite gone. "Yes. God, yes. Almost every day. But then I started doing research. About how male alphas,

especially ones with male omegas, were treated in Russia. What they would do to you if they found out. And what they would do to her if they knew she was yours." He looked up, his eyes pleading with Ilya to understand. "I was so scared, Ilya. Not for me, but for her. I was alone, my mom was working two jobs just to keep the lights on. I went to all those appointments by myself. It was... so lonely. But it wasn't as scary as the thought of ruining your life, and her future, all at once."

Ilya listened, his expression unreadable but for a slight tightening around his eyes. When Shane finished, a heavy silence descended. It was Ilya who broke it, his question a direct, painful probe.

"Did you... did you ever move on? Try to find someone else?"

A self-deprecating smile touched Ilya's lips as he pushed his drink aside. "I tried." He leaned forward, his elbows on the island, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial low. "The dates were fine, the women were beautiful. I could talk, I could even kiss them. But when it came to anything more... my body just... rejected them." He paused, his gaze flicking down to his own hands before meeting Shane's again. "The only way I could find any relief was alone, and it was always to the memory of you. I'd close my eyes, and it would be your hands on me, your mouth. I'd grip my own cock, pretending you were riding it, imagining you whispering my name. Around year three, I started to lose the details of your face, and that scared me more than anything. All I had left were the freckles I could barely remember, scattered like a piece of art. It was... pathetic. That's why I started seeing Galinda. That, and the depression after my father died." He took a ragged breath, his confession laid bare on the pristine kitchen counter. Then it was Shane's turn, and he asked the question that had been gnawing at him since Ilya had revealed his lonely self-pleasure.

"Did you find anyone else? Another alpha? For your heats?" The questions were blunt.

"No," Shane's voice was quiet, almost a whisper. "Never." He stared at the granite countertop, tracing a nonexistent pattern with his fingertip. "After Elena was born, I spent my heats alone. I'd book a cheap hotel room for three days, one I could barely afford. Just me, a dildo, and some premade meals and water. It sucked. It still sucks." He finally looked up at Ilya, the raw vulnerability in his eyes a stark contrast to the hardness of his next words. "My mom, she's a beta, would watch Elena. I never knew if I'd come out of it alive. What if something went wrong? No one would know to check on me except for my mom, and even then... what if it was too late?"

The thought made Ilya physically sick, a wave of nausea rolling through him. The image of Shane, alone and vulnerable, in some hotel room, fighting through a potentially dangerous heat by himself, was unbearable. He looked like he'd been struck, all the color draining from his face. Just then, the sharp ding of the oven timer cut through the heavy air, startling them both. "They're done," Ilya said, his voice strained. He turned to pull the perfect golden-brown sandwiches from the oven, the simple domestic task a welcome distraction in a sea of overwhelming emotions. He slid a third plate onto the island, a fragile peace offering between them. They could continue as they ate. The silence stretched for a few minutes as they took their first bites, the warm, cheesy food a small comfort. Finally, Shane broke the quiet, asking the question that was arguably the most practical, and yet the most terrifying.

"Would you be able to come out? Publicly?"

The food was a welcome distraction, a temporary anchor in the storm of their shared history. Ilya chewed slowly, thoughtful, as if weighing the gravity of the question against the mundane act of eating. "Uhm," he began, setting down his sandwich. "I'm not sure. I'd want to talk to my agent, Farah, about it. The team would be fine. We have a gay guy on the team now—Troy Barrett. He's not out publicly, but we all know. They tease him sometimes, but it's... brotherly. We all respect him. It wouldn't change that. But I don't want the world to attack you and Elena. It would be a huge deal. The world still knows who Shane Hollander is, but they don't know what happened. Imagine the scandal—they find out he's been hiding a perfect daughter and a beautiful alpha under their noses for years." He looked at Shane, his eyes burning with a fierce, protective light. "But I would do anything for you, Shane. I'd give up hockey right now and move to Canada for you. My life's purpose now is to protect my family and love them."

Shane's breath hitched, the air thickening in his lungs until it felt like he was breathing water. Ilya's words weren't just words; they were a vow, a shield, a home being offered right here in this pristine kitchen. He wanted to reach across the island, to thread his fingers through Ilya's and never let go. Instead, he gripped the edge of his plate, the cool porcelain a grounding force against the tremor in his hands. He swallowed past the lump in his throat, the taste of tuna and toast a strange comfort against the overwhelming tide of emotion threatening to pull him under.

And then Ilya chimed in, his voice soft, hesitant.

"What was it like for you? When you was pregnant?"

That question, however, was the one that finally shattered the carefully constructed composure Shane had been maintaining. The sandwich plate suddenly felt a hundred pounds heavier in his hands, the mundane object a painful reminder of everything he'd endured alone.

"It was..." Shane started, his voice rough, then cleared his throat. "It was lonely. So incredibly lonely." He pushed his plate away, his appetite completely gone. "At first, it was just this surreal thing. These phantom flutters that I thought were just gas until the doctor confirmed. Then they became kicks, strong little jabs that would keep me up at night. Sometimes I'd talk to her, just whispering in the dark of my tiny apartment. I'd tell her about hockey, about Montreal, about you. I never used your name, but I'd tell her about this alpha with eyes the color of the sky after a storm and hands that..." He broke off, swallowing hard. "I told her she was loved, even if it was just by me."

He looked up, his eyes dark with memories. "The worst part was the fear. Every appointment was a new terror. The doctors were... extremely concerned. They'd never seen a male omega carrying to term before. They treated me like a science experiment, asking invasive questions, taking extra scans. I felt like a circus freak, and every time they said the baby was healthy, a part of me didn't believe them."

His hands began to shake as he spoke, and he wrapped them around himself, as if trying to hold his younger self together. "My labor started at 3 AM. I'd been having contractions for hours, thinking they were just Braxton Hicks, until my water broke. And there was blood. So

much blood." His voice cracked, the words catching in his throat. "I called 911, barely able to speak through the pain and the terror. My mom met me at the hospital, her face white with fear. She'd never seen anything like this either."

"The doctors decided on an emergency C-section. I remember signing forms with a shaking hand, not really understanding what I was agreeing to. They gave me the epidural, but I could still feel everything—pressure, tugging, this sense of being split open. And then... nothing. For a moment, there was just silence. And I thought she was gone. That I'd gone through all this for nothing."

Tears streamed down his face now. "Then she cried. This tiny, furious sound, and they held her up for a second before whisking her away. And I thought, 'Okay, it's over. We made it.' But it wasn't over."

He took a ragged breath, his body trembling. "They couldn't stop the bleeding. My body was rejecting... well, everything. I remember fading in and out, hearing my mom crying, seeing panicked faces above me. They gave me blood transfusions, but it wasn't enough. The last thing I remember was a doctor saying 'We're losing him,' and thinking of you. I thought, 'At least I'll get to see him again when he gets where I'm going.'"

Shane finally looked at Ilya, his face a mask of raw pain. "I coded on the table, Ilya. For two minutes and seventeen seconds, I was dead. They brought me back, but it was... close. Too close. I woke up hours later, tubes and wires everywhere, my first coherent thought being 'Where's my baby?' They brought her to me, this tiny scrap of humanity wrapped in a pink blanket, and I just... broke. I held her and I cried, and I promised her I would never, ever let her be alone like that."

The sound of Ilya's choked sob broke through the silence following Shane's answer. Shane's fork clattered against the plate, the sound loud in the suffocating silence. He didn't think, he just moved. He rushed around the granite island, his bare feet silent on the cool floor, and wrapped his arms around the massive, shaking frame of the alpha. He hugged him so hard, burying his face in Ilya's chest, feeling the frantic beat of his heart against his cheek. For a long moment, they just held each other, the only sounds their ragged breaths and the faint hum of the refrigerator. Finally, Ilya's arms came up to circle Shane's back, holding him just as tightly.

"I only have one more question," he whispered, his voice muffled by Shane's hair.

"Will you be my mate? For life?"

Shane pulled back just enough to see Ilya's face, his own heart pounding against his ribs. But before he could speak, Ilya continued, a torrent of words pouring out of him, a desperate, beautiful manifesto of a future he was already claiming. "I know this is moving fast. I'm fully aware of how the outside world would look at this, but I'm not wasting any more time. I need you and Elena to be mine, not just by staying at my house, but by building a home with you. By wearing a ring eventually that tells everyone else to fuck the hell off. You're a Rozanov now." He cupped Shane's face, his thumbs stroking his cheekbones. "I need to mark you. I need to flood her belongings with my scent. I need everyone to know that if they pick on my daughter, they have a big Russian bear to deal with. I need to walk the South End with you

and her tucked in my side. I need to read her bedtime stories and make you dinner and take care of you when you're sick. I need you to travel with me. I need to see her at my games."

That last thought brought a tear to both of their eyes, the shared image so potent it felt real.

Shane was still processing the depth of Ilya's declaration when the alpha's gaze darkened, his voice dropping to a low, possessive growl. "I need to fuck you through our bed every chance we get." That thought made Shane blush furiously, and a small giggle escaped Ilya, a startlingly boyish sound amidst the profound intensity of the moment.

The blush on Shane's cheeks deepened, but he didn't look away. Instead, a fierce, brilliant smile broke across his face, erasing the years of loneliness and pain. "Yes," he breathed, the word a sacred vow. "Yes to all of it." He surged forward, grabbing Ilya's face with both hands, pulling him into another searing kiss. "Now," he demanded against the alpha's lips, "take me to the fucking bedroom and let's make a nest."

Ilya didn't hesitate. With a low growl of pure, unadulterated need, he hooked his arms under Shane's thighs and lifted him effortlessly. Shane instinctively locked his legs around Ilya's waist, their bodies molding together as if they'd been made for this. The kiss deepened, a desperate, hungry tangle of tongues as Ilya carried him out of the kitchen and down the hall.

They tumbled onto the massive California king in a breathless laughter. Ilya pulled back just long enough to slam the bedroom doors shut, the sound a final, definitive punctuation to the world outside. "We have to be quiet," Shane whispered, a flicker of anxiety piercing his desire as he thought of Elena sleeping down the hall. "We can't wake her."

"No, we don't," Ilya said, a confident, almost smug smile playing on his lips. He reached over and flicked on a small, discreet monitor on the nightstand. A soft pink glow emanated from it. "I had a sound monitor installed in her room. It stays green, but if it hears anything over a certain decibel level—like her getting up—it lights up pink." He then raised an eyebrow, a silent challenge in his gaze. "And as for us," he continued, his voice dropping to a low, husky murmur, "the remodeling included soundproof barriers between the master bedroom and the rest of the house. You can be as loud as you want."

Shane nearly fainted at the thought. The sheer, overwhelming consideration of it all—the monitor, the soundproofing, all done in the span of 48 hours, just so they could have this moment, this safety net for their daughter while they reclaimed each other.

It was a sanctuary for the savage music they were about to make. Ilya's words—those beautiful, possessive words—were the match, and the kindling of five years of loneliness went up in a blaze that incinerated all reason. Shane didn't pull him by the waistband; he launched himself, hooking his legs around Ilya's trim waist and dragging him down onto the California king with a grunt of satisfaction. Their mouths met in a clash of teeth and tongue, a kiss that wasn't gentle or sweet, but hungry, desperate, a punishment for every wasted second.

"Five years, you fucking asshole," Shane gasped when Ilya broke away to tear at the collar of Shane's shirt, ripping it clean open. "Five years I had to get myself off with a cheap piece of

silicone."

Ilya's eyes were black fire in the dim light of the bedroom. He bared his teeth, a predator's smile. "Did you think of me, little slut? Did you pretend it was my cock splitting you open?" He slapped Shane's thigh, a sharp, stinging crack that made Shane's dick jump. "You left me," Ilya accused, his voice a low growl as he ripped Shane's pants away, leaving him bare and writhing. "You're the one who ran."

"Make me regret it," Shane challenged, his voice ragged. "Make it so I can't even remember what it feels like to be without you."

That was all the invitation Ilya needed. He didn't go straight for the main event. No, this was a performance, a reclamation. He knelt between Shane's spread legs, his gaze possessive, worshipful. And then he descended. His mouth was hot and wet against the most sensitive part of Shane, a place that hadn't felt the warmth of another person in half a decade. Ilya didn't just lick; he devoured. He used his tongue, his lips, his teeth in a relentless assault that had Shane arching off the bed, his fingers fisting in the sheets, obscenities spilling from his lips. "Oh, fuck, Ilya... yes, just like that... don't you fucking stop."

Shane's body, which had only known the clinical, solitary pleasure of toys, was now being reacquainted with the messy, beautiful reality of another person. Ilya took his time, working him open with his tongue until Shane was a shaking, whimpering mess, his hole fluttering, desperate for more. When Ilya finally slid one finger inside, slick with his own saliva, it was a shock. Shane gasped, his body clenching around the intrusion. It had been so long. But the burn quickly gave way to a deep, throbbing pleasure that made his toes curl. Ilya added a second finger, then a third, stretching him with a skill that spoke of long-dormant memory.

"You're so fucking tight," Ilya groaned, his voice strained with the effort of holding back. "Like a virgin all over again. And this time, I'm not letting you go."

He worked him open with a devastatingly patient rhythm, crooking his fingers to find that special spot inside that made Shane see stars. Shane was babbling now, a stream of pleas and profanity. "Please, Ilya... I need... I need your cock. Now. Please, I'm begging you."

But Ilya wasn't done with his torture. He reached into the nightstand, his movements sure and deliberate, and pulled out a sleek, black butt plug, larger than anything Shane had ever used on himself. "You wanted me to mark you, to flood your belongings with my scent," Ilya said, his voice a low, dangerous purr. He coated the plug with lube, his gaze locked on Shane's face. "Let's start here. Let's get you ready for me."

He pushed the plug against Shane's entrance, a slow, inexorable pressure that had Shane crying out, his hands flying to Ilya's wrists, not to push him away, but to hold on. The stretch was intense, a burning, aching fullness that was almost too much. But then it was in, seated deep inside him, a constant, throbbing reminder of Ilya's possession. Ilya flipped him over then, pulling him up onto his hands and knees. He landed a sharp slap on Shane's ass, right over the base of the plug. "You're going to wear this," he commanded, his voice rough with arousal. "You're going to wear it until I decide you're ready to take my knot."

He fucked him with the plug then, a slow, teasing rhythm that had Shane sobbing with frustration and need. "Please, Ilya... please..." he begged, his face buried in the pillows.

"Please," Ilya mocked, his voice a dark caress. "Please what, whore? Tell me what you need." He twisted the plug, a cruel, perfect movement that sent a jolt of electricity straight up Shane's spine. "Use your words."

"I need your knot," Shane sobbed, the admission tearing from him. "I need you to fill me up, to fucking breed me until I can't walk, until I'm so full of you it's leaking out of me for days."

That was the breaking point. With a guttural roar, Ilya yanked the plug free, leaving Shane feeling achingly empty for only a second before Ilya's cock, hot and impossibly hard, was pressing against his entrance. There was no gentleness, no slow entry. Ilya slammed into him in one brutal, possessive thrust, burying himself to the hilt. Shane screamed, a raw, primal sound of pure pleasure-pain as he was split open, his body finally, finally claiming what it had been starved for for five long years. Ilya set a punishing pace, the slap of skin against skin a loud, percussive beat in the soundproofed room. He gripped Shane's hips hard enough to bruise, pulling him back to meet each thrust, their bodies meeting in a violent, beautiful symphony.

"You're mine," Ilya snarled, his words punctuated by the sharp smack of his hand against Shane's ass again. "This ass is mine. This hole is mine. You're going to take my knot, and you're going to take my cum, and you're going to beg for more." He leaned forward, sinking his teeth into the meat of Shane's shoulder, a claiming bite that was all dominance, all alpha. It sent Shane over the edge. He came with a hoarse cry, his body convulsing, his cock spilling onto the sheets beneath him without ever being touched.

But Ilya wasn't done. He flipped Shane over onto his back, never pulling out, the movement a seamless, fluid continuation of their frenzy. He hooked Shane's legs over his shoulders, changing the angle, hitting that spot inside him with unerring accuracy. He leaned down, their chests slick with sweat, their faces inches apart. "Look at me," he commanded. "Look at me when I fill you up."

Shane's eyes fluttered open, locking with Ilya's. The intensity in the alpha's gaze was overwhelming, a raw, unfiltered emotion that went far beyond mere lust.

He drove into Shane with a renewed, brutal intensity, their bodies slick with sweat, the air thick with the scent of their rutting. "You left me," Ilya snarled, punctuating each word with a punishing thrust. "You left me with nothing but the ghost of your scent on a fucking t-shirt." He reached between them, his rough grip closing around Shane's already sensitive cock, stroking him in a rhythm that was both a reward and a punishment. "Did you think of this?" he demanded, his voice a raw, guttural growl. "Did you think of me when you touched yourself?"

"Yes," Shane sobbed, his hands scrabbling for purchase on Ilya's sweat-slicked back, his nails leaving red furrows in their wake. "Always, Ilya, only you."

The admission seemed to shatter something in Ilya. He let out a ragged groan, his movements becoming erratic, desperate. "Again," he commanded, his grip tightening on Shane's cock.

"Cum for me again. Show me you're mine."

Shane's body, pushed to its absolute limit, obeyed. A second, more intense orgasm tore through him, a blinding, all-consuming wave of pleasure that left him shaking and breathless. As he came, Ilya's knot began to swell, a rapid, inexorable inflation that locked them together. Ilya threw his head back with a roar, his own orgasm crashing through him as he pumped Shane full of his release, a hot, flooding claim that was five years in the making.

They collapsed in a tangle of limbs, their bodies still joined, the only sound in the room their ragged, panting breaths. Ilya's weight was a comforting, grounding pressure, a tangible proof that this was real, that he was here. For a long moment, they just lay there.

But the frenzy wasn't over. It was a temporary lull, a chance to catch their breath before the next wave. As Ilya's knot receded, he rolled them over, pulling Shane on top of him, their bodies still slick with sweat and cum. "Not done yet," he growled, his hands gripping Shane's ass, pulling him down onto his already hardening cock. "We have five years to make up for."

"Ilya," he breathed, a note of genuine apprehension in his voice. "I don't... I don't think I can." He felt exposed, not just physically but emotionally, a raw nerve ending that had been stimulated to its absolute limit.

Instead of moving away, Ilya simply rolled, a fluid shift of muscle that placed him squarely between Shane's thighs, his broad shoulders pushing them wider apart. He didn't give Shane a chance to protest or question. He leaned down, his hot breath ghosting over the mess he'd made of Shane's hole—swollen, red, glistening with Ilya's release. A slow, predatory smile spread across Ilya's face right before he flattened his tongue and dragged it from Shane's perineum up to the sensitive, abused flesh.

Shane's back arched off the bed, a choked gasp tearing from his throat. It was filthy, debauched, and the most intimate thing he had ever experienced. Ilya's tongue was a wet, invasive heat, lapping at his own cum, a claiming act that was both possessive and reverent.

Shane's hands tangled in the sheets, his knuckles white, as Ilya delved deeper, the pointed tip of his tongue fucking into the loose, slippery opening before flattening again to lap up the creamy fluid that trickled out. Ilya took his time, savoring the taste, the texture, the sheer intimacy of it. Then he slid a finger through the mess, coating it with their combined fluids, the digit glistening in the dim light. He brought it to Shane's lips. "Taste," he commanded, his voice a low, husky rumble. "Taste how perfect we are together." Shane's lips parted without hesitation, his tongue darting out to meet Ilya's finger. The taste was salty, musky, undeniably them. It was a primal trigger that bypassed all thought, going straight to the core of his desire.

As Ilya's tongue worked its magic, Shane felt Ilya's erection, hot and hard, pressing against the back of his thigh. He wanted it. He wanted it so badly it hurt. But he wanted something else, too. Something darker, something more. He hesitated, the words caught in his throat, a shameful secret he was afraid to voice. Ilya pulled back, his chin slick with their combined fluids, his eyes dark and knowing. "Tell me," he commanded, his voice a low growl that sent a shiver down Shane's spine. "Tell your alpha what you want. Be clear."

Shane's breath hitched, his heart pounding against his ribs. He took a shaky breath, the words tumbling out in a rush.

"I want... I want you to choke me," he whispered, the admission a relief and a terror. "And pull my hair. And... and spit in my mouth." He paused, his gaze dropping to Ilya's chest. "And I want you to mark me. On my chest. A bite that's going to hurt for a month." Ilya's expression became dark, a primal hunger flashing in his eyes. He moved with a fluid, predatory grace, not bothering to reply with words. Instead, he surged up Shane's body, capturing his wrists in one large hand and pinning them above his head. He used his other hand to angle his cock, still slick and hard, against Shane's entrance, and then thrust forward, burying himself to the hilt in one smooth, possessive stroke that punched the air from Shane's lungs. "You want to be marked?" Ilya snarled, beginning to move, a hard, punishing rhythm. "Then I'll mark you from the inside out."

His free hand left Shane's wrists, tangling in the hair at the nape of his neck and pulling his head back, exposing the long, vulnerable line of his throat. His other hand wrapped around Shane's throat, a firm, unyielding pressure that cut off just enough air to make Shane's head swim. Shane could only nod, his eyes wide with a silent plea. Ilya's grip tightened, a slow, inexorable pressure that made his vision blur at the edges. Then he leaned in, a wad of spit gathering in his mouth. He let it drop, a warm, possessive mark on Shane's lips. "Swallow," he commanded. And Shane did, the act a final, humiliating submission that sent pure, unadulterated pleasure straight to his groin.

The pressure built, a dizzying, terrifying ecstasy that bordered on unconsciousness. Just as Shane's vision began to tunnel, Ilya eased his grip, allowing a rush of precious air to flood his lungs. "Again?" Ilya grunted, his voice a raw, possessive command. Shane's only answer was a desperate nod, a silent plea for more. Ilya's other hand, still tangled in Shane's hair, tightened, pulling his head back even further, arching his neck. The dual sensations—the sharp, exquisite pain in his scalp, the constricting pressure on his throat, the brutal stretch of his ass—were a symphony of sensation that sent him spiraling toward the edge.

"Look at you," Ilya snarled, his grip tightening once more, "so fucking desperate for it. Such a greedy little slut for my hands on you." The words, degrading and loving all at once, were the final push. Shane's body convulsed, a violent, shuddering orgasm tearing through him, his cum splashing across Ilya's chest in a hot, sticky arc. But Ilya wasn't done. He released Shane's throat, allowing him to gasp for breath, but he didn't let go of his hair. Instead, he shifted, his body moving down Shane's, his mouth trailing a hot, wet path down his chest. He found a spot over Shane's heart, the skin smooth and unmarked. He looked up, meeting Shane's dazed, lust-filled eyes. "This is mine," he growled, a final, irrefutable declaration. Then he sank his teeth into the flesh.

It wasn't a gentle love bite; it was a claiming, a brutal, possessive act of ownership. The pain was sharp, immediate, a searing white-hot agony that bloomed into a perverse, throbbing pleasure. Shane screamed, a raw, primal sound of pain and ecstasy as he came again, his body writhing beneath Ilya, *a fourth*, more powerful orgasm wringing him completely dry.

As Shane's body trembled in the aftermath, Ilya finally entered him again, his cock sliding home in one smooth, possessive thrust. Each thrust was a deep, deliberate claim, a possessive

rhythm that seemed to echo in the very marrow of Shane's bones. Ilya's movements were slow, torturous, a grinding tempo that allowed Shane to feel every single inch of him. And then Shane looked down.

His gaze, hazy and unfocused from the twin orgasms, drifted down to his own stomach, slick with sweat and cum. And he saw it. With every powerful thrust of Ilya's hips, with every deep penetration, Shane could see the slight, distinct bulge of his own lower abdomen rising. It was a visceral, breathtaking sight—the physical proof of how deeply Ilya was inside him, how completely he was being claimed.

"Oh, fuck," he breathed, the words a choked gasp of awe and arousal. "Ilya... look."

Ilya followed his gaze, a low, possessive growl rumbling in his chest. He placed a hand on Shane's lower abdomen, his fingers splayed across the skin. "You feel that?" he asked, his voice a rough, triumphant murmur. "You feel me inside you? Filling you up? Making you mine?"

Shane could only nod, his body trembling with a renewed wave of desire. The visual, combined with Ilya's words a final, overwhelming trigger. Ilya's movements became more erratic, his control finally snapping. With a final, brutal thrust, he buried himself to the hilt, his knot swelling, locking them together as he pumped Shane full of his release for a second time. The feeling of being filled, of being so utterly and completely claimed, was a final, devastating wave of pleasure that sent Shane over the edge one last time, a dry, shuddering orgasm that left him limp and boneless in Ilya's arms.

They collapsed with their bodies slick with sweat and cum.

"Mine," Ilya whispered, his voice a raw, possessive murmur against Shane's ear. "You're mine now." And Shane, in the haze of post-coital bliss, could only agree.

Ilya's weight was a solid and the fullness of his knot inside Shane a profound, unignorable reminder of the claim that had just been laid upon him. The energy that had driven them had dissipated, replaced by a deep, boneless exhaustion and a quiet, overwhelming intimacy. Ilya didn't move, save for the slow, steady sweep of his hand up and down Shane's thighs, a comforting, rhythmic caress. He buried his face in the crook of Shane's neck, breathing in his scent, now irrevocably mingled with his own. "Ty moy," (*You are mine*) he murmured, the Russian words a low, possessive rumble against Shane's skin. It wasn't a question, but a statement of fact, a foundational truth of the universe as Ilya now saw it. He shifted slightly, adjusting his weight to be more comfortable, careful not to jostle their joined bodies. "Ya tebya ne otpushchu," (*I won't let you go*) he continued, his lips brushing against the sweat-damp hair at Shane's temple.

The knot finally began to subside, a slow, receding pressure that left Shane feeling achingly empty when Ilya finally pulled out. But Ilya didn't let him feel that emptiness for long. He rolled off the bed, his movements sure and steady, and disappeared into the adjoining bathroom. Shane heard the sound of the shower, then the soft clink of glass. A moment later, Ilya returned, a warm, wet washcloth in one hand and a glass of water in the other. He knelt beside the bed, his expression tender, a stark contrast to the raw, primal dominance he'd displayed just moments before. He gently cleaned Shane, the washcloth warm and soft

against his sensitive, abused skin. He was meticulous, his touch gentle, reverent, as if he were handling something infinitely precious.

He finished, then helped Shane sit up, pressing the glass of water to his lips. "Drink," he commanded, his voice soft but firm. Shane drank, the cool water a soothing balm to his raw throat. Ilya then reached into the nightstand, pulling out a small, white jar. He opened it, scooping out a dollop of a cool, mint-scented salve. "This will help," he said, his thumb gently rubbing the salve into the deep, throbbing bite mark on Shane's chest.

The salve was cool and soothing, a welcome relief against the angry, throbbing bite. Ilya's touch was infinitely gentle, a stark, beautiful counterpoint to the brutal claiming that had put it there. He worked the ointment into the skin, his movements slow and deliberate, then he leaned down and pressed the softest of kisses to the mark, a gesture so tender it made Shane's breath catch. "Moy mal'chik," (*my boy*) Ilya whispered, the words a puff of warm air against the now-numbing skin.

He then guided Shane to lie back, pulling the duvet up over them, cocooning them in its warmth. He wrapped his arms around Shane, pulling him flush against his chest, tucking Shane's head under his chin. The steady, rhythmic beat of Ilya's heart was a lulling, comforting sound against Shane's ear. The frantic, desperate energy of the past four hours had been replaced by a deep, profound quiet, a sense of coming home, of finally being exactly where he was meant to be. Ilya's hand began to trace slow, lazy circles on Shane's back, a silent, continuous reassurance. "Ya budu zdes'," (*I'll be here*) he murmured, his words a promise, a vow.

And as Shane drifted off to sleep, exhausted and sated and utterly, completely claimed, he knew with a certainty that settled deep in his soul that Ilya was right. He was home. He was safe. He was Ilya's.

October 3, 2016

Shane woke not to an alarm, but to the gentle grey light of dawn filtering through the heavy drapes. Beside him, the bed was empty, the sheets cool. A brief, sharp spike of panic pierced the sleepy haze, a vestigial fear from years of waking up alone. He grabbed a pair of Ilya's sweatpants from a chair, the fabric soft and smelling of the alpha, and padded silently into the hallway. The monitor on the nightstand was still a steady, reassuring green. Then he heard it—a soft thumping, and the faint, tinny sound of music.

Following the noise, he found Ilya in the kitchen, a sight so unexpected and ridiculous that a startled laugh escaped him. The giant, fearsome Russian had a pair of wireless headphones in, and was sliding around the polished floor in his socks, shimmying his shoulders and flipping a pancake with a flourish as he hummed along to whatever was playing. He was completely, unselfconsciously happy, and the sight of it made Shane's chest ache with a fierce, tender joy. Ilya glanced up and saw him, a huge, unreserved grin spreading across his face. He pulled the headphones off, letting them drop to the counter, and crossed the room, grabbing Shane's hips and pulling him into a clumsy, joyous dance. "Morning," he rumbled, spinning Shane slightly before dipping him, a move so absurd and romantic it made Shane's head spin.

Their private bubble was violently burst by the unmistakable sound of the front door unlocking and swinging open. Shane froze, every protective instinct screaming as he tore himself from Ilya's arms and sprinted down the hall toward Elena's room.

He could hear a booming, cheerful voice from the entrance. "Roz! You here? Man, why didn't you text me back? Been trying to get ahold of you all weekend! Oh, you're cooking! You've got two plates out and everything. You domesticated motherfucker!"

The realization hit Ilya a second later; he'd forgotten to change the code. Cliff Marleau. His best friend. The one person who'd walk right in unannounced. Before Ilya could move, Cliff appeared in the kitchen doorway, taking in the scene with wide eyes. He looked from the half-eaten stack of pancakes to Ilya's thunderous expression. Ilya's voice was low and cold, a clear warning.

"Marly," Ilya began, the name a flat, dangerous stone, "leave." His usual jovial warmth for his friend had vanished, replaced by the protective, territorial menace of an alpha guarding his den. Cliff, oblivious as ever, just grinned and hopped up onto one of the barstools, completely disregarding the command. "Whoa, whoa, chill out, big guy. Just came to check on you. You're never radio silent this long. I was about to send out a search party." His gaze drifted to the second plate, the fork neatly laid beside it. "So, you got a guest? Don't tell me you finally brought home one of those puck bunnies you're always complaining about."

Just then, Shane emerged from the hall, the small, sleepy form of Elena balanced on his hip. She was a miniature vision of bedhead, her dark hair a fluffy halo around her head, her thumb tucked firmly in her mouth as she rubbed her eyes with a tiny fist. Shane moved with a quiet confidence, stepping up to Ilya's side, a silent, solid wall of support. Cliff's friendly chatter died in his throat, his eyes widening as he took in the scene: the omega he'd seen in the press years ago, the child who was the spitting image of both her parents, and the terrifyingly possessive alpha now hovering over them. His gaze slid from Shane's face down to the stark, purple bruise of a bite mark on his chest. The gears in Cliff's head turned, then audibly slammed into place. "Wait a minute..." he breathed, the cheerfulness draining from his face. "I know you. Hollander... Wait a minute! Holy shit. Roz, I..." He stood up, hands raised in a gesture of peace and apology. "Roz, man, I'm so sorry. I should go. I'm so sorry, I didn't know."

"Yes, you should," Ilya growled, taking a half-step forward, putting himself more squarely between Cliff and his family. But before he could escalate, Shane's soft but firm voice cut through the tension. "Cliff? Can I call you Cliff?" The other alpha nodded, looking utterly bewildered. "How about you join us for breakfast? I think that would be okay, wouldn't it, Ilya?" The question was directed at the alpha beside him, a gentle challenge in the warmth of his tone.

Ilya's entire posture shifted, the rigid anger melting away as if it had never been there. He looked down at Shane, at the steady, confident gaze that was asking for this, for a bridge to be built to the most important person in Ilya's life. The alpha's breath released in a quiet rush, the tension in his shoulders easing as he turned back to his friend. "Sure, sweetheart," he said, the endearment a new, soft thing in the charged air. "Whatever you want." Cliff stared, completely floored by the gentle acquiescence and the raw, possessive display of the bite on

Shane's chest. But Shane was already moving, expertly shifting Elena to the other hip and gesturing to an empty stool. "It's the least you can do for scaring the hell out of me, bursting in like that," he said with a small, disarming smile.

He thought, let him stay. Ilya's best friend should know he's not alone anymore, and Shane wanted to see the man who had been Ilya's family when he had no one. And as he settled Elena into her high chair and Ilya slid a perfectly golden pancake onto a third plate and the stories began.

Chapter 9: It All Happened So Fast.

Chapter Summary

A pancake breakfast turns into chaos when Cliff checks his phone and discovers that the entire internet has just found out about Shane and Ilya. As panic hits and the media storm begins, Ilya fears he's destroyed the life he just found—but unexpected support from his coach, Shane's mother, and his team reminds him he's not facing it alone. By the end of the morning, Elena gains a Papa, Cliff is sent on a cider run, and the Rozanov house prepares for an impromptu cookout with the team.

Cliff sat at Ilya's polished dining table, the remnants of a surprisingly delicious pancake breakfast pushed to the side. His gaze kept drifting to the little girl in the high chair, meticulously trying to feed a syrup-soaked piece of banana to a stuffed bear. His mind, however, was still trying to process the last half hour. The story had been incredible—a whirlwind of rivalry, fear, and a fragile, newly-formed family. As an alpha, Cliff's senses were reeling. The initial, terrifying scent that had hit him when he'd walked in—sharp, cold, and aggressive like being forced to swallow a gallon of minty mouthwash—had been pure Rozanov in territorial defense mode. He'd never felt so much like an intruder, so much like a legitimate threat that needed to be removed. But then Shane had spoken, and the scent had shifted. The mint hadn't vanished, but it had softened, melding with something warm and sweet, like pancakes and maple syrup. It was the scent of a pack, a blend of Rozanov's cool intensity and Hollander's surprising warmth, with little Elena a perfect note of honey tying it all together. It was, against all odds, calming.

He was so lost in thought, charmed by Elena's babbling, that he almost missed it. He'd picked up his phone to snap a quick picture of the girl with a smear of syrup on her nose, and the screen had exploded. The Boston Raiders team chat was a chaotic waterfall of notifications, texts from other players he hadn't heard from in years were lighting up his screen. "Oh my god, Roz," Cliff said, his voice suddenly tight as he stared at his phone. "Have you seen your phone?" "No, why?" Ilya's tone was still relaxed, but Shane's head snapped up, his eyes narrowing with concern. He made a move to stand and grab Ilya's phone, but Cliff held up a hand. "Hey, easy," he said, trying for a casual tone that he didn't feel. "Why don't you two go... check your phones together. In the bedroom. I've got Elena. I'll get her cleaned up." The subtext was clear: Whatever this was, the parents needed to see it alone.

Ilya and Shane walked back to the bedroom, a quiet, tense energy crackling between them. Ilya closed the door, the soft click echoing in the sudden silence. The moment they looked at their screens, the digital storm hit them full force.

Shane's stomach plummeted as he scrolled. His phone was buzzing with a handful of concerned messages—Dana from the hospital, Sveta, and most worryingly, a single, cryptic text from his mother that just read, "Call me." But the true chaos was on Ilya's device. It was

an unending flood of missed calls, frantic texts, and @ mentions from journalists, fans, and teammates. Shane's first, visceral fear was for Elena, and he scanned the articles with a desperate intensity, relief washing over him in a cold wave when he realized that in every grainy, stolen photo, the little girl's face was either turned away or obscured by Ilya's large frame. She was safe.

But the relief was short-lived. He looked up from his phone to Ilya, who had gone stark white. The powerful, confident alpha was crumpled on the edge of the bed, his phone clutched in a hand that was trembling violently. His breath came in short, ragged gasps, his wide eyes fixed on nothing. It was a panic attack, raw and overwhelming. Shane was on his feet in an instant, crossing the room and kneeling before him. "Ilya. Look at me. Breathe." But Ilya couldn't hear him, lost in a terrifying loop. All he could see was his career flashing before his eyes. The "playboy" reputation the media had so generously bestowed upon him was one thing, but this... this was real. This was a family. This was the life he desperately wanted to protect, and he'd just exposed it to the most unforgiving spotlight in the world. He was a US citizen now, so immigration wasn't the dagger it once was, but the PR disaster could be catastrophic. How could he give Shane and Elena the world if he lost the one thing he was good at, the only job that had ever defined him?

They hadn't known this day would arrive so soon, or with such force. A knot of guilt tightened in Shane's stomach—he was out of the NHL, a nurse now. The fallout would land squarely on Ilya's shoulders. But as Shane gently pried the phone from Ilya's trembling fingers, setting it on the nightstand, Ilya finally broke. A choked sound escaped him, a raw, wounded noise. He buried his face in his hands, his broad shoulders shaking.

Shane knelt before him, forcing Ilya's head up until their eyes met. "Hey. We face this together," Shane said, his voice a low, steady anchor in the storm of Ilya's fear.

Ilya just stared, his expression a mask of panic and dawning horror. Shit. Yesterday was supposed to be their first real date. Fuck. They'd only had sex twice—once that had created their beautiful daughter, and the mind-blowing, soul-bonding encounter just last night. They were moving so fast, fueled by years of unspoken tension. Neither of them regretted it for a second, but God, they had been reckless. Holding hands on the train like they were just a normal couple. Him, a quasi-celebrity after five years away, and Ilya, one of the most recognizable faces in Boston. What had they been thinking? They were thinking they could have this, could be like anyone else, could walk in the sun without the world watching. But that wasn't their life.

Just as Shane's words began to penetrate the thick fog of panic, Ilya's phone buzzed again, a harsh, insistent vibration against the nightstand. The screen lit up with a name that made Ilya's blood run cold: Coach LeClaire. His coach. The man who had drafted him, who'd championed him through rookie hazing and trade rumors, who loved him like a second son. Ilya flinched away from it as if it were a venomous snake, thumbing the screen to silence the call. He couldn't. He couldn't bear to hear the disappointment, the inevitable lecture about responsibility and focus. A text message flashed on the screen the second the call went to voicemail. It was short, devoid of any warmth.

Answer. Now. Rozanov.

It was the full use of his last name that broke him. This wasn't a check-in; this was a summons. "He's going to be mad at me," Ilya whispered, the words hollow and final. He felt the fight drain out of him, replaced by a bone-deep certainty. "He's going to trade me. Or worse." Before Shane could offer another reassurance, the phone rang again, the same harsh, demanding buzz. With a shuddering breath that felt like his last, Ilya swiped to answer. He didn't speak, just held the phone to his ear, a condemned man awaiting his sentence. Shane shifted on the bed, moving closer, his shoulder a firm, solid pressure against Ilya's arm. He wasn't going to let him face this alone.

"Ilya." The coach's voice was rough, but not with anger. It was laced with something that sounded unnervingly like concern. "You okay, kid?" Ilya was so stunned by the question that he could only manage a choked noise in response. "Listen to me," LeClaire continued, his tone firm but unwavering. "I don't give a damn who you were holding hands with. I give a damn about my captain. Are you alright? Your family, are they safe?" The question, so different from what Ilya had been bracing for, was like a punch to the chest. He felt a hot sting behind his eyes and had to blink rapidly.

"It's going to be a shitshow, Rozanov. No sugar-coating it," the coach went on. "The vultures are already circling. But you listen to me, and you listen good. You focus on what matters. You and yours. I'm going to handle the press. I'm already on the phone with PR. We will protect you to the best of our ability. You're the best player in this league, and you're our captain. That hasn't changed. Nothing else matters." LeClaire's voice was a bulwark against the rising tide of Ilya's fear, each word a deliberate, defensive placement. "We're putting up a wall around you and this team, and we're weathering this storm together. Do you hear me?" Ilya could only manage a weak nod, forgetting for a moment that the coach couldn't see him. He felt Shane's hand cover his where it rested on the bed, a silent, grounding pressure.

"You take the day," LeClaire commanded, his tone softening slightly. "Take tomorrow, too. Get your house in order. Talk to your family. I'll handle the wolves. Don't talk to anyone else, you hear me? No reporters. No statements. Let us do the work. Your only job right now is to make sure that you, and whoever is with you, are okay. That's an order, Rozanov." The use of his last name again, but this time it wasn't a threat; it was an anchor, pulling him back to the familiar world of locker rooms and strategy sessions. Ilya's throat worked, and he finally found his voice, rough with unspent emotion. "Yes, Coach." The words were barely audible, but they were there. "I hear you." "Call me if you need anything. Anything at all. I've got your back. Always."

The line went dead, and Ilya slowly lowered the phone from his ear, the solid weight of it feeling impossibly heavy. The panic attack that had been clawing at his throat receded. The fear wasn't gone, not completely, but it was no longer an all-consuming fire. It was a low, smoldering ember, manageable. He turned to Shane, the full weight of the last ten minutes etched onto his face.

"He's not... getting rid of me," Ilya said, the words feeling foreign on his tongue, like he was trying out a new language. He was still looking at the dark screen of his phone, but he turned it over and set it face down on the nightstand. He finally met Shane's gaze, his own eyes still wide with a lingering disbelief. "He just... wanted to know if I was okay. If *we* were okay."

He took a deep, shuddering breath, the air feeling easier to draw than it had just minutes before. "He told me not to worry. That they're putting up a... a wall around me. Around us. He said my job is to focus on my family, and let him and the PR team handle everything." He said the word 'family' with a newfound reverence, as if testing its weight and finding it solid, real.

"LeClaire said... he said he's got my back. Always." Ilya's voice cracked on the last word, the last vestiges of his control crumbling. The sheer, unyielding support from the man he admired most in the world, at the moment he'd least expected it, was a more powerful force than the panic. He leaned into Shane, burying his face in the omega's shoulder, and for the first time in a long time, he let himself be held.

Shane pressed a kiss into Ilya's hair, a profound sense of relief washing over him. He had been so focused on shielding Ilya from the fallout, he hadn't considered who might be shielding Ilya from the fallout. It seemed the formidable captain had more allies than he'd ever let on, a quiet support system that ran deeper than the usual team camaraderie. That thought, coupled with the solid presence of the man in his arms, filled Shane with a fierce, unshakeable resolve. They had each other. They had their daughter. Whatever storm was raging outside these walls, they were the eye of it, and they were unstoppable. But still, the world was out there, and he had one more call to make, one that could either be another battle or another reinforcement. "Ilya," Shane murmured, stroking the alpha's back. "I need to call my mom."

Ilya stirred, pushing himself up. "Of course," he said, his voice still hoarse but stronger now. "I'll give you some privacy." He made to stand, to leave Shane to it, but Shane's arm shot out, pulling him firmly back down onto the bed. "No," Shane said, his tone leaving no room for argument. "I want you here with me." Ilya looked at him for a long moment, a flicker of surprise and then something soft and vulnerable in his eyes, before he simply nodded. "Okay." Taking a deep breath, Shane found his mother's contact and, on impulse, hit the button for FaceTime. A few rings later, Yuna Hollander's familiar face filled the screen, her brow furrowed with immediate concern. "Shane? Are you and Elena okay? The internet is a complete circus right now."

"We're fine, Mom," Shane assured her, turning the phone slightly so that Ilya's profile was visible. "Elena is fine. She's in the living room with... Cliff Marleau." Yuna's eyes widened in disbelief. "Cliff Marleau? The Raiders defenseman? Ilya? Are you... are you Ilya Rozanov?" Ilya, who had been trying to compose himself, straightened up slightly and offered a small, respectful nod. "Nice to meet you, ma'am." Shane took a steadying breath, looking from the screen to the man beside him. "Mom," he said, his voice full of conviction. "I wanted you to meet my alpha. My partner. My heart. Ilya Rozanov." For a beat, Yuna was silent, her expression unreadable as she stared at the two of them, at her son's face.

For a beat, Yuna was silent, her expression unreadable as she stared at the two of them, at her son's tear-stained face and the imposing alpha now holding him. Then, a slow, brilliant smile spread across her face, warm and genuine and full of understanding. "Welcome to the family, Ilya."

Ilya physically flinched, a full-body shudder of pure, unadulterated shock. His head whipped around to stare at Shane, his eyes wide with a disbelief so profound it was almost painful. He'd heard 'alpha,' the primal, defining term that still sent a chill through him. He'd heard 'partner,' the modern, equalizing word that spoke of a shared life. But it was 'my heart' that had undone him. A simple, common phrase, but coming from Shane, it was a sacred vow, a public declaration that went far deeper than any mating bite. He looked back at the phone, at Yuna's smiling face, a woman he had only ever seen on television or in the stands, and she was welcoming him, accepting him without reservation. The sheer, overwhelming weight of it all—the acceptance from the coach, the unconditional support from Shane, and now this blessing from his mother—was too much. He felt a hot prick behind his eyes and had to blink rapidly, swallowing hard against the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat.

Shane felt the shift in Ilya, the tremor that ran through his frame, and he squeezed his shoulder, a silent acknowledgment of the monumental moment. He turned back to the phone, a watery smile on his own face. "There's more, Mom," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "Ilya... he's also Elena's other father."

The smile on Yuna's face vanished, replaced by a stunned, wide-eyed confusion. The screen seemed to freeze for a second before her brain caught up. "What?" she breathed, the single word a whirlwind of questions. "Shane Hollander, you have exactly thirty seconds to start talking, and you will not stop until I have a full rundown from beginning to end. Did you move to Boston for him? Have you been seeing each other in secret for years? When did this even start? And why on earth are you not in your own apartment? Start. Talking. Now."

Shane let out a slow breath, preparing for the interrogation, but before he could even form the first sentence, a deep, rumbling sound started beside him. It was Ilya, laughing. A real, genuine laugh, full of shock and relief, bubbling up from his chest. He wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, still chuckling as he looked from Shane's face to the small screen. "Wow," Ilya managed, his voice rich with amusement. "I really like her. She's just like you." The sheer, unexpected joy of it hit Shane, and he found himself chuckling too, a weak, watery sound that was part laugh, part sob. The tension in the room shattered, replaced by a warm, chaotic energy. For the next fifteen minutes, Shane talked, with Ilya interjecting a gruff confirmation or a soft correction when he got a detail wrong. They told her everything—the truth about Elena's conception, the long, painful years in between, Shane running into Ilya at the hospital only three days ago, the two moving into Ilya's home, and their first date. By the time they hung up, the weight of the secret felt lighter, shared.

"Okay," Shane said, finally setting the phone down. "We should go check on our daughter." He stressed the word 'our,' and Ilya's smile softened. "And on Cliff," Ilya added, a hint of his earlier territorialism returning. "Let's go make sure she hasn't killed him." They made their way down the stairs, the comfortable silence between them a stark contrast to the digital storm raging outside. As they reached the bottom, they could hear the sounds of a very animated conversation from the living room.

They rounded the corner to a scene that stopped them in their tracks. Cliff was on the floor, on his hands and knees, making growling dinosaur noises while Elena, shrieking with laughter, tried to climb onto his back. Her syrup-smeared face was alight with pure,

unadulterated joy. Cliff looked up, his expression a mixture of embarrassment and sheer delight. "Uh, hey," he said, slowly getting to his feet and dusting off his pants. "She, uh, she wanted to play dinosaurs but wouldn't let me clean her face." Shane felt a warmth spread through his chest that had nothing to do with the bite mark. He looked at Ilya, who was watching the scene with an expression of stunned, grudging approval.

Ilya walked over to Cliff and clapped a hand his shoulder. "Coach just gave me the day off and so I'm going to give the team the day off, too. I'm gonna' use it. This warm October weather is too good to waste inside." He looked past Cliff, just a few feet away where Elena's small, happy noises drifted out as she played with her dolls. "As long as LeClaire has my back, I don't think anything can really phase me right now. I need to introduce Shane and Elena to the team. These guys... they're my other pack. They're my brothers. I want them to meet my family." His expression softened.

"Hell, Elena might love having a few dozen more uncles." He looked at Cliff, a familiar, mischievous glint in his eye. "Text the guys. Afternoon practice is cancelled. We're having a cookout. Here. I'll order steaks for everyone." His gaze shifted to the little girl who had just wandered back into the room. "And I'll order chicken nuggets for my little nugget." Elena beamed. "Thank you, Mr. Ilya!" she chirped, before turning and darting down the hall to her room. The three men stood in a sudden, heavy silence, the weight of her innocent words landing between them. She didn't know. She didn't know he was anything more than a kind friend.

Cliff broke the quiet, his voice a low whistle. "Damn, Roz. That's... a lot. She doesn't know?" He could see the way the realization struck Ilya, a flicker of hurt and worry clouding his expression. They had been so careful, tiptoeing around the truth with the curious four-year-old. It seemed like everything was happening at once. Why not add another cog to the wheel?

Suddenly, Shane was at Ilya's side, pulling Ilya's wallet from the back pocket of his jeans. The sheer, casual confidence of the gesture made Ilya's eyebrows shoot up. Shane pulled out a debit card and handed it to Cliff. "Go down to Drover Orchard," he instructed, "get a few cases of cider for the cookout. Ask for Harris and tell him who it's for and invite him along." Ilya blinked. "Who's Harris?" he asked, a note of possessiveness creeping into his tone before he could stop it.

Shane chuckled, leaning into Ilya's side. "Relax," he murmured.

"He's not my type," Shane continued, his voice a low, confident murmur against Ilya's ear, a direct balm to the alpha's sudden spike of jealousy. "My type is six-foot-four, blue-eyed, chiseled, Russian, probably the best hockey player of all time, with an asshole-ish streak that hides the fact he's the most caring and loving person I've ever met." He punctuated this with a soft kiss to Ilya's jaw. "Harris is... not that." Ilya relaxed, the tension draining from his shoulders as Shane explained. "Harris is an omega, like me. We met at the Aldi on Kent Street a few months ago, right after we moved in. We hit it off instantly. He's kind, and nice, but he's not... you. Always talking about social media and photography and directing. He's maybe five-foot-eight, cute, with a little cubish belly, red hair and a matching beard. Looks like he takes care of himself, but in a 'works on a farm' way, not a 'rips it at the gym' way.

You'll see. You'll love him, and I could use a buffer amongst all of the Raiders that are going to be here."

Cliff just shook his head, a grin on his face as he took the debit card. "You two are something else," he said, before turning and heading for the door. "Steaks, cider, and a redhead. Got it." As the door clicked shut behind him, Shane and Ilya shared a look. It was time. They walked down the short hallway to Elena's room, the door slightly ajar. They knocked softly. "Elena, sweetheart?" Shane called. "Can we come in? We need to talk to you about something."

"Finally!" came her exasperated little voice from inside. They pushed the door open to find her sitting on her bed, arms crossed over her chest with an expression that was all Ilya. "I was wondering when you two were going to tell me." They both froze, completely baffled. Before they could even process her statement, she was issuing orders. "Mr. Ilya, you sit behind me and do my hair," she instructed, patting the spot on the bed behind her. "And Daddy, you sit in front of me." Shane, trying to process how she'd figured it out, moved to the small pink vanity.

He started to lower himself into the tiny chair, which groaned in protest at his plump ass, but before he could even begin, he decided to just dive in. "Elena," he began, trying to find the right words. "You know how you've only ever had a daddy?" She nodded, her eyes fixed on her reflection in the small mirror behind Shane. "Well, Mr. Ilya is... he's going to be our alpha. He's going to be part of our pack, to take care of us. Are you okay with that?" Elena paused her hair-brushing for a second, a thoughtful look on her face. "Okay," she said simply. Shane took a deep breath and went for the most important part. "And, sweetie... you know how you've never had a mommy or another daddy before?" She nodded again, a little less sure this time. "Well... Mr. Ilya is your other daddy."

"Woahhhhh," she breathed, her eyes going wide with dawning comprehension. "That's why I saw you kissing Daddy in our apartment!" Both Shane and Ilya froze, their brains screeching to a halt. At some point during the night, when they had fallen asleep on the couch in their makeshift nest, Shane must have kissed Ilya in his sleep. The little girl explained how she had woken up, seen them, and thought it was a secret game. Instead of being upset, she had just crawled in and cuddled with them both. The sheer, unadulterated shock on Shane's face, the way he blinked profusely and turned a brilliant shade of red, sent Ilya into a fit of laughter, a deep, rumbling sound that shook the bed. Elena joined him, their laughter mingling in the small room, a beautiful, chaotic sound.

Then it was Ilya's turn to blush. Elena turned around on the bed, her small face suddenly serious as she looked from one of them to the other. "Does this mean you're Dada?" she asked Ilya, her brow furrowed. "He's Daddy, and you're Dada?" Ilya's breath hitched with a shot to the heart in the best possible way. His vision swam as he looked at this perfect little girl, a product of a chance encounter. "No, kroshechnyy," he managed, his voice thick with unshed tears.

"I'm going to be Papa. If that's okay?"

The little girl's face lit up like the Fourth of July, a grin so wide and pure it nearly knocked the air out of Ilya's lungs. "Papa! I like it!" she squealed with delight, the word rolling off her

tongue like it was the most natural thing in the world to say. "Now can I go play with dolls, Papa?" Ilya felt like he'd been shot in the heart a second time, a clean, perfect shot that left nothing but overwhelming love in its wake. He had heard her say it twice, and the name sounded more perfect than any goal-call, louder than any Stanley Cup roar. "Go ahead, baby," he whispered, his voice choked.

She launched herself from the bed, her small arms wrapping around Ilya's neck in a fierce hug, followed by a sticky, wet kiss on his cheek. Then she was a blur of motion, tackling Shane who was still trying to process the scene, her own small form colliding with his. Just like that, she was gone, running out of the room and down the hall, her little feet padding against the hardwood floor as she yelled, "I'm going to watch Frozen and play with my dolls!" The silence she left behind was profound. Ilya sat on the bed, tears now freely streaming down his face, a messy, overwhelmed, ridiculously happy mess. And just like that, Ilya was Papa. Shane walked over and sat next to him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. He leaned in close, whispering into Ilya's ear, "Papa, eh? I may have to use that in the bedroom later?" Ilya choked on a laugh, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand as his body responded instantly to the suggestion.

The high of the moment in Elena's room lasted until they walked back into the living room, and the reality of what Ilya had just proposed hit Shane. *A cookout. For the entire Boston Raiders. Last minute.*

"Ilya," Shane said, his voice suddenly tight, "we can't just... we don't have anything. How many people are we talking about here? Twenty? Thirty? I can't feed thirty hockey players on two hours' notice!" His hands were starting to feel a little clammy, a familiar prickle of anxiety crawling up his neck. This was a disaster waiting to happen. What if they ran out of food? What if the house wasn't clean enough?

Ilya just chuckled, a deep, reassuring sound that cut through Shane's rising panic. He grabbed Shane's hand, pulling him toward the couch and plopping down next to him, pulling out his phone and opening the Instacart app. "Calm down, Shane," he said, the word a soothing balm. "It's not the whole team. When I told Cliff to invite 'the guys,' he knows what that means." He started tapping at the screen, adding items to a cart with practiced efficiency. "It's a small group. There's Troy, of course. And Luca Haas, our rookie. I've kind of adopted him. Zane Boodram will probably come, and maybe Vincent. And Wyatt Hayes." He looked up at Shane, a fond smile on his face. "That's it. Wyatt might bring his wife, and Zane might bring his wife and their kid. We've done this before. It'll be small. Just my pack." Shane felt the tension in his shoulders release, the knot in his stomach loosening at the clarification. A small group. Not an invading army of giant, hungry alphas. He could handle a small group.

Shane was still looking a little shell-shocked by the smaller guest list when Ilya deftly plucked the phone from his grasp. "Don't worry," Ilya said, his focus already on the Instacart app. "I'll get this." He started scrolling and tapping, a look of fierce concentration on his face. He added two family-sized bags of dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets. Then a giant tub of chocolate ice cream. Then another. Then three different kinds of potato chips, gummy worms, fruit snacks, and a case of apple juice boxes. He had a lot of time to make up for, years of birthdays and holidays he hadn't been a part of, and he was going to make a dent in it today.

Shane, still lost in the logistics of it all, wasn't paying much attention, simply letting the rhythmic tapping of Ilya's fingers on the screen wash over him. After about ten minutes of this, Ilya grunted in satisfaction and hit the 'Place Order' button. The confirmation screen flashed up: Total: \$1,304.04. Ilya's thumb hovered over the payment option and he automatically hit 'Pay with card on file,' his mind already moving on to whether he'd remembered to order A1 sauce for the steaks.

Then, it hit him. The card on file. His head snapped up. "Oh, shit." He had completely forgotten he was using Shane's phone. Did Shane even have that kind of money just sitting in his checking account? Panic, cold and sharp, flooded Ilya's veins. He looked at Shane, whose eyes had just drifted over to see the receipt on the screen. All the color drained from Shane's face as he stared at the four-digit number. "Shane, I—" Ilya started, but the words got stuck. He bolted across the room to the kitchen island, nearly tripping over an area rug in his haste. "What's your Venmo? I'm so sorry, I didn't realize, I'll pay you back right now."

Shane still hadn't picked his jaw up off the floor. He looked completely stunned, a statue of pale-haired horror. Ilya's heart hammered against his ribs. He'd screwed up. He'd been so caught up in providing, in overcompensating, that he'd been reckless. He rushed back to Shane's side, wrapping his arms around him in a desperate hug. "Shane, talk to me. Please. What's your Venmo name?"

He rushed back to Shane's side, wrapping his arms around him in a desperate hug. "Shane, talk to me. Please," Ilya begged, his own panic rising as Shane remained silent and unnervingly still. "What's your Venmo name? I'll send it right now. I'm so sorry, I just... I got carried away." He could feel the stiffness in Shane's body, the way he held himself away, even within the embrace. Ilya's heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic rhythm of regret. He'd been so focused on showering Elena with things, on making up for lost time in the most material way possible, that he hadn't stopped to think. He hadn't considered the reality of Shane's finances, the careful budgeting that had surely been a part of their life for four years. He hadn't considered that he might be causing shame instead of joy.

Shane slowly, mechanically, unlocked his phone and opened the Venmo app, the screen a bright, accusatory white. He held it out to Ilya, but he didn't look at him. His gaze was fixed on some point on the far wall, his jaw tight, and the sadness Ilya had seen earlier had deepened into something more painful, something that looked a lot like shame. Ilya took the phone, his thumb hovering over the keypad, ready to type in the astronomical sum, but he couldn't do it. Not yet. This wasn't a transaction that needed to be fixed with money; it was a wound he had unknowingly opened. He took a shaky breath, the nickname feeling clumsy on his tongue, but he knew it was the only way past this wall.

"Okay, kotenok," he murmured, the word a soft, desperate plea against Shane's hair. "I'm sorry." At that, something in Shane seemed to break. He finally let out a long, shuddering breath and melted fully into Ilya's arms, burying his face in the alpha's chest. "It's okay," he mumbled, the words muffled by Ilya's shirt. "It's okay." They stood there for a long moment, Ilya holding him tight, rocking him gently, promising himself he would never be this careless again. He would never make this amazing, strong, independent man feel like he couldn't provide for his own family. When Shane finally pulled back, his eyes were clear, the sadness replaced by a familiar, stubborn resolve.

"What does that mean?" Shane asked, his curiosity piqued. The word was a low, rolling murmur against Ilya's chest, foreign and intimate. He tilted his head back to look at the alpha, his earlier distress forgotten, replaced by a quiet interest. "What's 'kotenok'?" Ilya's expression softened, a deep affection warming his features as he looked down at the man in his arms. He loved that Shane had asked, that he wanted to know this piece of him.

"It means 'kitten'," Ilya explained, his voice a low rumble. Shane blinked, then a slow, endearing smile spread across his face. He let out a small, huff of a laugh. "Kitten? Seriously?" He didn't sound mocked, just... charmed. "I like it," he decided, nuzzling back into Ilya's embrace. "Will you... will you teach me Russian one day?" The question was so quiet, so full of a hopeful desire to be closer, that it hit Ilya with the force of a body check. He loved that thought more than anything. Sharing his language, his culture, the very core of who he was with Shane and their daughter. "Yes," Ilya breathed, his voice thick with emotion. "Of course."

He captured Shane's lips in a deep and tender kiss. Their daughter was only feet away, a small, perfect world contained within their arms, and for a moment, everything was right. Just as the kiss began to deepen, a buzz from Ilya's phone on the kitchen island broke the spell. Ilya grumbled but reluctantly let him go to grab it. He glanced down at the text from Cliff, a wide, genuine smile spreading across his face as he showed the screen to Shane.

Steaks, Cider, and Harris en route. The rest of the guys will be here in about an hour.

Chapter 10: Oh, can't you see (You belong to me?)

Chapter Summary

Ilya's teammates are coming over for the first time, and suddenly Shane's quiet new life turns into a backyard full of hockey players, curious questions, and one very important reveal.

As the Raiders meet the captain's secret family, loyalties are tested, jealousy sparks in unexpected places, and Shane begins to realize just how fiercely Ilya claims the people he loves.

By the end of the night, the truth is out, the team has chosen their side, and Shane and Ilya finally cross a line they've been circling for years.

Before the chaos began, they sat on the couch with a small, serious-faced Elena between them. "Papa's friends are coming over, solnyshko," Ilya began, using the Russian word for 'little sun'. "They might be loud, but they're good people. If you ever feel like you need a break, you just tell one of us, and we'll go somewhere quiet, okay?" Elena nodded, her brow furrowed in concentration. Shane watched her, a strange realization dawning on him. Since Ilya had arrived, since this warm, cinnamon scent had filled the apartment, Elena hadn't had a single sensory issue. No meltdowns over loud noises or itchy tags. It was as if Ilya's very presence was a balm, a calming pheromone neither of them was consciously aware of. She was freer, less cautious, and genuinely happier. After their talk, Elena's eyes lit up. "Are other kids coming?" she asked, her voice filled with hope. "Yes," Ilya confirmed. "The Hayes kids are coming. They're five and seven." That was all the encouragement she needed. Elena hopped up and marched determinedly toward her room. "I'm going to make my bed and lay out my best toys!" she declared. Shane watched her go, a warmth spreading through his chest.

He turned to Ilya, his eyes shining. "Thank you," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "I love you."

They both rose from the couch, and a dynamic shift occurred. "Okay, you go start the grill outside," Shane said, pointing toward the back door. "Cliff should be here with the steaks soon. I'll get the salad started." The authority in Shane's voice was natural, comfortable. It was new for Ilya. In Russia, the dynamic was rigid; an alpha commanded, and an omega served. But here, in this American home with Shane, it was different. It was a partnership. He wasn't here to be a master, but a provider and supporter, and in turn, Shane was giving structure and warmth to the sprawling, empty house Ilya had lived in. It felt good to be part of an ecosystem where he was cared for, not just feared. Ilya chuckled as he came back in from lighting the grill, finding Shane expertly tossing a Caesar salad in a large ceramic bowl Ilya didn't even know he owned.

Laughing, Ilya leaned against the kitchen island, watching Shane's skilled hands work. "How did you even find these bowls? I didn't know I had them." Shane looked up, a stray piece of romaine lettuce stuck to his cheek. "The decorators must have stocked the kitchen. They turned this bachelor pad into a real home in less than 24 hours." A warm smile spread across Shane's face. The thought of Ilya, without even knowing it, preparing a space for their family, was incredibly touching. Before Ilya could respond, the doorbell rang, cutting through the moment. Shane felt a jolt of anxiety. They hadn't discussed how Ilya was going to explain the four-year-old and the former NHL Rookie of the Year now chopping vegetables in his kitchen.

Ilya opened the door to Zane Boodram and his wife, Cassie. "Hey, man, come on in," Ilya greeted them. Cassie beamed, stepping inside. "Ilya! We were so excited to get an invitation. You never have anyone over!" She hugged him tightly, her eyes immediately catching sight of a small head at the living room table. "Oh, who is this?" she asked, as Zane followed her in, his arm wrapping around her waist. He stopped, sniffing the air. "Smells like breakfast in here," he commented, confused. "Maple and honey, but... no pancakes?" Shane dried his hands on a dish towel, his heart pounding, and walked over to the entryway. "Hi, I'm Shane," he said, extending a hand.

Ilya stepped forward, a protective hand landing on Shane's lower back. "Hi, this is my—" he started, but Zane cut him off with a friendly, oblivious grin. "Oh, Roz, I didn't realize you had a house omega." The words hit Shane like a slap. A house omega. A tool, not a partner. Heat flooded his face. Ilya's jaw tightened, and he cut in, his voice flat and dangerous. "No. This is Shane Hollander. Former Rookie of the Year. And this," he said, gesturing to the living room where Elena was now looking over with wide, curious eyes, "is our daughter." Cassie's jaw dropped, but her shock quickly melted into a brilliant, delighted smile. Zane, however, stood frozen, his mouth agape. Before anyone could process the revelation, another knock sounded at the door.

This time it was Cliff and Harris. Ilya shot to the door, leaving Zane and Cassie to process the bombshell he'd just dropped. He ushered them in, Cliff breezing past with grocery bags and a case of cider. Ilya was left at the threshold with Harris, who was bright-eyed and smiling, practically vibrating with an energy that was all Shane. Ilya analyzed him head to toe; he was exactly as Shane had described. Harris broke the ice with a respectful, "Hello, Mr. Rozanov." Ilya managed a small smile. "It's Ilya. Come on in." The moment he was inside, Shane sped past the other guests, letting out a happy squeal as he launched himself at Harris. The two of them jumped up and down like giddy teenagers. Ilya watched, a genuine warmth spreading through his chest. Harris, Ilya, Shane, and the still-stunned Boodrams moved out to the patio while Elena, sensing the shift in energy, went back to her dolls, a silent observer.

The next to arrive were Troy and the rookie, Luca. They didn't ask questions. Troy simply nodded at Shane, a knowing look in his eyes, while Luca was completely star-struck, his gaze fixed on Ilya as if he were a deity. Shane watched from the patio table, a strange feeling twisting in his gut as Luca hung on Ilya's every word, laughing a little too loudly at the captain's terrible jokes while he grilled the steaks. Shane's fingers tightened around his glass, the condensation slick against his skin. Luca was leaning just a bit too close, his eyes wide and worshipful, hanging on every syllable that dropped from Ilya's lips. It wasn't the admiration that bothered him; it was the blatant, unashamed hunger in Luca's eyes. It was a

look Shane knew all too well, but seeing it directed at his Ilya, in their home, sent a hot, possessive wave through him. He could feel his own scent spiking, sharp and acidic, cutting through the warm, sugary air.

The doorbell rang one last time. Shaking off the odd feeling, a sour taste in his mouth, Shane went inside to check on Elena before heading to the door. It was the Instacart driver with piles and piles of bags. As Shane began hauling them in, the plastic handles digging into his palms, the front door clicked open again. Ilya appeared behind him, his presence a warm wave that suddenly felt suffocating. He reached for a bag, his fingers brushing Shane's.

"I've got it," Shane snapped, a little too harshly, yanking the bag away. The word was sharp, brittle, shattering the easy atmosphere between them. "I'm good. I can handle it myself." He didn't look at Ilya, focusing instead on the mountain of groceries on the floor, his own anger a bitter taste in his mouth. He was being irrational, he knew it, but the image of Luca's adoring face was seared into his mind, fueling a green-eyed monster he hadn't realized was lurking so close to the surface.

Ilya stopped, genuinely shocked. "What's wrong?" he asked, concern clouding his features. Shane gestured with his head toward the patio. "Why don't you go back out with Luca? He'd probably enjoy your company more right now." It was petty, he knew it, but the words were out before he could stop them. Ilya stared at him for a second, then a slow, dangerous grin spread across his face. He realized exactly what this was: jealous Shane. And it turned him on.

Before Ilya could respond, Shane found himself being manhandled. Ilya moved with a speed and strength that left Shane breathless, hoisting him effortlessly over one shoulder. The world spun, a dizzying kaleidoscope of the entryway ceiling and the grocery bags still sitting on the floor. He barely registered the click of a door closing behind them before he was set down, a little unsteadily, on the plush carpet of the guest bedroom. "What the—" Shane started, but the words died in his throat as Ilya crowded him against the closed door, pinning him with his body.

A large, warm hand wrapped gently, firmly, around Shane's throat, not to hurt, but to possess.

"You're jealous," Ilya murmured, his voice a low, predatory rumble that vibrated straight down Shane's spine. He leaned in, dragging the flat of his tongue along the sharp line of Shane's jaw, tasting the faint salt of his skin. "Luca is a child with a crush on a fantasy. It's meaningless." He tightened his grip on Shane's throat just enough to make his pulse pound against Ilya's palm.

"You," Ilya breathed, his lips brushing Shane's ear, "are real. You are everything. And if you ever think for a second that some rookie could even come close to you, I will bend you over this bed and fuck you until the only name you can remember is mine, right here with all of those people outside." Shane's anger, the jealousy that had been coiling hotly in his gut, dissolved into a wanton, desperate heat. He was a puddle in Ilya's arms, his dick hard as a rock, straining against the fabric of his jeans, a testament to how much he wanted exactly what Ilya was threatening. Ilya's right hand dropped from his throat, sliding down to grab a handful of Shane's ass, pulling him flush against his own considerable arousal. His left hand palmed Shane's erection through his jeans, squeezing just enough to make Shane gasp. "I'll

take care of this tonight," Ilya commanded, his dark eyes locking with Shane's. "And you'll remember who you belong to. Now, calm yourself down. Join us when you're no longer pitching a tent."

And then he was gone, leaving Shane leaning against the door, panting and shaky. Ilya walked back into the entryway, scooped up the remaining bags, and headed for the kitchen.

In the kitchen, he found Elena, who had already discovered the chocolate ice cream. She sat on a barstool at the island, a giant spoon in her small hand and a chocolate mustache on her upper lip, her eyes wide with pure, unadulterated bliss as she took another giant scoop directly from the tub. "Papa, can I have more?" she asked, her voice sweet and innocent. Ilya laughed, the tension from the confrontation with Shane melting away at the sight of her. "Just this once, *kotenok*," he said, ruffling her hair. He quickly put the rest of the groceries away, a task made significantly easier by the small, happy helper handing him items one by one. Once the kitchen was stocked, he scooped Elena up, her small body light in his arms, and carried her outside

The patio was a hub of activity. Cliff was telling a loud, animated story to Troy, while the Boodrams were chatting quietly with the Hayes family, who must have arrived while he and Shane were... occupied. Ilya set Elena down gently. He looked over at Greg and Tonya Hayes, their faces friendly and curious. "This is Elena," he said, his tone leaving no room for question. "My daughter. Be nice to her." The statement landed like a thunderclap. The chatter died. Cliff stopped mid-sentence. All eyes turned to him, and then to the small, shy girl now clutching at the leg of his jeans. Just then, Shane emerged from the house, looking a little flushed but otherwise composed, and froze as he found himself the center of a silent, stunned audience.

Without hesitation, Ilya crossed the patio and took Shane's hand, pulling him close. In front of everyone—the teammates, the wives, the children—he kissed him. It wasn't a quick peck; it was deep, possessive, and full of unspoken promises. Shane melted into it, one hand coming up to rest on Ilya's chest, a soft sigh escaping him as he publicly claimed this moment, this man. A few cheers broke out, Cliff letting out a loud whoop, but Shane's keen ears caught a sharp, little gasp from Luca. Ilya pulled back, his arm now wrapped securely around Shane's waist, his gaze sweeping over the crowd. "This is what I wanted you all here for," he announced, his voice clear and strong. "This is my partner, Shane, and our daughter, Elena. If anyone has a problem with that, the door is right there." No one moved.

The patio erupted, not in judgment, but in genuine, happy applause. Zane, who had been speechless since the initial announcement, was now grinning and clapping, while Cassie looked positively ecstatic. Even Troy had a wide, genuine smile on his face. Only Luca remained quiet, a forced smile plastered on his face that didn't reach his eyes, his gaze fixed on the possessive way Ilya's hand rested on the small of Shane's back. But even he couldn't deny the pure joy radiating from the alpha. The collective acceptance washed over Shane, a warm, surprising tide that eased the last of the tension from his shoulders. He felt a little overwhelmed, a little exposed, but mostly, he felt seen. He gave a small, shy wave to the group before excusing himself, making a beeline for the patio table where Harris was sitting, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

He slid into the chair beside Harris, who immediately leaned in, whispering, "Okay, spill. All of it. Now." Shane let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding, a laugh bubbling up with it. Outside their happy bubble, Ilya was the calm center of the storm. He accepted a slap on the back from Cliff, fielded a barrage of good-natured teasing from Troy, and watched as Tonya Hayes spoke with Elena, who was now shyly holding the hand of one of the Hayes kids.

Harris had a bottle of hard cider open and in Shane's hand before he could even draw breath to begin the story. But seeing the way the others' eyes kept flicking towards them, the unspoken questions hanging in the air like smoke, Shane's grip on the bottle tightened. He wasn't ready for this. Before the awkward silence could stretch any further, Ilya stepped away from the grill, wiping his hands on a towel. He moved to Shane's side, his large hands resting possessively on Shane's shoulders, a clear, territorial gesture. "Alright, everyone listen up," Ilya's voice boomed, quieting the chatter instantly. Another announcement but his first left questions. "I know you all have questions. So we're going to get this over with now, one story, so Shane doesn't have to repeat himself." With that, Ilya began to talk. He told them everything, from their explosive meeting as rookies, the fiery rivalry on the ice, the hidden, complicated feelings, and the painful separation. He told them about finding each other again, about Elena, and about their decision to be a family. It was a story raw with regret and hope, and Ilya told it with an honesty that left no room for judgment. As he finished, he clapped Shane's shoulder. "Now, get your food." The band-aid had been ripped off.

"Wow," Harris breathed, nudging Shane's arm as everyone moved toward the food line. But as Harris absorbed the story, another presence approached. A scent, clean and sharp like freshly peeled oranges and tangerines, cut through the smoky air of the grill. It was Troy Barrett. Troy, quiet and observant, stopped in front of them, his green eyes soft. "Congratulations, Shane," he said, his voice low and sincere. "I'm really happy for our captain. He deserves this." But then his focus shifted. His scent intensified, a subtle, deliberate push aimed not at Shane, but at the omega beside him. Troy's eyes, wide and doelike, met Harris's. "I'm Troy, by the way," he said, a shy smile playing on his lips.

Shane watched the entire interaction with a knowing, amused grin. He'd seen that move a hundred times in nursing school, an alpha's polite attempt to catch another's interest. He saw the faint blush rise on Harris's cheeks, the way he suddenly became fascinated with the label on his cider bottle.

The scene unfolding was like a private play performed for an audience of one: him. Harris, usually so self-assured and quick with a witty comeback, was suddenly tongue-tied, a flush creeping up his neck that had nothing to do with the afternoon sun. Troy, for his part, seemed to find a newfound confidence, his usual quiet demeanor replaced by a focused intensity as he listened to Harris stammer out a response about the nice weather. The citrus scent spiked again, a clear, silent invitation that Shane felt he could almost taste. A wide, irrepressible grin spread across Shane's face. This was too perfect. He rose from his chair, interrupting the charged quiet. "Actually, Troy," Shane said, his tone light and firm, "Ilya could probably use a hand with the corn on the cob. Why don't I go give him a hand? You stay put." He then turned to Harris, patting the now-empty chair beside him. "And you, keep my seat warm for me. I'll be right back."

With a conspiratorial wink at Harris, Shane slipped away from the table and made a beeline for Ilya at the grill, weaving through the crowd of teammates now piling their plates high with steak and potato salad. He came up behind Ilya, wrapping his arms around the alpha's waist and pressing a kiss to the space between his shoulder blades. Ilya grunted in acknowledgement, expertly flipping a steak with his free hand. "Look," Shane murmured, poking Ilya in the side and subtly nodding toward the patio table. Ilya glanced over, and a slow, knowing smirk spread across his face as he took in the scene: Troy leaning in toward Harris, who was smiling shyly back at him, the space between them crackling with a new, sweet potential. "Well, look at that," Ilya rumbled, his voice a low vibration against Shane's cheek. "Troy finally making a move." He turned in Shane's embrace, crowding him against the railing of the patio.

The rest of the cookout passed in a warm, happy blur. The sun began to dip, casting a golden light over the patio as the last of the steaks were eaten and the cider flowed freely. Shane found himself drawn into conversations with the other wives and partners, laughing at Cassie's stories and swapping parenting tips with Lisa Hayes. He looked over at Ilya, who was deep in a strategic hockey discussion with Cliff and Wyatt, and felt a profound sense of belonging settle over him. These weren't just Ilya's teammates anymore; they were becoming his friends. As the evening wound down, guests began to trickle out, their goodbyes filled with promises to do it again soon. The last to leave, besides Harris and Troy, was Luca. He emerged from the house after a lengthy absence, looking pale, his face scrubbed clean, and his eyes suspiciously red-rimmed. The sight sparked a complicated mix of pity and territorial instinct in Shane. This was just a kid, a puppy crush as Ilya had said, but the omega in him couldn't help but feel a pang of something possessive.

"Hey, you okay?" Shane asked, gesturing for Luca to take a seat at the now-empty patio table. Luca just nodded, staring down at his hands. Shane fetched them both a final cider. "Look," Shane began, his tone softening, "I know you... I know you look up to Ilya. He's a great guy."

He learned in the next twenty minutes that Luca was only nineteen, newly arrived from Switzerland, and still navigating the complexities of a new country and a new league. He presented as a beta, a fact that seemed to bring him a quiet kind of relief, though his pining for the team captain was an open secret. Shane found himself genuinely liking the kid, feeling a surge of protectiveness that surprised him. He was just young, lonely, and infatuated with the wrong person.

In the middle of their quiet conversation, he saw Harris slipping out the front door. Shane excused himself, jogging over to give his friend a tight hug. "Call me tomorrow," he whispered. Harris just squeezed him back, a wide, mischievous grin on his face. As Shane pulled away, he finally saw what Harris's look was all about. Troy Barrett was standing by the hedge outside, barely visible in the twilight, trying to be discreet but failing spectacularly. He gave Shane a short, respectful nod, then turned to catch Harris's eye and gave a slow, deliberate wink.

His jaw slack, Shane stared at the secretive little scene playing out in his front yard. Harris and Troy. Harris and Troy. A slow smile spread across his face. That sneaky little bastard. He

turned back to Luca, who had also followed his gaze and now looked utterly lost. "Right," Shane said, shaking his head as if to clear it. "Anyway." Just then, the patio door opened and Ilya stepped out, his phone in hand. "Luca, your Uber is here," he said, his tone gentle but firm, a captain taking care of his rookie. He gave the young beta a clap on the shoulder. "Go home. Get some rest. Practice on Wednesday." Luca nodded, looking gratefully at Ilya, then at Shane. "Thank you," he mumbled to Shane, before shuffling out the door. Ilya watched him go, then turned to Shane, pulling him into a warm embrace. "He's a good kid," Ilya murmured against Shane's hair. "He'll be fine." They stood there for a moment in the quiet house, the distant murmur of the last guests fading away.

They found Elena curled up on the couch, her small body cocooned in a fluffy throw blanket, her breathing soft and even. She'd fallen asleep with one hand still clutching a plastic doll. A wave of overwhelming love washed over Shane as he looked down at their daughter, her peaceful face a perfect mirror of the contentment he felt inside. He smoothed a stray curl back from her forehead, his heart swelling. He didn't want to move, didn't want to disturb this perfect, precious moment.

After a few minutes, Ilya came over, kneeling beside the couch. He gently untangled the doll from her grasp and placed it on the coffee table. With infinite care, he scooped the sleeping girl into his strong arms. She stirred slightly, letting out a soft sigh, and nestled her head into the crook of his neck, her tiny arm wrapping around him. Ilya held her close, her small weight a comfortable, familiar burden, and walked silently toward her room. Shane followed, leaning against the doorframe of the pink bedroom, watching as Ilya carefully placed her in her bed, pulling the duvet covers up to her chin.

He watched as Ilya bent down, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead, murmuring something in Russian that Shane couldn't quite catch but knew was full of love.

The door to Elena's room clicked shut, the soft sound sealing them in their own private world. The house was finally quiet, the last traces of their party fading into memory. In the dim hallway, Ilya turned to Shane, his eyes dark with an intensity that stole the breath from Shane's lungs. There was no preamble. Ilya simply bent, hooking an arm behind Shane's knees and another around his back, and lifted him as if he weighed nothing. Shane let out a surprised yelp, wrapping his arms around Ilya's neck as he was carried swiftly down the hall and into the master bedroom. The door was kicked shut behind them.

The scent of mints and cinnamon enveloped Shane as Ilya tossed him onto the bed. He bounced once on the mattress, a gasp escaping his lips before Ilya was on him, a heavy, demanding weight pinning him down. Ilya's mouth crashed against his in a bruising, possessive kiss that stole what little air Shane had left in his lungs. Teeth nipped at his bottom lip, tongue sweeping in to claim every corner of his mouth.

"Mine," Ilya growled against his lips, the word vibrating through Shane's entire body.

Shane arched up into him, his fingers tangling in the thick hair at Ilya's nape. "Yours," he breathed back, the single word tasting like surrender.

Clothes were torn away with an impatience that bordered on violence, a frantic need to feel skin on skin. The fabric of Shane's shirt ripped with a sound that echoed in the quiet room.

Buttons popped and scattered across the hardwood floor. Ilya's large hands roamed over his bare chest, thumbs brushing against his nipples until they pebbled into tight peaks. Shane gasped, his back arching off the bed as Ilya leaned down to take one into his mouth, teeth grazing the sensitive nub.

Ilya made quick work of Shane's jeans, yanking them down along with his boxers in one rough motion. Shane kicked them off the rest of the way, his body already trembling with anticipation. The cool air of the room did little to soothe the fire building under his skin. Ilya's scent filled the room, overwhelming Shane's senses, making him dizzy with want.

"Turn over," Ilya commanded, his voice low and rough.

Shane obeyed without hesitation, flipping onto his stomach and raising his hips in offering. Ilya's hands gripped his ass, kneading the flesh before spreading him open. The cool air against his most intimate place made Shane shiver. There was no finesse, no gentle prep. It was pure, raw claiming.

Ilya pushed into him in one brutal thrust, and Shane cried out, the sound half-pain, half-ecstasy. He buried his face in the pillow, his fingers fisting in the sheets as Ilya began to move, a relentless, punishing rhythm designed to erase any doubt.

"Tell me," Ilya growled, his voice a ragged command against Shane's ear. "Tell me who you belong to."

"You," Shane gasped, his voice muffled by the pillow. "Only you."

Ilya pulled out almost completely before slamming back in, hitting that spot inside Shane that made him see stars. "Louder," he demanded, his hand wrapping around Shane's throat and pulling him up onto his hands and knees. "Who gets your attention? Who do you think about when you touch yourself?"

"You, Ilya, only you!" Shane sobbed, pushing back to meet every powerful thrust, his body a live wire of sensation. "Only ever you!"

The wild, animalistic fucking went on for what felt like an eternity, a primal display of ownership that left them both slick with sweat and shaking. Ilya's hips snapped forward, each thrust sending waves of pleasure through Shane's body. He could feel the knot beginning to form at the base of Ilya's cock, stretching him impossibly wide. The thought of being tied to Ilya, of being filled so completely that they were inseparable, sent a jolt of arousal straight to his own cock.

"Please," Shane begged, his voice broken and hoarse. "Please, Ilya."

Ilya's response was a guttural groan as he pushed deeper, his movements becoming impossibly deep and deliberate. He leaned down, his forehead pressed against the sweat-slicked skin of Shane's back, and in a hoarse, broken whisper, he said the words.

"I love you."

The world stopped. Shane's breath caught in his throat, his heart hammering against his ribs. The wild rhythm faltered as he tried to process what Ilya had just said. Holy fuck. Holy fuck. He could feel Ilya starting to soften inside him, the alpha's insecurity evident in his sudden hesitation.

"Say it again," Shane demanded, turning his head to look at Ilya

Ilya's grip on Shane's hips tightened, and for a moment, Shane thought he wouldn't answer. But then, with a raw, vulnerable honesty that took Shane's breath away, he said it again. "I love you, Shane. I've always loved you."

And just like that, the spell was broken. Shane's response was immediate, a desperate, heartfelt confession that poured out of him. "I love you too, Ilya. God, I love you so much."

The words acted like electricity, and Ilya's cock, which had begun to soften, swelled to life inside him, harder than before. The wild, animalistic fucking was gone, replaced by something deeper, more meaningful. Ilya's movements became slower, more deliberate, each thrust a promise, a declaration of his love. He pulled Shane up, wrapping his arms around his chest, holding him close as he rocked into him.

Shane turned his head, capturing Ilya's lips in a kiss that was gentle, tender, and full of unspoken emotions. This was what he had been waiting for, what he had been craving. This was more than just sex; it was a connection, a merging of two souls that had been apart for far too long.

Shane pulled away from the kiss, a sly smile playing on his lips. He gently pushed Ilya back, turning to face him. "Now," he said, his voice low and commanding. "Tell me again. Tell me who has your eyes. Tell me who you'll never touch."

Ilya's breath hitched, his eyes darkening with desire. He knew what Shane was doing, and he loved it. He loved this new, confident, dominant side of Shane.

"You," Ilya said, his voice a rough whisper. "Only you, Shane. I have no eyes for anyone else. I would never touch another person."

Shane's smile widened as he continued tracing patterns on Ilya's chest. "Again," he commanded softly, leaning in to press a kiss against the corner of Ilya's mouth. "Make me believe it."

A shudder ran through Ilya's body. He captured Shane's wrist, bringing his hand to his lips and kissing the palm. "There is no one else," he breathed against Shane's skin, his voice rough with emotion. "There's never been anyone else but you. My eyes are on you, my thoughts are of you. I would never, could never, touch another. My body is yours. My heart is yours."

Satisfied, Shane took control. With a surge of strength, he pushed Ilya back onto the bed, surprising the larger man. Ilya landed with a soft thud, his eyes wide with a mixture of shock and arousal. Shane straddled him, not to impale himself again, but to hold him down, to make him look up. This was a different kind of claiming.

He began to move, a slow, deliberate grind of their hips that was both torturous and exquisite. The friction built a sweet, aching fire between them. He leaned forward, his hands braced on either side of Ilya's head, their mouths a breath apart. "Say it," Shane whispered, the words a puff of air against Ilya's lips. "Say you're mine."

"Yours," Ilya choked out, his hands fisting in the sheets as he bucked up, seeking more contact. "Shane, I'm all yours."

The power was intoxicating. Shane rode him, a slow, sinuous rhythm that was meant to drive them both to the brink. Ilya's hands roamed his body, mapping every curve and plane, but they were reverent now, worshipful. Shane guided one of Ilya's hands to his own leaking cock, showing him how he wanted to be touched. They moved together, a shared breath, a shared heartbeat, their bodies speaking a language that needed no words. He could feel Ilya's knot swelling again, stretching him, claiming him in the most primal way. Shane leaned down, biting gently at the skin of Ilya's shoulder, a mark of ownership.

"Ilya," Shane gasped, his rhythm faltering as pleasure coiled tight in his belly. "Look at me."

Ilya's eyes, dark and dazed with love and lust, locked with his. In that moment, everything else fell away.

"I love you." Shane sputtered definitely.

The words were a final, devastating crack in the dam. Shane cried out Ilya's name as he came, spilling hot and wet between them, his body convulsing with the force of it. The rhythmic clenching around Ilya's cock pulled him over the edge with a hoarse roar. He surged up, burying himself as deep as he could go as his knot locked them together, a hot, powerful flood of his release filling Shane completely. It was a claiming, a bond, a tangible proof of the words they had just exchanged. They lay tangled together, sweaty and shaking, Ilya's knot still tying them fast. In the quiet aftermath, Ilya peppered Shane's face and shoulders with soft, lingering kisses, murmuring words of love in both English and Russian. The wild energy had been spent, replaced by a deep, soulful connection that felt more profound than any pleasure that had come before.

October 4, 2016

The next morning, the pale sunlight filtering through the bedroom curtains felt different. Lighter. Shane slipped out from under Ilya's heavy arm, smiling as the alpha grumbled in his sleep. He showered and dressed quietly, pulling on his scrubs. By the time he was ready, Ilya was awake, leaning against the doorframe of the bedroom, a sleepy Elena perched on his hip, her head tucked into the crook of his neck. "Morning," Shane said, his voice soft. He went to them, kissing Ilya soundly before brushing a gentle kiss on Elena's cheek. "I have to go, baby girl. Be good for your Papa." Ilya just nodded, his gaze full of a warmth that had nothing to do with desire and everything to do with domestic contentment. "We'll be fine. Let's get you to work."

It was the first morning he would leave them completely alone, just Ilya and Elena against the world. He grabbed his bag from the couch, and Ilya followed him out, buckling a still-

groggy Elena into her car seat in the back of Ilya's SUV. The drive to the hospital was quiet, the city waking up around them. Ilya pulled up to the main entrance, right where Dana was taking her final sip of coffee before heading inside.

"This is me," Shane said, leaning over to give Ilya a quick, firm kiss on the lips. "See you guys tonight." He got out, but before he shut the door, Ilya rolled down the passenger window.

"Hey, Dana," Ilya called out, a friendly smile on his face. Dana, a woman in her late fifties with a sharp eye and an even sharper tongue, stopped dead. She turned, her coffee cup frozen halfway to her lips as she took in the scene: the captain of the Raiders in the driver's seat of a massive SUV, and a car seat in the back. Shane felt a blush creeping up his neck but stood his ground by the open door.

"Well, I'll be," Dana said, walking over to the window with a slow, deliberate stride that screamed "information gathering." Her eyes darted from Ilya to Shane and back again. "Rozanov. Didn't know you were in the business of chauffeuring our nurses to work."

"Just this one," Ilya replied smoothly, his arm draped casually over the steering wheel. "He's special." From the back seat, a small yawn came from Elena, drawing Dana's attention. She peered inside, her expression softening for a fraction of a second before her professional curiosity returned.

With a final, charming nod, Ilya rolled up the window and pulled away from the curb. Dana turned to Shane, her lips pursed into a knowing smirk. She linked her arm through his as they walked toward the automatic doors. "Saw the news," she said, her tone light but her eyes gleaming with undisguised interest. "Crazy first date, huh?" Shane let out a laugh, the sound bright and full of a happiness he hadn't realized he was missing from the morning of worry and silence. He didn't even try to deny it. "You have no idea." The two of them walked into the bustling hospital together.

The eight hours passed in a blur of beeping monitors, urgent requests, and the constant, thrumming energy of the hospital. But for the first time in a long while, the chaos felt manageable, even energizing. When eight o'clock finally arrived, Shane was tired, but not bone-deep exhausted. He walked out into the cool evening air, and there it was, the familiar black SUV idling at the curb. He didn't even have to look to know who was behind the wheel.

He opened the passenger door and slid in, immediately leaning over to press a firm, grateful kiss to Ilya's lips. "Hey," he breathed, pulling back with a smile. "I could definitely get used to this." Ilya's answering smile was warm, crinkling the corners of his eyes. A happy gurgle from the back seat drew their attention. Elena was wide awake, her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright with excitement, a stark contrast to the sleepy child from that morning. She bounced in her car seat, her little fists clenched with the force of her news.

"Daddy, Daddy!" she chirped, her voice a happy melody. "Papa and me, we went to the park! And we saw doggies! Big ones and little ones! Then Papa let me have ice cream, the chocolate kind, and he got some on his nose!" She erupted into a fit of giggles, pointing a tiny finger at Ilya, who rolled his eyes but was clearly fighting a grin. "And then! Then we went to

the store and Papa bought me a new coloring book with princesses, and he tried to color but he went outside the lines!" She took a breath, her eyes widening with even more excitement. "But the best part, Daddy, the best part was watching Mulan! Papa was Mushu, and he made the funniest voice!" She began to giggle again, bouncing in her car seat. "He was running around the living room saying 'Dishonor on your cow!' and pretending to breathe fire with his mouth! I was Shan Yu, the mean guy, and we had a big battle with pillows!"

Shane turned to watch Ilya, his heart swelling. The alpha was blushing slightly, a faint pink rising on his cheeks, but his eyes were bright with amusement. He ran a hand through his blonde curls, and in the dim glow of the dashboard, they looked like spun gold.

Ilya caught his gaze out of the corner of his eye, his lips curving into a soft, intimate smile that was just for him. As Elena's happy voice filled the car with stories of pillow battles and heroic dragons, Shane reached back, squeezing her small knee before turning back to Ilya.

His heart was so full it felt like it might overflow, a warmth spreading through his chest that had nothing to do with the car's heater. This was it. This was what happiness felt like.

Chapter 11: Have I known you 20 seconds or 20 years?

Chapter Summary

After finally finding peace together, Shane and Ilya think the hardest battles are behind them until old ghosts, buried secrets, and the brutal spotlight of professional hockey collide. When financial struggles surface and Shane reveals the devastating truth about Elena's past, the foundation of their partnership is tested in ways neither expected. But as Ilya delivers the performance of a lifetime and publicly claims his family in front of the world, their quiet life shatters into chaos. Now, with the media circling, rivals watching, and their first heat and rut together approaching, they'll have to decide what it truly means to build a future as a family.

October 5, 2016

The morning unfolded in the comfortable rhythm they'd both been craving, a quiet domestic symphony of toothpaste-flavored kisses and the familiar scrape of a razor. Ilya's hands lingered on Shane's hips in the shower, steam fogging the glass as he promised a slow, thorough exploration later that night, a reward for surviving another shift. Downstairs, Elena was a whirlwind of sleepy protests and brightening smiles as Ilya's deft fingers worked her hair into intricate braids while Shane wrestled her into tiny sneakers. The drop-off at preschool was a flurry of sticky-fingered hugs and promises of stories before Ilya pulled away from the curb, the silence in the car settling into a comfortable hum. He dropped Shane at the hospital entrance with another quick kiss, a lingering look that said everything the morning rush hadn't allowed, before heading toward the practice facility and the relative sanctuary of the ice.

Ilya skated through drills with a ferocity that bordered on punishing, each slapshot a release of the tension that still coiled in his gut. The meeting with the coaching staff had been a relief, their pragmatic focus on his performance over his personal life a balm he hadn't realized he needed. He could handle the extra attention from opposing players, the targeted hits they knew they could get away with; it was a language he understood, a physical conversation he could win. The threat of it all being taken away had been the true terror, and now, with that fear receded, he could focus on the bone-jarring joy of the game. He left the ice sweating, satisfied, and already mentally mapping out the evening with Shane, a welcome shift from the constant worry of the past few days.

Meanwhile, across town, the hospital's caffeine oasis beckoned. The line was short, the scent of roasted beans a welcome reprieve from the sterile hallway air. Shane stepped up to the cart, a small, genuine smile on his face as he ordered his usual black coffee. He held out his card, a simple, mindless gesture he'd performed a thousand times. The barista's machine whirled, then beeped, a harsh, discordant sound. A small, apologetic look crossed her face. "Sorry, it's been declined." A hot flush of embarrassment crept up Shane's neck as he fumbled

for his wallet, pulling out a different card with a forced laugh. "Must be the chip," he mumbled, but the second card met the same fate. The realization hit him with the force of a physical blow, a sudden, sickening lurch in his stomach.

The barista's sympathetic gaze felt like a physical weight, pinning Shane in place amidst the hospital's controlled chaos. He could feel the prickle of sweat on his brow, the sudden awareness of the line forming behind him. With a mumbled apology that was more of a strangled noise than actual words, he backed away from the cart, abandoning the promised comfort of the coffee. He ducked into a nearby alcove, the sterile white wall a cold presence against his back as he pulled out his phone. His thumb hovered over the banking app, a leaden dread coiling in his gut. He almost didn't want to look, didn't want to see the number he already knew would be there, bright red and screaming failure. He tapped the icon, the screen loading with an agonizing slowness that stretched into an eternity before finally revealing the damage.

The negative balance was worse than he'd imagined. A string of small, automatic payments—a subscription and a utility bill—had each been a tiny pebble, but together they had started an avalanche. Shane's breathing stopped for a second, the familiar walls of the hospital feeling like they were closing in. He wasn't just broke; he was in the red, sinking. The shame was a bitter taste in his mouth. This was more than a simple oversight; it was a stark, humiliating reminder of the imbalance between them, of Ilya's world of multi-million dollar contracts and his own of careful budgeting that had just spectacularly imploded. The coffee wasn't the point; it was the public exposure of his private vulnerability that stung.

He thought of Ilya, on the ice, powerful and in control, probably not giving a second thought to a simple grocery bill. Shane couldn't bring himself to text him, not now. Not with this sickening churning in his stomach and the image of the barista's pitying face burned into his mind. He needed a moment, a breath, but the hospital didn't grant such luxuries. His pager buzzed against his hip, a sharp, insistent summons back to reality. Dr. Evans needed a consult on the fourth floor. Tucking his phone away with a snap, as if he could hide the evidence of his financial ruin, he straightened his shoulders, smoothed the front of his scrubs, and walked toward the elevators, the mask of the competent resident settling back into place, even as the ground beneath him felt like it was crumbling.

The familiar drive to Elena's preschool was filled with the upbeat pop song she'd been obsessed with all week, her small voice belting out the lyrics from the backseat with gleeful abandon. Picking her up was a burst of color and noise, a flurry of glitter glue drawings and stories about sandbox politics. They went to a park, Ilya pushing her on the swing until she squealed with glee, then shared an ice cream cone, the sticky sweetness a perfect punctuation to a simple, good day. Back at home, they built a magnificent pillow fort in the living room, Ilya's large frame squeezed inside as Elena read him a story from a picture book, her finger tracing the words she was just learning to recognize. It was easy, this life, a quiet contentment settling deep in his bones.

At 7:30, with Elena yawning against his shoulder, Ilya buckled her into her car seat and drove to the hospital to collect Shane. At 8:00, the familiar figure emerged from the sliding doors, but Ilya felt a subtle shift in the atmosphere. Shane's smile didn't quite reach his eyes, a weariness in his posture that went beyond a long shift. Ilya's brow furrowed slightly, a silent

question forming, but he kept it to himself as he leaned over to give Shane a quick kiss. "Hi," he said softly, his gaze searching. "How was your day?" Elena, oblivious to the undercurrent of tension, immediately launched into a detailed account of their pillow fort, her cheerful chatter filling the car and creating a shield around the unspoken tension between the two men in the front. Ilya listened, one hand on the wheel, the other finding Shane's knee and giving it a gentle squeeze, a silent promise: we'll talk later.

The bedtime routine was a comforting ritual. They tag-teamed brushing teeth and reading one last story, their movements efficient and practiced, a well-oiled machine of parental care. Once Elena was finally tucked in, her breathing deep and even, the quiet of the house settled around them, the silence amplifying the distance that had grown in the car. They climbed into bed, the space between them feeling vast despite their proximity. Ilya propped himself up on an elbow, turning to face Shane in the dim light of the bedside lamp.

"What's wrong, solnyshko?" Ilya's voice was low, the endearment a soft anchor in the quiet room. He reached out, his fingers tracing the tense line of Shane's shoulder. The question, gentle as it was, seemed to break something in Shane. He let out a shaky breath and rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling as if the answer might be written there. The story came out in a halting torrent, the words heavy with humiliation. He told him about the coffee cart, the piercing beep of the declined card, the sickening lurch in his stomach when he checked his balance. He explained the feeling of being small, of being a charity case in a world that wasn't his, the constant, gnawing worry of the negative number in his account. "I know you'll want to fix it," he finished, his voice strained. "And I appreciate it, I really do. But right now, all I need is for you to Venmo me for the groceries from the cookout. Just that. Please."

Ilya listened without interruption, his expression a mixture of sadness and understanding. He saw the pride in Shane's posture, the rigid set of his jaw that was fighting against the vulnerability. He knew this feeling. He'd grown up with it, the constant calculation of every dollar, the shame of not having what others did. He'd been that kid. When Shane finished, the room was silent again, but the tension had shifted. Ilya's sadness remained, but it was now tinged with resolve. He swung his legs out of bed and stood up, the movements deliberate. He padded silently down the stairs, returning a moment later with something from his wallet. He slid back under the covers and pressed a piece of plastic into Shane's hand.

Shane looked down. It was a debit card, sleek and black. Embossed on the front were two names: Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov. "I was going to give it to you this weekend," Ilya said softly, his gaze steady. "But it seems you need it now. I put your name on my account. It's your money too." A fresh wave of emotion washed over Shane, a confusing mix of gratitude and frustration. This was a grand gesture but it didn't fix the immediate, gnawing problem of the bills in his own name, the disparity that felt like a chasm between them.

Ilya's gaze didn't waver from Shane's face, reading the conflict warring there with an unnerving accuracy. "I know," he said, his voice quiet but firm, cutting through the turmoil in Shane's head. "This doesn't fix your bills, solnyshko. It doesn't fix the feeling. I get it." He shifted closer, the mattress dipping with his weight, closing the small distance between them. "I had nothing when I came to this country. My first paycheck from the league, I thought I was a king. I understand what it's like to count coins." His thumb gently brushed over Shane's knuckles, still clutching the debit card. "But we are a team. Your problems are my problems."

The raw honesty in Ilya's words, the shared history of poverty Shane had never truly considered, began to chip away at the fortress of Shane's pride. He'd been so focused on the disparity between their current lives, he'd forgotten they had started from similar, desperate places. With a sigh that seemed to deflate him completely, Shane leaned into Ilya's touch, his head finding the familiar hollow of Ilya's shoulder. "Okay," he whispered, the word tasting of surrender. "Venmo me. And then... we need to talk. About this." He gestured vaguely with the card. "I can't... I need to be able to stand on my own two feet, Ilya. Even with you."

Ilya's arms came around him then, a solid, reassuring weight. He nodded, pressing a kiss to Shane's hair. "Of course," he murmured, his breath warm against Shane's scalp. He reached for his phone on the nightstand, his fingers moving swiftly across the screen. A moment later, Shane's phone buzzed on the bedside table, the notification a simple, transactional confirmation of a transfer. It was the exact amount of the cookout groceries. The precision of it, the fact that Ilya remembered, was more potent than any grand gesture. It was listening. It was care. "Now talk," Ilya said, settling back against the pillows, holding Shane close. "Tell me what you need."

The simple act of being heard was a balm, but the problem remained, a knot of tension in Shane's gut that the Venmo notification couldn't untie. "This," he said, his thumb tracing the raised lettering on the debit card, "this is a lot, Ilya. It's... everything. But it doesn't fix the real issue for me." He took a deep breath, gathering the words he'd been turning over in his mind all day. "I need to know that the life I've built, the person I am, isn't erased by this. I need to pay my student loans. I need to pay my credit card bill. I need to budget for groceries. It's not just about the money; it's about the process. It's how I know I'm in control of my own life, that I'm a partner in this, not... not a dependent."

Ilya's arms tightened around him, not in a restrictive way, but as if to anchor him. His expression was solemn, his full attention on Shane's face. "I hear you," Ilya said, his voice a low rumble against Shane's ear. "I do. I never want you to feel like that. You are my partner. The strongest person I know." He paused, a thoughtful line creasing his brow. "So, okay. We make a plan. Not me fixing it. Us. You tell me what your bills are. We look at your salary, my salary. We decide how much goes into a joint account for the house, for Elena. And the rest... the rest is yours. To manage. To pay your loans, to buy your coffee, to save. The card... it's for an emergency."

It was the answer Shane needed. Not a dismissal of his fears, but an acknowledgement and a framework to move forward within. The idea of "us" tackling the finances, of maintaining his own financial identity while still being woven into the fabric of their shared life, felt right. It respected the man he was while still accepting the reality of who they had become together. He turned in Ilya's arms, burying his face in the crook of his neck. "Okay," he whispered again, but this time the word wasn't a surrender; it was an agreement.

The gratitude in Shane's voice was a fragile thing, barely audible in the quiet intimacy of their bedroom. "Thank you," he whispered, the words feeling small and hollow against the enormity of Ilya's offering—not just a financial solution, but a profound understanding of Shane's need for autonomy, for partnership. He pulled back slightly, his body still curled into Ilya's embrace, creating just enough space to meet his partner's eyes. The decision to share this next part felt like standing on the edge of a precipice. There was a tremor in his hands as

he gathered the courage, his fingers finding their way to Ilya's forearm, gripping as if for balance.

"There's something else," he began, his voice catching on the words. "Something you don't know. Something I've never told anyone but my Mom." Ilya's brow furrowed with concern, his hand moving to cover Shane's, offering silent encouragement. The simple touch was all Shane needed to continue, though the words felt like glass in his throat. "When the league kicked me out... they gave me a severance. Five million dollars."

The number, once his security blanket, now felt like a ghost as he watched Ilya's reaction—a flicker of disbelief, then shock, then confusion. Shane quickly looked away, unable to maintain eye contact as he revealed how that fortune had evaporated. "It was gone in just a year. All of it." His gaze dropped to the blanket pooled between them, his fingers twisting the soft fabric into a tight knot. The silence that followed was thick with unasked questions, but Ilya waited, giving Shane space to navigate this difficult terrain.

The memories came rushing back, vivid and painful. "The pregnancy... it was complicated. And I didn't have health insurance. Not then." He could feel Ilya's muscles tense at this revelation, the protective instincts already kicking in. "The bills were astronomical, but I thought... I thought that was it. That the worst was over." A bitter laugh escaped him, dry and humorless. "I was so wrong."

Shane's voice grew quieter, almost a whisper as he revisited that terrifying time. "Then, right after her first birthday, she got sick. It happened so fast. One minute she was just fussy, the next she was burning up, having a seizure in my arms." The memory washed over him with the force of a tidal wave—the sterile scent of the hospital, the terrifying calm of the doctors as they spoke words he couldn't fully comprehend, the feeling of his world crumbling. "Bacterial meningitis." He swallowed hard, the medical term still sounding like a death sentence in his mind. "They told me she might not make it. That even if she did, there could be... permanent brain damage."

He finally looked up then, forcing himself to hold Ilya's gaze, wanting him to see the full scope of that nightmare. "There was no choice. There was no question. They put her in the PICU. She was on a ventilator. So small, connected to all those machines." His voice cracked, the emotion he'd kept buried for years finally breaking through. "Infectious disease specialists, neurologists, round-the-clock care, IV antibiotics for weeks... the scans, the monitoring... I signed every paper. Every authorization. I would have sold my soul a hundred times over if it meant she would wake up and be okay."

He could see the heartbreak in Ilya's eyes now, the dawning realization of what Shane had gone through alone. "So that five million dollars... it wasn't a fortune to me. It was the price of our daughter's life. Every last cent of it." A tear finally escaped, tracing a hot path down his temple. "And I would do it again in a heartbeat." He leaned his forehead against Ilya's, their breath mingling in the dim light. "But it's gone. And I have nothing to show for it except her. Which is everything to me, but it's also why I have nothing now."

The question fell from Ilya's lips, raw and stripped of any pretense. "Is she okay now?" The five million dollars, the severance, the immense sacrifice—all of it was background noise to the single, terrifying possibility that their daughter, the bright, chattering little girl who

braided her hair with Ilya's fingers, was still somehow touched by that long-ago nightmare. The thought was a physical blow, a crack in the newly formed foundation of their world, and the walls Ilya had so carefully constructed around his heart crumbled. He had only known this child existed for less than a week, but the prospect of her suffering, of almost losing her, was an agony that stole the air from his lungs.

Shane's hands came up to frame Ilya's face, his thumbs gently wiping away the tears that were now freely tracking down Ilya's cheeks. "She's okay," Shane assured him, his own voice thick with emotion, the steady repetition of the words a litany against the fear. "She's perfect. Healthy, smart, so incredibly strong." A watery, fragile smile touched his lips. "Her only lasting scar is a weakness for chocolate ice cream." The levity did little to lighten the profound sorrow in the room. Ilya buried his face in Shane's neck, a ragged sob escaping him. "I should have looked for you," he choked out, the words a confession of failure. "I should have tried harder. You were going through all that alone."

"Hey, look at me," Shane said softly, guiding Ilya's face back up. "What could you have done? You would have been deported. Or worse." The thought, so clearly articulated, was another knife twist. "I was scared. I didn't know what to do." He was crying too now. It was the past, a haunting echo, but it was done. The only thing left was to be there for each other now, in the wreckage and the aftermath.

Ilya's hands tightened on Shane's arms, his gaze intense and unwavering, a desperate plea etched into every feature. "Promise me," he demanded, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Promise me you will never hide anything like this from me again. If you need a dollar, if you need a million, you tell me. There is no 'you' and 'me' in this.

Shane met Ilya's desperate gaze, his own tears subsiding into a quiet resolve. He saw not a demand, but a terrified plea, a man laying bare his deepest fear of being left in the dark again. "I promise," Shane said, the words solid and certain. "I promise I won't hide anything from you. Ever again." The relief that washed over Ilya was palpable, the tension in his shoulders finally breaking as he collapsed back against Shane, their foreheads pressed together, sharing the same space, the same breath. The promise hung in the air between them, a new, unbreakable clause in the constitution of their relationship.

But Shane wasn't finished. He gently shifted, pulling back just enough to look Ilya in the eye, to ensure he was being heard not as a victim, but as an equal partner. "And that goes both ways," he said, his tone firm but kind. "But we have to do this my way. We have to be smart. Ilya, I don't want this to be about you just throwing money at problems. I want us to build something." A spark of the old Shane, the strategist, the planner, returned to his eyes. "I have plans. For our future. A long, bright future that lasts long after the skates are hung up for good."

Ilya listened, the raw emotion slowly being replaced by a deep, focused curiosity. He saw the passion in Shane's expression, the same passion he saw on the ice, the same passion that had built a life for their daughter against impossible odds. "What kind of plans, solnyshko?" he asked, his voice still thick but now laced with intrigue.

"We invest. Not just stocks, but in things that matter. Maybe we start a foundation. A charity for kids like Elena, kids whose parents can't afford the medical care they need to survive." He

was leaning forward now, his hands animated, the vision taking shape in the dim light of their bedroom. "We take that money and we turn it into something good. Something lasting. We build a legacy, Ilya. For us. For her." The idea hung there, brilliant and audacious, a way to transform the darkest chapter of their lives into a story of hope and purpose. It wasn't just about being frugal; it was about being deliberate, about taking control and writing their own future, together.

October 20, 2016

Two weeks passed in a comfortable blur of settled routines and shared moments, the foundational cracks from their difficult conversation patched over with a newfound transparency. The debit card remained in Shane's wallet, untouched but reassuring, and their joint financial planning sessions, conducted with spreadsheets at the kitchen table, felt less like a chore and more like building a fortress together. The quiet domesticity of a Thursday night found them on the couch, the blue-white flicker of a hockey game illuminating their faces. Elena was a small, industrious figure on the rug, arranging her dolls in a complex, silent drama.

Without looking up from her play, Elena's small voice cut through the play-by-play commentary from the television. "Papa, when do I get to come watch you play a real game?" Ilya, mid-sip of water, nearly choked, the liquid catching in his throat. He froze, the glass halfway to his lips, his entire body going still. The question, so simple and innocent, detonated inside him. The image flashed through his mind: Shane and Elena, high in the stands, their faces lit by the arena lights. He wouldn't just be playing; he would be performing. Every hit would be a declaration, every goal an offering. A primal, possessive thrill shot through him, so potent it left him breathless, and he found he couldn't form a single word, his throat tight with an emotion he couldn't name.

The silence stretched, charged with Ilya's unspoken reaction. Shane glanced from Ilya's stunned face to their daughter, a slow, knowing smile spreading across his lips. He solved the problem with simple practicality. "Well, you know, Papa has a game against Montreal on Saturday. And I'm off of work." The words acted as a key, unlocking Ilya's frozen state. A grin bloomed across Ilya's face, wild and brilliant, the kind of unadulterated joy that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. He looked like a madman who'd just been handed the world. He was so happy at the thought. Shane looked down at Elena. "Would you like to go watch Papa on Saturday with your Daddy?"

A cheer erupted from the rug, a high-pitched squeal of pure delight as Elena scrambled to her feet, her dolls forgotten. "Yes! Yes! I wanna see Papa skate!" Shane laughed, scooting closer to Ilya on the couch, pressing their shoulders together. "So," he said, his voice low and teasing, "think you can get us a couple of tickets?" Ilya's arm wrapped around him, pulling him in for a hard, quick kiss.

Ilya's response was a low, rumbling laugh against Shane's temple. "Of fucking course," he breathed, the words saturated with disbelief and elation. He kissed Shane again, deeper this time, a promise of the thunderous performance he would deliver just for them. The sheer force of his happiness was a tangible thing in the room, filling every corner. They were a unit,

a family, about to step onto the biggest stage he knew. He pulled back, his eyes shining, ready to say more, to plan everything, but a small, indignant voice from the floor stopped him cold.

"Daddy," Elena said, her hands planted firmly on her hips, her expression a perfect mirror of Shane's 'disappointed nurse' face. "Papa said a swear word!" Her accusation was met with a mock-groan from Shane, who tried and failed to hide his smirk. He pointed a finger towards the kitchen, where a large glass jar sat on the counter, already containing a respectable number of bills. "You know the rules, Rozanov. The jar awaits."

Ilya's grin didn't falter; it only widened. "That's a dollar," he announced cheerfully, pulling out his wallet. He sauntered over to the swear jar, fishing out a crisp bill and slapping it onto the counter with a satisfying smack. "Happy to contribute." Shane watched him, shaking his head with laughter. Ilya's contributions alone had nearly doubled the jar's contents in the past two weeks, a testament to his passionate, and frequently profane, personality. But as Ilya walked back to the couch, he didn't sit. He knelt in front of Elena, his expression softening into something infinitely tender. "I'm sorry for the swear word, malysh," he said seriously. "I was just very, very happy. Now, which lucky jersey should you wear to the game on Saturday?" The question shifted the focus entirely, and in that moment, planning their first family outing in front of the world became the most important thing in the world.

October 22, 2016

Saturday morning dawned with a strange, jittery energy. Ilya, a force of nature on the ice, was a bundle of frayed nerves at home. He paced the length of the living room in his suit, adjusting his tie for the tenth time, his gaze constantly flicking to the front door where Shane stood trying to corral a wiggling Elena into her custom-made miniature Rozanov jersey. "You have your tickets? Your phones?" Ilya asked, for what Shane was sure was the fiftieth time. Shane stepped forward, placing a calming hand on Ilya's chest, feeling the frantic thrum of his heartbeat. "Breathe," he said softly, rising up on his toes to kiss him. "We'll be fine. We'll be the loudest ones there. Now go play some hockey." Ilya took one last look at them, at the small girl who held his entire world in her hands and the man who had given her to him, and kissed them both fiercely before grabbing his bag and heading for the door. "See you tonight," he called over his shoulder, the words thick with an emotion that went far beyond simple anticipation.

The roar of the arena was a physical force, a wave of sound that washed over them as they found their seats. Ilya had come through, securing three incredible rinkside seats, just three rows up from the penalty box, giving Elena a perfect, unobstructed view of the vast, gleaming ice. Dana, bless her, was already there, settling in with a hot dog and immediately christening a wide-eyed Elena with her favorite nickname. "Alright, rugrat, you see the big guys on the ice? One of them is your papa." Her presence there was a testament to yesterday's conversation at the hospital; Shane, needing a buffer and an extra pair of hands for an inevitably overstimulated Elena, had finally caved to Dana's persistent requests. As the charge nurse, Dana was a die-hard fan, and she'd jumped at the Raiders in person. And then, as if summoned by her words, the Raiders spilled onto the ice for warmups, a sea of black and gold. Elena's gasp was lost in the crowd noise, her small hand pointing as she spotted number 81. "Papa! There's Papa!" she shrieked, jumping up and down in her seat.

Ilya's head snapped up the second he heard her, or perhaps he'd been scanning the crowd from the moment he stepped on the ice. He saw them instantly, a small, bright cluster in the sea of faces. He broke away from the drills, skating directly over to the glass near their section. The cameras followed him, the jumbotron broadcasting his every move. He stopped, his gloved hand resting on the dasher, and looked right at them.

He blew a kiss, a slow, deliberate motion that was magnified on the massive screen above the ice. A collective "aww" rippled through the crowd, but for Shane and Elena, the world shrank to just the three of them. Dana wolf-whistled beside them, egging him on. With a gentle nudge, Shane directed Elena's attention back to the ice. "Look, sweetie, Papa's blowing a kiss to you!" he said, pointing. Elena, without a second of hesitation, puckered her lips and blew a kiss right back, her whole body vibrating with excitement. "GO PAPA! GO PAPA!" she shrieked, her small fists pumping in the air, her pure, unadulterated joy echoing in the cavernous space.

A wave of warmth spread through Shane's chest, but it was quickly followed by a familiar, sharp pang of unease. His eyes drifted across the ice to the opposing team, the Montreal Metros. The sight was a punch to the gut. There was Hayden, the captain, his jaw set in that familiar, stubborn line. There was Gilbert, the goaltender, tapping his posts in a ritual Shane knew by heart. JJ and Mitty, laughing together on the bench, the same two ex-friends he'd helped break in years ago now looking like seasoned veterans. They were ghosts from another life. For a heart-stopping moment, the old bitterness, the what-ifs, threatened to pull him under.

But Ilya hadn't skated away. He was still there, right in front of them, his posture suddenly rigid. He was looking past Elena now, his dark eyes locked on Shane, a flicker of something sharp and angry in their depths. He saw Shane's attention had drifted, saw the direction of his gaze, and he understood. He blew another kiss, this one not sweet, but a theatrical, almost aggressive pucker of his lips. He pointed a gloved finger directly at Shane, then at himself, a raw, public claim in front of thousands of people, a silent battle against the ghosts in Shane's past. A hot flush of embarrassment crept up Shane's neck, but he pushed it aside. Instead of mirroring the gesture, he brought his hand up, catching Ilya's invisible kiss, and pressed it firmly against the center of his chest, right over his heart. Then he mouthed the words, clear and deliberate: "I love you."

The final buzzer for warmups shrieked, and the teams cleared the ice for the official start. Ilya, captain of the Raiders, skated to the center circle for the opening faceoff. Across from him stood Hayden Pike, the Metros' captain, a man who had once been Shane's linemate. Ilya settled into his stance, his body coiled like a spring. He didn't look at Pike, didn't acknowledge the familiar, hard glare. He was looking past him, up into the stands, at Shane. The ref dropped the puck, and Ilya exploded. In a blur of motion, he won the draw cleanly, sending the puck back with such ferocity that the Metros' defenseman stumbled. He was off, a black and gold missile, and the game was on. Pike said nothing, but the cold fury in Ilya's eyes was a statement more potent than any trash talk.

What followed was less a hockey game and more a coronation. Ilya was a man possessed, playing with a terrifying, beautiful focus that left the opposition scrambling. He moved with a prescience that was almost clairvoyant, always a half-second ahead of the play. His first goal

came just three minutes in, a blistering slapshot from the top of the circle that blew past Gilbert's glove before he could even flinch. The arena erupted, but the loudest sound was a small, piercing shriek from section 114. "HE SCORED! MY PAPA SCORED!" Elena was on her feet, bouncing, her little fists pumping in the air, her face alight with pure, unadulterated pride. As his teammates mobbed him, Ilya broke away, skating a quick circle near the glass. He caught Elena's eye, sending her a quick, triumphant wave and a grin that was just for them. The sight of her wild joy surged through him like lightning, strengthening his resolve.

The second and third goals followed in swift succession, a masterclass in offensive dominance. One was a laser of a one-timer on the power play, the other a dazzling display of individual skill as he weaved through three defenders before tucking the puck into an empty net. A hat trick before the second period was even half over. The jumbotron played a montage of his goals, each one more spectacular than the last, cutting to shots of a beaming Shane and a deliriously happy Elena. But Ilya wasn't done. He was putting on a show, a violent, poetic symphony of skill and fury, each goal a dedicated verse to the family in the stands. By the end of the third period, he had five, a franchise record. The crowd was on its feet, chanting his name, and Elena was hoarse, her small voice lost in the deafening roar but her spirit soaring.

The locker room was a chaotic symphony of victory. The sharp, chemical scent of champagne mingled with sweat. Music blasted from a portable speaker, and Ilya's teammates, a boisterous, adoring pack of oversized brothers, were all over him. They smacked his helmet, ruffled his sweat-soaked hair, and poured champagne over his head while he laughed, trying to shield the expensive bottle from the spray. He was the center of the universe, the king of their castle, and for a moment, he let himself bask in it, letting their joy wash over him. He saw their faces, full of pride and affection, and felt a profound sense of belonging. This was his team, his family on the ice. But just as he was about to take a celebratory swig from the bottle, a figure appeared in the doorway, cutting through the revelry.

"Rozanov," Coach LeClaire said, his voice calm but carrying an undeniable weight that silenced the room instantly. "My office. Now." The playful atmosphere evaporated. A ripple of confusion went through the players. Ilya, six goals fresh and floating on adrenaline, felt an attack of ice-water in his veins. What could it be now? He had just delivered the performance of a lifetime. Was he actually in trouble? He set the bottle down, gave a reassuring nod to his concerned teammates, and followed the coach out of the locker room, the cheers fading behind the closed door of the office. The space was stark and functional, a world away from the celebratory chaos he'd just left. LeClaire gestured to a chair, and Ilya sat, his body still humming with nervous energy. The coach settled behind his desk, his face a granite mask of inscrutability.

He stared at Ilya for a long, silent moment, the tension stretching until it was almost unbearable.

Then, LeClaire let out a huff of air, and the stone facade cracked, replaced by a wide grin. "Five goals, Rozanov. Really?" he boomed, shaking his head in disbelief. "And let me guess," he added, leaning forward, his eyes twinkling, "that was your boyfriend and kid out there?"

Ilya nodded, his confusion giving way to cautious hope. "Yes," he said, his voice steady. "Shane Hollander. He's my partner." He paused, the word feeling right, feeling true.

"He was there," Ilya confirmed, the name feeling like a declaration. "And my daughter, Elena."

LeClaire stared at him, the grin slowly dissolving into an expression of pure, unadulterated shock. "Shane Hollander? The Shane Hollander? The Metro prodigy who vanished five years ago without a trace?" The coach leaned back in his chair, which creaked in protest. "Kid, you are a walking, talking miracle. A few weeks ago, the league was breathing down my neck to bench you for holding some guy's hand on camera." He let out another bark of laughter, a sound full of genuine amusement and disbelief. "God, can you imagine if they knew it was Shane Hollander? Their heads would explode."

Ilya watched him, a slow warmth spreading through his chest. He had braced for a lecture, a warning about media distractions or team focus. Instead, he was getting... support. "I just want to tell them the truth," Ilya said, his voice thick with emotion. "In the press conference. I want to say I played like that because I'm finally happy, because I don't have to hide who I am anymore." He looked down at his hands, the calluses on his palms a roadmap of his career. "But I'm so afraid. Afraid of losing all of this. Losing hockey."

LeClaire's laughter faded, replaced by a serious, steady gaze. "Son, you don't have to worry about your job here. Not with me. If that's what you want to say, then you go say it. I will back you every step of the way against the league." He leaned forward again, his hands clasped on the desk. "But I can't protect you from the media firestorm. That part is all on you. You need to be sure."

Ilya's head snapped up, his eyes clearing, the last of his fear dissolving like mist in the sun. "So if I go out there," he asked, clarifying, "and I answer their questions... and if I'm asked, I can tell the world about my omega? About my beautiful daughter?" A slow, shit-eating grin spread across LeClaire's face. "Rozanov," he said, his voice full of pride. "In fact, I hope you do."

Ilya rose from his seat, the powerful energy of the game returning, now fused with a new, incandescent purpose. He didn't say another word, simply reached across the desk and shook LeClaire's hand, a grip that was firm and final. As he turned and walked out the door, he left the coach's triumphant laughter echoing behind him. LeClaire knew exactly what was about to happen. With a deep, satisfied chuckle, he turned on the small television perched on a filing cabinet, opened a beer from the mini-fridge, and settled back in his chair to enjoy the show.

The press conference room was already packed, a wall of flashing cameras and a cacophony of shouting reporters. When Ilya entered, the noise escalated to a fever pitch. He took his seat at the table, the microphone before him, and waited for the din to subside. The questions started predictably, focused on the franchise-record five goals, on his seemingly superhuman performance. He answered them with short, polite responses, his mind clearly elsewhere.

Then, a reporter from NBCSports, a woman with a sharp, intelligent gaze, stood up. "Ilya," she began, her voice cutting through the room, "you played so well against the Metros. But

you were also seen interacting with a man and a little girl rinkside. You blew them kisses. Can you tell us who they are, and what they meant to your performance tonight?"

The room went silent. All eyes were on him. Ilya leaned into the microphone, his expression calm and clear. "Yes," he said, his voice steady and strong, carrying across the hushed room. "That was my partner, Shane Hollander, and our daughter." A wave of shocked murmurs rippled through the crowd. He held up a hand, and they fell silent again. "The reason I played the way I did tonight is simple. For the first time in a long time, I am truly happy. I no longer have to hide who I am, or who I love. Everything I do on the ice, I do for them. I love this team and they have been nothing but supportive of the three of us. I can't wait to show off more for my printsessa in future games." He looked directly into the main camera, his eyes blazing with a fierce, protective love. "My name is Ilya Rozanov. And that is *my family*."

The roar in the press conference room followed Ilya out the door, a living wave of noise that echoed down the corridor. He grabbed his bag from the now-quiet locker room, the champagne-stale air a stark contrast to the storm brewing outside. He moved toward the tunnel that connected to the public area, expecting to find Shane and Elena waiting, a small, calm island in the chaos. Instead, he walked into a maelstrom. A solid wall of cameras and shouting reporters blocked the exit, their flashes blinding, their voices an orchestra of questions about Shane Hollander, about the daughter he'd just claimed in front of the world. He fought through the throng, security desperately trying to push the media back, and finally spotted him. Shane was there, but the space beside him was empty.

Shane greeted him with open arms, a huge, fucking brilliant smile on his face that momentarily blinded Ilya more than any camera flash. They hugged, a brief, hard press of bodies in the chaos, the scent of Shane's familiar, maple sweet syrup cutting through the pandemonium. Ilya pulled him around the corner, into the relative seclusion of a service hallway. "Where's Elena?" Ilya asked, his heart pounding. "I had Dana take her home," Shane explained, his eyes shining. "She was asleep. And my phone is blowing up. Twitter is going crazy. You just came out to the entire world, Ilya." Ilya searched his face, looking for any sign of anger or fear. "Are you mad?" he asked, his voice low. "I wish you'd talked to me first so we had an escape plan for her, but I'm not mad," Shane said, his expression softening. "If you're ready to tell the world, then I'm ready to stand by your side and weather any storm with you." The raw emotion in his words was too much. They were lost in the kiss, a deep, possessive claiming that was a world away from the chaste press conference peck.

They were interrupted by the heavy clang of a door opening down the hall. Gilbert Comeau and Hayden Pike emerged from the visitors' locker room, their conversation dying the instant they saw them. There was no hiding it. Instinctively, Ilya grabbed Shane, pulling him behind his body, but Shane pushed right back, planting himself firmly at Ilya's side. Hayden's gaze lingered on Shane, a complicated mix of shock and something that looked achingly like regret.

"Shane—can we talk?" Hayden's voice was rough, a stark contrast to the cold captain who'd ruled the ice five years ago. The sadness in his eyes was genuine, a jarring sight for a man Shane remembered as being made of stone and ice. "We don't have anything to talk about," Shane barked back, the words laced with the venom of old wounds. He saw the flicker of hurt

in Hayden's eyes before the other man's face shuttered, giving a slow, defeated nod as he turned to leave. He took a single step away.

But Gilbert Comeau wasn't finished. "Fucking faggots," he sneered, the word a poison dart thrown with casual cruelty. A white-hot rage shot through Ilya, every muscle in his body coiling to swing, to obliterate the sneer from Gilbert's face. But he forced himself still, remembering the press, the cameras, the fragile new world he had just publicly declared. He couldn't add fuel to this fire.

But Shane, no longer bound by the league's unspoken rules, felt no such restraint. "What the fuck did you just call us?" Shane's voice was dangerously low, a promise of violence. Gilbert just laughed. "You heard me." The sound was cut short by a sickening crack. Shane's right hook, fueled by years of buried fury and a fierce, protective love, connected squarely with Gilbert's jaw. The 6-foot-3 goalie, a mountain of a man, dropped to the floor like a sack of cement.

Ilya's dick twitched in his pants, a primal, scream of arousal at the sight of his omega, his solidly built partner, laying out a professional athlete twice his size. As Ilya moved to grab Shane, pulling him back from the near-unconscious man, a wave of scent hit him so strong it almost staggered him. Maple syrup and honey, richer and more potent than ever before, the intoxicating smell of a protective, enraged omega.

"Don't you ever speak about my partner or look our way again," Shane snarled down at Gilbert, his chest heaving. Gilbert, dazed and furious from the ground, spat, "Rozanov, you better control your bitch." Ilya let out a sharp, dangerous laugh. "My 'bitch' just knocked you the fuck out. I'd suggest you get your jaw checked, Comeau." By this point, Troy Barrett, Wyatt Hayes, and Cliff Marleu had appeared at the end of the hall, drawn by the commotion.

"Jesus, Roz, what the hell happened?" Wyatt asked, his eyes wide as he took in the scene: a dazed Gilbert Comeau on the floor and a very satisfied-looking Shane Hollander standing over him. "You know Comeau's an asshole, but you didn't have to lay him out." Ilya wrapped an arm possessively around Shane's waist, pulling him back from the fallen goalie. "That wasn't me," Ilya said, a note of profound pride in his voice. "That was Hollander. He knocked him on his ass." The three Raiders players erupted in a chorus of cheers, clapping Shane on the back with unadulterated glee, treating him like one of their own who'd just scored a game-winning goal.

Troy, ever the practical one, disappeared back into the home locker room for a moment and returned with an ice pack, pressing it gently into Shane's already swelling knuckles. "So, what set him off?" Cliff asked, still laughing. Shane, the anger slowly receding but the fire still in his eyes, answered bluntly, "He called us faggots." The laughter died, replaced by a round of impressed murmurs. "Normally I'd let that shit go," Shane continued, "but Ilya had just poured his heart out on live television for us, and... I don't know. I was feeling emotional." This elicited another round of cheers and backslaps, his teammates now fully inducted into the small, fierce circle of their family.

Finally, Ilya's gaze on Shane turned dark, possessive. "It's time to go home," he said, his voice a low command. Shane agreed, offering a final goodbye to the players.

The quiet hum of the car on the dark highway was a stark contrast to the chaos of the arena. The adrenaline was still thrumming under Ilya's skin, a live wire of emotion. "After we get Elena to sleep tonight," Ilya broke the silence, his voice a low, predatory rumble, "I'm going to fuck you, suck you, eat you, until the sun rises. You'll be begging me to quit." He let out a shaky breath. "Seeing you take up for us like that... it made me feral. I had to tuck my dick into my waistband after hearing your fist make contact with Comeau's face." A thrill went through Shane at the raw honesty, at the sheer possessiveness in Ilya's tone.

Shane twitched in his seat, the promise in Ilya's words a direct attack to his system. He shifted, the leather of the passenger seat creaking softly. The darkness of the highway, the rhythmic thump of the tires, the scent of Ilya's arousal mingling with his own—it was all a cocoon of intimacy, a private world separate from the public storm they had just unleashed. He turned to look at Ilya's profile, illuminated by the dash's soft glow, the hard line of his jaw, the intense focus in his eyes even as he drove. "Maybe we don't have to wait until we get home," Shane murmured, the words a deliberate test, a challenge to the simmering tension.

Ilya's hands tightened on the steering wheel, but he said nothing. Taking the silence as an invitation, Shane acted. He slipped his hand beneath the seat, finding the lever and pushing the driver's seat back. Ilya grunted in surprise, forced to reach further for the pedals. Shane then unbuckled his own seatbelt, the click loud in the quiet car. He leaned over the center console, the space tight and charged with unspoken intent. His fingers fumbled with Ilya's button and zipper, yanking his pants down to midthigh. Ilya's nine-inch cock, already hard as a rock, sprang free, slapping against his abdomen with a heavy thud. Without preamble, Shane lowered his head and took it into his mouth, the sudden wet heat forcing a choked gasp from Ilya.

He came up once, leaving a glistening trail on Ilya's skin, and kissed the side of his neck. "I want you to take your free hand and face fuck me," he whispered, the words a hot puff of air against Ilya's ear. "Please, Ilya." The plea was all it took.

Ilya's right hand left the wheel, tangling firmly in Shane's hair. He guided him down, setting a brutal, demanding rhythm that was all about claiming and taking. The car swerved slightly on the highway as Ilya struggled to maintain control, torn between the road and the overwhelming pleasure. He wasn't gentle, and Shane didn't want him to be. He gagged and took it, tears pricking his eyes, reveling in the feeling of being completely possessed by the man he loved. Ilya let out a raw, guttural groan as he emptied a second load down Shane's throat just as he was turning into their driveway, the car rolling to a stop in the quiet darkness of their home.

The car engine clicked off, plunging them into a profound silence broken only by their ragged breathing. They sat there for a moment, the air thick with the scent of sex and unspoken promises, before Ilya tucked himself back into his pants. They stumbled out of the car and up to the front door, which opened before they could knock. Dana stood there, her keys already in hand, a knowing, tired smile on her face. "She's been asleep for an hour," she whispered, gesturing with her thumb toward the stairs. "You two caused quite the stir. My phone's been buzzing nonstop." She gave Shane a quick hug and Ilya a respectful nod. "Go handle your family. I'll see you tomorrow." With that, she was gone, disappearing into the night, leaving them alone in the quiet sanctuary of their home.

Ilya didn't even bother turning on the lights. He grabbed Shane's hand, pulling him through the darkened house and up the stairs, bypassing Elena's room, her door cracked open to reveal the small, still form in her bed. They moved with a singular purpose, entering their bedroom and shutting the door with a soft click, sealing the world outside. The moment they were inside, Ilya slammed Shane against the door, their bodies colliding with a force that stole the air from their lungs. He attacked Shane's mouth, a desperate, hungry kiss that was all teeth and tongue, a ferocious attempt to consume him. He tore at Shane's clothes, the sound of ripping fabric loud in the room, until Shane was bare before him.

"I meant what I said in the car," Ilya growled, his voice a low, dangerous rumble that vibrated through Shane's chest. He spun him around, pressing him face-first against the cool wood of the door. "I'm going to fuck you until you beg me to stop." He kicked Shane's legs apart, and without preamble, without any preparation other than the sheer force of his will, he pushed inside. Shane cried out, a mix of pain and profound pleasure, as Ilya set a punishing rhythm, each thrust a declaration, a brand, a reminder of who he belonged to. The car had been an appetizer, but this was the main course—a raw, primal, and utterly consuming feast that would not end until the sun began to rise.

November 17, 2016

The month had blurred into a relentless cycle of press conferences, practice drills, and late-night strategy sessions, each day merging into the next like watercolor bleeding across wet paper. It wasn't until Shane's work calendar notification pinged on his phone that realization struck him with the force of a car.

In bold red letters: HEAT LEAVE – THANKSGIVING WEEK. His stomach plummeted. A week from now, his biology would seize control of his body and mind, and Ilya's rut, which always arrived around the same time each year, would align perfectly. They had never planned this together, never discussed what it would mean to be locked in the house, feral and insatiable, with their daughter just down the hall.

The panic had him pacing their living room, the scent of anxious omega beginning to curl around the air like smoke. He'd already cleared the week off months ago with Dana, but somehow the critical conversation with Ilya had slipped through the cracks of their chaotic new reality. How could he have forgotten something so fundamental?

"You're going to wear a hole in that rug," Ilya observed from the doorway, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed. His eyes, the color of storm clouds, traced Shane's agitated movements. "What's wrong?" Shane scrubbed a hand over his face. "My heat. It's next week. And I haven't even—"

Ilya's expression softened into something approaching amusement. "You think I didn't notice? The way our scents have been syncing these past few weeks? It's like our bodies have been merging together without us." He pushed off the doorframe, closing the distance between them. "Why don't we ask your mother to visit? It would be good for me to meet her finally, and Elena would love having her grandma for a week." The tension in Shane's shoulders eased at the suggestion. "Are you sure? That's a long time for her to stay, especially with—"

Ilya interrupts, "The holidays," and finishes smoothly. "And besides, I always take a week off for my rut anyway."

The FaceTime call was answered on the second ring, Yuna's face filling the screen with its familiar warmth. "Shane! Elena! I was just thinking about you both." Elena, who had been drawing at the kitchen table, scrambled over to see her grandmother. "Hi, Grandma!" she squealed, pressing her face close to the phone.

Shane took a breath, forcing a casual tone that barely masked the undercurrent of urgency. "Hey, Mom. Listen, Ilya and I were wondering... would you be interested in a little Thanksgiving adventure? A whole week with your favorite granddaughter?" He watched as Yuna's eyes lit up at the prospect. "We thought you could come stay, and we'd book an Airbnb nearby. It would be like a mini-vacation for you and Elena." He paused, steeling himself. "The thing is... well, you know my heat is next week and Ilya's rut is also next week. They're syncing up, right around Thanksgiving."

He saw the flicker of understanding in his mother's expression. "But after the fourth day, once things have settled, we'd have three whole days to just spend time with you, properly, in our own home."

Yuna's warm smile didn't falter; if anything, it deepened with empathy. "Oh, sweetheart. Of course. You two need that time to bond properly, especially with everything you've been through." She chuckled softly. "As a matter of fact, my job just switched me to remote work permanently, so there's no need for me to be in the office that week anyway. It's perfect timing."

Before Shane could continue laying the groundwork, Ilya moved behind him and gently took the phone. "Yuna," his deep voice rumbled through the speaker, rich with an alpha's confident warmth. "Shane is being too polite. I have already booked your flight. It leaves Sunday morning. I've also arranged for a three-bedroom Airbnb with an indoor pool for you and Elena to enjoy. You can use the spare bedroom for your home office."

Shane stared at Ilya, his mouth slightly agape. They'd been so careful about their finances since their conversation, but the sheer certainty of the gesture made warmth spread through his chest, displacing his earlier panic. "All you need to do is pack," Ilya continued, a smile evident in his voice. "I am very much looking forward to meeting you in person at the end of the week."

After they'd ended the call, with Yuna still buzzing with excitement, Shane just shook his head, a slow, happy smile spreading across his face. Maybe a splurge was exactly what they needed. The relief was short-lived, replaced by a different kind of nervous energy. As Elena went back to her drawing, humming happily about her upcoming week with Grandma, Shane pulled up his laptop on the coffee table. He'd never experienced a heat with a partner before, and he knew Ilya had never shared his rut with anyone who could help ground him. What if they destroyed the furniture? What if they ran out of supplies mid-feral state?

"Okay," he muttered to himself, opening a shopping site. "This is a necessity." He felt slightly excessive as he began adding items to his cart: waterproof mattress protectors, extra-soft

blankets, nutrient-dense snacks, massage oils, even a small mini-fridge for their bedroom. Ilya came up behind him, glancing at the screen with raised eyebrows.

"Preparing to never leave the bedroom, sweetheart?"

Shane flushed. "I've never done this with someone before. And you've never... I just want to make sure we have everything.

Ilya leaned down, pressing a kiss to Shane's temple, his breath warm against his skin. "It's not excessive if it gives you peace of mind," he murmured, his eyes scanning the ever-growing list on the laptop screen. "In fact..." He took the laptop from Shane, navigating to a different site. "Add this." He added a high-tech white noise machine to the cart. "To block out the world. And this," he said, adding a set of blackout curtains. "So the sun doesn't dare interrupt us." He looked at Shane, his expression serious but filled with a warmth that made Shane's chest ache. "This is our first heat and rut together, Shane. I want it to be everything we need it to be. No distractions. No worries. Just us." He handed the laptop back, and with a deep breath, Shane clicked "confirm purchase," the finality of the act sending a shiver of anticipation down his spine.

The week leading up to Yuna's arrival was a flurry of activity. The boxes arrived, and Shane and Ilya spent an evening transforming their bedroom into a fortress of comfort and desire. The new blackout curtains were hung, plunging the room into a deep, velvety darkness even in the middle of the day. The white noise machine was tested, its gentle hum a soothing balm against the outside world. The new blankets were soft and plush, and the mattress protector, a practical necessity, felt like a silent promise of the uninhibited passion to come. They stockpiled the mini-fridge with electrolyte drinks, protein bars, and bottles of water, preparing for the days they'd be too lost in each other to venture downstairs.

When Yuna arrived on Sunday, the atmosphere in the house was electric with a different kind of energy. Elena was overjoyed, her laughter echoing through the house as she showed her grandmother her room and her favorite toys. Ilya, who had been a bundle of nervous energy, immediately relaxed in Yuna's presence. He was charming and attentive, his deep voice a soothing rumble as he chatted with her about her flight and her plans for the week. Shane watched them, a warmth spreading through his chest as he saw the two most important people in his life, besides Elena, connect so effortlessly. Yuna, ever the intuitive beta, seemed to understand the unspoken tension in the air, her presence a calm, grounding force that allowed Shane and Ilya to breathe a little easier.

That night, after Yuna and Elena had settled into the Airbnb, Shane and Ilya stood in their transformed bedroom, the silence of the house a stark contrast to the storm brewing within them.

Chapter 12: Oh, Mother!

Chapter Summary

Locked away from the world, Shane and Ilya finally face their first heat and rut together. What begins as overwhelming physical need transforms into something deeper as the days pass, forcing them to confront buried regrets, fears, and the love that binds them together. When the storm finally breaks, the quiet aftermath brings unexpected vulnerability—and a promise of a future neither of them ever thought possible.

Reunited with Elena and welcomed by Yuna, their fragile new family grows stronger as secrets turn into plans, alliances are forged, and Ilya quietly prepares the next step in their life together.

Chapter Notes

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

The final lock on their bedroom door clicked shut, the sound a gunshot in the sudden, profound silence. For a moment, they just stood there, the air thick with anticipation, their scents beginning to weave together—a delicate dance of maple syrup and honey from Shane, not yet overwhelmed by Ilya's sharp, clean bite of icy mint and warm spice of cinnamon. Ilya was the first to move, closing the distance between them in a single, fluid motion. He didn't kiss him, not yet. He simply buried his face in the crook of Shane's neck, inhaling deeply, as if trying to absorb him, to brand him on a cellular level. Shane's body responded instantly, a tremor running through him as he clutched at Ilya's shoulders, his own head falling back to grant better access. This was it. The precipice.

Ilya pulled back slightly, studying him. There was still clarity in Shane's eyes, the glimmer of rational thought that hadn't yet been consumed by the heat that was brewing beneath his skin. This was his moment. Before the primal need took over completely, before Shane became a creature of pure instinct, Ilya had a window of opportunity to put his plan into motion.

"Shane," he murmured, his voice a low, serious rumble as his hands came up to cup Shane's face, his thumbs stroking his cheekbones. "Look at me. I want to try something, but we need to talk about it first. Trust." He paused, letting the word hang in the air between them, charged with meaning. "If you're scared, if anything feels wrong, you tell me immediately. Okay? Can you do that for me, solnyshko?"

Shane's breath hitched, a thrill of vulnerability and anticipation shooting through him. He met Ilya's intense gaze and nodded, a silent, trusting assent. The heat was still simmering, a pleasant warmth rather than an all-consuming fire. He had time. They both did.

A slow smile spread across Ilya's face, a mixture of relief and predatory hunger. He guided Shane to the bed, their movements a clumsy, desperate dance. He stripped Shane with a reverence that belied the raw hunger in his eyes, tossing aside their clothes. When Shane was bare before him, Ilya paused, his gaze sweeping over him. He then pushed Shane back onto the bed, sprawling him out against the new, plush blankets. He took Shane's wrists in one large hand, pinning them above his head. "Don't move," he commanded. He then took a strip of the new, soft silk rope they'd bought, his movements methodical and deliberate as he tied Shane's wrists to the headboard. Next came the blindfold, a strip of dark, heavy silk that plunged Shane into a world of darkness, amplifying every other sense. The sudden lack of sight made the soft brush of Ilya's lips against his collarbone feel like an electric spark.

Ilya's lips were a whisper against Shane's skin, tracing a path down his chest, over the frantic beat of his heart. "Moy zolotoy mal'chik," he murmured, the endearment a low vibration against Shane's sternum. Each kiss was a butterfly touch, light, fleeting, yet they left trails of fire in their wake, mapping the territory of his body. He worshiped him with his mouth, praising his skin with soft, sweet words in a language Shane didn't need to understand to feel its meaning. Then, the kisses stopped. The weight on the bed shifted as Ilya stood. "I'm going to leave you here for a while," Ilya's voice was a low, controlled growl, laced with a promise that made Shane's cock twitch. "Just you, the dark, and the feeling of my hands on your skin. But I promise, solnyshko, when I come back, it will all be worth it. The wait will make you crave me more." The click of the door closing was a thunderclap in the sudden, absolute silence.

Alone, tied, and blindfolded, the world narrowed to a pinpoint of sensation. The silk of the restraints was a constant, thrilling friction against his wrists. The cool air of the room caressed his overheated skin. He listened, straining to hear something, anything. Then it began. From the hallway, a series of sounds. A heavy box being dragged. The ripping of cardboard. The sharp, decisive rattle of metal components being emptied onto the floor. The noises were muffled by the door but distinct, a mechanical symphony of unknown purpose. Excitement warred with impatience in Shane's gut. His cock was a hard, aching weight against his belly, and the heat, a pleasant simmer before, was now beginning to rise, a slow, inexorable tide that promised to drown him.

About fifteen minutes later, the bedroom door creaked open. Shane's breath hitched. He felt the bed dip as Ilya sat beside him. Then, those butterfly kisses returned, pressing against his temple, the line of his jaw, the sensitive skin of his throat. The contact was fleeting, a ghost of a touch, but it was enough to stoke the fire in his blood, a silent reassurance that he was not forgotten. Ilya's scent, the sharp mint and cinnamon, washed over him before he was gone again, the sounds of construction resuming with renewed vigor.

The pattern became an exquisite, torturous ritual. The relentless, rhythmic sounds from the other room—a click, a metallic scrape, the low whir of a drill—would build a cocoon of suspense around him. Just as the silence threatened to become unbearable, as the rising tide of heat made him whimper against the silk, the door would open. Ilya's presence would flood the room. He wouldn't speak, merely bestow those fleeting, worshipful kisses upon Shane's overheated skin: one on the curve of his shoulder, another on the sensitive skin inside his elbow, the lightest of touches on the tip of his weeping cock that made Shane's entire body bow off the bed. Each brief visit was a promise, a confirmation that this torment had a

purpose, and it left him even more desperate than before. The heat was no longer simmering; it was a rolling boil, a fever that demanded sating. His skin felt too tight, his breath came in ragged pants, and the silk restraints were both an agony and an anchor.

After what felt like a lifetime of this cyclical torment, a final, loud clang echoed from the hallway, followed by a profound silence. The door opened, but this time, the footsteps didn't approach the bed. They crossed the room and stopped near the far wall. "It's done," Ilya's voice was a low, triumphant rumble, vibrating with a barely restrained energy that was almost feral. He sounded breathless, exhilarated. "I'm going to untie you now, moy zolotoy mal'chik. But keep the blindfold on. I have a surprise for you." His hands moved to the ropes at Shane's wrists, his touch impossibly gentle as he worked the knots free. As the silk fell away, Ilya massaged the circulation back into Shane's arms, his fingers tracing the faint red marks left by the bindings. He helped Shane sit up, his body trembling with a potent cocktail of anticipation and raw, unslaked need. Ilya's own scent was a thick cloud of dominant arousal, practically foaming at the mouth with the effort of holding back.

"Come with me," Ilya commanded softly, taking Shane's hand and guiding him off the bed. Shane's bare feet sank into the plush rug as Ilya led him across the room. The air felt different here, charged with something new. He could feel the heat radiating off Ilya's body, a furnace of barely contained lust.

Ilya stopped them, positioning Shane a few feet from the far wall. His hands were gentle but firm on Shane's shoulders, a steady anchor in the overwhelming darkness. He stood close enough that Shane could feel the rapid, excited thumping of Ilya's heart against his back, could smell the intoxicating cocktail of his triumphant satisfaction and rampant desire. A low, possessive growl rumbled in Ilya's chest. "I've been waiting to do this properly," he murmured, his lips brushing against the shell of Shane's ear. "To have you exactly where I want you." He hesitated for a breath, a flicker of vulnerability in his otherwise confident demeanor. "I hope... I hope you like it."

With a deliberate motion, Ilya reached up and lifted the blindfold. Light flooded Shane's vision, blurry at first, then sharpening into focus. His gaze locked onto the object standing before him, a complex apparatus of sturdy black straps and gleaming chrome chains suspended from a towering metal stand with a wide, stable base. There were padded loops for his ankles, wider ones for his thighs, and a sturdy harness with attachments for his wrists. It was a sex swing on a portable stand, an intimidating and utterly thrilling promise of the vulnerability and pleasure to come. For a second, the room was silent, the only sound their combined, ragged breaths.

A slow, wide grin spread across Shane's face, a mirror of the pure, unadulterated delight he felt in his chest. He turned to Ilya, his eyes shining with a fierce curiosity that completely washed away any trace of the nervous omega from the beginning of the night. "You built this for me?" he asked, his voice hoarse with awe and lust. He took a step closer, running a hand over the cool, smooth leather of the main harness. "Is it... will it hold? I mean, really hold me?" The question was not one of doubt, but of genuine, practical excitement, a desire to understand the mechanics of the fantasy Ilya had just constructed for them.

Ilya's relief was palpable, a tension leaving his shoulders that Shane hadn't realized was there. A proud, predatory smirk replaced the last of his hesitation. "That's what I've been doing for the past hour and a half," he growled, stepping behind Shane and wrapping his arms around his waist, pulling him flush against his body. He ground his hard, clothed cock against Shane's bare ass.

There was no more room for talk. The sight of the swing, the solid, grounding pressure of Ilya's body against his back, the sheer, raw possessiveness radiating from him—it was the spark. The simmering heat in Shane's blood ignited, exploding into an all-consuming fire that swept away every thought except one: need. A whine tore from his throat, high and desperate. Ilya answered with a guttural growl, his hands moving with practiced urgency. He guided Shane into the harness, lifting him with an easy strength that made Shane's head spin. His legs were secured in the padded loops, spread wide and held high, leaving him completely open and suspended. His arms were tethered to the sides, limiting his movement, rendering him utterly helpless. The feeling was intoxicating, a perfect, dizzying blend of vulnerability and safety, of being completely and irrevocably possessed.

The rut had fully claimed Ilya. His eyes were blown black with lust, the scent of aggressive cinnamon and mint a suffocating, glorious blanket that smothered the last of Shane's coherent thought. He didn't undress. He simply ripped open his fly, freeing his massive, weeping cock. The sight of it made Shane's slick gush, the sound obscene in the sudden, heavy silence. Ilya didn't prepare him. He didn't need to. Shane's body was a willing, pliant vessel, already weeping with slick and desperate to be filled. With a single, powerful thrust, Ilya buried himself to the hilt, the entry a brutal, claiming fire that seared through Shane's body. The swing allowed for an impossible depth, a new angle that had him crying out, a sound of pure, unadulterated pleasure-pain. Ilya set a punishing rhythm, using the swing to pull Shane back onto his cock with each brutal stroke, a relentless, primal claiming that was exactly what his heat-craved body demanded.

Every brutal thrust sent a shockwave of pure bliss through Shane's system. The swing was a revelation, a marvel of physics and depravity that allowed Ilya to strike places deep inside him that had never been touched, never even known to exist. Each withdrawal was a sweet, devastating ache, and each return was a homecoming, a fierce, possessive claiming that felt both brand new and as natural as breathing. The room was a symphony of their debauchery: the rhythmic creak of the swing's chains, the wet, percussive slap of Ilya's hips against Shane's ass, the high, desperate whines tearing from Shane's throat, and Ilya's constant, guttural growls.

A primal rhythm took hold, a brutal, percussive beat that thrummed through the room. Ilya was a force of nature, a relentless storm of flesh and desire, using the momentum of the swing to drive into Shane with an almost mechanical precision. Each punishing thrust was a declaration of ownership, a branding that went deeper than skin, deeper than bone. The air was thick, almost liquid with the scent of their combined essences—a maelstrom of Shane's sweet honey and maple, now subsumed by Ilya's overwhelming, ferocious cinnamon. The only sounds were the slick, rhythmic slap of their bodies, the hungry groan of the chains, and Shane's incoherent cries, which had devolved into a desperate, pleading litany.

Ilya could feel the coiling tension in the base of his spine, the tell-tale tightening that heralded the peak. He watched, mesmerized, as Shane's body arched in the harness, a perfect, desperate curve of need. With one last, powerful thrust, he sent the swing flying back, pulling away for a split second, giving them both a moment of agonizing, empty space. And then, the swing came rushing back. But this time, as Shane's body hurtled towards him, something shifted in the omega's eyes. A desperate, ferocious clarity. As Ilya drove forward to meet him, Shane, freed from the pendulum's inertia by the sheer force of their momentum, reached down. His hands, slick with sweat, latched onto Ilya's sides, claws digging into the fabric of his jeans. He used every ounce of his strength to halt their motion, to press himself onto Ilya's cock with a final, earth-shattering slam, impaling himself completely.

The world fractured. The sudden, unyielding pressure, the way Shane took control at the very precipice, was the final, exquisite trigger. A scream tore from Shane's throat as his orgasm ripped through him, a violent, convulsive wave that made his entire body seize. Ilya answered with a roar that was half pain, half ecstasy, as Shane's body milked him, demanding everything. The base of his cock swelled impossibly, the flesh stretching, locking them together in a primal, unbreakable bond as he pulsed, filling Shane with a searing heat that marked him from the inside out. They remained locked in that suspended, breathless moment, a single, shuddering entity caught between two points of oblivion, the swing hanging still and silent in the aftermath of their shared storm.

For five long, breathless minutes, they remained locked together, a living sculpture of satiated desire. The silence was profound, broken only by the slowing thud of their hearts gradually syncing into a single, heavy rhythm. Shane held on fiercely, his limbs wrapped around Ilya's torso, a silent anchor in the sea of overwhelming sensation. He could feel the gradual recession of the pressure inside him, the tight, possessive seal of Ilya's knot slowly, reluctantly softening. When the last of the tension finally released, allowing Ilya to slip from him with a wet, final gasp, a profound emptiness washed over Shane, a void that was immediately filled with a new, burning impatience.

Ilya made a move to step back, to give him space, but Shane's grip tightened, stopping him cold. "No," Shane rasped, his voice a raw, ruined thing. He pushed himself back slightly in the harness, enough to look Ilya in the eye. His gaze was burning, the heat-fog clearing just enough to allow for a sharp, crystalline demand. "Take off your fucking clothes." The words were a command, not a request, laced with an impatience that bordered on violence. "All of them. Now. I can't fucking stand not seeing your chest while you fuck me."

Ilya stared, a slow, predatory grin spreading across his face at the sheer audacity of the order, the primal hunger in his omega's eyes. There was no hesitation. With a fluid motion, he yanked his t-shirt over his head, revealing the broad, muscular expanse of his chest, dusted with dark hair that narrowed down to a happy trail disappearing into his jeans. He toed off his socks and then, with a deliberate, teasing slowness, undid the button and zipper of his jeans, letting the denim pool around his ankles before kicking them away. Now, he was as bare as Shane, a magnificent specimen of alpha power, his skin flushed and gleaming with a light sheen of sweat, his cock already hardening again, rising to the occasion. "Better?" he growled, a low rumble of amusement and desire as he stepped back into Shane's space, his body heat a palpable force.

"Much better," Shane breathed, his eyes drinking in the sight of Ilya's bare chest, the hard planes of muscle, the dark hair that he desperately wanted to run his fingers through. A slow, satisfied smile touched his lips, a predator's grin. "Now fuck me again." He let the demand hang in the air for a beat before adding the crucial, depraved caveat. "But before you cum, pick me up off this swing and take me to our nest."

A shudder ran through Ilya's body, a full-body tremor of pure, unadulterated lust. The command hit him like a physical blow, a perfect, filthy request that spoke directly to the most primal, possessive parts of his alpha soul. He didn't answer with words. He answered with action. He moved forward, his hands gripping the leather straps of the swing, and he drove into Shane's still-slick, waiting hole in one smooth, powerful thrust. This entry was different—not the initial, claiming fire, but a confident, masterful return, a homecoming that was both devastatingly familiar and electrifyingly new. The swing groaned under the renewed assault as Ilya set a brutal, demanding pace, each stroke designed to push Shane higher and higher, to wring every drop of pleasure from him before the main event.

The room became a blur of motion and sound. Ilya's hands were everywhere, gripping the swing, then roaming over Shane's body, pinching a nipple, digging into his thigh, marking him. Ilya's lips were at his ear, whispering a constant stream of obscenities in both English and Russian, praising the tight heat of his hole, the way he took it, the desperate sounds he was making. Shane was lost in a haze of pleasure, the constant, rhythmic pounding a perfect counterpoint to the rising tide of his heat. He could feel it building, the coiling tension in his groin that signaled another release, but he held back, remembering his own command, waiting for the next act in their depraved performance.

Ilya could feel the precise moment the control shifted. The tremor started in Shane's thighs, a vibration that traveled up the chains of the swing and into Ilya's hands. A ragged gasp tore from Shane's lips, and then a command, hoarse and absolute. "Now. Take me." The single word was a lit match to a gasoline-soaked rag. Without breaking their rhythm, Ilya's hands shot out, releasing the safety catches on the ankle restraints. He pulled back for one last, brutal thrust, and as the swing recoiled, he reached down, hooking his arms under Shane's knees and around his back. With a primal grunt of pure effort, he lifted him. Shane's weight was a welcome burden, his legs wrapping instinctively around Ilya's waist as Ilya's cock remained buried deep inside him, a unbreakable link during the seamless transition.

The journey to the nest was a chaotic, stumbling affair—a frantic, raw display of alpha strength. Ilya didn't carry him gracefully; he claimed him. Each step was a jarring impact, driving his cock impossibly deeper as he crossed the room. Shane clung to him like a second skin, his fingers digging into Ilya's shoulders, his face buried in the crook of his neck, inhaling the intoxicating scent of sweat, cinnamon, and pure male exertion. The nest was not a pristine, beautiful thing; it was a chaotic pile of every soft thing they owned—pillows, blankets, discarded clothes—all saturated with their combined scents, a primal representation of their bond. Ilya didn't lay Shane down gently. He fell with him, collapsing onto the heap of fabrics with a heavy thud that knocked the air from their lungs, a tangle of limbs and desperate need.

There was no finesse, no rhythm, only a raw, animalistic rutting. Ilya's hands were rough, grasping, pulling Shane's hips up to meet each punishing slam. He wasn't making love to

him; he was using him, a vessel for the overwhelming, instinctual fury of the rut. The sounds were obscene. A wet, slapping rhythm, the creak of the floorboards beneath them, and their own guttural vocalizations, neither human nor beast. Ilya's words were low, guttural commands. "Mine," he snarled against Shane's neck, his teeth scraping the sensitive skin.

The storm broke as suddenly as it had arrived, but the aftermath was a tethered, shared stillness. Ilya collapsed against Shane, his entire body a deadweight of spent force, but they did not separate. The base of his cock remained swelled, a thick, possessive knot locking them together, a physical anchor in the sea of bliss. For a long moment, the only sound was their ragged, desperate gasps for air, their hearts hammering against each other's rib cages like trapped birds, the frantic pace now a slow, heavy drum. The ferocious energy that had driven them had evaporated, leaving behind a profound, bone-deep exhaustion and a lingering, shimmering haze of bliss.

Shane lay limp, a pleasant, heavy lethargy seeping into his limbs. He felt utterly used, claimed in the most fundamental way possible, and the feeling was a deep, soothing balm to the still-smoldering embers of his heat. The fullness inside him, the unyielding presence of Ilya's knot, was a constant, grounding pressure. He turned his head, his gaze finding Ilya's. The alpha's features were soft now, the predator's snarl replaced by a look of tender, almost awestruck reverence. Ilya reached out, his fingers gently brushing a stray, sweat-damp strand of hair from Shane's forehead. "Hey, solnyshko," he murmured, his voice a low, soothing rumble that vibrated through Shane's very bones. "You with me?"

A slow, tired smile touched Shane's lips. He hummed in response, a quiet, contented sound. Ilya took that as his cue. He shifted slightly, the movement restricted by their intimate bond, and reached for the supplies he had laid out on the floor within arm's reach. He returned with a damp cloth. The first touch of the warm, damp cloth against Shane's sweat-slicked skin was a shock, but it was quickly followed by a wave of soothing relief. Ilya was methodical, impossibly gentle, wiping down Shane's face, his neck, his chest, his touch a stark contrast to the brutal claiming from moments before. He couldn't clean Shane's most intimate places yet, locked as they were, but the care was no less reverent.

After he was done, Ilya coaxed him to drink some cool, clean water from a glass he held to his lips. Then, he rearranged their nest, pulling the softest, cleanest blankets around them until Shane was cocooned in a perfect, warm nest of comfort. He settled behind him, spooning his body as best he could, his chest a solid wall of warmth against Shane's back, his knot a persistent, possessive weight inside him, a silent promise that this was only the beginning.

Day two was not a gentle awakening. There was no slow return to consciousness, only a sudden, violent shift from satiated sleep to a raging, all-consuming inferno. The sun was just a faint suggestion behind the blackout curtains, but the room was already sweltering, the air thick, heavy, and almost unbreathable with the sheer potency of their combined scents. The heat had fully taken root, a merciless, driving force that made Shane's skin feel too tight, a constant, throbbing ache centered deep in his core. He was drenched in a sheen of sweat, his cock hard and leaking against the soft blankets of the nest. The nest itself was a wreck of saturated fabrics, a chaotic monument to their frenzied coupling from the night before. Ilya

was already awake, a looming presence behind him, his own body a furnace. He was hard, the thick line of his erection pressed against Shane's ass, and a low, constant growl rumbled in his chest, a sound of pure, unadulterated alpha need.

This day was a blur of desperate, instinctual motion. There were no breaks for conversation, no moments of tender care. The rut and the heat were in full, savage command. Ilya moved him, used him, and rearranged him in the nest with a single-minded purpose. He took him from behind, spooning him on their sides, a slow, grinding possession that was relentless and deep. He rolled Shane onto his stomach, spreading his legs wide and driving into him with a brutal, punishing force that made the bedframe slam against the wall. At one point, he pulled Shane to the edge of the bed, standing over him as he fucked into his hole, watching with a predatory focus as his cock disappeared again and again into Shane's willing, slick body. The only reprieve was the brief moments when Ilya's knot would swell, locking them together in a blissful, agonizing stasis. During these lulls, Ilya would spoon water and bits of energy-rich food into Shane's mouth, murmuring broken, possessive phrases in Russian against his neck, a constant, grounding presence in the fever dream.

Day three was a descent into a deeper, more primal level of awareness. Words became obsolete, their communication reduced to a series of guttural growls, whimpers, and the slick, percussive sounds of their bodies meeting. The world outside their bedroom ceased to exist. There was only the nest, the heat, and Ilya.

The morning broke not with light but with the intensification of scent, a thick, cloying cloud of cinnamon, musk, and the sharp, metallic tang of sweat that hung in the stagnant air of the room. Shane was already awake, or perhaps had never truly slept. He lay on his side, curled in on himself, his body trembling with a deep, bone-rattling chill that had nothing to do with temperature and everything to do with the voracious emptiness inside him. His skin felt paper-thin, every nerve ending raw and exposed, screaming for a touch that was both a balm and a brand. The heat was no longer just a fire; it was a gnawing hunger, a physical void that demanded to be filled, stretched, and claimed. He could feel the slickness leaking from him, a constant, humiliating proof of his body's desperate readiness.

Ilya was a shadow against the wall, a predator watching its prey. He hadn't slept either. His eyes, burning with a feverish intensity in the gloom, were fixed on Shane. The rut had stripped him down to his most fundamental core, leaving behind a creature of pure instinct and overwhelming possessiveness. He was a magnificent, terrifying sight, his body corded with tension, his cock a heavy, thick arch against his stomach, weeping with need. He didn't move, didn't speak, simply watched, letting the silence stretch, thick and suffocating, until the air vibrated with unspoken need. Then, he moved. Not with the frantic energy of the previous day, but with a deliberate, stalking grace that was infinitely more predatory.

He didn't enter the nest. He stood at the edge, a stark silhouette against the faint gray light filtering through the curtains. He reached down, his hand wrapping around his own erection, stroking himself slowly, his gaze never leaving Shane's trembling form. A low growl rumbled in his chest, a sound that was not a threat but a promise, a declaration of ownership. Shane whimpered, a pathetic, needy sound that was torn from his throat. He tried to move, to crawl

towards the alpha, but his limbs were leaden, useless. He was trapped, a captive of his own body's traitorous demands.

Ilya finally stepped into the nest, his movements slow, almost reverent. He knelt behind Shane, not touching him yet, simply inhaling his scent, a deep, shuddering breath that seemed to pull the very air from the room. He leaned forward, his lips brushing against the sensitive skin behind Shane's ear. "Moy," he breathed, the single word a hot puff of air, a possessive whisper that was more binding than any chain.

Then, he was inside him. There was no preparation, no gentle coaxing. There was only the relentless, demanding pressure of his cock breaching Shane's body, a single, powerful thrust that buried him to the hilt. The sensation was overwhelming, a white-hot flash of pain that instantly melted into a blinding, all-consuming pleasure. Shane cried out, a raw, ragged sound that was swallowed by the oppressive stillness of the room. Ilya didn't pause. He began to move, a slow, grinding rhythm that was designed to torment, to draw out the pleasure until it was an exquisite agony. His hands were bruising on Shane's hips, holding him in place, dictating the pace, claiming him from the inside out.

The hours bled into one another, a timeless stretch of sensation. There was no day, no night, only the rhythmic slap of skin against skin, the guttural sounds of their coupling, and the constant, overwhelming presence of the other. Ilya was relentless, a machine of pure, primal need. He took Shane on his hands and knees, arching his back, driving into him with a force that left him gasping for breath, his vision blurring with tears of pleasure and pain. He rolled Shane onto his back, hooking his legs over his shoulders, folding him in half, their faces inches apart, their eyes locked as Ilya pounded into him, his thrusts short, sharp, and impossibly deep. Their communication was non-verbal, a language of touch, of scent, of the desperate, instinctual movements of their bodies. A whimper from Shane meant he was close, a plea for more. A growl from Ilya was a warning, a promise of the knot to come, a possessive claim that echoed in the very marrow of Shane's bones.

The only reprieve came with the tying, the blessed, agonizing stretch of Ilya's knot swelling within him, a perfect, possessive lock that soothed the fever in Shane's blood while simultaneously stoking it to new heights. In these moments of forced stillness, when the frantic motion ceased and they were bound together, Ilya would become someone else. The relentless predator would soften, his growls subsiding into low, rumbling purrs. He would lick the salt from Shane's skin, his tongue a rough, soothing balm against raw nerves, a tender, grooming ritual that spoke of devotion as much as ownership. He would whisper words of praise and possessiveness in broken Russian against Shane's temple, his voice hoarse with exhaustion and emotion. "Moy khoroshiy," he'd murmur. "Moy prekrasnyy omega." These were the islands of peace in a sea of overwhelming sensation, brief moments where Shane felt cherished, adored, not just used. Then the knot would subside, and the inferno would begin anew, a cycle of desperate need and satiated bliss with no end in sight.

Day four dawned with a shift, a subtle but profound change in the atmosphere. The feverish, all-consuming intensity that had dominated the past two days had receded, leaving behind a lingering, bone-deep ache and a sense of impending loss. The air, still thick with their combined scents, was now breathable, the suffocating pressure eased. Ilya's movements were

slower, more deliberate, the frantic, animalistic urgency replaced by a deep, thorough possession. He took Shane with a languid, grinding slowness, a deliberate drawing out of every last drop of pleasure. Each thrust was a claiming, a marking, a final, possessive brand. He held Shane's hips in a firm grip, pulling him back onto his cock, his own breathing heavy and controlled. He was watching him, his dark, intense gaze fixed on Shane's face, a silent, unspoken question in his eyes. This was it. The final act.

The pressure was building, a slow, inexorable tide that was both agonizing and exquisite. Shane could feel the familiar coiling in his groin, the tightening of his muscles, the tell-tale tremor that heralded the peak. But this time, it was different. As the pleasure crested, a wave of emotion rose with it, a tidal wave of something so profound, so overwhelming, it stole his breath. A sob tore from his throat, a raw, broken sound that was quickly followed by another, and another. Tears streamed down his face, hot and fast, a sudden, violent torrent of grief and regret. He was coming, his body convulsing with a pleasure that was so intense it was almost painful, but his mind was a million miles away, lost in a maelstrom of what-ifs and if-onlys. The orgasm ripped through him, a violent, shuddering wave that left him gasping, but the tears didn't stop.

Ilya felt the change in an instant. The shift in Shane's body, the sudden, desperate sound of his crying, the way he collapsed, not in bliss, but in a heap of raw, unadulterated sorrow. He pulled out gently, ignoring his own unfinished pleasure, and wrapped his arms around Shane's shaking form. He didn't ask questions. He didn't try to fix it. He just held him, pulling him close, cocooning him in his arms, his body a solid, unyielding wall of strength. He pressed soft, gentle kisses against Shane's hair, his face, his neck, a constant, silent reassurance.

The storm of sobs that wracked Shane's body was a violent, heartbreaking thing. He buried his face in Ilya's chest, the sounds muffled by sweat-slicked skin and the tangled mess of their nest. Each tear was a release of years of pent-up fear, of loneliness, of denying himself this very connection. "I'm sorry," he gasped between ragged, hitching breaths, the words a self-recriminating litany. "I'm so sorry I waited. I wasted so much time." His fingers clutched at Ilya's back, not in passion, but in a desperate search for an anchor in the tumultuous sea of his own regret.

Ilya's response was immediate and absolute. He tightened his embrace, a cage of muscle and warmth that was both impenetrable and infinitely safe. He shushed him gently, a low, soothing sound that was more felt than heard. "No, solnyshko," he murmured, his lips pressed to Shane's temple. "No apologies. Not for this." He rocked them slowly, a gentle, rhythmic motion that was as much for himself as for Shane. He could feel the last embers of the rut beginning to cool, the primal, possessive haze receding, leaving behind a crystal-clear, piercing love and a fierce, protective instinct. He ran a hand through Shane's damp, tangled hair, a gesture of pure, uncomplicated comfort. "You were not ready," he continued, his voice a low, steady rumble. "And I was not here to catch you. But we are here now. This is our beginning."

Shane's sobs slowly subsided, quieting to weak, shuddering hiccups. The heat that had been a raging inferno was now just a low, warm ember in his blood, a fading thrum. The finality of it was a new kind of ache, a hollow sadness that this intense, all-consuming connection was

drawing to a close. But Ilya's words, his unwavering presence, were a soothing balm. He lifted his head, his face a mess of tears and snot, and looked at Ilya. The alpha's face was etched with a tenderness that was almost painful to behold, a stark, beautiful contrast to the ferocious predator he had been just moments before. Ilya leaned in and kissed him, a soft, gentle press of lips that was devoid of all passion, a simple, pure gesture of comfort and unwavering devotion.

Ilya pulled back just enough to see Shane's face, his thumbs gently wiping the tear tracks from his flushed cheeks. The room was quiet now, the desperate energy of the rut replaced by a profound, echoing stillness. The dim light filtering through the curtains cast a soft glow, making the sweat on their skin shimmer. "I love you," Ilya said, the words simple, direct, and utterly true. They weren't a grand declaration, but a statement of fact, as fundamental as gravity. "More than I knew was possible to love anyone. More than I love breathing." He held Shane's gaze, letting the weight of his words settle in the space between them. In his mind, gears were already turning, plans forming, a quiet, resolute promise taking shape.

Shane's breath hitched, a fresh wave of tears welling in his eyes, but these were different. They were not born of regret, but of an overwhelming, overflowing joy that was almost painful in its intensity. He had never felt so seen, so completely and unconditionally accepted for every broken, messy, beautiful part of himself. "I love you, too," he whispered, his voice cracking with the force of the emotion. "God, Ilya, I love you so much it scares me sometimes." He took a shaky breath, gathering the courage for the words he'd been holding close to his heart, the words that felt more right than anything ever had. He began, his voice gaining strength. "I want... I want to build a life with you. I want to be your husband."

A brilliant, breathtaking smile transformed Ilya's face, erasing every trace of the predator, leaving only the man who loved him. He looked stunned, utterly speechless for a moment, before a low, joyous laugh rumbled in his chest. "Yes," he said, the word a choked, exultant sound. He captured Shane's face in his hands, kissing him deeply, a kiss that was a promise, a vow, a sealing of their fate. When he finally pulled back, his eyes were shining with an unspoken plan.

"Yes. Of course, yes. There is nothing I want more. You are my home, Shane. You are my everything." He wrapped his arms around him again, pulling him close, and in the quiet, tangled mess of their nest, with the scent of their shared history still clinging to the air, they held each other, two halves of a whole, finally, irrevocably, and forever joined.

As the emotional tempest subsided, a profound quiet settled over them, a peace so deep it felt sacred. The last vestiges of the fever, both of heat and rut, had finally burned away, leaving a clean, clear space in their wake. Ilya held Shane, feeling the steady, reassuring beat of his heart against his own. The desperate, instinctual need to claim and possess had been replaced by a much calmer, more resolute impulse: to protect. To build. To bind Shane to him in every way the world would recognize. He listened to Shane's even breathing, the soft sounds of the city slowly waking up outside their window, and a slow smile spread across his face, a private, secret thing.

His mind was already awhirl, not with the chaotic energy of the rut, but with the quiet, meticulous focus of a planning a campaign. The thought of proposing to Shane had been a

distant, abstract possibility before this, a "someday" dream. Now, it was a certainty, an immediate, non-negotiable mission. He wouldn't just get a ring. He would create a moment. It had to be perfect, a memory so powerful it would eclipse the sorrow of this morning, a testament not to the primal frenzy of their bonding, but to the enduring, quiet love that sustained it. He was already mentally cataloging Shane's favorite places, the little things that made him smile, the quiet moments he cherished. The plan was still forming, a collection of disparate ideas, but the goal was crystalline in his mind: to ask Shane to be his husband in a way that would leave no doubt in his heart that he was loved, not just as an omega to be claimed, but as a partner to be treasured for a lifetime. He held him a little tighter, a silent vow made to the slumbering man in his arms, the first step in a journey he would meticulously, and joyfully, orchestrate.

By evening, the world had slowly crept back in. The oppressive silence of the bedroom was replaced by the distant sounds of traffic, and the hunger in their bellies was for food, not each other. A new, profound stillness existed between them, a quiet intimacy forged in the fire. The need to see their daughter, to reconnect with the life that had been put on hold, was a palpable, shared ache. "I want to see them," Shane had murmured, his voice still raspy. "I need to see them."

Shane moved with the slow, deliberate grace of the truly exhausted, pulling on a pair of well-worn sweatpants and a faded gray t-shirt. It was the uniform of comfort, of a man who had been through a war and survived. When he emerged from the closet, he stopped dead, a slow, incredulous smile spreading across his face. Ilya was standing by the door, looking like he'd stepped out of a high-fashion editorial. He wore a cream-colored turtleneck that hugged every line of his muscular torso, tucked into sleek, black leather pants and the runway that ended in a pair of imposing, polished leather boots. He was every inch the formidable alpha, radiating a confident, sophisticated energy that was at stark odds with their current state.

Shane let out a low whistle. "What in the hell are you doing?" he asked, a laugh bubbling up in his chest. "We're going to my mom's airbnb, not walking in Milan."

Ilya's expression was dead serious, though a hint of amusement glinted in his dark eyes. "I am dressing to meet my future mother-in-law for the first time," he stated, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "First impressions are important."

Shane stared at him, a mixture of exasperation and utter adoration warring for dominance on his face. "Oh, you asshole," he breathed, shaking his head. "You can't show up looking like that and leave me looking like a schlub in a t-shirt. That's just not fair." The challenge was issued, and accepted. Shane turned on his heel and marched back into the closet, emerging a few minutes later transformed. He had swapped the sweatpants for perfectly fitted, light-wash jeans and the t-shirt for a form-fitting, black cashmere sweater that clung to his lean frame. He looked effortlessly elegant, a perfect, beautiful complement to Ilya's stark intensity.

Shane found Ilya standing by a sleek, black sedan, the passenger door already swung open in a gesture of chivalry that was both old-fashioned and utterly charming. Ilya leaned against the driver's side door, arms crossed, a slow, predatory smile spreading across his face as Shane approached.

"Trying to impress me?" Shane asked, his voice still a little rough.

"Always," Ilya replied, his gaze hot enough to melt the concrete around them. "But I have to admit, I wasn't expecting you to try and upstage me with that sweater." He pushed off the car, closing the distance between them in two long strides. He reached out, his fingers tracing the collar of Shane's cashmere sweater. "It's soft. Like you."

Shane rolled his eyes, but a blush crept up his neck. "You're ridiculous. Are we going, or are you going to keep trying to distract me?"

Ilya's grin widened. "Who's distracting who?" He leaned in, his lips brushing Shane's ear. "I'm just trying to figure out how I'm going to get through this without dragging you into the nearest empty room."

Shane shivered, a delicious thrill running through him. "Behave," he warned, though he made no move to pull away.

"Never," Ilya whispered, before finally stepping back and gesturing towards the open car door. "After you, my love."

The drive to the downtown Boston Airbnb was a blur of city lights and a charged, flirtatious silence. The leather of Ilya's pants creaked softly as he shifted in his seat, the sound a constant, maddening reminder of his presence. Ilya's hand found its way to Shane's thigh, his thumb stroking a slow, deliberate rhythm that sent sparks straight to Shane's groin. Shane retaliated by tracing the seam of Ilya's pants, a light, teasing touch that made the alpha's grip on the steering wheel tighten. They were a wire pulled taut, the air in the car thick with unspoken promises.

The elevator ride up to the apartment was a delicious torture. The soft music and the gentle ascent did little to quell the rising tide of desire. They stood in the middle of the car, the mirrored walls reflecting their twin, hungry gazes. Ilya backed Shane against the cool metal wall, caging him in with his arms, their bodies a breath apart. The urge to kiss him, to touch him, to pull him right back to the car and take him home was overwhelming.

"Ilya," Shane warned, his voice a low, breathless plea, "not here. Not now."

Ilya groaned, resting his forehead against Shane's. "You are a test of my control, solnyshko," he growled, the pet name a rough, endearing caress.

The doors dinged open, and they both took a shaky breath, composing themselves as they stepped into the quiet, carpeted hallway. They stopped before a solid dark wood door, the brass number gleaming under the soft hallway lighting. This was it. The final barrier. Ilya's heart was pounding in his chest, a rhythm that had nothing to do with desire and everything to do with the immense, life-altering significance of what was about to happen. He was about to meet the woman who had raised the love of his life, the woman who was, for all intents and purposes, Shane's mother.

Shane took a steadying breath, his hand resting on the solid wood of the door. He could hear faint sounds from within—the soft murmur of a television, the high-pitched giggle of a little

girl that sent a jolt of pure, parental longing straight through him. He raised his fist to knock, but Ilya's hand covered his, stopping him. "Let me," he said, his voice low and serious. He gave Shane's hand a gentle squeeze before knocking, three sharp, decisive raps that echoed in the quiet hallway.

The door swung open to reveal Yuna Hollander. She was a striking woman, with the same sharp, intelligent eyes as her son, though her hair was streaked with distinguished silver at the temples. She was framed in the warm light of the apartment, a formidable presence in a simple, elegant blouse and slacks. Her gaze swept over them, a quick, assessing flicker that took in their impeccable, if mismatched, attire before landing on Shane. A warm, genuine smile broke across her face. "Shane, my boy." She pulled him into a fierce, tight hug, a gesture that spoke volumes of their deep bond.

Then she turned her attention to Ilya, her smile softening into something more guarded, more analytical. "Ilya," she said, her tone polite but edged with a cool professionalism that had been honed over years of high-stakes negotiations.

"Mrs. Hollander," Ilya said, his voice a low, respectful baritone. He inclined his head, a gesture of old-world deference. "It is an honor to finally meet you. Shane has told me so much about you."

"Yuna, please," she replied, though her expression remained unchanged. "Well, don't just stand there in the hallway. Come in, come in." She stepped aside, allowing them into the spacious, sun-drenched apartment.

Before they could take another step, a small, whirlwind of energy came barreling around the corner. "Daddy!" Elena shrieked, her tiny legs carrying her straight into Shane's waiting arms. He scooped her up, burying his face in her sweet-smelling hair, a wave of pure, unconditional love washing over him.

"Papa!" she chirped, reaching for Ilya.

Ilya took her, a look of pure, unadulterated adoration softening his features. He held her with a surprising gentleness, this large, intimidating alpha utterly captivated by the small child in his arms.

Yuna watched the reunion, her heart melting a fraction at the sight of her granddaughter so happy, so securely loved by two fathers. "Alright, let's get you two something to drink," she said, her tone softening. "Wine?" As Shane settled onto the plush sofa with Elena chattering excitedly in his lap, Ilya followed Yuna into the sleek, modern kitchen. "Thank you for this, Ilya," Yuna began, her back to him as she retrieved three glasses and a bottle of deep red wine from the counter. "For arranging this place, for letting me have this time with her. It means the world." She poured the wine, her movements precise. "But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious. Shane... he's my whole world. He's been through more than you can imagine. I need to know what your intentions are."

Ilya accepted the glass she offered, his posture relaxed but respectful. "My intentions, Mrs. Hollander, are to spend the rest of my life making him and Elena happy," he said, his voice steady and sincere. He met her probing questions head-on, addressing her concerns about his

past with a candid honesty she hadn't expected. He didn't deflect, didn't make excuses. He spoke of his feelings for Shane with a depth of feeling that was undeniable, of how he saw their future, of the life he wanted to build. For fifteen minutes, she interrogated him, and for fifteen minutes, he stood his ground, a respectful but immovable force, completely focused on earning her trust.

From the living room, Shane's happy laughter mingled with Elena's giggles, a soundtrack to a life Ilya desperately wanted. He wished for a buffer, for a single glance from Shane, but he understood. This was Shane's time, and this was Ilya's fight to win. Then, Ilya decided to change the game. "Mrs. Hollander," he said, pulling out his phone. "I know words are easy. But I wanted to show you something." He navigated to his photo album, opening a single image. On the screen was a stunning, antique-style platinum ring, its centerpiece a deep, brilliant sapphire flanked by two smaller, shimmering diamonds. "I bought this this afternoon," he explained quietly. "I've been looking at it since our first real date. After seeing Shane in the hospital for the first time weeks ago. But after these past four days... I knew I couldn't wait any longer."

Yuna stared at the phone, then at Ilya's earnest, hopeful face.

Yuna stared at the phone, her breath catching in her throat. The sapphire was the exact deep, captivating blue of Ilya's. It wasn't just a ring; it was a declaration, a piece of armor and a promise all in one. All her carefully constructed walls, her professional skepticism, crumbled in an instant. This wasn't a playboy trying to charm his way into her son's life. This was a man who had looked at her son's soul and wanted to build a fortress around it. A small, watery laugh escaped her, a sound of pure, unadulterated defeat. "Oh," she whispered, and then she was grabbing Ilya's bicep, leaning her head against the solid muscle of his arm in a gesture of weary, accepting camaraderie. "You've got me. You've completely got me."

"What's going on?" Shane's voice, filled with amused curiosity, broke the spell in the kitchen. He stood in the doorway, Elena balanced on his hip, a look of bewilderment on his face as he took in the scene: his mother, the formidable Yuna Hollander, practically draped over Ilya's arm.

Ilya, flustered, nearly dropped his phone, fumbling to catch it with a sharp clatter against the marble countertop. Yuna threw her head back and let out a real, hearty laugh, a sound Shane hadn't heard in far too long. "Oh, nothing, sweetie," she said, wiping a tear from her eye. "I was just cuddling your papa's very impressive bicep."

Shane's eyebrows shot up, a slow, wicked grin spreading across his face. "Mom, are you feeling alright? First you interrogate him, now you're copping a feel?"

The shared laughter that followed was a release, a breaking of the final dam. Yuna pushed herself off Ilya, but kept her hand on his arm. She looked up at him, her gaze direct and piercing, but now it was filled with warmth and acceptance. She leaned in and kissed him firmly on the cheek. "Welcome to the family, kid." The gesture was simple, but it carried the weight of her world. Shane watched, his heart swelling, a profound sense of rightness settling over him. He crossed the room, and as Ilya and Yuna embraced, he wrapped his free arm around them both, pulling them into a three-way hug.

They settled back in the living room, the atmosphere transformed. The tension had evaporated, replaced by a comfortable, familial warmth. Yuna regaled them with stories of their four-day adventure—trips to the Boston Public Garden, a slightly chaotic visit to the New England Aquarium, and the sheer joy of introducing Elena to clam chowder for the first time. "She loved it," Yuna said, her eyes sparkling with pride. "Got it all over her new sweater, but she loved it." Shane listened, a contented smile on his face, his arm resting along the back of the sofa behind Ilya, his fingers occasionally brushing against the nape of Ilya's neck. Ilya, in turn, had one arm draped possessively over Shane's shoulders, his thumb rubbing slow circles on Shane's bicep. They were a unit, a cohesive whole, and Yuna drank in the sight of it.

"You know," Yuna mused, swirling the last of the wine in her glass, "Boston really has a pulse to it. A different energy than Ottawa. I'd forgotten what it was like to be in a city that's always moving." She looked from Shane to Ilya, a speculative gleam in her eye. "It's been a wonderful visit. We'll have to do this again soon."

Ilya took a slow sip of his wine, a faint, enigmatic smirk playing on his lips. His gaze drifted to the window, where the city lights glittered against the dark canvas of the night sky. A new plan, a new possibility, was already taking shape in the intricate, brilliant architecture of his mind, a complex scheme born of a simple, powerful desire: to give Shane and Elena the world. He could feel Shane's eyes on him, studying him, and he knew that Shane was starting to recognize that look—the tell-tale sign that Ilya was plotting something monumental. He kept his expression carefully neutral, but the smirk remained, a quiet, confident promise of the future he was already building for them, piece by deliberate piece. Shane just shook his head, a fond, exasperated smile on his face, content for now to let the mystery unfold, secure in the knowledge that whatever it was, it would be for them.

The evening wore on, the warmth of the wine and the company making the late hour feel like a gentle suggestion rather than a demand. But eventually, the long days of separation and the intense reunion began to weigh on them all. "We should get this little one home," Shane said, his voice soft as he smoothed a hand over Elena's hair, where her head had lolled against his chest. As they stood to leave, Yuna's expression faltered slightly, the prospect of returning to the quiet, empty Airbnb suddenly feeling stark and lonely. Ilya saw it, the flicker of disappointment she tried to hide.

"Yuna," Ilya began, his tone gentle but firm, cutting through the polite goodbyes. He turned to face her fully. "Don't stay here for the rest of your stay." He gestured vaguely. "Stay with us. At our home." He didn't pause for breath, laying out the plan with the easy confidence of a man who was used to things falling into place. "I can cancel the rest of the reservation. We have a guest room, it's no trouble at all. I'd like to cook for you. In fact," he continued, a brilliant idea striking him, "I was planning on making Thanksgiving dinner. I want you there. So please, come home with us. Rest here tonight, and tomorrow... maybe you and I could go for a grocery run together in the morning when you wake up."

Yuna looked taken aback, her professional composure momentarily failing her. "Ilya, I couldn't possibly impose," she stammered, though the hope in her eyes was unmistakable.

"You wouldn't be imposing," he said immediately, his voice leaving no room for argument. "You're family. I want you there for breakfast in the morning. We want you there."

Shane watched the entire exchange unfold, a profound, overwhelming sense of love washing over him. Ilya wasn't just asking his mother to stay; he was weaving her into the fabric of their lives, taking care of her, anticipating a need she hadn't even voiced. It was so simple, so right. A wide, genuine smile spread across Shane's face. Before they left, both he and Ilya leaned in, pressing soft kisses to Yuna's cheeks, a silent, unanimous confirmation. With a final, happy sigh of agreement from Yuna, Shane scooped a sleeping Elena into his arms, her small body a trusting weight against his chest, and followed Ilya out the door, the three of them heading home, together.

The morning air was crisp as Ilya pulled up to the curb, Yuna already waiting with a small suitcase at her feet. She slid into the passenger seat, her smile bright with genuine anticipation. "Shane and the little one are still passed out," Ilya explained, pulling smoothly into traffic. "I thought we could grab some things for dinner. Whole Foods alright with you?" The next two hours were a whirlwind of domestic bliss, a dance of carts and conversation as they navigated the aisles, debating the merits of brining versus roasting a turkey and laughing over which brand of cranberry sauce was superior. Ilya found himself utterly charmed by this easy, collaborative partnership, the simple joy of planning a family meal with the woman who was quickly becoming a second mother to him.

But as they loaded the last of the groceries into the trunk, the scent of fresh herbs and rosemary filling the air between them, Ilya bypassed the familiar turn towards their neighborhood. A small, knowing smile touched his lips. "One more stop," he said, his voice low and conspiratorial. He turned down a winding road that led them away from the manicured city streets and into a sprawling, uneven parking lot, cracked with age and dotted with hopeful weeds pushing through the asphalt. The outlet mall loomed ahead, a patchwork of brick and siding, but Ilya guided the car towards a quieter corner, parking in front of a standalone building that looked like it had been plucked from a cobblestone European street.

He cut the engine, the sudden silence ringing with anticipation. "Wait here," he said softly, and before Yuna could even process the command, he was out of the car, moving around the hood with a grace that belied his height. He opened her door, not just with a casual push, but with a deliberate, almost courtly gesture, his hand resting on the frame as if to ensure she wouldn't stumble as she stepped out onto the uneven pavement. It was a small thing, but it spoke volumes, a silent echo of the respect and care he held for her.

They walked the short distance to the little brick building, the morning sun catching in the mortar between the dark red bricks. Ilya reached for the heavy wooden door, pulling it open and holding it for her, a gesture that felt both old-fashioned and profoundly modern in its sincerity. The moment Yuna stepped over the threshold, a small bell chimed softly, and her breath caught in her throat. The air inside was cool and still, smelling of expensive perfume and polished glass. It was a high-end jewelry store, the kind she used to frequent during Shane's prime negotiating endorsement deals, but this felt different. This felt personal.

Ilya moved with a purpose that was both calm and electric, a current of energy just beneath his composed surface. He approached the polished mahogany counter, his gaze fixed on the impeccably dressed sales associate. "Pickup for Ilya Rozanov," he said, his voice steady, betraying none of the frantic thrumming in his own chest. The woman smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners, and disappeared into a back room. When she returned, she carried a small, velvet box, the color of a midnight sky. She placed it on the counter between them.

Ilya's hand trembled slightly as he reached for it, his knuckles whitening for a moment. He flipped open the lid. And there it was. A sapphire ring, so deep and brilliant it seemed to contain the entire ocean, flanked by two diamonds that sparked like captured stars. It blazed under the focused spotlights of the display case, a perfect, breathtaking promise. A soft gasp escaped Yuna's lips, her hand flying to her mouth. Tears welled in her eyes, hot and sudden, mirroring the unmistakable sheen that glazed over Ilya's.

He looked at her then, his guard completely down, his vulnerability laid bare in the shimmering light of the jewel. And she saw it all—the hope, the fear, the overwhelming love he held for her son, for her granddaughter. In that moment, they weren't just future in-laws; they were conspirators in a grand, beautiful design. Yuna closed the small distance between them, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders, pulling him into a spontaneous, fierce hug that felt more like a victory celebration. He buried his face in her hair, his own shoulders shaking slightly with the force of his emotion.

Leaving the store, they were practically floating. The world seemed brighter, the air sweeter. They were giddy with a shared, intoxicating joy, their laughter echoing across the uneven pavement of the sketchy parking lot. They were like two teenagers who had just pulled off the greatest prank of their lives, their steps light, their hearts full. They scrambled into the car, the velvet box a sacred object resting on the console between them, a secret that felt bigger and more beautiful than both of them combined.

Back in the car, the giddy energy began to settle, replaced by a comfortable silence. A shadow passed over Ilya's features, a fleeting sadness that Yuna, with her agent's eye for detail, couldn't miss. "Ilya?" she asked gently. "You alright?" He hesitated, then the words tumbled out, a story he hadn't shared with many. His father, lost to dementia a year ago. His mother, Irina, gone far too soon from an overdose when he was just twelve—a twelve-year-old who had been the one to find her.

A heavy silence settled in the car, thicker than the morning fog. Yuna's heart ached for him, for the little boy who had carried such a profound trauma. Without a word, she reached over, her hand finding his on the center console. She gave it a firm, grounding squeeze. "You know," she said, her voice thick with emotion, "it may not mean much, coming from a stranger... but I'd like to be there for you. In any way that you need. Not to try and take your beautiful mother's place, God no. But just... to be the support you need, whenever you need it." She squeezed his hand again. "You shouldn't have to carry that alone."

The wall Ilya had so carefully constructed around his pain crumbled. A choked sound escaped his throat, a raw, vulnerable "Fuck." He immediately shook his head, the apology instantaneous. "Sorry. I shouldn't—"

Yuna let out a soft, watery laugh. "Honey, please. I raised Shane Hollander. There's nothing you can say that I haven't heard before. You're fine." The levity was a lifeline, and Ilya grabbed it, grateful for the shift. He took a steadying breath, needing to move away from the precipice of his own grief. "Yuna," he started, his voice regaining its composure, "weren't you Shane's manager when he was in the NHL?"

The change in topic was welcome, and Yuna embraced it, a fond nostalgia warming her tone. "I was. His agent. I loved it. God, I fucking loved it. The negotiations, the strategy, getting him the endorsements he deserved... it was like the best chess game in the world." She paused, a wistful look on her face. "It's... not the same now. HR for the Centaurs. It's a paycheck." The unspoken longing hung in the air between them, a familiar ache they both recognized.

That was Ilya's opening. He took it, his voice measured and serious. "My agent... he's a good man. A Russian man I've known for years. But since I came out, during that interview... it's not the same. The trust is fractured." He turned to look at her, his blue eyes intense and earnest. "I need someone in my corner who will fight for me, who believes in me. I was wondering... if you would be interested in being my agent."

Yuna didn't answer. She turned her head to look out the passenger window, her reflection a blur against the passing storefronts. Her shoulders hitched, a single, silent tear tracing a path down her cheek. The silence in the car became a cavernous thing, and Ilya felt a cold dread creep up his spine. He had misread the situation, pushed too far, too fast. He had mistaken her professional nostalgia for a desire to return to the fray, and now he'd made things awkward, had possibly fractured the fragile new bond they'd just forged. His hands tightened on the steering wheel, his mind racing for a way to backtrack, to take the words back.

Then it came—a sound like shattered mending, a laugh so fragile it might have been a sob, echoing in the confined space of the car. It wasn't whole, not yet, but it was the first note of a song thought lost forever, a melody rising from the ashes of grief. The sound seemed to fill every corner of the vehicle, pushing back the silence that had grown heavy with unspoken histories and fractured trust. Yuna turned back to him slowly, her movements deliberate, as if turning a page in a sacred text she had waited a lifetime to read. In the dim light of the car's interior, filtered through the tinted windows, her eyes were twin constellations, tears glimmering like captured stars against the velvet darkness of her irises. Each droplet held a universe of memory, a testament to the love and loss she had carried with such stoic grace for so many years. Her gaze held his, unwavering, and in its depths swam a light so brilliant it seemed to cast shadows of doubt behind them, illuminating possibilities that had once seemed as distant as unreachable galaxies.

"Ilya Rozanov," she breathed, the name a prayer on her tongue, each syllable carefully enunciated as if it were a sacred incantation, "you're an answered prayer I never knew I'd sent." Her voice trembled with the weight of revelation, the words quivering with the force of decades of unspoken longing for connection, for someone to understand the particular shape of her sorrow. A shaky inhale, and she leaned forward slightly, her body angled toward his, as if sharing a secret that could heal the world, her hand still resting on his where it gripped the steering wheel, their skin pressed together creating a point of warmth in the cool interior of the car.

"Don't you think?" she whispered, her words painting a tapestry in the space between them, weaving threads of loss and love into something new and beautiful. "That somewhere, beyond the veil of years and sorrow, my David and your Irina... they found each other?" Her gaze grew distant, seeing something far beyond the confines of the car, beyond the mundane world of passing traffic and distant cityscapes.

Her eyes softened, as if she could truly see them, two souls dancing among the clouds, their forms translucent yet luminous. "Can't you just picture it?" she continued, her voice gaining strength as the vision solidified in her mind's eye. "Two souls, waiting, loving us from afar. And one day, they looked down at our broken, lonely worlds and said—'Enough. It's been far too long. Let's weave our families together. Right now.'"

The words hung in the air, luminous and alive, a divine conspiracy whispered between them, filling every shadow with impossible light, transforming the leather seats and plastic dashboard into something sacred, a confessional where two souls had finally found their counterpart in each other's grief and hope.

"I'd love to be your agent. I'd quit my job in Ottawa tomorrow."

The relief that washed over Ilya was so profound it left him breathless. He pulled the car over to the side of the road, needing a moment to process the seismic shift that had just occurred. He turned to her, his own eyes now moist. "Yuna... I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything," she said, reaching over to take his hand again. "Just know that you're not just getting an agent. You're getting a family." She gave him a look that was fierce, protective, and utterly, unshakably loyal. In that moment, Ilya knew he had done more than just hire an agent and he couldn't wait to tell Shane.

The front door clicked open, spilling the scent of coffee and maple syrup into the entryway. Yuna followed Ilya into the warm embrace of their home, where the faint, sugary aroma of cinnamon hung in the air like a promise. From the living room, a small whirlwind in pink pajamas—Elena—broke free from her cartoon-induced trance. "Mommaw Yuna! Papa!" she squealed, launching herself at their legs. Yuna scooped her up, burying her face in the soft cloud of her granddaughter's hair, while Ilya ruffled the girl's dark curls, his sharp features softening with an affection that seemed to radiate from his very core. The sight made Yuna's heart ache, a fierce, protective joy swelling in her chest.

In the kitchen, Shane stood with his back to them, phone pressed to his ear, a pan sizzling on the stove. The scent of cooking bacon joined the mix of morning aromas. He turned at the sound of their entry, his face breaking into a wide, brilliant smile when he saw them. He held up a finger, mouthing "One second," before turning his attention back to the call, his voice dropping into a conspiratorial hush.

Ilya's gaze drifted from Shane's smiling face to the velvet box tucked away in his jacket pocket, a weight that felt both terrifying and exhilarating. But then he caught a snippet of Shane's conversation, and a jolt of pure, unadulterated smugness shot through him. "Harris, that is so awesome," Shane was saying, his voice buzzing with an excitement Ilya hadn't

heard in weeks. "No, I get it. This is a huge opportunity for you. I can't believe it. Yeah, of course. We'll celebrate soon."

Shane ended the call, letting the phone drop onto the counter with a clatter. He turned, his eyes shining with a light that seemed to illuminate the entire kitchen. He practically bounced on the balls of his feet, a restless energy thrumming through him. "You will not believe who that was," he started, then stopped, his eyes narrowing playfully at Ilya's knowing smirk. "Wait. You knew, didn't you?"

Ilya just shrugged, a picture of feigned innocence, though the glint in his blue eyes gave him away completely. He set his keys on the counter, the movement slow and deliberate. "I may have had a conversation or two with the front office," he said, his voice a low, conspiratorial rumble. "They were looking for someone with a certain... expertise. Someone who understood the game from the inside, and who had a knack for connecting with people online. Harris likes hockey. This is good, yes?" He let the words hang in the air, enjoying the look of dawning comprehension and pure, unadulterated happiness that washed over Shane's face.

A laugh burst from Shane, bright and full of disbelief. "You absolute menace," he breathed, crossing the kitchen in two long strides. He didn't stop, just walked right into Ilya's space, wrapping his arms around Ilya's waist and burying his face in the crook of his neck. "You did this for him?" The words were muffled against Ilya's skin, but the raw, unfiltered gratitude was unmistakable. Ilya's arms came up to circle Shane's back, one hand splayed wide between his shoulder blades, holding him close. He felt the solid, reassuring weight of the ring box in his pocket pressing against Shane's hip, a secret promise hidden in plain sight amidst this open display of affection. "Is good," Ilya murmured into Shane's hair.

Yuna watched them, her hands resting on Elena's shoulders as the little girl leaned back against her legs, munching on a piece of bacon from the platter on the counter. The look on her face was one of profound, almost overwhelming contentment. This was it. This was the family she had prayed for, the one she had feared Shane might never find after everything. Seeing them like this—Shane's unrestrained joy, Ilya's quiet, steadfast support—was like watching a masterpiece being painted in real-time. She saw the way Ilya held Shane, not just with strength, but with a fierce tenderness that spoke volumes. She saw the way Shane melted into him, trusting him completely. She saw the future, and it was beautiful.

Pulling back slightly, Shane's eyes were shining, a wide, goofy grin plastered on his face. "He's starting next week. He got the job, Ilya." The words tumbled out, a cascade of pure happiness. He looked from Ilya to Yuna and back again, as if trying to make sure they all understood the magnitude of this moment. "This is... this is huge. For him." He let out another breathy laugh, shaking his head in awe. "I swear, sometimes I think you're magic." He leaned in and pressed a hard, grateful kiss to Ilya's lips, a quick, impulsive gesture that was filled with more emotion than a thousand words could convey. When he pulled away, he was still smiling, but there was a new warmth in his eyes, a depth of love that went beyond simple gratitude.

Shane finally tore his gaze away from Ilya, turning to beam at his mother. "And you," he said, grabbing one of her bags. "Let me show you to your room." He led her down a short hallway,

the warm wood floors creaking softly under their feet. He pushed open a door to a guest room that was surprisingly spacious, filled with neutral tones and soft light. "It's lovely, sweetie," Yuna said, her voice full of genuine appreciation. "The whole house is... it's so warm." Her eyes then drifted toward another open door down the hall, a splash of vibrant pink visible within. "Is that her room?" Shane nodded, a proud smile on his face as he led her to the doorway. Inside was a little girl's paradise, from the pale pink walls and shelves overflowing with books and toys. "Oh, Shane," Yuna whispered, her hand going to her heart. "It's perfect."

The morning morphed into a full-blown culinary operation. With a silent, intuitive understanding, Ilya and Yuna claimed the kitchen as their own. It became their stage, their battlefield, their sanctuary. Ilya, focused and intense, took charge of the main components—deboning the turkey with a surgeon's precision, creating a rich, fragrant stock from the carcass. Yuna, a whirlwind of efficient energy, handled the sides, her knife a blur as she chopped mountains of herbs and vegetables for the stuffing. They moved in a synchronized dance around each other, passing bowls without a word, handing over spices, tasting and adjusting, their easy camaraderie a testament to a bond forged in a single, eventful morning. The air grew thick with the scent of roasting garlic, thyme, and sweet potatoes.

Shane, having been banished from the main prep area after nearly contaminating the cranberries with bacon grease, had claimed the kitchen island as his official observation post. He sat on one of the high stools, elbows on the cool marble, chin in his hands, and just watched. He watched the way Ilya's brow furrowed in concentration, the way a small, private smile would touch his lips when a particular spice hit the pan just right. He watched the way Yuna would hum a tuneless song as she worked, the comfortable domesticity of it all making his chest feel tight and full.

The kitchen was a symphony of controlled chaos. A mountain of peeled potatoes sat in a bowl of cold water, glistening under the recessed lighting. Yuna was meticulously folding pecans and brown sugar into a sticky, fragrant topping for the sweet potatoes, while Ilya was checking the temperature on the turkey, its skin now a perfect, burnished gold. Shane, nursing a mug of coffee, was trying to convince himself that he wasn't getting in the way by simply breathing the same air. It was in this quiet, domestic lull, with the rich scent of roasting meat filling every corner of the house, that Ilya turned from the oven, wiping his hands on a dish towel.

"Shane," Ilya said, his tone casual, almost offhand. "We have some news for you." He exchanged a quick, conspiratorial glance with Yuna, who immediately stilled her hands, a mischievous smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

Shane looked up from his coffee, his brow furrowed in confusion. "News for me? What are you talking about?"

"Yuna is quitting her job," Ilya stated flatly, as if he were commenting on the weather.

Shane's jaw went slack. He looked from Ilya's deadpan expression to his mother, who was now failing spectacularly to suppress a laugh. "What?" Shane sputtered. "Mom? You're quitting? Why? I thought you liked... well, you didn't hate it."

Yuna finally let out a full, bright peal of laughter. "Oh, sweetie. I do hate it, a little." She wiped her hands on her apron, her eyes twinkling. "It's because I'm taking a new job."

Ilya stepped forward, a rare, unguarded smile spreading across his face, lighting up his entire being. He placed a hand on Yuna's shoulder, a gesture of partnership and absolute conviction. "She is going to be my agent."

Shane's coffee mug froze halfway to his lips. He stared at them, his expression a perfect tableau of bewilderment. His mother, smiling. Ilya, beaming. Two people who, less than twenty-four hours ago, were sizing each other up like prizefighters, now stood together as a united front, gleefully dropping a bomb into the middle of his perfectly normal Thanksgiving Eve. He slowly set the mug down on the island, the ceramic making a soft, deliberate click. "You're... what?" he managed, the words feeling foreign in his own mouth. He looked at Ilya, searching for a punchline he knew wasn't coming. "My agent? But... what about Anatoly? Mom, you have a career in Ottawa. A life."

"Anatoly is a good man, but he's not fighting for me anymore," Ilya said, his tone losing its playfulness, replaced by a quiet sincerity. "She will."

"And my 'life' in Ottawa is a job I tolerate in a city I live in," Yuna added, stepping closer to the island. "This... this is being part of a life I love with you three. I get lonely sometimes in Ottawa. I really think Ilya and I could match some magic with his new brand. Think of all of the Pride merch!"

Of course, Yuna Hollander was already planning marketing deals.

The words echoed their conversation from the car, a private joke made public, a promise solidified. She watched as the realization dawned on her son's face, as the pieces clicked into place—not just a new business arrangement, but the final weaving of their families into a single, unbreakable thread. The shock on Shane's face melted away, replaced by a wave of emotion so powerful it rendered him speechless.

He looked from Ilya's determined face to his mother's beaming smile, and for the first time in a long, long time, he felt the last vestiges of the past few months of tension and uncertainty finally release. He wasn't just building a life with Ilya and Elena; Ilya was actively, fiercely building it right back with him, bringing in the most important person from Shane's own world.

God, he loved this man.

Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter is very soft, very full of love, and very rooted in building Shane and Ilya's life together after years of being apart but I need you to trust me here. This fiction is not turning into pure domestic fluff.

There is still angst ahead, and there is definitely trouble waiting in the water. I wanted to build this foundation as carefully and as high as possible, because when things go bad, I want it to feel like a true freefall. That said, I promise you this: Shane and Ilya are going to be okay. They are endgame, and that will not change.

But Chapter 15? Chapter 15 is going to be rough.

Chapter 13: Jealousy, turning saints into the sea.

Chapter Notes

Notice a few times after my initial publishing at like 5:00 AM that I indicated that Shane and Ilya are married. Nope, not yet! Edited as of 03/11. :)

Three weeks after Thanksgiving, the house was quiet. Yuna had already flown back to Ottawa, a woman on a mission. She'd quit her job with a flourish that was probably still being discussed in HR, and had been in full "mom-ager" mode ever since. Ilya sometimes thought he spoke to Yuna on the phone more than he spoke to Shane. She was a force of nature, and an absolute shark at her new job. In less than a month, she'd secured a deal with Skittles—"Because why not taste the rainbow, Ilya?"—and a partnership with Doc Martens. Ilya was practically vibrating with anticipation for the incoming delivery of leather boots and infinite amounts of candy. She had also landed him the cover and main feature for the next issue of OUT Magazine. This made both him and Shane a little intimidated, a lot exposed, but Ilya was excited. This was their story, their way, and Yuna was the one to tell it.

One afternoon, with Ilya at a Saturday practice, Shane was pacing their bedroom like a caged animal. In four days, Yuna would be back for the holidays. In six, they'd do the OUT Magazine interview. A cold dread, irrational and sticky, began to seep into Shane's bones. He had never really seen Ilya interact with the wider queer world. There was Troy, another hockey player, and Harris, a coworker, but they were in their bubble. What about people who were more flamboyant? People who were trans? People who were very comfortable in their own skin?

Unlike Shane.

Ilya was a bisexual monster, a fact Shane usually loved. But what if he found something on that set, something new and thrilling, that Shane couldn't offer? No, that was crazy. Ilya was a flirt, not a cheater. But then Shane's eyes landed on the ottoman at the foot of their bed, the one where Ilya had started storing old video game cases and magazines from his pre-Shane life. It was locked now. He definitely had something in there. Most likely a ring. And the not-knowing was killing him, a silent, ticking bomb in their bedroom that fueled all of his other anxieties.

His thoughts spiraled back to the interview. He could go. He could just show up in New York City on the 21st. He could be there. He wanted that queer experience with Ilya, to stand beside him and celebrate what they were building. He wanted to feel the thrill of changing the league, the world, together—a feeling that had been ripped from him along with his NHL career.

Ugh.

All of his feelings were bubbling up, a toxic brew of insecurity and nostalgia that soured in his gut like curdled milk. Before Ilya, this would have been the moment he'd collapse onto the hardwood floor, the cool wood a meager comfort against his heated skin. He would have tucked his head between his knees, the world narrowing to a pinprick of light as he rode out the crushing wave until it finally, mercifully passed. But now, he had Ilya. He had the solid, unwavering presence of the man he loved, whose very scent could short-circuit a panic attack before it could take hold, a cool, minty balm for his frayed nerves. Elena was down for her nap, her sleepy sighs from the monitor a soft reminder of his responsibilities.

The house was quiet, the silence stretching and amplifying the frantic drumming of his own heart against his ribs. He needed to get it together, to shove this anxiety back down into the dark place it came from before she woke up, or worse, before Ilya walked in on him having a full-blown meltdown in their bedroom. Instead of the cold, unforgiving floor, Shane crawled into bed, the sheets a tangled mess from the morning. He moved past his own rumpled side, a familiar landscape of his own anxieties, and burrowed into the left side, Ilya's side.

He plunged his face deep into Ilya's pillow, the cotton still holding the faint warmth of his body from the night before. There it was. That strong, clean, minty scent that he craved, a scent of icy mint unique, sharp tang that belonged only to his Alpha. He lost track of time, just breathing it in, letting it wash over him, a desperate attempt to absorb Ilya's calm, to replace his own frantic thoughts with the steady, rhythmic beat of Ilya's heart that he could almost hear in the scent itself.

Then he felt it. A hand, heavy and warm, resting on his shoulder blade. He hadn't heard a thing. Scared, he whipped around, and there was Ilya, leaning over him, a silent, amused spectator. The smell wasn't just the pillow; it was him, right here, watching him the whole time. Ilya's calloused hand slid from his back to his chest as he crouched by the bed, and Shane saw it—his pupils were blown wide, dark pools of hunger in his icy blue eyes. He was hungry for his Omega. The desire shot through Shane as well. All the anxiety, all the paranoia, it didn't matter. Ilya was here. Ilya was his. And just like that, Shane was hungry, too.

Shane pushed himself up, using a hand on Ilya's chest to shove him lightly, guiding him to stand at the foot of the bed. Shane sat up, his feet dangling over the edge, and looked up at the towering figure of his Alpha, his own need a palpable thing in the quiet room. Ilya didn't speak. He just ran a hand through Shane's hair, his rough fingers gently massaging the nape of his neck. Shane shivered, pressing his face forward, burying his nose in the thin fabric of Ilya's basketball shorts. The scent was overwhelming here—the clean sweat from practice, the deep, primal musk of him, everything that was Ilya.

God, how did he get so lucky?

The thought was a flash of lightning in the haze of his own desire. Shane had always known he had an oral fixation, a discovery made the very first night he'd wrapped his lips around the head of Ilya's cock, the same night Elena was conceived. He craved the feeling of Ilya's girth filling his mouth, the way it would restrict his air, a controlled suffocation that was the ultimate surrender. Shane loved being a messy, spit-leaking bitch for his Alpha, and it was the biggest turn-on he'd ever discovered. Sometimes, when Ilya's knot formed, it would seal

Shane's mouth shut after he came, leading to long, breathless minutes where Shane could only gasp for air through his nose, fighting to control his breathing around the pulsing heat. The only thing that turned him on more was their sex swing, a memory that now came with a sting of chagrin after Elena had stumbled into their room one morning and asked if she could climb on it. That was a disaster.

But right now, with Ilya standing before him in basketball shorts, a worn t-shirt, and the smell of the rink still clinging to him, there was only one thing Shane wanted. He looked up, a silent plea in his eyes, and let it happen. The next thirty minutes were a blur of sensation, of Shane in the same position, on the edge of the bed. Ilya's shorts hit the floor, and he was thrusting into Shane's throat, a relentless, punishing rhythm that wiped Shane's mind clean of everything but the feeling of being used, of being completely and utterly owned by the man he loved. Shane's hands gripped Ilya's powerful thighs, fingers digging into the hard muscle as his head bobbed in time with Ilya's movements. His jaw ached, his eyes watered, but he didn't want it to stop. The sound of Ilya's breathing, harsh and ragged above him, was the only thing that mattered. The taste of him, salty and male, filled his senses. Shane's own cock was hard, straining against his jeans, but he didn't touch it. This wasn't about his pleasure; it was about Ilya's. It was about service, about devotion, about the profound peace he found in surrender.

When Ilya came, he did knot Shane's mouth. The swell was immediate and absolute, a familiar pressure that still managed to steal Shane's breath. It was like a balloon inflating inside his mouth, a hot, pulsing mass that pressed against his tongue and the roof of his mouth, sealing his lips around Ilya's base. He could feel Ilya's pulse, a frantic tattoo against his tongue, as wave after wave of hot release flooded his throat. They stayed like that for several long minutes, a strange and beautiful intimacy born of a forbidden act. They had done this before. Ilya trusted Shane not to hurt him, not to clamp down and bite. They had seen the videos in sex-ed classes, heard the horror stories of Alphas nearly losing their dicks, but they trusted each other with a blind faith that defied caution. They loved this feeling, this dangerous, exquisite connection. For Shane, it was the ultimate expression of their bond, a physical manifestation of the trust and love that flowed between them. He could feel Ilya's hand on his head, gentle now, stroking his hair as they both came down from the high.

Then, as gradually as it began, the swell started to go down. Ilya's cock softened enough to pull free, and Shane finally drew a deep, shuddering breath, collapsing backward onto the bed. Ilya laughed, a low, joyous sound that was the most beautiful music Shane had ever heard.

The laughter died in Ilya's throat as he leaned over the bed, his gaze soft and searching as he took in the sight of Shane sprawled out, chest heaving, lips swollen and glistening. A sliver of cum glistened on Shane's chin, a stray drop that had escaped when they'd pulled apart. Without a word, Ilya bent lower, his tongue darting out to capture it. He then leaned in, pressing his lips to Shane's, pushing the salty, intimate taste back into his Omega's mouth. Man, they were freaks, and they both loved it, this strange and sacred ritual they shared. Shane savored the last taste, a soft hum of contentment vibrating in his chest. Ilya patted him gently on the stomach. "Come on," he murmured, his voice a low, soothing rumble. "Let's get you cleaned up."

The aftercare was as much a part of their ritual as the act itself. In the bathroom, Ilya was attentive and tender. He started the shower, adjusting the water until it was a perfect, cascading warmth. He stepped in behind Shane, lathering a soft washcloth with a gentle body scrub and washing him with a reverence that made Shane's heart ache. He moved with a sure, unhurried grace, cleaning away the sweat and the spit and the lingering scent of their frenzied coupling, but not the feeling. He never washed away the feeling. When they were done, he wrapped Shane in a towel, rubbing his skin until it glowed pink from the heat. He even brewed Shane's favorite herbal tea, a chamomile blend with a hint of honey, and brought it to him in the kitchen where they sat in comfortable silence, the warm mug cradled in Shane's hands.

The quiet was broken by the familiar, sleepy sounds from the baby monitor on the counter—a soft yawn, the rustle of blankets, the sleepy murmur of their daughter waking from her nap. The world outside their bubble was knocking, gently but insistently. Ilya smiled, a genuine, easy smile that reached all the way to his eyes, and reached across the table to squeeze Shane's hand. All the earlier anxiety, the paranoid spirals about the interview and the locked ottoman, seemed like distant echoes, shadows banished by the bright, undeniable light of the love they shared. In the warmth of the kitchen, with the taste of Ilya still on his tongue and the promise of their daughter's company just moments away, Shane felt a profound sense of peace.

December 21, 2016

The house felt hollow, a cavernous space missing its vital, mint-scented core. Ilya had left on a flight to New York that morning, a lingering kiss on Shane's lips a promise and a taunt all at once, the cool pressure of his mouth still ghosting across his own. Yuna had arrived yesterday, her presence a warm, buzzing energy that filled the rooms with the scent of jasmine and the gentle clatter of her belongings, but it wasn't enough. It was like trying to warm a mansion with a single candle. Shane was already missing Ilya, a physical ache that settled deep in his bones, and damn it, the house was starting to stink of his own anxiety. It was a sour, acidic scent, one he recognized all too well, the scent of his own fraying nerves. He couldn't stop thinking about it: Ilya, alone in a room full of queer people. It wasn't jealousy, not the simple, territorial kind. He wasn't worried about someone hitting on Ilya, or Ilya wanting them back. He trusted Ilya implicitly. No, it was a deeper, more selfish ache.

He wanted to see it. He wanted to see Ilya in that light, happy and relaxed, surrounded by like-minded people who weren't just dumb jockey hockey players who understood the world only through stats and slapshots. He wanted to witness that part of his partner's life, the part he kept so carefully guarded, and hoard the memory for himself.

Shane paced and paced, a worn track forming in the plush area rug between the living room and the kitchen, his bare feet silent on the fibers. He pulled out his phone, his thumb hovering over the airline app, the screen cool against his skin. Ilya's flight. Land at 11:45 AM. Interview at 5 PM at OUT headquarters. Flight back at 10:25 PM.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

The schedule was a perfectly orchestrated loop designed to exclude him, a neat little package that didn't account for a desperate, impulsive Omega. The thought of Ilya navigating the city

alone, the interview, the potential for vulnerability, it was all too much. He opened the Delta app, the screen a bright, hopeful beacon in the dim light of the hallway. There it was. Boston to Newark. Landing at 2:35 PM. It gave him time.

He could do it.

He could meet Ilya there, slip into the background, maybe even catch a glimpse of the interview.

His thumb hovered over the purchase button, a war waging in his chest between rationality and a wild, possessive need. He pulled out the emergency credit card—the one Ilya had given him for "emergencies only, solnyshko," his voice warm and serious—and tapped the screen. Ticket purchased. A wave of adrenaline, sharp and exhilarating, surged through him, a chaotic symphony in his veins. This was crazy. He was crazy. But he was also going to New York.

He strode into the living room, ready to deliver his grand, impulsive news, his heart thumping a frantic rhythm against his ribs, but Yuna was already there, holding out a piece of paper before he could even open his mouth. Her expression was knowing, a small, wry smile playing on her lips as if she could see the whole wild plan unfolding behind his eyes. Shane took the paper, his fingers fumbling, the crisp edges digging into his skin. It was a printed-out email: the address, the directions, the name of the building where the interview was being held. He stared at it, the bold black letters swimming before his eyes, then at her. "How did you know?" he whispered, the words barely audible over the pounding in his ears. Yuna just laughed, a soft, musical sound that did little to soothe his frantic energy.

"Shane," she said, her tone equal parts exasperation and affection, "I could smell it all over you. You should have just gone with him on the plane this morning."

The words were a splash of cold water and a warm blanket at the same time. Of course, she knew. His mother could probably read his chaotic emotional state from a different timezone. There was no use arguing, no point in denying the wild, impulsive scheme that was now cemented with a non-refundable airline ticket. He just nodded, a sense of both shame and relief washing over him. She wasn't mad. She understood.

He ran to the bedroom, a renewed energy propelling him forward. He threw a few essentials into a duffel bag all the while a manic grin stretched across his face. He leaned over Elena's bed, where she was napping peacefully, her little chest rising and falling with each breath. He kissed her on the head, her hair as soft as duck down. Then he went back to the living room and kissed Yuna on the cheek, a silent thank you passing between them. He ordered an Uber, the app glowing on his phone like a green light, and within minutes, he was out the door, the cool December air a shock against his flushed skin.

As the car sped toward the airport, Shane felt a shift. Crazy Shane was coming out to play, but that was okay, right?

Right?

He was going to New York, and he was going to see Ilya.

When he finally steps out into the lobby of the massive skyscraper, the sheer scale of it is staggering. The ceilings are high enough to make him feel small, the air thick with the scent of expensive perfume and floor wax. He approaches the security desk, his heart thumping a frantic rhythm against his ribs, a wild, hopeful grin on his face. "I'm here to see Ilya Rozanov," he says, his voice a little too bright. "He's here for an interview with OUT Magazine."

The security guard, a burly man with a face like granite and a name tag that reads "Brad," looks up from his monitor, his expression a blank slate of disinterest. "Do you have an appointment?" he asks, his voice flat, a clear indication that he's heard this line before. Shane's shoulders slump. He hadn't thought that far ahead, a rare, uncharacteristic oversight that leaves him feeling exposed and foolish. "No," he admits, "I just... I wanted to surprise him." Brad is not budging, his gaze unwavering, a silent, immovable force. "No appointment, no entry," he says, his tone final.

Just as Shane's hope begins to crumble, a man approaches from the side, a whirlwind of energy and confidence that cuts through the sterile silence of the lobby. He's shorter, with a wiry build, black wavy hair, and a jawline dusted with a five o'clock shadow that would look sloppy on anyone else but on him, it looks deliberate. He's dressed in a way that screams New York City, a perfectly curated ensemble of colors and textures that Shane could never pull off. But it's the dimples that really do it, deep creases that appear when he smiles.

"Oh my God," the man says, his eyes widening with recognition. "You're Mr. Rozanov's partner." Shane's face lights up, a wave of relief washing over him. "Yes," he says, his voice breathless. "I am." The man laughs, a warm, infectious sound that puts Shane at ease.

"I wanted to surprise him but you don't have a way up," he says, a knowing glint in his eye. "I'm Kristopher Grady, but everyone calls me Kip. I'm one of the associates at OUT, and we have been buzzing over this interview all week. It's so fun that you're here to surprise him. I just came down to get our takeout for post-interview," Kip added, gesturing to a mountain of plastic bags on a nearby chair.

"Why don't you come back up with me?" Ecstatic, Shane nodded so hard he felt dizzy. "Yes! I'd love to." He grabbed a handful of the Chinese food bags, the warmth of the containers a welcome distraction from the chill of his own anxiety. Brad-the-security-guard shot them a withering look but let them pass, the swipe of Kip's keycard a satisfying beep in the otherwise silent lobby. They rode the elevator up, the mirrored walls reflecting the city sprawling below them, a world away from the quiet life in Boston.

"So you didn't call ahead?" Kip asked, breaking the comfortable silence. "We could have set this up for you, assisted in the surprise." Shane shook his head, a sheepish grin on his face. "No. My decision was... impulsive. I didn't have much time to plan." Kip threw his head back and laughed, a genuine, hearty sound. "Wow. You must really love him." The sincerity in his tone made Shane's chest tighten.

"Mr. Rozanov is a real inspiration to a lot of people in the world," Kip continued, his voice softer now. "You're lucky to have him." He explained that his own boyfriend was affiliated with hockey, and watching Ilya's coming out interview had meant a lot to him and his entire

circle. "That's... that's amazing," Shane managed, his throat suddenly thick with emotion. The elevator dinged, the doors sliding open to the 28th floor.

The hallway was a hive of activity, people buzzing around with equipment and clipboards. "Well, he's just in there," Kip said, pointing to a set of double doors. "Want to tell the producers and directors you're here? We could make it a bit of a moment, a surprise on camera." Shane immediately shook his head, with panic shooting through him. "No, I don't—"

But Kip was already moving, a man on a mission. He wasn't one to listen, it seemed. He scurried over to a man with striking bleach blonde hair, whispering in his ear. The bleach blonde man, who was clearly in charge, immediately turned and looked toward the door. Shane froze.

"Ilya, if you could just continue to look at the camera. I'm going to go out into the hallway and grab some extra lights to bring in. I'll be right back." The director's voice carried clearly through the open doorway, and Shane heard it all. And he saw it all. His Alpha, Ilya, had his back to him, a expanse of muscle and skin that Shane knew better than his own. And this other man, this handsome, laughing stranger, was touching him, a brush here, a swipe there, and Ilya was leaning into it, a deep rumble of a laugh vibrating from his chest.

A cold dread washed over Shane, a sudden, icy flush that had nothing to do with the building's aggressive air conditioning. There was only a door and a window separating him from Ilya, but it felt like a chasm. Ilya couldn't see him, couldn't possibly know he was there. He was too infatuated with the man playing with his face, too lost in the easy camaraderie that Shane himself craved in the moment.

Shane almost didn't notice the bleach blonde director was now standing in front of him, a friendly smile on his face and a hand extended. "Jacob," he said, as Shane's vision swam for a moment. He almost blacked out, the possessive rage a dizzying wave. He shook it back, forcing a smile onto his face. "Shane," he replied, his voice a strained rasp. His eyes immediately darted back to the doorway, back to Ilya and that... that face. Jacob noticed the possessive fire in Shane's gaze, and his own smile widened. He knew a possessive Omega when he saw one. He found it amusing.

He opened the door wider, calling into the room. "Hey, Benito! Can you come help me with this light?" The man—Benito—looked up from Ilya, a question in his beautiful doe eyes. "What light?" he asked, confused. When he finally came into the room where Jacob, Kip, and Shane was standing, Jacob gestured towards Shane. "There is no light, dummy. This is Ilya—Mr. Rozanov's partner." Benito's eyes swept over Shane, from his worried brow to his clenched fists. A slow smile spread across his face. "Oh. Oh," he breathed. "Wow. You're even hotter in person. Ilya has done nothing but talk about you and his daughter all day. Does he know you're here? Oh, I'm Benito, by the way. Benito Skinner." Jacob and Kip quickly explained the surprise plan, and Benito's dimples deepened.

"Benito," Jacob said, pointing a finger towards the makeup station beside Ilya, "do you have any scent blockers in your bag?" Benito nodded, his brow furrowed in confusion. "Yeah, why?" Jacob shot a look at Shane, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. "You're going to need them," he said, his tone light but firm. "You smell sweeter than honey right now, and I'm sure he'll smell you before we even get to the door. We want this to be a surprise, don't we?" Jacob

laughed, a short, sharp bark of amusement, and Shane felt a blush creep up his neck. He hadn't realized, so consumed by the sight of Benito's hands on Ilya, that he'd been omitting a heavy, possessive scent. "It's cute!" Jacob added, clapping him on the shoulder, but Shane didn't feel cute. He felt like a territorial wolf about to bare its teeth.

He watched, every muscle in his body tense, as Benito sauntered back into the studio. He bent down to retrieve his makeup bag, which was sitting beside Ilya's feet, but as he did, he let his hand rest casually on Ilya's left thigh. His fingers lingered for a beat too long, a proprietary touch that was accompanied by a look, a direct, challenging gaze that seemed to connect with Ilya's. That was it. That was the final straw. A hot, white-hot rage surged through Shane, a primal instinct that eclipsed all rational thought.

Benito, seeming to finally sense the territorial energy rolling off Shane in waves, slowly removed his hand from Ilya's thigh. He sauntered back into the hallway, a small, knowing smirk playing on his lips as he rejoined the group. Jacob turned to Shane, his eyes gleaming with an almost predatory light as he took in the boiling possessiveness radiating from the Omega. "Shane," he said, his voice a low, conspiratorial purr, "how would you feel if we turned this into a couples interview?"

Shane looked at him, sloshed and confused by the sudden shift. "What?" he managed, the word feeling thick and clumsy in his mouth. Jacob's expression was earnest, a stark contrast to the playful gleam in his eyes. "I did tons of research on you and Ilya after his coming-out interview. What the league did to you—kicking you out for presenting as an Omega—that was bullshit. You had the best stats in the league just a few years ago, and they discarded you not because of your skill, but because of who you are biologically. I think the world needs to hear that from you, too. I could easily switch some questions around, make this work. But we'd have to be quick. You'd have to let Benito apply the scent blockers, and you'd need a change of wardrobe and hair done within ten minutes if we want to make this happen and still get Mr. Rozanov to his flight on time."

Shane's mind reeled. "I don't want to take the spotlight away from Ilya."

Jacob let out a short, sharp laugh, a fury of excitement in it. "Take the spotlight? That man has done nothing but talk about you all day. He said he wished you were here a dozen times. I think he'd be more than fine with it. In fact, I think he'd love it."

The four of them—Shane, Jacob, Kip, and Benito—moved swiftly down the hall and into a small dressing room that wasn't attached to the main studio, the door clicking shut behind them. Jacob rummaged through a rack and pulled out a black leather Balenciaga jacket, a pair of loose-fitting black jeans, and a crisp white t-shirt, throwing the bundle at Shane.

"Kip," he commanded, "once he's changed, do his hair. A messy middle part. Be quick. We'll stall as much as possible before Mr. Rozanov freaks out. But before we go," Jacob said, turning to Shane with a serious expression, "you have to let Benito apply the blockers." Shane

Shane agreed, a tight knot of disgust forming in his stomach at the thought of Benito's hands on him, on the sensitive skin of his neck where Ilya's scent should be. But the desire to see

Ilya, to be a part of this important moment in his partner's life, was stronger. He had to do this. For Ilya.

Benito stepped forward, a small, amused smile on his face as he unscrewed the cap on a small, clear bottle. "This won't hurt a bit," he said, his voice a low, playful murmur. He was too close, the scent of his cologne a sharp, citrusy tang that made Shane's nose wrinkle. Benito's fingers were cool against the warmth of Shane's neck, a gentle, practiced touch that made Shane's skin crawl. He closed his eyes, trying to imagine Ilya's hands, Ilya's touch, but the image was clouded by the lingering memory of Benito's hand on Ilya's thigh.

Then, it was over. Benito stepped back, and Shane was left with the lingering scent of the blocker and the faint, citrusy tang of Benito's cologne. He took a deep breath, the air in the small dressing room feeling charged with a new kind of energy.

Benito and Jacob slipped out of the room, the click of the door echoing in the sudden silence, leaving Shane alone with Kip. In the ten minutes that followed, a strange sort of magic happened. Shane changed into the clothes Jacob had picked out, the buttery-soft leather of the jacket molding to his shoulders, the jeans fitting perfectly. He looked at himself in the full-length mirror, and fuck, he looked hot. The outfit was a masterpiece of contrasts, edgy and sleek, and he knew, with a certainty that made him ache, that Ilya would want to chew him in half in it. Then there was Kip. God, Kip really worked a miracle with his hair. With a few deft twists and a light mist of product, he'd given Shane a messy middle part that looked effortlessly cool and artfully disheveled. Shane felt powerful. He felt like a star again like the player he used to be. He felt like Shane.

Just as he was admiring his own reflection, a smug grin on his face, the door swung open and Jacob strode back in. "All ready? Wow," he said, his eyes raking over Shane with an appreciative, almost hungry gaze. "You look hot. Damn. Ilya is going to lose his mind." Then Jacob leaned in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Just an FYI, you'd better hope your phone is on silent, because in the nine minutes you've been in here, he's tried to call you twice on set. He was telling you he might be a little late getting home tonight. It was really cute when he had to leave you a voicemail."

Shane's heart did a painful little flip-flop in his chest. He thought of Ilya, on that sterile set, taking a moment between questions to call him, to check in, and he hadn't even known.

He needed to get to Ilya. Now.

Jacob, as if reading his mind, laid out the plan. "I have it all worked out. We'll catch it all on camera. I can already imagine all the clicks this video is going to get. Hot bisexual Alpha NHL player, the first one out in the league, surprised by his partner, an Omega, ex-Rookie of the Year and former NHL superstar, on the set of an OUT interview." Jacob's eyes were gleaming, a vision of viral success dancing in his head.

"You're going to walk in through the back door of the studio," Jacob explained, a manic glint in his eye, the kind only a creator gets when they're about to capture lightning in a bottle. "I'll ask Ilya a few warm-up questions, nothing too heavy, just get him comfortable and looking right into the main camera. On my third question, Kip will give you the cue, and you'll walk in. We'll have a camera on you, and one on him. I want to see it all, Shane. The shock, the

love, the pure, unadulterated joy." He paused, a genuine smile replacing the crafty one. "And when he sees you in that outfit? We're going to get something even better. We're going to get pure, uncut Alpha possession."

A tremor of anticipation, hot and sharp, shot through Shane. He nodded, a single, decisive motion. "I'm ready." Jacob clapped him on the shoulder, a solid, reassuring weight. "Good. Kip will take you to the back entrance. Don't come in until you hear me ask, 'So, what's the one thing you love about playing in Boston?' That's your cue."

Kip led him down a short, nondescript hallway to a heavy, unmarked door. The sounds from the studio were muffled but clear—the low hum of equipment, the soft, reassuring murmur of Jacob's voice as he spoke to Ilya. Then, Shane heard it, Ilya's voice, deep and familiar, a balm to a wound he hadn't realized was still so raw.

"The one thing I love most?" Ilya was saying, his tone thoughtful. "Being with a team that feels like family. It's really a group of people that continues to support me and my solnyshka."

That was the question. The door clicked open under Kip's hand. Shane stepped through, the scent blockers doing their job but doing nothing to dampen the fire in his veins. He could see Ilya now, sitting on a simple stool, bathed in soft, warm light, looking directly at the camera. He was beautiful.

Shane moved with a predator's grace, silent and sure on the polished concrete floor. The cameras, the lights, the hushed crew—it all faded into a peripheral blur, the entire world narrowing to the single, illuminated point of the man on the stool. He came up behind Ilya, a phantom gliding through the artificial day, and wrapped his arms around that solid, familiar frame. His left arm looped around Ilya's neck, his right arm snaking down the length of his torso, splaying a possessive hand flat against the hard plane of Ilya's stomach.

He could feel the chill of surprise that went through Ilya's body, the sudden, rigid freeze of a man caught off guard. Ilya's deep voice, the one that narrated Shane's dreams, faltered on the studio air. "Uhm, I didn't—"

Shane leaned in, his lips brushing the sensitive shell of Ilya's ear, his own voice a low, intimate murmur that was meant for an audience of one. "Did you say something about your sunshine?"

For a beat, the world was a silent vacuum. Ilya remained perfectly still, his entire being focused on the phantom sensation of Shane's breath against his ear, the impossibly faint scent of him cutting through the sterile studio air and scent blocker. Then, as if the weight of the reality was too much to bear, he dipped his head, his chin falling to his chest. "I know I'm dreaming," he murmured, the words thick with a disbelief so profound it was almost painful. "This can't be real."

"It's real, Ilya. I'm here," Shane whispered back, his heart a frantic, joyful drum against his ribs. "Surprise."

With a sharp, jerky movement, Ilya dragged a hand down his face, one hand, bracing stroke as if to wipe away the illusion. Then he was on his feet, pivoting with an athlete's speed to disentangle Shane's arms and turn to face him. His eyes, wide with shock, scanned Shane from the messy mop of his hair to the worn leather of his jacket. "Shane! You're here!" The roar of it was pure, unadulterated joy. Before Shane could even process the movement, he was off the ground, lifted with an easy strength that stole the breath from his lungs and spun him in a dizzying circle. "Moya lyubov"! Oh my god, you're here. I missed you so much."

The world was a blur of motion and elated laughter. When Ilya finally set him down, the studio floor felt unsteady beneath his feet. He was immediately attacked by a torrent of kisses, a frantic, loving assault aimed at every freckle, the sharp line of his jaw, the soft swell of his lips, the sensitive skin of his forehead. It was a desperate, joyous mapping of his face, Ilya's hands cradling his head, holding him still as if he might disappear at any moment.

The studio, for a moment, was a tableau of shock, and then it erupted. Jacob was leaning against a light stand, laughing so hard he had to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye, a director who'd just been handed a masterpiece of unscripted emotion. He knew, with an artist's certainty, that this was gold, the kind of raw, authentic content that couldn't be bought or faked. The rest of the camera crew and staff, caught up in the sheer, unadulterated joy of the moment, broke into spontaneous applause. Kip stood near the monitors, a wide, genuine smile on his face, his eyes shining. He loved this, loved seeing the real thing, the genuine connection that was so often missing from the polished, pre-packaged interviews they usually conducted. He was in awe.

But as Shane's gaze swept the room, it landed on Benito, who stood near the craft services table, a small, polite smile plastered on his face. He looked happy for them, but his eyes were flat, unamused, and Shane, for all his impulsiveness, was a student of people. He filed the look away, a tiny, sharp pinprick in the back of his mind, a note for his personal file of things to be examined later.

The applause died down, and Kip, ever practical, grabbed a second chair and set it down beside Ilya's stool. Ilya, still holding Shane's hand as if he might float away, turned to Jacob, his expression a mix of awe and confusion. "Did you know this was happening?" he asked, his voice still rough with emotion.

Jacob shook his head, a wry grin on his face. "No. Your partner here just appeared in our lobby about twenty minutes ago, determined to surprise you. He had to charm his way past security." Ilya's eyes widened, and he turned to Shane, a million questions in his gaze. Shane just gave him a small, reassuring look, a silent promise that he would explain everything later.

Jacob, ever the orchestrator, stepped forward, his expression serious but excited. "Ilya, Shane, this is... well, it's better than I could have ever scripted. I want to turn this into a joint interview, if you're both willing." He looked at Ilya, then at Shane. "We can pivot, make it work."

Ilya looked at Shane, his entire being focused on him, a silent question hanging in the air between them.

Ilya's gaze was a warm weight that settled on Shane's shoulders, asking for permission without a word. Shane didn't hesitate. He gave a firm, decisive nod, a small smile playing on his lips. In that moment, the interview, the cameras, the entire elaborate charade of the day fell away. It was just them, an Alpha seeking the confirmation of his Omega. Ilya's answering smile was immediate, a brilliant, sun-drenched thing that erased every trace of confusion from his face. He turned back to Jacob, his arm slipping around Shane's waist, pulling him flush against his side in a gesture that was both territorial and deeply content.

"As long as Shane is okay with it," Ilya said, his voice clear and strong, "then I'm okay with it."

Jacob clapped his hands together, a sharp, decisive sound that cut through the lingering excitement in the room. "Perfect! Okay, people, we're pivoting. Let's reset." The crew, energized by the unexpected turn of events, scrambled to adjust the lights and cameras, creating a new composition for the duo. Ilya guided Shane to the newly placed chair, but didn't let go of him, his hand resting possessively on Shane's knee. Shane sat, the buttery leather of the jacket cool against the studio's warm air, and met Ilya's gaze. The world could watch now. This was their stage.

"Alright," Jacob's voice boomed, all business once more. "Let's start again from the top. Ilya, look at me. Shane, look at camera two. We're going to do this just as we discussed, but with a few... additions. Just be yourselves. ."

The red light on the main camera blinked on, a silent, watchful eye. Ilya's thumb began to trace slow circles on Shane's knee, a rhythmic motion that was both calming and a constant, thrilling reminder of his presence. Shane, for the first time all day, felt a profound sense of peace.

The second Jacob called cut, the charged atmosphere of the interview dissolved into a wave of adrenaline and relief. He was practically buzzing, walking over to them with a grin that could have powered half the borough. "That was... that was electric," he breathed, shaking both of their hands with an enthusiastic grip. "One of the most exciting interviews I've ever done. Honestly, the only thing that tops it was Billy Porter a few years back, and I didn't think anything could come close. This... this was good." Shane, still riding the high of seeing Ilya's face, thanked him sincerely for helping with the surprise.

"I'm just going to get changed, and then we'll be out of your hair." Jacob held up a hand, stopping him. "No. Keep it. Wear it out. You deserve it, for the magic you helped create today." Shane huffed out a small, surprised laugh, the possessive victory settling warm in his chest. "Thanks."

They walked out into the main hallway, heading for the elevator, when Kip stepped in front of Shane, blocking his path. "Hey," he said, his smile genuine. "If you're ever in New York again, for real, let me know. I'd love to take you and Ilya to the bar I work at, just to hang out." There was no flirtation in it, only a clear, earnest offer of friendship. Shane felt a knot of tension he hadn't realized was there loosen in his shoulders. He thought about it, about the easy camaraderie they'd found in just a few hours. They could be good friends, he thought. New York wasn't so far away.

But as they were talking, Shane's eyes snagged on a scene playing out just twenty feet away. Benito, like a moth to a particularly bright flame, had cornered Ilya again. Their heads were close together, Benito speaking in a low, intimate murmur that Ilya couldn't seem to help but respond to, letting out another one of those loud, booming laughs that grated on every one of Shane's nerves.

He saw it then, a flicker of movement from Benito's direction as the man gave Shane a deliberate, knowing look, a slow, infuriating wink. Kip followed his gaze and sighed, shaking his head. "I'm sorry about him," he said quietly. "He's a great makeup artist, a social media mogul, but he's messy. Just another New York City gay trying to get something he can't. Don't worry about it too much." But Shane was worrying.

He pulled out his phone, ignoring the distant laughter that felt like a physical blow, and handed it to Kip. "Put your number in," he said, his voice flat, "Let's stay in touch." He was done with this. Done with Benito's little show. Let him talk all he wanted; at the end of the day, Shane was the one whose back arched off their sheets, the one whose name was gasped into their pillow. He had already won.

Except then Ilya let out another long, rich laugh, so loud and uninhibited it echoed in the hallway and snagged at something deep and possessive inside him. Shane's eyes met Kip's, and he saw his own fury reflected there. "Fuck this," Shane muttered, and Kip nodded, looking ready to throw down right there for a man he'd met an hour ago. "Yeah, fuck him. And fuck Ilya for laughing like that."

Shane strode over, the anger coiling tight in his gut, and wrapped an arm around Ilya's waist, pulling him flush against his side. "What's so funny, babe?" he asked, his tone dripping with a sweetness that was pure poison. Ilya's laughter died in his throat, and he looked down at Shane, recognizing the glint in his eye instantly. Jealous Shane. He could feel the heat begin to simmer in his own stomach. "Benny was just telling me about the—"

"Oh, that's nice," Shane cut him off, not even looking at Benito. "Are you ready to go?"

Before they could escape, Benito made his final play. With a fluid motion that suggested he'd practiced it in a mirror, he slipped a sleek, matte black card from the breast pocket of his silk shirt. It was minimalist—just his name in elegant silver foil and a phone number below. "Well, if you're ever back in the city, Mr. Rozanov," he purred, his voice dropping an octave as he deliberately excluded Shane, "here is my card." He bit down on his bottom lip, a gesture meant to be alluring, widening his eyes until they looked like dark, polished marbles. The performance was so transparent it was almost insulting.

Ilya, ever the gentleman, even in the face of such blatant disrespect, automatically reached out to take it. A reflex. But Shane's hand shot out faster, a blur of motion. He didn't just take the card; he plucked it from Benito's grasp with his thumb and forefinger, a sharp, pinching motion that made the other man flinch. A small, audible gasp escaped Benito's lips, his carefully crafted facade cracking for a split second. Ilya paused, his hand hovering in mid-air, and then a small, breathy laugh escaped him—part shock, part morbid fascination at Shane's audacity. From a few feet away, Kip erupted in a loud, unapologetic cackle, the sound bouncing off the marble floors and glass walls.

Without another word, Shane steered Ilya toward the waiting elevator. The mirrored doors slid open, reflecting the four of them in a silent, fractured scene. As Shane and Ilya stepped inside, Shane held the card between two fingers. Just as the doors began to slide shut, sealing them in their private world, he flicked his wrist. The card sailed through the narrowing gap, spinning like a miniature black halo before landing face-up on the polished concrete of the 28th floor, exactly where it belonged.

The moment the elevator doors slid shut, cutting them off from the world, Ilya erupted. A deep, full-bodied laugh shook his entire frame, the sound bouncing off the mirrored walls. He threw his head back, the lines of stress from the day finally giving way to pure, uninhibited amusement. Shane, still vibrating with a righteous fury, could only stare at him. "Fuck you," he snarled, but there was no heat in it, only a raw, ragged edge.

With a sharp, angry tug, he ripped the scent blocker patch from the gland on his neck. The sting was a fleeting, satisfying pain. The world tilted, then righted itself as the true scents of the enclosed space flooded his senses. There was the sterile metallic tang of the elevator, the faint, lingering citrus of Benito's cologne that clung to Ilya's clothes, and then, washing over it all like a warm, soothing balm, was Shane. That familiar, comforting smell of maple syrup, the scent that was home. But beneath it, something was wrong. A faint, bitter note of distress, like burnt sugar, threaded through the aroma that Ilya was smelling.

Ilya's laughter died in his throat. The shift was instantaneous, the mirth draining from his face to be replaced by a deep, gut-wrenching concern. He took a half-step back, his hands coming up to hover over Shane's arms, not quite touching, as if he were afraid of causing more pain. "Shane?" he whispered, the name a fragile thing in the suddenly heavy silence. "What is it? What's wrong?" The playful glint in his eyes was gone, replaced by the desperate, searching look of an Alpha who could smell his Omega's pain and didn't know how to fix it.

Shane's breath hitched, the raw frustration and hurt he'd been suppressing finally boiling over. He couldn't look at Ilya, focusing instead on the glowing numbers of the floor indicator as they descended. "I came here because I wanted to share this with you," he started, his voice tight and brittle. "This is a huge milestone for you, for us, and I wanted to be here for it. I wasn't even going to let you know I was here until after the interview was over." He let out a harsh, humorless laugh. "But then Jacob asks me to be a part of it, and I got so excited. But before the interview even started I watched you laughing at that douchebag's stupid fucking jokes, and I watched you laughing at them again after."

He finally turned to face Ilya, his eyes shining with unshed tears of anger and pain. "You're just a big flirt, Ilya. And it sucks," he choked out, the words thick with emotion. "It sucks because I want to be able to trust you. I want to be able to let you go places without this... this gnawing feeling in the back of my mind that someone else is getting what's mine. That someone is getting your attention. The attention that only belongs to me." The admission hung in the small space between them, a raw, vulnerable confession of his deepest insecurity, a fear he hadn't been able to voice until now, when it had been torn from him by the sight of someone else's hands on his partner.

The confession stayed in the small space between them, a raw, vulnerable wound. Ilya's heart constricted, a sharp, physical pain that had nothing to do with a physical blow. He reached

out, his hands gently cupping Shane's face, forcing him to meet his gaze. "Hey," he murmured, his thumb stroking over the sharp line of Shane's jawbone. "You are the only one. You're the only one who has my heart, solnyshko. You know that, right?" He tried for a reassuring smile, but it felt thin, stretched tight over the sudden ache in his chest.

The words didn't seem to land. Shane's expression remained shuttered, the scent of his distress a sour cloud in the elevator. It didn't hurt any less to hear the fear in Shane's voice, to know he was the cause of it. "Oh, Shane," Ilya breathed, the apology already forming. "I never want to be the one to give you stress, to cause you any kind of pain. That would... that would suck." He swallowed hard, the realization hitting him with the force of a body check. "I am a big flirt. That's... that's how I am. It's how I charm my way through life. I guess I never really thought about how it would look from the outside, how it would affect you. I'm so sorry." The apology tumbled out of him, profuse and desperate, a litany of regret for a flaw he'd never considered a burden until this very moment.

The elevator doors slid open to the vast, echoing lobby of the OUT Magazine building, a space of glass and steel that felt suddenly cold and unwelcoming. Ilya's apology still hung in the air between them, fragile and unanswered. Shane didn't even look at him, just stared straight ahead at the revolving doors that led to the New York street. "Get us a damn Uber so we can get the fuck home," he said, his voice flat and devoid of emotion. "You knew this was a bad idea. I should have just stayed with Elena." The words were a deliberate, cruel twist of the knife, and they landed with brutal accuracy. Ilya flinched as if struck, the light in his eyes dimming as he nodded, looking for all the world like a beaten puppy. He wordlessly pulled out his phone, his thumb moving with a familiar, defeated swipe over the screen to summon their ride.

The car that pulled up was a nondescript black sedan. They slid into the back seat, the silence between them a heavy, suffocating blanket. Neither of them had luggage; this was supposed to be a quick, triumphant day trip. Shane fixed his gaze on the window, watching the city blur into streaks of light and color, refusing to give Ilya the satisfaction of seeing his face. He could feel Ilya's gaze on him, a palpable weight of regret and concern, but he held his ground, feeding his anger with every passing block. Then, unexpectedly, the car slowed and pulled over to the curb. They weren't at the airport. Shane's eyes followed Ilya's, landing on an illuminated sign in elegant, flowing script: Faena. It was a hotel, an impossibly chic and expensive-looking one at that. He finally turned, the question sharp and accusatory. "What are we doing?"

Ilya met his gaze, a desperate hope warring with the fear in his eyes. "Come on," he pleaded, his voice soft. "Let's have a night alone. Just us. I already texted your mom. She's watching Elena and she told us to be safe on our travels for tomorrow." He held up his phone, showing the screen, the evidence of a conversation already had. "I bought us two tickets for tomorrow afternoon, to go home." He was trying so hard, laying out this olive branch of a plan, a desperate attempt to salvage something from the wreckage of the day.

Shane stared at the illuminated hotel sign, then at the hopeful, pleading look on Ilya's face. The anger was still there, a dull throb behind his eyes, but beneath it, a bone-deep exhaustion was setting in. He was so damn tired. Tired of fighting, tired of performing, tired of the constant, gnawing insecurity that had been clawing at his insides all day. A night in a hotel?

The thought of navigating another unfamiliar space, of arguing in a sterile room that wasn't theirs, was almost too much to bear.

But the alternative—heading to the airport, the sterile fluorescent lights, the impersonal crowds, the long flight home alone with nothing but his thoughts and the lingering scent of Benito's cologne on Ilya's clothes—was even worse. He just wanted it all to stop. He wanted to close his eyes and wake up in his own bed, with this whole miserable day just a bad dream.

"Fine," he said, the word scraped out of his throat, flat and devoid of any emotion. "But don't think for a second this is okay. I'm going to sleep. That's it." He didn't look at Ilya, just turned his gaze back to the window, watching as the driver pulled up to the hotel's grand entrance. "I just need some rest."

A flicker of relief, so fragile it was almost painful to witness, crossed Ilya's face, but he wisely kept his mouth shut. He just nodded, a sharp, jerky motion, and got out of the car, holding the door open for Shane like a personal attendant. Shane slid out, ignoring the offered hand and the uniformed doorman who rushed to greet them. He followed Ilya through the revolving doors, his footsteps heavy on the polished marble floors. The lobby was a symphony of muted gold and soft, diffused light, a space designed to soothe and impress, but all Shane felt was a profound sense of dislocation.

Ilya handled the check-in with a quiet efficiency, his voice low as he spoke to the woman behind the desk. Shane stood off to the side, his gaze fixed on a massive, abstract painting on the far wall, letting the sounds of the hotel wash over him. The clink of glasses from the bar, the distant murmur of conversations, the soft whoosh of the elevator doors opening and closing. He felt like an actor in a play he hadn't auditioned for, just going through the motions until the curtain fell.

The room was on a high floor, with a floor-to-ceiling window that offered a glittering panorama of the city. It was beautiful, impersonal, and everything Shane didn't want. He walked straight to the bed, not bothering to take in his surroundings. He toed off his shoes and slid under the covers, still fully dressed, pulling the duvet up to his chin. The sheets were cool and crisp, smelling of expensive laundry detergent and nothing else. Not of home.

He could feel Ilya's eyes on him, a heavy weight of unspoken apologies and desperate hope. He heard the soft click of the door closing, the faint sound of Ilya moving around the room, but he didn't open his eyes. He just lay there, his body tense, his mind racing, waiting for the oblivion of sleep to claim him. He wasn't forgiving Ilya. He wasn't letting him off the hook. He was just too damn tired to keep fighting.

But damn it, he couldn't sleep. The bed, though luxurious, felt like a slab of ice. The city lights, usually a source of wonder, now felt like a thousand accusing eyes. Every time he closed them, he saw Benito's winking face, heard Ilya's booming laugh. His own mind was a prison. With a frustrated sigh, he grabbed his phone, the cool glass a small anchor in the storm of his thoughts. His intention was mindless scrolling, an escape into the void of social media, but a notification popped up first.

A text from Kip. *It was great meeting you tonight! Let's hang soon!*

A spark, mischievous and defiant, ignited in Shane's chest. He glanced at the clock. 9:34 PM. It wasn't objectively late. He was tired, but if Ilya wanted to have fun, so could he.

In one fluid motion, fueled by a fresh surge of righteous anger, he threw back the duvet and swung his legs out of bed. He was still wearing the black leather jacket and jeans Jacob had given him, the clothes of a conqueror. He quickly typed back to Kip, his thumbs flying across the screen. "What about tonight? We decided to stay the night."

The reply came back almost instantly, a volley of eager energy. "That would be awesome! I'm at the Kingfisher waiting on my boyfriend. Want to join us?"

A grin, sharp and predatory, spread across Shane's face. "Send me the address."

He stood up, the leather of the jacket creaking softly in the quiet room. Ilya, who had been sitting in a plush armchair by the window watching him with a wounded expression, finally spoke, his voice hesitant. "Shane? What are you doing?" Shane didn't look at him, just pulled on his boots. "I'm going to hang out with my friend Kip at a bar," he said, the words clipped and precise. "If you want to come, feel free. Maybe Benito will be there for you." The name was a deliberate barb, a small, sharp needle meant to draw blood.

And it did. Something in Ilya finally snapped. The quiet apologies, the desperate hope, the wounded puppy act—it all vanished, replaced by a flash of pure, unadulterated Alpha rage. In a few moves, he was across the room, his movements fluid and terrifyingly fast. He slammed his palm against the wall beside Shane's head, the impact rattling the picture frames.

The impact made the air itself seem to compress. Shane flinched, but refused to back down, tilting his chin up in defiance. The scent of Ilya's fury, hot and electric like an approaching storm, filled the space between them, overwhelming the room. Ilya's face was inches from his, his eyes blazing with an intensity that was both terrifying and intoxicating. "Benito?" he snarled, the name a contemptuous growl in his chest.

Ilya's free hand shot out, gripping the back of Shane's neck, not to hurt him, but to hold him still, to force him to listen. His fingers dug into Shane's skin, a proprietary, unshakeable grip. "Listen to me, Shane. Look at me." He waited until Shane's defiant gaze locked with his own.

"He is nothing. He could never be you. Do you understand that? He will never have this." His thumb pressed into the frantic pulse point in Shane's neck. "He will never have your fire, your stubbornness, your brilliant, impossible heart. He doesn't get to see the way you look at me when you think I'm not watching. He doesn't get to hear you talk about our daughter in your sleep. He gets a few hours for an interview with the hottest man in Boston but I get a lifetime with that same man."

The anger in Ilya's voice didn't abate, but it shifted, raw with a desperation that bordered on pain. "So don't you ever, ever put him in the same sentence as you again. Don't you ever cheapen what this is by comparing it to that. That man, that whole performance, it was nothing." He finally released his grip on Shane's neck, but he didn't move away. He stayed pinned against him, the wall a solid presence at Shane's chest, Ilya a solid presence at his

front, trapping him with nothing but the ferocity of his words and the undeniable truth in them.

For a beat, the room was utterly silent. The raw, desperate intensity pouring off Ilya seemed to hang in the air, a tangible force. He was breathing hard, his chest rising and falling with the effort of his confession, his eyes locked on Shane's, searching for any sign that his words had landed, that he was understood. And then Shane opened his mouth and lit a match.

"I think you called him Benny," he said, his voice a low, even purr that was more devastating than a shout. "Not Benito."

It was the final, gallon of gas on a wildfire. The nickname, a sign of casual familiarity, a small intimacy that shouldn't exist, hung between them, toxic and undeniable. The rage that had been simmering in Ilya's gut boiled over, extinguishing any last vestige of control. He didn't speak. He didn't need to.

With a guttural sound that was half growl, half snarl, he hauled Shane away from the wall. Shane stumbled, a surge of adrenaline and a dark, triumphant thrill coursing through him. He wanted this. He wanted Ilya to lose it, to claim him with a force that would leave no room for doubt. But then Ilya wasn't guiding him towards the bed. He spun him around and marched him toward the large, floor-to-ceiling window, the glittering city lights spread out beneath them like a sea of scattered diamonds. He pressed Shane's chest against the cool, unforgiving glass, the impact knocking the breath from his lungs. One hand splayed across the back of his neck, pinning him in place.

This was about Ilya trying to fuck the memory of another man's name right out of the space between them. And as Shane felt the cool glass against his cheek and the hot press of Ilya's body behind him, a cold, hard certainty settled in his stomach. As hot as the scene was, the possessive threat of it burning through him, it wasn't what Shane wanted. Not really.

With a surge of adrenaline that eclipsed everything else, he pushed back against Ilya's chest, using the momentum of the bigger man's own force against him. The movement was so unexpected that Ilya stumbled backward, his haze of lust and rage momentarily shattered. Shane spun around, the leather of his jacket creaking like a whip. The crack of skin meeting skin echoed in the quiet room, sharp and brutal. Ilya's head snapped to the side, the red imprint of Shane's hand already blooming on his cheek. He slowly turned back, the predatory fire in his eyes extinguished, replaced by a look of utter, soul-crushing shock. He looked like a broken puppy, abandoned and confused.

Shane stood before him, chest heaving, tears he hadn't realized were forming now spilling over and tracking hot paths down his cheeks. "No," he choked out, the word a raw, ragged thing. "This isn't what I want." He took a shaky breath, forcing the words past the lump in his throat, the words he should have said from the start. "I don't want you to fuck me to prove I'm yours, Ilya. I need you to tell me. I need to hear you say that you will never let someone flirt with you like that again. That if someone gives you their number, you'll tell them to fuck off because you have a partner and daughter at home who loves you." He took a step forward, closing the small distance between them, his voice dropping to a desperate, pleading whisper. "I need to know that when I'm not standing right next to you, you're still mine. I need to be able to trust you. That's what I need."

The raw honesty in Shane's voice, the vulnerability laid bare between them, was a force more powerful than any physical blow. Ilya just stared, the stinging in his cheek nothing compared to the ache blooming in his chest. He had been so focused on the physical, on proving his possession, that he had completely missed the point. He saw it now, the deep, gnawing fear that had driven Shane here, the need for a verbal promise, a sacred vow of fidelity that transcended the physical.

The anger in Ilya's face seemed to melt away, draining out of him like water from a broken vessel, leaving behind only a vast, hollowed-out ache. The faint red print on his cheek was a stark accusation in the soft light of the hotel room. He took a staggering half-step back, not from fear, but from the sheer weight of Shane's words. He looked utterly broken, the bravado and the fury gone, replaced by a raw, unshielded devastation that was far worse to witness. His gaze dropped to the plush carpet for a long moment, and when he finally looked back up at Shane, his own eyes were shimmering with unshed tears.

"Oh, Shane," he whispered, his voice cracking, thick with a regret so profound it felt like a physical presence in the room. He took a hesitant step forward, his hands rising slowly, palms up, in a universal gesture of surrender. "It will never happen again. I promise you. I will never let anyone talk to me like that again. I will never make you feel like you are anything less than my entire world." His words weren't a performance; they were a vow, each one falling into the charged space between them with the gravity of a sacred oath. "You're right. Sometimes it's hard for me to remember that I don't have to act like this anymore. It's hard to believe that you're truly mine. Maybe my mind is having a hard time letting go of bad habits. I promise that it won't happen again." He finally closed the distance, gently cupping Shane's face in his hands, his touch impossibly tender. "You are the only one. You always will be. I'm so, so sorry I made you doubt that for even a second."

A slow, watery smile finally broke through the storm on Shane's face, the tension in his shoulders releasing as if a physical weight had been lifted. He leaned into Ilya's touch, closing his eyes for a brief moment and just breathing him in. "Thank you," he whispered, the words a fragile, happy sound. He opened his eyes and looked up at the man he loved, the relief so potent it was dizzying. "Was it that hard? I just need reassurances, Ilya. I don't even think what you did today was all that bad. I just need it to not be reciprocated or led on. Okay?" he asked, a hint of his old teasing tone returning, soft and forgiving.

Without waiting for an answer, Shane surged forward, closing the remaining gap and pressing their lips together in a kiss that was everything the moment before wasn't. It wasn't desperate or punishing; it was a kiss of profound relief, of reconnection, of coming home. He poured all of his fear, his anger, and now, his forgiveness, into it, a silent communication that words couldn't fully capture.

Shane pulled back from the kiss, his forehead resting against Ilya's, the frantic rhythm of their hearts gradually slowing to a synchronized beat. "Keep your clothes on, Rozanov," he murmured, a playful glint returning to his eyes. "As much as I want to celebrate your new stardom in ways that would require use paying the full security deposit for this room, that's not what I need right now." He took Ilya's hand, their fingers intertwining naturally. "I want to go out. I want to hold my partner's hand and walk through this city without worrying about

a puck, a camera, or anything hospital related.. I'm still going to have that drink with Kip and his boyfriend. You're coming with me."

A slow, easy smile spread across Ilya's face, the last shadows of doubt and anger chased away by the simple, clear demand in Shane's voice. "Okay," he said, his tone warm and sure. "This will be good for us." Shane squeezed his hand, a flicker of guilt crossing his expression.

"And hey," he started, a little awkwardly, "I'm sorry I slapped you. I wasn't... I was picturing Benito's face. It just came out." The confession was so absurdly honest that Ilya let out a startled bark of laughter, the sound echoing in the luxurious room.

"Well," he grinned, a wicked light dancing in his eyes, "I wouldn't mind if you slapped me like that again some time. Under different circumstances." Heat shot straight to Shane's groin at the implication, and he let out a small, strangled laugh.

"Alright, that's it," he said, grabbing Ilya's hand and forcibly pulling him toward the door before they ended up testing the structural integrity of the bedframe after all.

The ten-minute walk was a good comfortable wash of silence between them, the city lights painting gold streaks across the pavement at their feet. They were still holding hands, a firm, reassuring connection that needed no words, when they pushed open the heavy wooden door of The Kingfisher. The bar was a warm, inviting space, filled with the low hum of conversation and the pleasant clinking of glasses against wood. Shane's eyes scanned the room, landing immediately on Kip, who was waving enthusiastically from a booth tucked away in the corner. From their angle, Shane could see Kip's bright, welcoming smile, but across from him was just the back of a man's head, distinguished by short, brown hair peppered with gray, his attention seemingly focused on the coaster he was spinning on the table. As they approached, Shane let go of Ilya's hand to lean in and give Kip a friendly hug.

As Shane straightened up from the hug, a laugh from behind him caught him completely off guard. It wasn't a chuckle or a polite giggle; it was a full-throated, booming cry of sheer, unadulterated disbelief. "No fucking way!" Ilya roared, the words so loud they drew the attention of nearby patrons. Shane turned, a frown of confusion on his face, and looked at the man in the booth. The stranger had spun the coaster around and was now looking up at them.

It was Scott Fucking Hunter.

Captain of the Admirals. The same Scott Hunter who'd taken a nineteen-year-old Shane out for celebratory shots after he'd won Rookie of the Year, slinging a fatherly arm around his shoulders and telling him the league was lucky to have him. And, most critically, the same Scott Hunter who had cultivated a deep, professional, and deeply personal loathing for Ilya Rozanov, a hatred born from a thousand cheap shots and incessant, grating chirps on the ice. The sheer, cosmic absurdity of it all hit Shane at the same time.

Ilya wasn't looking at Shane; his gaze was fixed on a horrified-looking Kip, a grin of pure, unadulterated delight stretching across his face. "This is your boyfriend?" he asked, his voice dripping with a smug satisfaction so thick you could bottle it. Scott Hunter, who looked like

he'd just seen a ghost, slowly raised a hand and dragged it down his face, a gesture of profound, soul-crushing resignation. He dropped the hand to the table and stared at Kip.

"These are the guys you met today?" Scott asked, his voice a low, pained groan. "These guys, babe? Of all the people in New York City, you had to go and befriend the one man in the NHL I can't stand and the one rookie he's attached himself to."

Poor Kip looked like a deer caught in the headlights of a very expensive, very dramatic collision. He held his hands up in a gesture of pure, panicked supplication. "Okay, listen! I just said I was working with this amazing couple, an NHL star and his partner, and he just kind of... grunted and said 'good for him' about the coming-out thing!" he explained, directing the latter part at a stunned-looking Scott. "I mean, he never, ever talks about work, but he did say that guy had guts. I thought it would be nice! A bonding experience!"

Ilya threw his head back and let out a laugh so genuine and loud it seemed to shake the rafters, a sound of pure, unadulterated delight at the glorious, ironic mess of it all. He loved this. He absolutely loved this. "Scoot over, grandpa," he chirped, nudging Scott's shoulder with the back of his hand. There was no malice in it, only the playful energy of a predator who had just cornered his favorite, most stubborn prey. Shane rolled his eyes but slid into the booth next to Kip, leaving Ilya to plop down beside a deeply resigned-looking Scott.

Scott turned away from Ilya's gloating face and fixed his gaze on Shane, his expression softening considerably. "How have you been, rook?" he asked, the nickname a warm throwback to simpler times.

Shane's face immediately lit up, the tension from the earlier hour completely forgotten. "I've been amazing, Scott, really," he gushed, the words tumbling out in an excited rush. "Elena's talking up a storm now, full sentences, and she's obsessed with Frozen. And this guy," he said, jerking a thumb toward Ilya, "he's been a rock, honestly. He's handling all the new stuff so well, and coming home to them every day... it's just the best." Ilya watched him, the smug amusement on his face melting into something softer, something profoundly fond and adoring.

Once Shane's monologue wound down, Ilya leaned forward, propping his chin on his hand and fixing Scott with a wicked grin. "So, Hunter" he began, "They let you out of museum past 8 p.m.? Must be special occasion." As Kip and Shane caught the bartender's eye, waving him over with a shared look of 'we are all going to need drinks,'

Chapter 14: We're looking for something dumb to do.

Chapter Summary

After the quiet warmth of Christmas settles over their home, the fragile balance Shane and Ilya have built begins to shift in ways neither of them can fully see yet. A moment at the hospital forces them to confront how much they've been holding back, while the holiday itself brings gifts that quietly redraw the boundaries of their lives and the future they thought they understood. What starts as a season of family, small promises, and unexpected generosity slowly builds toward something far bigger—something Ilya has been planning in secret. By the time the lights of the arena come up and thousands of eyes turn toward center ice, the course of their lives is already changing. And once the moment finally arrives, there will be no way to return to what they were before.

Chapter Notes

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

December 24, 2016

In the days that followed their trip to New York City, a comfortable rhythm reasserted itself in Boston. Shane was back to his three-days-on, four-days-off schedule at the hospital, a luxurious arrangement that allowed him to be home for Christmas. The holiday swap, a standard fairness policy at the hospital, meant he'd be working on Christmas Eve, but the trade-off was worth it. His mother had become an indispensable part of their lives, not only caring for Elena while they were at their respective jobs but also filling their home with the comforting aroma of home-cooked meals. Dana, the charge nurse on the pediatric oncology wing, had noticed a change in the ward's atmosphere, and it all circled back to Ilya Rozanov. He was visiting more often, and while she knew it had everything to do with a certain handsome nurse, she also saw it was about more than that. Ilya had a specific routine. He always saved Robby for last. Dana had once overheard him telling another nurse that the little boy reminded him of himself as a child—lost and alone, searching for a light in the darkest corners. To Robby, Ilya was that light, and damn if it wasn't the cutest, most heart-wrenching thing to watch.

Christmas Eve was one of those days. The other nurses would practically vibrate with anticipation, their whispers about the "hottie in the leather jacket" filling the nurses' station. They all flirted, of course, drawn in by the intimidating biceps and the easy smirk, completely unaware that after years of deflecting their advances, the man's heart was not only taken but fiercely guarded. From her perch at the desk, Dana watched Shane work. He was one of the best she'd ever had—meticulous, thorough, with a bedside manner that could soothe the most frightened child. He could be blunt, a trait she privately chalked up to an undiagnosed neurodivergence that gave him a unique, refreshing directness. Before that day in September, he'd been wound tight, a coil of professional tension. But since reuniting with Ilya, he'd

loosened. His personality, once buried under layers of propriety, was shining through. She saw it in the way Ilya would arrive with Santa sacks overflowing with presents, making a grand tour of the ward before ending up at Robby's room. She saw it in the way Shane would always, always, find a reason to check Robby's chart or adjust his IV precisely five minutes after Ilya had disappeared inside.

That day, however, Ilya had brought Robby a gift that made even the busiest nurses pause. It was a tiny Boston Raiders jersey, perfectly fitted to a small boy's frame, with ROZANOV emblazoned across the back in bold white letters. With a strength that defied his illness, Robby marched himself out into the hallway, puffed out his chest, and showed every nurse in the vicinity his new treasure, with Ilya walking proudly beside him like a general reviewing his troops. Dana had to physically turn away, pretending to be engrossed in her monitor to hide the ridiculous, watery smile spreading across her face. It was, without a doubt, the cutest goddamn thing she had ever seen in her twenty years on this floor. As visiting hours wound down and the ward quieted, Ilya prepared to leave. He made his rounds, saying goodbye to the other nurses, always giving Dana a quick, friendly hug before heading for the automated doors. But he never hugged Shane. Never even touched him. It was their unspoken rule, a wall of professionalism they had erected between their two worlds, and it drove Dana insane.

She watched as Ilya walked away, her gaze shifting to Shane, who was standing by the desk, pretending to read a chart but really just watching the doors with a quiet, longing look in his eyes. Enough was enough. Life was too damn short, especially in a place like this. "ROZANOV!" she bellowed, her voice cutting through the hushed evening quiet. He turned, a questioning look on his face. "You're forgetting something," she said, her tone leaving no room for argument. Shane glanced at her, utterly confused. The exchange was pulling the attention of the night shift, but Dana didn't care. Ilya walked back, now standing directly in front of the desk, Shane a few inches to her left. "What did I forget?" Ilya asked, genuinely puzzled.

Dana leaned forward, her hands braced on the counter, her gaze boring into both of them. "Listen, kids. Every day you walk out those doors, you think you're leaving the problems behind. But you take a new set with you." Her voice lowered, thick with an old, familiar ache. "I spent years going in and out of this very hospital without saying goodbye to my husband because we wanted to keep it at home. We didn't want anyone to see us kiss or know that we were a thing despite working in the same hospital together. We wanted to be professional. And I regret that every fucking day." Her eyes glistened.

"He died two years ago," she said, the words barely a whisper now, each one a heavy stone dropped into the silent space between them. "Prostate cancer. And I'm never going to get to see him again." A single tear broke free and traced a path down her weathered cheek. She sniffed, straightening her shoulders, the charge nurse back in control even as her heart was laid bare. "If he was here now, he'd be right beside me, telling you two how fucking stupid you are for not kissing, for not hugging, for not doing whatever it is you two do when you leave each other's side. No matter where you are. Say goodbye and hello the way that makes your heart whole and leaves no regret for later."

She took a shaky breath and looked from Ilya's stunned face to Shane's, which was now burning a deep, embarrassed crimson. "Now," she said, her voice stronger, "I'm going to say

it again. Rozanov, you forgot something." Her gaze flicked pointedly to Shane. Ilya stared at Dana for a long second, a thousand unspoken emotions warring in his expression—shock, empathy, and then, a slow, dawning understanding that bloomed into the brightest of smiles. Without another word, he leaned over the high counter, the smooth Formica cool against his forearms, and planted a soft, quick, and utterly unapologetic kiss right on Shane's mouth. It wasn't deep or passionate, but it was real, and it was there for everyone to see.

"That's more like it!" Dana declared, clapping her hands together once, the sound echoing in the quiet hall. "Now get your ass back to work, Hollander," she said to a dazed-looking Shane. As Shane mumbled something and drifted away, Ilya lingered, his gaze fixed on Dana. "Thank you, Dana," he said softly. "And I'm... I'm sorry to hear about your husband." She managed a watery smile, wiping defiantly at her own tear.

"Thanks, kid. You have a good Christmas." But Ilya had one last thought, one more piece to this unexpected evening. "Dana," he began, "would you like to join us for Christmas? At our house?" She seemed genuinely touched by the offer, but shook her head kindly. "Thank you, but I'll be here. Can't leave the kids." She paused, a real smile reaching her eyes this time.

"But I would love to come back to another Raiders game though."

A slow, easy grin spread across Ilya's face, the kind that spelled trouble and delight in equal measure. "How about in two weeks? For family night?" he suggested, leaning slightly over the counter as if sharing a state secret. "I think it's going to be a big night versus the Metros. And there are going to be some big surprises that night... surprises that you may want to see." He finished with a shit-eating grin that made Dana's own lips twitch with curiosity. "I'd love to," she said, playing along. "But what's the surprise?"

Ilya wagged a finger at her, the picture of mock severity. "Ah, ah, ah. If it's going to be a surprise, I can't tell you." Dana blew a loud, playful raspberry and swatted him lightly on the shoulder. "You're a pain in the ass, Rozanov," she laughed. "Alright, you've got a deal." Ilya gave her a final, brilliant smile, one that seemed to light up the entire sterile corridor. "Great. Mark your calendar for January 30th," he clarified, before turning and finally walking out through the automated doors, leaving Dana to her thoughts.

December 25, 2016

The next day, on Christmas, a tiny, energetic force of nature named Elena launched herself into the master bedroom with the force of a hurricane. She landed squarely in the middle of the bed, where Shane and Ilya were still curled around each other, cocooned in matching red-and-green plaid pajamas identical to the ones their daughter had worn the night before. Shane had even insisted Yuna get a set, resulting in a slightly blurry but joyous Christmas Eve selfie. Ilya startled awake, flipping onto his back with a grunt as Elena immediately scrambled to straddle his chest, her small hands pressing against him as she shrieked, "Papa, it's present time! Wake up!"

Shane watched the chaos unfold, a deep, contented smile spreading across his face as he propped himself up on an elbow. He smoothly plucked their giggling daughter from Ilya's chest, pulling her into a tight cuddle against his own. Ilya rolled over, enveloping them both

in a warm, sleepy embrace, creating a small, perfect family bubble amidst the rumpled sheets. Elena, however, was on a mission. She wiggled and squirmed, desperate to escape the loving trap and get to the living room, where the Christmas tree stood groaning under the weight of a mountain of presents. They had all agreed, in a quiet show of unity, that every gift was for Elena. Even Cliff Marleau had sent a package, a thoughtfully chosen toy with a card signed "Uncle Cliff." A warmth spread through Shane's chest at the thought, a reminder of the sprawling, unconventional family they were building. He made a mental note to engage more, to be better at investing in Ilya's team, maybe even host another cookout this spring. His thoughts were interrupted by a determined tug on his pajama shirt.

"Daddy, this one is for you! It says it's from Papa!" Elena announced proudly, holding up a small box wrapped with exquisite precision. Shane stared at it. He knew, with absolute certainty, that he hadn't wrapped this one. He'd spent an entire evening last week wrestling with curling ribbon that refused to cooperate and tape that seemed to have a mind of its own, their living room floor littered with crumpled wrapping paper by the end. While Shane meticulously folded corners and smoothed edges, Ilya had been decidedly unhelpful, more interested in attempting to wrap Shane himself with the sparkly gold paper, his long fingers tracing patterns along Shane's sides before attempting to tape him to the sofa cushion. They'd laughed until their sides ached, the scent of pine from their fresh Christmas tree mingling with the sweet aroma of the hot cocoa Yuna had brought them. It had been a frustrating, messy, and utterly perfect memory—their first time wrapping their daughter's Christmas presents together, Mariah Carey's holiday hits providing the soundtrack as Ilya occasionally attempted to serenade Shane with off-key but heartfelt renditions of "All I Want for Christmas Is You." But this box... this was different. The paper was pristine, the corners folded with mathematical precision, the bow symmetrical in a way Shane's own haphazard attempts could never achieve. A lump formed in his throat as his fingers brushed

He looked up, locking eyes with Ilya, and the frantic storm of questions in his mind simply evaporated. There was only Ilya. Beautiful, infuriating, perfect Ilya, with the sharp line of his jaw, the stupid, perfect mole on his left cheek, and the dimples that appeared as he watched Shane with a soft, knowing smile. The future could wait. All that mattered was now. Taking a breath, Shane carefully tore at the paper, revealing a small, black velvet box. He popped it open. Inside, nestled against the satin lining, was a beautiful silver chain, its links heavy and substantial. It wasn't a ring, but it was breathtakingly perfect.

"You like it, malysh?" Ilya asked, his voice a low rumble. Shane could only nod, his throat too tight to form words as he held up the necklace. Ilya crossed the room in a few strides, taking the chain from him. "Let me," he murmured, moving to stand behind Shane on the couch. He gently swept Shane's hair aside, the warmth of his fingers sending a shiver down Shane's spine as he fastened the clasp. The silver settled against Shane's skin, its weight a cool, reassuring presence. It was an exact match to the gold chain Ilya never took off, a silent, shining declaration. A feeling of being possessed, of being utterly and completely claimed, washed over him, and he felt a blush creep up his neck.

Ilya leaned in, his lips brushing the shell of Shane's ear. "I have one more surprise," he whispered, his breath hot. He moved back to the tree, digging deep beneath the boughs and retrieving one last, perfectly wrapped gift. He handed it to Elena. "Take this to Grandma," he

instructed softly. Shane and Ilya sat back down on the couch, watching as their daughter trotted over to Yuna, who was perched on the armchair, a look of fond curiosity on her face.

Yuna opened the box. Inside, nestled in a bed of tissue paper, was a single, old-fashioned brass key. She looked up, utterly baffled. Shane was equally lost. Then Yuna picked up the key, revealing a small folded note beneath it. Her eyes scanned the paper, and her expression shifted from confusion to disbelief. She looked over at Ilya, her eyes wide.

"Ilya, what is this?" Shane asked, his heart starting to beat a little faster.

Ilya shrugged, a gesture that was meant to be casual but couldn't quite hide the nervous energy thrumming beneath the surface. "It's the key to the home next door," he said, the words dropping into the room with quiet force. "It is small, but I think you will love it. If you don't like it, we will just sell it. No big deal, da?" He said it so lightly, as if he were talking about buying a new toaster, not an entire house. Yuna's jaw went slack. Shane's brain stuttered to a halt, the two pieces of information refusing to connect.

"Ilya... you bought me a home for a Christmas gift?" Yuna finally managed to whisper, her voice trembling. Ilya just nodded once, a firm "Da" escaping his lips. Shane stared at him, wide-eyed, the world narrowing to the man sitting beside him. He turned slowly, his gaze meeting his mother's across the room, and he saw the same dawning, overwhelming realization mirrored in her tear-filled eyes. A dam broke inside him. He turned back to Ilya, his own vision blurring.

"Mommy is going to be my neighbor?" The question came out as a choked whisper, full of a hope so immense it was almost painful to hold. Ilya's gaze softened, all his feigned nonchalance vanishing as he searched Shane's face. "Da. Shane. Is that okay?"

"More than okay," Shane gasped, the tears now freely streaming down his face. He launched himself across the small space between them, wrapping his arms around Ilya's neck and burying his face in the crook of his shoulder. "Oh my God. I love you."

For a long moment, the only sound in the room was the soft rustle of the key as Yuna's trembling fingers released it back into the box. Her gaze was fixed on Ilya, but it was a look of profound, uncomprehending shock, as if she were trying to translate a language she'd never heard before. Then, a single sob broke from her, a raw, wounded sound that seemed to carry the weight of every struggle, every worry, every lonely night she had ever endured. She pushed herself up from the armchair, her movements unsteady, and crossed the small space between them. Ilya stood to meet her, his own carefully constructed wall of nonchalance finally crumbling. Without a word, Yuna wrapped her arms around his middle, burying her face in his chest and weeping with a force that shook her entire body. Ilya stood frozen for a second, his arms hovering awkwardly, before he carefully, hesitantly, wrapped them around her, one large hand coming up to rest gently on the back of her head, a silent, clumsy anchor in her storm of emotion.

"Ilya," she finally choked out, her voice muffled by his shirt. "You cannot... you cannot do this." She pulled back just enough to look up at him, her face a mess of tears and utter disbelief. "This is too much." She gestured vaguely toward the window, as if she could already see the house next door.

She pulled away completely now, wiping furiously at her cheeks with the back of her hand, her composure fighting a losing battle against her gratitude and her astonishment. "Do you know what I have given you? I gave you my son. That is all I have. That is everything to me. And you have given him back to me. You have made him happy, truly happy, in a way I have not seen him since he was a small boy. That is a gift. A gift I can never repay. And this... giving me the opportunity to see you all everyday. My heart. Oh God." She looked from Ilya to Shane, her expression shifting from overwhelmed to fiercely maternal. "You will not sell it. I'll move in as soon as possible. When can we see it?"

Ilya's gaze softened, the tension in his shoulders easing as he watched Yuna's tears shift from shock to fierce joy. A slow, genuine smile spread across his face, replacing the guarded look he'd worn moments before. "We can go over right now if you want?" he offered, his voice gentle, as if he were afraid the moment might shatter. "I was thinking... we connect our yards." He said it so casually, as if he were discussing connecting a garden hose.

Before anyone could fully process the magnitude of that statement—a physical bridge between their homes, their lives—a gleeful, ear-piercing yelp erupted from the small person who had been silently observing the entire exchange with wide, fascinated eyes. "A YARD!" Elena shrieked, her joy so pure and absolute it cut through the lingering tears and emotional gravity in the room. She started bouncing on the balls of her feet, her small fists clenched with excitement. "Papa, Daddy, Grandma, we can all play in the yard! Together! We can have a swing set with the pool and we can run and run and run!" Her words tumbled out in a breathless, ecstatic rush, a perfect, chaotic embodiment of the future Ilya had just handed them.

Shane let out a watery laugh, reaching out to pull their daughter into a one-armed hug while still keeping a firm grip on Ilya's hand. "I think that's a yes, Ilya," he said, looking from Yuna's beaming, tear-streaked face to Ilya's own profoundly happy expression. "I think that's a very enthusiastic yes." Yuna, still wiping at her eyes, simply nodded, her smile so wide it looked like it might split her face in two. The reality of it was sinking in—not just a house, but a home next to her son, her granddaughter, her family. A shared space. A connected life. The thought was so enormous, so perfect, it felt like a dream she was afraid to wake from. "Alright," she said, her voice thick with emotion but full of resolve. "Let's go see Grandma's new home."

January 19, 2017

The idea had been simmering in Ilya's mind for weeks, a wild, audacious plan that felt both terrifying and utterly right. It had started as a flicker of thought during a quiet moment watching Shane sleep, the silver necklace glinting in the moonlight against his skin. It had grown into something monumental, a plan so grand it made his own breath catch every time he allowed himself to fully imagine it. The logistics alone were staggering—the timing, the permissions, the sheer spectacle of it all. But the image of Shane's face, the possibility of creating a memory that would outshine even the necklace and the house next door—it was a risk he had to take. He knew he couldn't pull it off alone, not on the scale he envisioned, not without crossing lines he wasn't sure he had the authority to cross. Which is how he found himself standing in the middle of Harris's office, the scent of stale coffee and paper a stark

contrast to the pine and sugar cookies still lingering from Christmas. He took a breath, the air thick with his own nervous energy, the words coming out in a rush, tumbling over each other in their haste to escape.

"You want me to ask the front office to allow you to propose to your partner on the center ice during family night... in front of the Montreal Metros?" Harris asked.

The silence that followed was deafening. Harris's jaw literally dropped, his mouth hanging open for a solid three seconds as if the gears in his brain had completely stalled. He stared at Ilya, blinked once, then twice, as if trying to confirm he'd actually heard the words correctly. Ilya immediately began regretting his decision, the air suddenly feeling thin and sharp in his lungs. He should have gone to Gen first, he thought, a cold dread creeping up his spine. Or better yet, just done it himself, without this humiliating interrogation.

Harris thinks I'm insane. Maybe he doesn't like Shane as much as I thought. Maybe this whole "we're a family" doesn't apply to all of the Raiders staff. The internal spiral of self-doubt was just gaining momentum when Harris finally found his voice.

Just as Ilya was about to backtrack, to mutter something about it being a stupid idea and make a hasty retreat, Harris slammed a palm flat on his desk, the sharp crack making Ilya jump. The sound echoed in the small office, a punctuation mark to the silence. "GEN!" Harris bellowed, his voice booming through the closed office door, a sound usually reserved for calling out plays from behind the bench. "Get in here! We have planning to do." There was a shuffle from the outer office, a brief clatter of keyboard keys, and then Genevieve Côté, the team's meticulous PR director, appeared in the doorway, a curious look on her face. "What? What's going on?" she asked, her gaze flicking between her boss's thunderous expression and Ilya's rigid posture, her eyes narrowing slightly as she tried to piece together the scene.

Harris leaned back in his chair, the leather groaning in protest, a slow, wolfish grin spreading across his face. It was the same look Ilya got when he was about to pull off a complicated line change that would leave the other team scrambling. "Mr. Rozanov is going to propose to his partner on family night," he announced, the words filled with a sudden, infectious energy that crackled in the air between them. He looked from Ilya to Gen, his eyes alight with the thrill of a game-winning play. "We're going to make it perfect." A wave of relief so powerful it almost buckled Ilya's knees washed over him. He hadn't been judged; he'd been greenlit. The weight on his chest lifted, replaced by a buzzing, electric excitement. A slow smile spread across his own face as he looked between the two of them, his heart beginning to race, not with anxiety, but with the exhilarating, terrifying, and utterly perfect thrill of what was to come

January 30, 2017

"Family Night" at the Boston Arena was a spectacle of manufactured sentimentality, a carefully orchestrated tradition that Coach LeClaire cherished. It operated like a high school senior night writ large: for each player with family in attendance, the public address announcer would call their name, and the player, accompanied by their loved ones, would glide onto the ice to a wave of applause. They never had to step onto the frozen surface themselves; a plush red carpet was unfurled from the tunnel entrance, a safe path for parents,

spouses, and children. After the acknowledged families were escorted to their seats, the second group would emerge: the players whose families were continents away, the trade acquisitions, the rookies. They walked out together, flanked by the captain and the coach, a somber procession of chosen brothers. Coach LeClaire lived for this part, pulling each one into a gruff, heartfelt hug, a word of pride whispered in their ear before sending them off the ice. Until this year, Ilya had been a part of that second group, a lone wolf finding solace in the coach's embrace. But this year was different. The captain had a family now, and he would walk with them, a new unit formed at the end of the line.

Ilya's large frame blocked the tunnel's view as Shane bounced a giddy Elena on his hip. She was practically vibrating with excitement, a miniature Ilya clone in her tiny custom Rozanov jersey, desperate to escape Shane's arms and show off for the roaring crowd of twenty thousand. But Shane didn't see the sea of faces or notice Dana sitting in their seats, waving enthusiastically. His attention was snagged by a strange sight: Harris was stepping onto the ice, a professional camera crew fanning out behind him. A knot of unease tightened in Shane's stomach. Then the announcer's voice boomed through the arena, "Ladies and gentlemen, now joining us on center ice... the Captain of the Raiders, Ilya Rozanov and his family!" Ilya took Shane's right hand, his left enveloping Elena's miniature one, and they stepped onto the red carpet. The crowd roared. Shane offered a practiced smile, his eyes automatically darting to the Montreal Metros' bench, where most glowered with a professional contempt. A notable exception was Hayden Pike, whose expression seemed almost... happy? Shane filed that away for later. Elena, however, was in her element, waving like a pageant princess, and Shane's heart swelled.

They reached the center ice, the sprawling Boston logo a familiar welcome mat. Wyatt Hayes, the alternate captain, skated over, a warm, genuine smile on his face. Shane expected a quick nod, a bit of team camaraderie, but instead, Wyatt bent down and scooped a squealing Elena right out of Shane's arms. "Hey, superstar," he grinned, hoisting her onto his hip. "Mind if I borrow your daughter for a second?" Confusion immediately went through Shane. Why? The rest of the team began to form a loose circle around them, their faces a mixture of knowing smiles and barely suppressed laughter. Shane's gaze darted around the arena, landing on Harris, who was now holding a microphone and reaching it to Ilya. Then he saw her, standing just off the red carpet, phone held high to capture the moment: Yuna.

Oh no. Oh no. OH NO. Oh yes?

He looked at Ilya, who met his gaze with a devious, heartbreaking grin.

"Hello Boston!" Ilya's voice, amplified by the microphone, boomed through the arena, drawing an earth-shaking roar in response. "I want to thank you for coming out to support your Raiders." He paused, letting the sound wash over them. "I also want to thank you. Since I came out to the world and you all found out about my beautiful daughter and my pretty partner... I have read all of the signs and I have seen all of the t-shirts. You support us. Both of us. So, I just want to take a moment to say... thank you." Another deafening roar.

"But tonight," Ilya continued, his voice dropping to a more intimate, serious tone that somehow still carried to every corner of the building, "before we get started on the ice, I have one more question. And it is not for you. It is for my pretty boyfriend."

He turned fully to Shane. The world narrowed to just the two of them, the face he knew better than his own, now etched with an overwhelming shock. Shane's hand flew to his mouth, as if to physically hold back the sob that was building in his chest.

"Sheyn, moya lyubov'," Ilya began, the Russian words a private, sacred thing shared with twenty thousand people, "spasibo tebe za vse blagosloveniye, kotoryye ty mne daroval." Then, in a move that was pure, unadulterated theater, Ilya Rozanov dropped to one knee on the Boston Arena ice, the microphone still held to his lips.

Harris moved forward, a picture of professionalism as he placed a small, royal blue velvet box into Ilya's outstretched palm. A sound somewhere between a gasp and a sob escaped Shane's lips, hot tears instantly blurring his vision, tracing paths down his freckled cheeks. He watched through a watery haze as Ilya, the stoic captain, began to cry too, his own composure finally shattering under the weight of the moment. "Shane," Ilya's voice cracked over the loudspeaker, thick with emotion, "you make me the happiest man in the world. I have been in love with you since the first time I laid my eyes on you, and I want nothing more than to become Mr. Hollander-Rozanov with our beautiful Elena." He took a shaky breath. "Shane Hollander, will you marry me?"

Ilya thrust the microphone back toward Harris, who made a hasty but graceful retreat, eager to get out of the frame. Then Ilya snapped the box open with a flick of his thumb. And there it was. A stunning silver ring, its band wide and substantial. At its center sat a deep, captivating sapphire, the exact color of Ilya's own intense eyes, surrounded by a glittering constellation of diamonds. The crowd's roar was insane, a wall of sound that Shane could barely process. He looked down at Ilya, at the man he loved, kneeling on the ice, and realized he'd been silent for far too long.

"YES!" he finally managed to scream, the word tearing from his throat as he nodded his head frantically, holding out his left hand. Ilya swatted it away gently but firmly, a small, watery smile on his face. "Russian Orthodox wears it on the right hand," he explained, his voice no longer amplified but clear and intimate. "Oh," Shane breathed, switching hands.

Ilya rose smoothly to his full, imposing height, still on his skates, and closed the small distance between them, effectively bracketing Shane in his arms. Shane didn't hesitate; he grabbed Ilya by the waist and pulled him close, lifting him slightly off the ice as they kissed, a messy, tearful, passionate embrace that was broadcast on the Jumbotron for the world to see.

Their private bubble was popped by a tiny voice. "Papa and Daddy is getting married! Can I be flower girl?" Elena shrieked from Wyatt's arms, and the entire arena seemed to laugh with her.

The laughter was a physical force in the arena as the Raiders mobbed them. Wyatt carefully handed Elena off to Cliff, who immediately spun her around in a circle, making her giggle wildly. Zane and Troy were pounding Ilya's back so hard Shane was surprised he didn't crack a rib. Even Harris was there, a rare, genuine smile splitting his face as he clapped a heavy hand on Shane's shoulder. They took turns, a chaotic relay of joy, lifting Elena towards the rafters while Shane and Ilya held each other, their foreheads pressed together, the roar of the crowd a distant hum. Through the tangle of limbs and congratulations, Shane's gaze drifted

across the ice to the opposing bench. The Metros' anger was clear, a dark, simmering cloud of fury. He let the image settle, then dismissed it with a final, decisive thought.

He didn't give a fuck.

As the team began to disperse, heading back to the locker room to prepare for the game to begin, Shane pulled Ilya close, speaking directly into his ear over the fading noise. "Go beat their asses, Rozanov," he said, his voice low and possessive. "Get this win. Then come back to me so I can have hot and heavy sex with my *fiancé* tonight."

Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him, a flash of pure, unadulterated fire in his eyes. He responded by capturing Shane's lips in a deep, claiming kiss that left them both breathless before he finally, reluctantly, began to skate away. Just before he disappeared into the tunnel, he turned back, a smirk playing on his lips, and delivered a sharp, resounding smack to Shane's ass. The crowd, which had been quieting, erupted all over again. Shane couldn't help but laugh, shaking his head as he finally turned to lead Yuna and a very hyped-up Elena to their seats, the weight of the new ring on his right hand a perfect reality.

The night ended not with a whimper, but with a roar. A deafening, four-goal shutout that echoed the explosive joy from earlier. Ilya Rozanov, fueled by a ring that now felt like a second heartbeat on Shane's hand, was a man possessed. He was an unstoppable force on the ice, a blur of motion and intent, scoring three goals with a terrifying efficiency that left the Montreal Metros' defense in shambles. The crowd chanted his name, a thunderous, rhythmic wave that built with every shift. Then, with the game already won, Troy Barrett buried the final goal, a beautiful slapshot from the point that Ilya had teed up for him with a perfectly timed pass. The arena exploded, the sound shook the very foundations, a culmination of a night that had started with a single, life-altering question on center ice and ended with the most dominant victory of the season. As the final buzzer sounded, Ilya didn't celebrate with his teammates; he skated directly to the tunnel, his eyes finding only one person in a sea of twenty thousand, a promise of a much more private victory waiting for him at home.

Chapter End Notes

PAIN INCOMING. I'm so so so so so sorry.

Chapter 15: To be the sad man behind blue eyes.

March 19, 2017

Ilya Rozanov had come to hate road trips. They were no longer a brief escape from domesticity, a chance to bond with the guys over greasy food and cheap beer. Now, every city, every anonymous hotel room, was just another place he wasn't. He was missing the scent of Shane's shampoo on their shared pillows, the feel of Elena's small body burrowing into his side for a morning cuddle. Every road game had settled into its own painful rhythm. Ilya would finish warmups, his body humming with pre-game adrenaline, and the second he was off the ice, his phone would buzz. Shane's name would light up the screen, a small lifeline across the miles. "Good luck, love," he'd say, and if the timing was right, a sleepy, high-pitched "Go, Papa!" would echo in the background. Shane would stay up, no matter the hour, watching every shift, every hit, every goal. His texts would follow, a stream of praise and analysis that was always supportive, even on nights when Ilya knew he'd played like shit.

Tonight was one of those nights. The win in Los Angeles had been a gritty, ugly thing, a victory earned more through stubbornness than skill. His ribs screamed with every breath, a deep, bruised ache from getting shoved through the glass in Denver after he'd put Dallas Kent's face through his fist for whispering something vile about Shane. He regretted nothing about the punch, but he regretted the fallout: the very angry, near-tears fiancé on the phone, the frustration of not being able to explain, and the lingering pain that made every movement on the ice a conscious effort. Exhaustion hung on him like a lead blanket. All he wanted was the quiet of his hotel room, a shower, and the familiar comfort of Shane's goodnight text. He trudged down the long, carpeted hallway, staring down at his phone, a small smile touching his lips as he re-read Shane's last message: You played amazing. Now get some rest. I love you.

But as he approached his door, the smile faltered. The door was ajar, propped open by the secondary security latch. A cold knot of dread formed in his stomach. Ilya pushed the door open slowly, his senses on high alert. The living room of the suite was dark, save for a sliver of moonlight cutting through the gap in the curtains.

His eyes immediately landed on his open suitcase on the luggage rack. It was empty, its contents strewn across the king-sized bed in the adjoining room. For a fleeting, ridiculous second, a wave of hope washed over him. Shane? Again? He almost laughed at the absurdity, the sheer, romantic perfection of it. But the hope curdled into ice as a sound drifted from the bedroom. A soft, knowing chuckle that sent a feeling of revulsion down Ilya's spine. He knew that laugh. It was a ghost from a past he had buried, a sound that had once promised pleasure but now only whispered of violation.

"Hello, Ilyushka."

The name, a childhood diminutive he hadn't heard in years, was like poison. Ilya stepped around the corner into the bedroom.

Sasha.

Of course it was Sasha. He was lounging on Ilya's bed amidst the scattered clothes, looking utterly at home, a smirk playing on his lips. The room was thick with cloying, suffocating scent of roses, a smell Ilya had once found intoxicating but now made him want to gag. Sasha had been here, touching his things, marking them.

"Sasha, what the fuck are you doing here?" Ilya's voice was a low growl, dangerously calm.

"I was horny, and I knew you were in LA for the game," Sasha purred, sitting up and letting the sheet pool around his waist. "So why not come and get railed?" He gestured around the room, at Ilya's t-shirts and jeans. "I thought we could celebrate tonight. Your win, and my new ownership." Ilya's blood ran cold at the casual mention of it, another secret weapon Sasha had unearthed to use against him.

"Ownership?" Ilya repeated, the word tasting like ash in his mouth.

"Yeah," Sasha grinned, oblivious to the fury building in the room. "I'm finally getting more involved in hockey. My dad is so proud. I'm going to be a part owner of the Montreal Metros. You and I will finally be in the same timezone. We'll be able to see each other a couple of times a year."

Ilya saw red. "Fuck you. You're lying."

He was still standing in the doorway, a barrier between himself and the contamination in the room. Sasha stood up, slowly, deliberately pulling a t-shirt over his head to reveal a toned, familiar chest.

He grabbed his crotch, a vulgar, challenging gesture, and walked toward Ilya, the smirk never leaving his face. It was a move calculated to provoke, to reassert a dominance that had long since evaporated. Ilya didn't retreat. Instead, he stepped past Sasha, snatching the discarded shirt from the floor and throwing it at him with a sharp, disgusted flick of his wrist. "Get the fuck out of here," he snarled, the words clipped and precise. "And stop touching my clothes."

Sasha just laughed, a harsh, grating sound. "Aw, don't want me anymore since you have a lover, Ilyushka?"

"Don't fucking call me that," Ilya shot back, his patience snapping. "I'm not a child anymore. I have a fiancé. How did you even get in here?" The question was a desperate attempt to understand, to find the crack in the system he could file away and fix later.

Sasha's grin widened. "I told the little front desk girl downstairs that my name was Shane Hollander and I wanted to surprise my fiancé, Ilya Rozanov. Then I paid her a hundred bucks."

The words hit Ilya like a brick. Not just the breach of security, but the casual, cruel use of Shane's name. A surge of pure, unadulterated rage propelled him forward. He lunged, grabbing Sasha by the arm and aiming to shove him bodily out the door. But Sasha was quicker, twisting in his grip. Instead of being pushed, he surged forward, crashing into Ilya

and sinking his teeth into the side of his neck. The pain was sharp and searing, an act of primal possession. Ilya roared, more in fury than in agony, grabbing a fistful of Sasha's hair and yanking his head back with brutal force. He landed a solid punch to Sasha's gut, the air rushing out of him in a pained gasp. Using the moment of weakness, Ilya shoved him hard, sending him stumbling out into the hallway. He slammed the door, engaged every lock, and slid to the floor, his back against the wood, his breath coming in ragged, painful gasps.

From the other side of the door, Sasha's muffled yell echoed down the hall. "This isn't over, Ilyushka. I know where you live." Then, silence. Ilya scrambled to his feet and ran to the bathroom, flipping on the light with a trembling hand.

He leaned toward the mirror in the bathroom, tilting his head to the side. A dark, ugly bruise was already blooming on the skin just above his collarbone, an angry purple-red ring with distinct impressions of teeth. It throbbed with a deep, insistent pain that had nothing to do with the physical injury and everything to do with its implication. His whole world was collapsing. How could he explain this? The image in the mirror was a confession, a glaring, undeniable sign of betrayal. Shane would see it and he would believe the worst. There was no universe in which a hickey like this didn't mean cheating. And oh god, that smell. The cloying scent of roses had followed him, clinging to him like a shroud, a chemical stain that even the sterile hotel air couldn't dispel.

Fuck.

He fumbled for his phone, his fingers slipping on the screen as he pulled up Shane's contact. He hit dial, holding the phone to his ear with a desperation that made his own heart ache. It rang once, twice, then went to voicemail. "Shane," he whispered to the recording, his voice cracking. "Call me. Please." He tried again. Voicemail. A third time. The same. He knew it was after two in the morning on the East Coast, but Shane wasn't a heavy sleeper. A surge of a different kind of panic seized him. Was he okay? Was something wrong at home? The irrational thought warred with the rational one—he was probably just asleep—but the fear was physical, tightening its grip on his throat.

He needed help. He needed someone who would understand without judgment. His thumb scrolled past Harris, past Luca, until it landed on Troy Barrett. He hit call.

About fifteen minutes later, a soft, hesitant knock echoed through the suite, a stark contrast to the violence that had just occurred. Ilya scrambled to the door, peering through the peephole before yanking it open and dragging Troy Barrett inside by the front of his hoodie. Troy's eyes, wide with sleep and concern, took in the scene: the scattered clothes on the bed, the overwhelming, floral scent, and finally, Ilya himself—pale, trembling, and with tears cutting clean tracks through the stubble on his cheeks.

"Holy shit, Roz, what the fuck is happening here?" Troy asked, his voice low. His gaze zeroed in on the mark on Ilya's neck, and his eyes went wider still. "What is that? Holy shit." He took a step closer, the concern on his face hardening into a protective anger. "Roz, what's going on?" Ilya just shook his head, the words catching in his throat. He pointed a shaking finger at the bed, then at the door, a jumble of frantic gestures. "One of my old hook-ups from Russia broke in," he finally managed to gasp out, the words tumbling over each other. "He scented all of my clothes. He fucking bit me before I punched him and kicked him out."

"Jesus Christ," Troy breathed, running a hand through his messy hair. "Are you okay?" The question seemed to break Ilya completely. The frantic energy drained out of him, replaced by a wave of bone-deep terror. "I don't know," he whispered, his gaze fixed on the floor. "I can't get ahold of Shane. I want to tell him, but I'm so scared. He's going to think I cheated when I fucking threw him out." His shoulders shook with a suppressed sob. "You don't know, man. I'm so scared." Troy didn't hesitate. He crossed the small space in two long strides and wrapped his arms around his captain, pulling him into a fierce, grounding hug. "No, come here, dude," he said, holding him tight until Ilya's trembling began to subside. When Ilya finally pulled back, Troy got his first close-up look at the bite mark. It was worse than he'd thought. He swore under his breath. "Okay. We need to get some ice on that. And I need to run to a drug store. I'm getting make-up."

"Make-up?" Ilya asked, the word sounding foreign and absurd.

"Yeah, make-up," Troy said, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Concealer. Heavy-duty, theater-grade shit. We can't have the guys see that, Roz. You think they'd actually kill you. And I don't think you'd make it home if they thought you cheated on Shane." The brutal honesty of it cut through Ilya's panic. He knew Troy was right. The team was more than just teammates; they were a pack, and Shane was a part of their heart. Seeing this mark would unleash a kind of loyalty-fueled fury that Ilya didn't want to be on the receiving of. While Ilya pressed a makeshift ice pack filled with hotel ice cubes against the throbbing bite, Troy was already on the phone, his voice low and urgent as he detailed the situation to Harris, asking for advice on the specific brand of concealer to buy. Then another call, to Cliff, asking him to come down and sit with their captain, to make sure he wasn't alone.

When Troy returned nearly half an hour later, he was laden with a plastic bag that crinkled ominously. He handed a small bottle and a sponge to Cliff, who had been sitting silently on the couch, a solid, comforting presence. "Air fresheners too," Troy said, pulling out a pack of four and immediately starting to unpeel one. "We're going to need to fumigate this place." He popped the cap off a can of lavender-scented spray and began to mist the air, the cloying sweetness of it fighting a losing battle against the pervasive scent of Sasha's roses. The combined smells were a chemical assault, a thick, artificial cloud that did little to mask the violation that had occurred here. As Troy worked, Cliff gently dabbed the thick, pancake-like concealer onto Ilya's neck, the cool texture a strange, bizarre comfort against the heated, bruised skin. They were a strange, fractured triptych of silent purpose.

March 20, 2017

The morning light filtering through the bedroom curtains did little to warm the chill that had settled deep in Ilya's bones, a cold that had nothing to do with the hotel's overzealous air conditioning. He hadn't slept, not really, just drifted in and out of a restless state, every creak of the hotel floorboards, every distant siren, every muffled laugh from the hallway sending a jolt of adrenaline through his exhausted body. The concealer Cliff had so carefully applied felt like a thick, cloying mask, a constant physical reminder of the ugly truth it was hiding, and the lingering scent of roses, now battling a losing war with the aggressive lavender of Troy's air fresheners, turned his stomach. He was a bundle of raw nerves, a captain stripped of his command, dreading the flight home more than any game he'd ever played.

Across the country, in their shared Boston home, Shane woke to a string of missed calls and a trio of voicemails from Ilya. He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he pictured a drunk, overly affectionate fiancé celebrating a hard-won game. The messages, garbled and desperate with whispered pleas to call him back, sounded to him like the happy ramblings of a man who missed his family, perhaps a little too much to drink. He laughed softly, imagining Ilya's slurred words, and sent a text that read, Good morning, my love. Hope you had fun! Can't wait to see you after work tonight, and went about his day, blissfully unaware of the storm gathering speed on its way to him.

Ilya landed at Logan at seven, the spring air still holding a sharp, damp chill that seeped into his bones despite the warmth of his jacket. He navigated the airport terminal with a forced calm that felt fragile as glass, his steps purposeful as he bypassed the garage where the team bus idled, a low, rumbling promise of camaraderie he couldn't bear to face. He could feel Troy's concerned eyes on his back, a silent question mark, but Ilya offered only a brief, tight nod before disappearing into the vast concrete labyrinth of the long-term parking garage. He found his SUV exactly where he'd left it before the roadie, a hulking black beast among rows of identical metal shells. The click of the remote unlocking the doors echoed too loudly in the cavernous space, a sharp, lonely sound. He slid into the driver's seat, the familiar leather offering no comfort, just a cold, unwelcome embrace. He didn't want to go home, not yet. He needed to see Shane first, to face this head-on, to see the look in his eyes before he could even think about putting on a brave face for Elena. He programmed the hospital's address into the GPS with a trembling finger, his mind racing through a hundred different ways to begin a conversation he never wanted to have, each one ending in disaster.

At eight, he pulled up to the hospital's main entrance, the SUV's interior a small, dark bubble against the bright lights of the emergency room. The windows were rolled all the way down, the April evening whipping through the car, a desperate, futile attempt to air out the lingering, cloying scent that Troy's air fresheners had failed to completely eradicate, a ghost of a presence that refused to leave. He wore a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes and a pair of dark sunglasses, a ridiculous, suspicious-looking disguise for the nighttime, a flimsy shield against the world. He saw Shane before Shane saw him, walking out with a tired but easy grace, and Ilya's heart hammered against his bruised ribs, a frantic, panicked drumbeat.

Shane spotted the car, a frown creasing his brow as he noted the open windows and Ilya's odd getup, a strange combination for the cool evening. He slid into the passenger seat, leaning in immediately for the kiss he always greeted him with, a small, reassuring gesture of their connection. But the moment their faces were close, the smell hit him. It was cloying, floral, and utterly foreign, a chemical perfume that clung to Ilya's jacket and hair, a stark, invasive presence in the familiar space of their car. Roses. A primal, possessive fury, cold and sharp, roared to life in Shane's chest, the likes of which he hadn't felt since that disastrous night in New York, a raw, instinctual rage that threatened to consume him.

The short drive home was a masterclass in shared, suffocating silence. Each man was trapped in his own head, a torrent of wild assumptions and desperate denials. For Shane, the scent of roses was an aggressor, a chemical entity that saturated the car, clinging to the very fabric of Ilya's being. It was a violation, a claim staked on territory that was unequivocally his. He watched the city lights blur past, his mind replaying every late-night call, every whispered "I love you," wondering if it had all been a performance. For Ilya, the silence was a ticking

clock, each second bringing him closer to a moment of destruction he couldn't seem to outrun. He could feel the phantom weight of the bite on his neck, a brand of shame he couldn't wash away, and the cloying sweetness in the car was a constant, mocking reminder of Sasha's invasive presence. He gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white, the familiar streets of their neighborhood feeling alien and unwelcoming, a prelude to the judgment he knew was waiting for him inside their own home.

The moment the front door opened, the familiar warmth and domesticity of the house was a slap in the face. Yuna was on the couch, a book in her lap, her expression immediately shifting to one of concern as she took in Ilya's haggard appearance, the hat and sunglasses still on indoors. "Ilya, are you okay?" she asked, her voice soft but piercing in the quiet hallway. Ilya offered a weak, tight smile, his eyes immediately finding the small lump of a sleeping form on the baby monitor screen on the kitchen counter—Elena, safe and oblivious. A fresh wave of guilt and longing crashed over him. He needed to hold her, to breathe in her clean, innocent scent, but he was radioactive, contaminated. "I'm fine, Yuna," he managed to say, the words rough. "Just tired. Long flight." He didn't wait for a response, brushing past Shane and Yuna and heading straight for the sanctuary of their bedroom, the desperate need to wash the last twenty-four hours off his skin an all-consuming imperative.

Shane watched him go, a storm brewing behind his calm façade. He turned to Yuna, forcing a reassuring smile that felt like a lie. "He's just exhausted," he said, the words tasting like ash. "Probably just needs a long shower and some sleep. Don't worry about it." Yuna didn't look convinced, but she nodded, her gaze full of a sympathy that made Shane's skin crawl.

The bathroom door clicked shut behind Ilya, the sound a final, damning punctuation mark to the agonizing silence in the bedroom. Shane sat on the edge of their bed, the mattress dipping slightly under his weight, the room feeling unnervingly still and cold without Ilya's presence. He could hear the water start in the shower. He clenched his fists, the sharp edges of his engagement ring biting into the palm of his hand, a painful reminder of the promise he'd thought they were both holding. He felt a sickening sense of *déjà vu*, a dark echo of the jealousy that had nearly torn them apart in New York, but this felt worse, more real, more irreversible. He waited, the silence of the room a heavy, suffocating blanket, each tick of the clock on the nightstand a countdown to a confrontation he wasn't sure he had the strength to face.

The bathroom door finally opened, releasing a cloud of steam and the scent of Ilya's soap, a clean, familiar fragrance that did little to mask the phantom scent of roses that still clung to the edges of Shane's consciousness. Ilya walked out, a towel wrapped around his waist, his skin flushed and pink from the heat of the shower, but his face was pale, etched with a deep, bone-weary exhaustion and a fear so palpable it made Shane's heart ache, even through the suffocating fog of his own anger. He looked so broken, so defeated, and for a fleeting second, Shane's resolve faltered, a desperate, hopeful part of him wanting to believe there was an explanation, a reason this wasn't what it looked like. But then Ilya turned slightly to grab a pair of sweatpants from the dresser, and the dim light of the bedside lamp caught the mark on his neck. It was dark, an ugly, mottled bruise in the distinct, damning shape of a bite mark.

Shane went still, the air leaving his lungs in a silent, painful rush. The world narrowed to that one spot on Ilya's neck, a brand of betrayal that seared itself into his vision. Ilya saw the shift

in his eyes, the dawning, horrified understanding, and he froze, his own hand flying up to cover the mark, a pathetic, futile gesture.

"Shane," Ilya breathed out, the name a desperate plea. "Let me explain."

But the plea fell on deaf ears. A chilling calm descended over Shane, a stillness that was more terrifying than any outburst. He stood up from the bed, moving with a slow, deliberate grace that was utterly devoid of its usual warmth. He didn't look at Ilya, his gaze fixed somewhere on the far wall. He reached for his left hand, for the beautiful silver ring that Ilya had placed there in front of twenty thousand people, and with a quiet, horrifying click, he began to twist it off his finger. The movement was small, intimate, and it felt like a bone snapping. He placed the ring carefully on the dark wood of the dresser, the metal seeming to absorb all the light in the room. Then, without another word, he turned and walked out of the bedroom, leaving Ilya standing alone, naked and exposed in the middle of the room, the silence left behind screaming louder than any accusation could.

"Shane, listen! No, don't do this!" Ilya's voice cracked as he scrambled after him, forgetting the towel, which pooled on the floor behind him. He caught up to him in the hallway, grabbing his arm, a desperate, panicked grip.

"This is the exact reason I am always insecure," Shane said, his voice dangerously low, shaking with a suppressed fury. He didn't pull away, but he didn't look at Ilya either, his gaze fixed on the closed door to Elena's room. "For you to go get drunk and fuck with whatever omega or whatever fucker that smells like roses while you're on the road." He finally turned, his eyes blazing with a pain that cut deeper than any anger. "We have a daughter, Ilya. A fucking daughter. We can't just uproot her and separate now, but as of right now, we are not engaged." His words were like shards of glass, each one a precise, calculated wound. "I can't even stand to look at you."

Ilya was crying in earnest now, silent, hopeless tears streaming down his face, but he held on, unable to let go. He tried to explain, to find the words, but they were a tangled mess in his head. He broke in. He bit me. How did any of that sound like anything other than a pathetic excuse? He was a captain, a powerful man, and he had been violated in his own space.

He stood there, naked and trembling in the hallway. The silence that followed Shane's retreat was heavier. A suffocating vacuum that stole the very air from Ilya's lungs. He listened, straining to hear anything—a sob, a curse, the soft click of the lock on Elena's door—but there was nothing. Just the hum of the refrigerator and the frantic, pounding rhythm of his own heart, a trapped bird beating against the cage of his ribs. He looked down at the empty hallway, then back into the bedroom, at the small, silver circle glinting accusingly from the dresser. His world, which had been so perfectly, wonderfully whole just hours ago, was now a collection of shattered, irreconcilable pieces.

He finally retreated back into their bedroom, closing the door with a soft click that felt like a final admission of defeat. He pulled on the sweatpants he'd abandoned, the movements mechanical and slow. His gaze drifted to the bathroom, to the wet towel on the floor, a relic of a desperate attempt to wash away the un-washable. He had scrubbed his skin raw, trying to erase the memory of Sasha's mouth, the scent of roses, the feeling of violation. But the mark remained, a dark, ugly stain on his skin, and now, a matching one was on his heart. He sank

onto the edge of the bed, the spot where Shane had been sitting, the mattress still holding the faint impression of his body. The silence in the room was a living, breathing thing, a suffocating presence that pressed in on him from all sides.

The fight had been quiet, a muted, terrifying exchange of whispered accusations and desperate denials, a strange, unspoken agreement between them to shield their daughter from the storm. But the silence that followed was louder, more damning than any screaming match could ever be. Ilya curled into a ball on the bed, pulling the sheets up to his chin like a child hiding from a monster in the dark. The sobs he'd been holding back tore free from his chest, raw, raggedged, and utterly devoid of comfort.

He was alone. He had driven a wedge between himself and the two people who mattered most in the world, and he had no idea how to fix it. He could hear the faint, even sound of Elena's breathing through the baby monitor on the nightstand, a small, innocent sound that only served to amplify the crushing weight of his failure. He was a father, a fiancé, a captain, and in one night, he had managed to feel like a failure at all three.

His thoughts drifted, dark and insidious, to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. To the bottles of pills nestled inside. A quick, permanent solution. Maybe he could end it like his mother. Maybe he could just take a bottle of pills and be done. If he lost Shane and Elena, what was the fucking point? Surely Shane wouldn't stay if he thought Ilya cheated. He had more value for himself than that.

But the thought of Elena, of her growing up without her Papa, of Shane having to explain why her papa was gone, was a sick feeling. He couldn't do that to them. He wouldn't. He sat up, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, the decision made but the despair lingering. He sat like that for hours, his body aching with a grief so profound it felt physical.

March 21, 2017

He probably didn't fall asleep until 5 AM, the first hint of dawn beginning to creep into the room. He had to be up at 9 AM for morning lift by 11 AM. He wanted to try to talk to Shane before he left for work at 7 AM, but he slept through his alarms, the deep, dreamless sleep of the emotionally exhausted. He didn't get to see Shane or Elena before they left for the day. Fuck, he didn't even make it to the morning lift. It was 1 PM when he finally opened his eyes, the sun high in the sky. Coach LeClaire was going to be pissed.

Usually, the hospital for Shane a strange sense of calm. Today, it was a cage. He moved through the corridors with a brittle, mechanical efficiency, his smile for patients a fragile mask over the chasm of despair that had opened up inside him. Each ring of a phone, each page over the loudspeaker, was a fresh pain to his raw nerves. He was going through the motions, a ghost in his own life, the heavy absence of the ring on his finger a constant, throbbing reminder of the chasm that had opened up between him and Ilya. He approached the main desk to check his messages, needing a distraction, anything to quiet the screaming in his head.

"Shane, there you are," Dana said, her expression a mixture of professional calm and personal concern. "I was about to call you. You have a couple of visitors waiting."

Shane's gaze followed hers, and his stomach dropped. Leaning against the far wall, looking conspicuously out of place in their hoodies and jeans, were Troy Barrett and Cliff Marleau. What the fuck were they doing here? They looked like they'd been mainlining coffee, their faces pale and etched with a worry so profound it was almost tangible. They spotted him at the same moment, and in a heartbeat, they were closing the distance between them, their movements swift and purposeful, cutting through the afternoon bustle of the lobby.

"Shane, have you seen Ilya?" Troy blurted out, his voice low but urgent, completely bypassing any pretense of a casual greeting. "He missed morning lift. He's never missed a lift, not in five years. He's not answering our calls. We're freaking out."

A cold, bitter satisfaction, sharp and poisonous, coursed through Shane. He met their panicked gazes with a shrug that was meant to be dismissive but came off as brittle. "I don't know where he is," he said, the words clipped and cold. "And frankly, it's not my problem anymore. Why don't you go ask his friend? The one who smells like fucking roses." He turned back to the desk, dismissing them, but a strong hand clamped down on his arm, and he found himself being steered with surprising force toward an empty consult room, the door clicking shut behind them.

"Listen to me, you idiot," Troy snarled, his usual laid-back demeanor completely gone, replaced by a protective fury that made Shane's own anger seem small and petty. "Some fucking psycho—his ex, a guy named Sasha—broke into Ilya's hotel room last night. He scented all his clothes, Shane. And he fucking bit him. Ilya threw him out, but the guy was a mess, crying and terrified. We had to go buy concealer to cover the bite mark so the team wouldn't see it and fucking kill him. He was scared to death of you finding out, of you thinking exactly what you're thinking right now. We were with him half the night."

The image of Ilya, that proud, his partner in life, crying and afraid, was a spear to the heart. The cloying scent of roses wasn't a sign of a tryst; it was the mark of an invasion. The bite mark wasn't a hickey from a lover; it was a brand of violation. And the sunglasses, the hat, the open windows—they weren't the pathetic attempts of a cheater to hide a secret, but the desperate, terrified actions of a victim trying to scrub himself clean. A wave of nausea, hot and overwhelming, washed over Shane. He hadn't just jumped to a conclusion; he had sprinted towards it, trampling the trust he claimed to value so dearly.

"Fuck," he breathed out, the word a raw, agonized sound. He looked from Troy's grim face to Cliff's solemn nod, the truth of it settling in his gut like ice. He had taken off his ring. He had told Ilya they weren't engaged. He had accused him, in that quiet, cutting way, of cheating, while Ilya was probably reeling from an assault. He had left him alone in their house, drowning in a trauma Shane hadn't even bothered to ask about. Without another word, Shane shoved past them, ripping the door open and striding back to the front desk, a single-minded purpose driving him. Dana looked up, startled by the wild, desperate energy rolling off him. "I have to leave," he said, his voice cracking with an urgency that brooked no argument. "It's an emergency." Dana just nodded, her eyes wide, as he and Troy and Cliff barreled toward the exit.

The ride home was a silent, screaming hell. Cliff drove with a white-knuckled focus, weaving through traffic while Shane was a frantic storm in the passenger seat, his thumb repeatedly jabbing Ilya's name on his phone screen. Each ring was a new stab of agony, each unanswered call a confirmation of a worst-case scenario that was rapidly solidifying into reality in his mind. The call went to voicemail again, and Shane slammed his palm against the dashboard, the dull thud echoing the frantic, desperate pounding of his own heart. "He's not answering," he choked out, the words catching in his throat. "Fuck, he's not answering."

His mind kept replaying Troy's words, but they were now tangled with a much darker, more insidious fear. He knew about Ilya's mother, about the suffocating blackness of her depression, about the way it had finally, tragically, claimed her. He knew that same darkness lived in Ilya, a shadow he fought every single day. And what had Shane done? He had thrown him into that darkness, told him he wasn't enough, that their life, their daughter, wasn't enough to keep him. He had handed him the rope. A wave of self-loathing so profound it made him physically sick washed over him. He needed therapy, he needed to be locked in a room and forced to confront all of his own toxic bullshit, but right now, none of that mattered. He just needed to see Ilya, to hear his voice, to know he was okay.

Cliff skidded to a halt in the driveway, the tires crunching on the gravel. Shane was out of the car before the engine had even fully died, fumbling with his keys, his hands shaking so badly he could barely get the key into the lock. The door swung open, and the house was silent, a heavy, oppressive stillness that was wrong, all wrong. Yuna's car was gone, and he knew Elena was safe at daycare, which meant the silence was a void waiting to be filled by something terrible. "I'll take upstairs!" Troy yelled, already taking the stairs two at a time. "I've got the kitchen and living room!" Cliff called back, disappearing into the heart of the house. Shane sprinted down the hall toward their bedroom, a primal fear propelling him forward. As he got closer, he heard it. The faint, steady sound of the shower running. Hope, desperate and sharp, lanced through him.

Shane didn't hesitate. "Help me," he grunted at Troy and Cliff, who appeared at his side. On three, they threw their combined weight against the door. The lock splintered with a violent crack, the frame groaning as the door flew inward.

The bathroom was a steam-filled cocoon, the air thick enough to choke on. Through the fog, they could see the vague silhouette of a man in the shower, unmoving under the spray. But he was on the floor.

"Ilya!" Shane yelled, his voice hoarse as it hit the wall of steam. "Ilya, can you hear me?"

No response. Not a flinch. The figure remained utterly still. Shane's gaze darted to the sink counter and froze. Pill bottles. Dozens of them—antidepressants, sleeping pills, anti-anxiety medication—all of them scattered across the marble surface, their caps askew or completely off. The medicine cabinet stood wide open and empty.

"Fuck," Shane breathed, the air leaving his lungs in a rush. The possibility, the absolute terror of what Ilya might have done, seized him by the throat. He lunged for the shower, ripping open the glass door without a second thought and climbed in.

And there he was. Curled into a tight ball on the shower floor, knees drawn to his chest, Ilya was letting the scalding water pound down on him. His eyes were closed, face turned up to the spray as if in some sort of penance. He was so completely lost in himself that he didn't even register their violent entry.

But what made Shane's blood run cold was the sight of Ilya's clenched fist, pressed tight against his chest. In his grip was Shane's engagement ring, the diamond catching what little light managed to pierce the steam.

"Oh god," Shane whispered. He hadn't just abandoned Ilya after an assault. He'd abandoned him in the depths of despair, with a pharmacy's worth of pills at his disposal. "Ilya, please, look at me. Did you... did you take anything?" The question hung in the air, charged with a terror so profound it made the steam feel cold.

"Ilya, look at me," Shane's voice was a raw, desperate thing, strained near to breaking as he knelt on the wet tile, the scalding water soaking through his scrubs. He reached out, his hand trembling as it hovered over Ilya's shoulder. "Ilya, please. Did you take anything? Answer me. Did you take any of the pills?" Troy and Cliff stood in the shattered doorway, their faces pale masks of horror, the reality of the scene hitting them with the force of a physical blow.

Cliff was the first to shake off the shock, moving with a purpose that belied the fear in his eyes. "We need to get him out of here. The water's too hot." He reached in, twisting the shower knob off with a sharp click. The sudden cessation of the roaring spray was deafening, leaving only the sound of Ilya's ragged, shallow breaths and the frantic, pounding beat of Shane's own heart. "Shane, Troy, help me. Let's get him up."

Working together, they managed to maneuver Ilya's limp, unresponsive form from the floor of the shower. He was a dead weight, a puppet with its strings cut, and it took all three of them to lift him. They carried him from the steam-filled bathroom into the comparatively cool air of the bedroom, laying him gently on the bed. The shock of the temperature change, the shift from the oppressive heat to the cool breeze from the open window, seemed to finally jolt him back to consciousness. His eyelids fluttered, and a low, guttural sound escaped his lips, a sound that quickly built into a wracking, body-shaking sob. He was completely naked, utterly vulnerable, and he curled in on himself, a wave of fresh tears streaming down his face. Then, with a desperate, searching motion, he reached out and found Shane's arm, pulling him close, hugging him with a strength born of pure desperation, burying his face in the crook of Shane's neck, the fabric of his scrubs growing damp with Ilya's tears.

Shane's arms came around him automatically, holding him tight, but his mind was still racing, still stuck on the image of the pill bottles. "Ilya, listen to me," he whispered, his voice thick with a terror he couldn't contain. "Please, I need to know. Did you take anything? Any of the pills? We need to know. We have to call 911 if you did." He was practically vibrating with panic, the thought of losing Ilya to this, to his failure, a suffocating, all-consuming dread.

"No," Ilya's voice was a ragged whisper against the damp skin of Shane's neck, the single word vibrating with a profound, soul-deep weariness. "No, I didn't." He pulled back slightly, just enough to look Shane in the eye, his own swollen and red-rimmed, but holding a flicker of clarity that cut through the panic. "I couldn't. I thought about it. I sat there for so long, and all I could see was her face. Elena's. I couldn't do that to her, Shane. I couldn't do that to

you." He took a shaky breath, the admission costing him what little strength he had left. "I flushed them. All of them. Every last one down the toilet. I had to get them out of the house."

The words were a life raft in a storm-tossed sea. A wave of relief so potent it left Shane dizzy washed over him, his knees going weak as he finally, truly processed what Ilya was saying. He hadn't taken them. The temptation had been there, a gaping maw of despair, but Ilya had fought it, he had won. For their daughter. For him. He pulled Ilya back into a crushing embrace, burying his face in Ilya's wet hair, the clean, familiar scent of it chasing away the lingering phantom of roses. "Okay," Shane breathed, the word a prayer. "Okay. Thank you. Thank you for fighting." His own tears came then, silent and hot, tears of overwhelming gratitude and gut-wrenching guilt, a torrent of emotion he could no longer contain. He had failed Ilya, had let his own insecurities blind him to Ilya's pain, but Ilya, in the depths of his own personal hell, had still found the strength to hold on, to fight for the life they had built together.

From the doorway, Troy and Cliff watched the raw, painful reunion, a silent, unspoken understanding passing between them. "We'll, uh, we'll just be downstairs," Troy said quietly, his voice thick with emotion. "Making sandwiches for you two. He needs to eat." He gently closed the bedroom door, giving them the privacy they so desperately needed.

The crushing weight of Ilya in his arms was a penance, a welcome anchor in the storm of Shane's self-reproach. The sobs gradually subsided, replaced by a shuddering, exhausted stillness, but Shane didn't let go. He couldn't. He held him tighter, burying his face in the damp, clean strands of Ilya's hair, inhaling the scent that was purely, undeniably his, a scent he had been so terrified of losing forever. The silence in the room was no longer an accusation, but a shared, sacred space, heavy with the unspoken enormity of what had almost happened. "I'm so sorry, Ilya," Shane whispered, the childhood name a raw, desperate plea for forgiveness. "I am so, so sorry. I saw the mark, I smelled the roses, and I just... I broke. I let every insecure, toxic part of me take over, and I didn't even ask. I didn't even give you a chance. I just accused you. I took off my ring. I left you here alone after..." He choked on the words, the guilt a physical weight in his chest. "After you'd been hurt. I need to know. What Troy told me... about the hotel, about this Sasha... is it true? Tell me everything. Please."

Ilya pulled back slightly, his movements slow, heavy with a weariness that went bone-deep. He searched Shane's face, his own expression a mosaic of pain, fear, and a fragile, dawning hope. He looked smaller, broken in a way Shane had never seen, the arrogant armor of the captain completely stripped away, leaving only the vulnerable man beneath. He nodded, a barely perceptible movement that sent a fresh wave of nausea through Shane. "It's true," Ilya's voice was a hoarse whisper, raw from crying and the steam of the shower. "His name is Sasha. He... he's someone from my past. From Russia. He was there, in my room, when I got back from the game. He'd paid off someone at the desk. He was... he was touching my things, our things. He said he wanted to sleep with me" He shuddered, a full-body tremor that ran through him like an electric current. "I told him to get out. We fought. He bit me before I could get him out the door. He said it wasn't over."

Shane didn't speak. He couldn't. Words felt useless, cheap betrayals of the storm of emotions tearing through him. Instead, he acted. He leaned in, not with the desire of a lover, but with the fierce, protective intent of a guardian. He pressed a soft, reverent kiss to the dark, mottled

skin of Ilya's neck, right over the damning teeth marks. It was an act of erasure, a silent promise to replace the memory of violation with one of devotion. He then gently pushed a stray, damp lock of hair from Ilya's forehead, his touch impossibly gentle. "Let's get you warm," he murmured, his voice thick with an emotion that threatened to choke him. He rose from the bed, moving to the dresser, and pulled out a pair of worn, soft sweatpants and one of Shane's own oversized hoodies, the fabric imbued with the comforting scent of home. He helped Ilya dress, his movements slow and careful, as if handling something infinitely precious and dangerously breakable.

Once Ilya was clothed, a small shiver wracking his frame, Shane sank to his knees on the floor in front of him, taking Ilya's cold hands in his own. He looked up, meeting Ilya's gaze, and all the walls he'd ever built came crashing down. "I'm so sorry," he whispered, the name a caress, a prayer. "I failed you." He looked at Ilya's hand, at the small silver ring that was soaking wet. "You held onto this," he said, his voice cracking. "Even when you thought you'd lost me, even when you were in so much pain." He felt a fresh wave of tears burn at the back of his eyes. "Can I have it back? I need to put it back on. I was a fool. A scared, insecure fool. I promise you, I will get help. We will get help. Just... let me have it back."

Ilya's gaze followed Shane's to his hand, and a flicker of something—life, hope—returned to his eyes for the first time all day. He uncurled his fist, revealing the ring nestled in his palm, still warm from his skin.

Ilya didn't answer with words. He simply opened his palm, offering the ring, his eyes fixed on Shane's face. With a trembling hand, Shane took it, the cool, wet metal a stark and heavy promise in his grasp. But before he could slide it back on, Ilya's other hand shot out, gripping Shane's wrist with surprising strength. His eyes, though still swollen with grief, held a desperate, blazing intensity. "Promise me," he rasped, his voice a raw, broken whisper. "Promise me that no matter how bad things get, no matter how much I fuck up or how scared you are... you never, ever take this off again." He held Shane's gaze, pleading. "Seeing it off your hand... it broke something in me."

A choked, disbelieving laugh escaped Shane's lips, a harsh, wet sound that was more sob than mirth. It was the release of all the terror, all the guilt he'd been holding in a tight knot in his chest. "God, Ilya," he breathed, shaking his head. "It's a promise. I promise. I'm never taking it off again." He slid the ring onto his finger. A current of life, of hope, visibly surged back into Ilya. He sat up straighter, the rigid terror in his shoulders easing, a fragile smile finally touching the corners of his lips.

Shane climbed onto the bed, pulling Ilya into a fierce hug, burying his face in the soft hood of his own sweatshirt. "We need help," he said, the words muffled but clear. "Real help. For me, and for you. I think... I think we need to find a couples therapist. Someone who can help us with my insecurities and your depression and the fact that we are both so monumentally shitty at communicating." He pulled back, framing Ilya's face with his hands. "I almost lost you. We're not letting that happen again."

Ilya nodded, a tear slipping free to trace a path down his cheek, but this one was different, born of relief. "Okay," he whispered, leaning into Shane's touch. "Okay." He curled into Shane's embrace, tucking his head under Shane's chin, breathing in the familiar, reassuring

scent of him, a scent he had been terrified he would lose forever. The hood of Shane's sweatshirt was soft against his cheek, the fabric a barrier between him and the cold, hard world. He felt a gentle hand stroking his back, a rhythmic, soothing motion that coaxed the last of the shudders from his body.

"We need to go downstairs," Shane murmured after a few moments, his lips brushing against Ilya's hair. "Troy and Cliff are here. They need to know you're okay. They've been worried sick." The thought of facing anyone, even two of their closest friends, was daunting, but the protective steadiness in Shane's voice gave Ilya the strength he needed. He nodded, a small, hesitant motion against Shane's chest. "Okay," he agreed, his voice still rough, but no longer breaking. "Let's go." He knew he owed them a thank you, an explanation, an apology for putting them through hell. But he also knew he wouldn't have to face them alone. Shane would be right there by his side.

When they entered the kitchen, Troy and Cliff were at the counter, the sharp, clean scent of frying bacon filling the air. The sight of them, so solid and reliable, standing in their kitchen making food, was so normal, so profoundly comforting, that Ilya felt a fresh wave of emotion prick at his eyes. They looked up as they entered, their expressions a mixture of profound relief and lingering concern. "Hey," Cliff said, his voice gentle. "We, uh, made sandwiches. Thought you could both use some food."

They sat at the large oak table, the plate of BLTs placed in the center like a peace offering. Shane kept Ilya tucked into his side, their shoulders pressed together, his hand resting possessively on Ilya's thigh. For a while, they ate in silence, the only sounds the crunch of toast and the occasional scrape of a fork against a plate. The simple act of eating, of tasting the salty bacon and crisp lettuce, felt monumental to Ilya, a return to the physical world he'd nearly abandoned.

"You had us scared, you know," Troy finally said, breaking the quiet. He pushed his own half-eaten sandwich away, focusing his full attention on Ilya. "When you didn't answer and Shane told he hadn't heard from you... we were terrified. Just... talk to us, man. What can we do? Do we need to call someone? A lawyer? The police?"

Ilya took a slow breath, glancing at Shane, who gave him a small, encouraging nod. "He's from my past," Ilya began, his voice still a little rough but steady. "Someone who... doesn't understand boundaries. He's dangerous, but he's also pathetic. I think he's more of a threat to himself than to anyone else, but he said some stuff that didn't make any sense and I just don't want to think about him." He looked down at his plate, picking at a loose thread on the tablecloth. "And I don't want the police. Not yet. That would... it would turn into a media circus. I just need to figure out how to make him leave me alone. For good. I'm fine, I promise."

A quiet peace had settled over the kitchen as Ilya trusted his friends into the room, an intimacy broken only when the doorbell rang. Cliff turned from the table, a questioning look on his face, and jogged to the front door. Shane's arm tightened around Ilya as he listened to the muffled exchange from the hallway. Cliff opened the door, and a calm, pleasant voice drifted in.

"Hi, sorry to bother you. I'm looking for a friend of mine, Ilya Rozanov. I was told he lived here."

Cliff's reply was cautious. "Yeah, he does. Can I ask who's looking?"

"My name's Sasha."

Chapter 16: Love is war.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains references to physical assault, sexual assault, and expressions of wishing death upon another. Reader discretion is advised.

Sasha's name landed in the quiet kitchen like a lit stick of dynamite. The easy rhythm of chewing, the simple comfort of food, vanished. Ilya went completely still, the sandwich halfway to his lips, a statue carved from ice. His face, which had finally regained some color, went white as chalk. The warmth of Shane's body beside him suddenly felt like a thin shield against a coming blizzard.

Shane saw the change happen in real-time. One moment, Ilya was present, recovering. The next, he was a thousand miles away, trapped in a memory Shane couldn't see. The name hit him a second later, and a cold, black fury unlike anything he had ever known rose up in him, burning away the guilt and leaving only a pure, protective rage. "Troy, stay with him," he ordered, his voice a low growl, already pushing back from the table. "Don't let him out of your sight." He didn't wait for a reply, striding out of the kitchen and into the hall, a man on a mission.

In the hallway, Cliff was still trying to reason with the man at the door, but Sasha's eyes had already slid past him, trying to peer into the house. "Ah, there you are," Sasha said, a smug smile gracing his lips as he saw Shane approaching. "The possessive Canadian. Ilya always did have a type. Tell me, you're his good boy now?" The use of the Russian diminutive, "Ilyushka," was a deliberate, intimate poison. "Ilyushka," he called out, his voice singsong and mocking. "Your friend is being rude. Won't you come say hello?"

That was the breaking point. Shane didn't even pause to speak. He lunged for the tall coat closet by the door, flinging it open and grabbing the first thing that came to hand—Ilya's game stick, lean and hard from use. "Shane, no!" Cliff yelled, jumping to intercept him, but he was too late. Shane was past him in a flash, bringing the composite stick back and swinging it with all the force of a slap shot. The sharp crack echoed through the house as the shaft connected with Sasha's side, the stick splintering into two pieces. Sasha cried out, stumbling back against the doorframe, the smug look finally wiped from his face, replaced by shock and pain. Shane didn't hesitate, dropping the broken pieces and lunging forward, tackling him to the ground.

Shane's world narrowed to the feeling of his fist connecting with Sasha's face, a sickening, satisfying crunch that did nothing to quell the fire in his blood. He hit him again, and again, a raw, primal scream tearing from his throat. "You don't get to say his name! You don't get to come here! To our home!" Sasha was barely a person under him, just a target for all the fear, guilt, and rage that had been building for weeks. It was Troy and Cliff who finally pulled him

off, their combined strength barely enough to break through the red haze of Shane's fury. "Shane, stop! You're going to kill him!" Troy yelled, wrestling his arms back as Cliff wedged himself between the two men.

Sasha staggered to his feet, wiping a stream of blood from his split lip with the back of his hand. He looked a mess, but a terrifyingly calm, almost triumphant smirk was spreading across his battered face. "You see, Ilyusha?" he called out, his voice taunting, clear despite the blood. "This is what he is. An animal. You deserve better." He took a deliberate step back onto the porch, holding Shane's furious gaze. "This isn't over. I hope you enjoyed your honeymoon." Then he turned and walked calmly down the driveway, disappearing around the hedge as if he hadn't just been assaulted on their doorstep.

Cliff slammed the door and threw the deadbolt, the sound echoing the finality of the moment. He and Troy finally let go of Shane, who was breathing heavily, his knuckles split and bleeding. "He's gone," Cliff said, his own voice shaky with adrenaline. "He's gone." Shane turned back to the kitchen, his anger draining away to be replaced by a cold dread. He found Ilya exactly where Troy had left him, but the frozen stillness had shattered. Ilya was shaking violently, silent tears streaming down his face as he stared at the broken pieces of the hockey stick on the floor. The adrenaline crash had hit, and he was breaking apart.

Shane rushed to him, dropping to his knees and pulling Ilya into his arms. "It's okay," he murmured, holding him tight as the sobs finally broke free, wracking Ilya's body. "They're gone. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere." He rocked him gently, one hand stroking his hair, the other pressed firmly against his back.

He held Ilya until the tremors subsided, until the violent sobs softened into quiet, shuddering breaths. The broken stick lay on the floor like a fallen totem, a symbol of how completely their sanctuary had been violated. "How did he find us?" Ilya finally whispered, his voice muffled against Shane's shoulder.

April 15, 2017

A few weeks passed in a tense, fragile state of normalcy. The house was fortified, a new digital fortress of security cameras and motion sensors. They went to therapy. They talked. Slowly, painstakingly, they began to rebuild. Then the playoffs began, and the Boston Raiders were set to face the Montreal Metros. The series felt less like a competition and more like a countdown. Game One was on one of the rare nights that Shane had to work an overnight shift at the hospital but, of course, it was a home game for the Raiders. After tucking a sleepy Elena into bed at Yuna's, he found a spot in the hospital to watch the game with Robby. The game was a brutal, beautiful war. Ilya was a force of nature, playing with a ferocity that seemed to channel all his fear and anger onto the ice. When Boston won in a hard-fought overtime, a fierce, possessive pride swelled in Shane's chest

Meanwhile, after the game, Ilya was home alone. The quiet of the house a stark contrast to the violence he'd just left on the ice. He was on the phone with Cliff, absently stirring a pot of pasta sauce as they replayed the game's highlights. "We were fucking incredible out there,"

Cliff was saying, his voice buzzing with energy through the speaker. "That hit on Comeau? I thought you killed him." Ilya smiled faintly, the scent of garlic and tomatoes filling the air. Just then, the back door splintered open, the sound of wood cracking like a gunshot.

"What the—" Ilya's exclamation was cut short as the back door burst inward. Three large figures swarmed into the kitchen, their forms silhouetted against the night, but Ilya didn't need to see their faces to know who they were. The Metros crest on the chest of the man in front was enough. It was Gilbert Comeau, flanked by two other familiar, brutish-looking veterans from the Montreal team. The look on Comeau's face was pure, unadulterated malice. "Where is he, Rozanov?" Comeau snarled, advancing into the room. "Where's your boyfriend? We came to have a little chat with him about what he did to Sasha." They expected Shane. They came here to retaliate for the beating, expecting to find them both, but they had come on the one night Shane wasn't there.

But this wasn't just about Shane anymore. Comeau's eyes flickered to the family photo on the counter—Shane, Ilya, and Elena, grinning on Christmas Eve with Yuna. A cruel, predatory smile twisted his lips. "Or maybe we'll have a chat with someone else. Maybe the little girl? I see she's got a pretty smile." The words hung in the air, a poison dart aimed at Ilya's heart. He gripped the phone tighter, knuckles white. "Don't you even fucking think about her," he snarled, his voice barely a whisper. Comeau laughed, a harsh, grating sound. "Oh, I'm thinking about it. And I see your boyfriend's not here to save you this time."

Ilya dropped the phone, but it didn't disconnect. From miles away, Cliff heard the splintering crash of the door, followed by Comeau's words, and then a grunt of effort from Ilya. "He's not here!" Ilya shouted, backing away, putting the large kitchen island between himself and the invaders. "It's just me!" His mind raced, the adrenaline from the game surging back with a terrifying new purpose.

Cliff's blood turned to ice. "Roz? Roz, what's happening?" he yelled into the phone, but all he heard back was the sounds of a struggle—a grunt, a crash, a pained curse that wasn't Ilya's. He could hear Comeau yelling something about "Sasha." Without a second thought, Cliff disconnected and dialed 911, his hands shaking so badly he could barely swipe the screen. "There's a home invasion happening," he spat into the phone the second the operator answered. He gave the address, his voice raw with panic, then threw the phone down and grabbed his keys, sprinting for his truck. He was fifteen minutes away. It might as well be an hour.

As the first of the players lunged around the island, Ilya sidestepped, shoving him hard into the refrigerator. He'd spent a lifetime fighting on ice; he knew how to use his body. But it was three against one. Just as Comeau lunged for him, another figure exploded through the shattered doorway.

It was Hayden Pike. He looked wild-eyed and breathing hard, but there was no hesitation in his movements. "Get away from him!" Pike roared, throwing himself at the player who had a grip on Ilya's arm. Pike was a fighter, a pest, and he threw himself into the brawl with a reckless abandon that took the Metros players by surprise. He managed to land a solid punch, dislodging the man from Ilya, and for a moment, it was a chaotic melee of four men in the small kitchen. Ilya, using the precious seconds Pike had bought him, grabbed a cast-iron

skillet from the stove, its weight familiar and comforting in his hand. He swung it in a wide arc, catching the third player, who was trying to circle around Pike, square in the jaw

. The man went down with a yell. But Comeau was still on his feet, his face a mask of fury. Seeing his teammates incapacitated, he lunged not at Ilya, but at Pike, catching him off guard. There was a sickening thud as Comeau's elbow connected with Pike's temple. Pike crumpled, his head cracking against the corner of the granite table near the kitchen before he slid limply to the floor. "Pike!" Ilya screamed, a raw, horrified sound. Pike was down, unmoving. The two players Pike had taken down were already getting back up, their anger now fueled by embarrassment.

Before Ilya could even think to run, Comeau was on him like a predator sensing final kill. Ilya tried to swing the skillet again, but his arm was caught in a crushing grip, the iron clattering to the floor. "Not so tough without your boyfriend, are you?" Comeau sneered, his face inches from Ilya's. Then he drove his fist into Ilya's stomach with such brutal force that Ilya felt something tear inside. The air whooshed out of Ilya's lungs in a painful gasp as he collapsed inward. But Comeau wasn't finished. He grabbed Ilya by the hair, yanking his head back to expose his throat, and delivered not a punch but a vicious, downward elbow strike to Ilya's temple. The impact was sickening, a wet, percussive crack that echoed in the small kitchen. Ilya's neck snapped at an unnatural angle, and white-hot agony exploded behind his eyes before everything went black. His body went limp, a puppet with its strings cut, and he crumpled to the floor like a sack of wet cement. The back of his head slammed against the floor with a sound that made even Comeau's remaining teammate flinch. A thin trickle of blood seeped from Ilya's ear, dark against the pale tile. Comeau stood over him, breathing heavily, a terrifying calm settling over his features as he looked down at the still figure at his feet. The last thing Ilya registered before the darkness swallowed him whole was the sound of his own name being called, distant and distorted, as if from underwater, a desperate plea from a world he was rapidly leaving behind.

He didn't know how much time had passed when consciousness returned, a slow, agonizing trickle. His head throbbed with a deep, rhythmic pain, each beat of his heart sending a fresh wave of agony through his skull. Something warm and sticky was matting the hair on the side of his head. He tried to open his eyes, but only one would cooperate, the other swollen shut. The kitchen was a wreck of shattered wood and overturned furniture. The back door hung off its hinges. He was alone. Pike was laying in a pool of his own blood just a few feet away. The intruders were gone. With a groan, he pushed himself up, his body screaming in protest. He had to get out. He had to find Shane. He stumbled toward the front door, his vision blurring, the world tilting dangerously. Just as his fingers brushed the deadbolt, the front door burst open. Ilya flinched back, raising his hands to protect himself, a strangled cry caught in his throat. But it wasn't another attacker. It was Cliff, his face pale and streaked with tears of rage and fear, his eyes wide with horror as he took in the sight of Ilya, battered and bleeding, standing in the wreckage of their home. "Roz," Cliff whispered, his voice breaking as he rushed forward, catching Ilya just as his legs finally gave out completely.

"Shane," Ilya mumbled, the name a slurred, desperate prayer against the fabric of Cliff's jacket. "Need... Shane." The words were all he could manage before a fresh wave of dizziness sent him spiraling back toward the darkness.

"We'll get him," Cliff said, his voice a low, steady anchor in the storm. He carefully lowered Ilya to the floor, propping him against the wall, his movements economical and precise. "Just hang on, okay? The ambulance is on its way. Don't you dare pass out on me." He was already on his phone again, his fingers flying, but he wasn't calling Shane. Not yet. He was calling Yuna Hollander, who was now the agent of Cliff Marleau, his voice tight but controlled, explaining with brutal efficiency what had happened and that she needed to keep Elena with her, no matter what. He was making a firewall around their daughter, protecting her from this.

The distant wail of sirens grew steadily louder, a piercing, discordant symphony that echoed the frantic pounding in Cliff's head. Within minutes, two paramedics were rushing through the door with a gurney and medical bags. "We've got another one in the other room!" Cliff yelled, pointing toward the kitchen. "Hayden Pike. He's unconscious." They split up, one pair moving with practiced urgency toward the kitchen where Pike lay, while the other knelt beside Ilya, their gentle questions and prodding hands a stark contrast to the violence that had just occurred. Ilya winced as a penlight was shone in his good eye, his answers short and confused. They fitted him with a cervical collar as a precaution, the stiff plastic a foreign, humiliating pressure against his bruised neck.

Miles away, the overnight shift was finally winding down. The hospital was quieting, the chaos settling into the rhythmic hum of a place catching its breath. Shane scrubbed his hands at a sink, the warm water a welcome comfort, watching the last of the soap suds circle the drain. He was exhausted, bone-deep, but looking forward to going home, to crawling into bed with Ilya, to celebrating his hard-won Game 1 victory in the quiet of their own sanctuary. He'd grab a coffee on the way, something sweet to surprise Ilya with. He was thinking about the smug look on Comeau's face after the final buzzer after ESPN panned to it, about the way Ilya had skated circles around him, when the automatic doors at the end of the hall slid open, a flash of red and white lights strobing across the ceiling.

The automatic doors slid open, and the cool pre-dawn air hit Shane's face as he stepped outside, pulling his phone from his pocket to order a ride. The familiar, distant wail of sirens grew closer, but he barely registered it, his mind already on the coffee he'd grab for Ilya and the warmth of their bed. Two ambulances pulled up to the emergency entrance, their lights painting the pre-dawn sky in strobing flashes. He moved to the side, ready to head to the parking lot, when a familiar figure stepped out of the back of the first ambulance. Cliff Marleau.

Shane's blood ran cold. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. He started toward the ambulance, but before he could reach Cliff, paramedics were unloading a gurney from the back. And on it, strapped to a board with a cervical collar, was Ilya. His face was a swollen, bruised mess, one eye completely shut, a stark white bandage wrapped around his head. Shane's mind went blank, his legs moving without thought as he rushed forward. "Ilya!" he choked out, his voice cracking. "What happened? Is he—"

"Shane, get back!" Cliff yelled, grabbing his arm as the paramedics pushed forward, their movements urgent and efficient. "They need to get him inside. Let them work." The medical team closed ranks, physically moving both Shane and Cliff aside as they rushed Ilya through the automatic doors and into the hospital. Shane tried to follow, but Cliff held him back, his grip iron-tight. "Wait, Shane. Just wait."

But Shane's attention had already shifted to the second ambulance. Another gurney was being unloaded, and as the paramedics pulled it clear, Shane's breath caught in his throat. It was Hayden Pike, unconscious and bleeding, his head bandaged in a way that suggested a serious injury. Confusion warred with panic in Shane's mind. Pike? What the hell was Pike doing there? He turned to Cliff, his mouth opening to demand an explanation, but the words died before they could form. Because in that moment, the nurse in him took over. He saw the way Pike's head was angled, the shallow rise and fall of his chest, the paramedic's frantic motions. "I need to help," Shane said, his voice suddenly steady, professional. He moved without another word, his exhaustion forgotten as he began assisting the paramedic with Pike's airway, his hands moving with practiced precision. He needed to do something, anything, that wasn't standing helplessly by while Ilya was being wheeled away into the unknown.

The emergency room became a controlled vortex of chaos. Even though Shane's did not specialize in trauma or neurosurgery, the overnight shift was understaffed, and a nurse was a nurse. He found himself pulled into the orbit of Hayden Pike's gurney, his hands moving on autopilot, helping to stabilize the hockey player's head and neck as the trauma team descended. Through the glass partition of the adjacent bay, he could see a flurry of activity around Ilya. He forced himself to focus on Pike's vitals, on the rhythm of the monitors, but every fiber of his being was strained toward the other room. He managed one quick, stolen glance. Ilya was thrashing, a raw, guttural sound of agony cutting through the beeps and commands. But he was breathing. Shane clung to that single fact like a lifeline.

He was starting to find a clinical rhythm, a way to compartmentalize the horror, when a voice, sharp and clear, cut through the controlled pandemonium from the next room. "He's got severe bleeding from the rectum."

Time stopped.

The words hit Shane. A sledgehammer to the chest. His hands, which had been deftly assisting with Pike's intubation, froze mid-air. Pike. Hayden Pike, his former captain, a man who needed him in this moment. But the world had shrunk to that statement.

What did they do to Ilya? What did they fucking do? The ER dissolved, replaced by a waking nightmare. He imagined Ilya, in their home, their kitchen, being violated in the most brutal way imaginable. He saw a flash of Elena's smiling face.

Oh, my God. Elena. What if they had come another night? What if she had been there?

The cold dread of that thought finally broke him free from his paralysis. He stumbled back from Pike's gurney, ignoring another nurse's questioning look. He fumbled for his phone, his fingers shaking so badly it took three tries to dial his mother. Yuna answered on the first ring, her voice already full of concern. "Shane. Cliff called. We have her. She's safe. She's asleep. She doesn't know anything. You just focus on Ilya. Focus on him, baby." Her words were a raft in a stormy sea, a temporary anchor against the tidal wave of terror.

He mumbled a thanks and slowly hung up, the phone feeling like a lead weight in his hand. The sterile, clinical sounds of the emergency room rushed back in, a cacophony of beeps and urgent commands. A firm, familiar pressure landed on his shoulder. He turned, his movements sluggish, and found himself looking into the worried eyes of Dana. Without a

word, she pulled him into a fierce embrace, her strength a temporary shield against the world. One of the ER nurses must have called her. Dana held him for a long moment before pulling back, her hands on his arms, her gaze direct and unwavering. She was the bearer of news, the gatekeeper to the truth. He knew, with a certainty that chilled him to the bone, that he would be able to see the whole story in her face. "Go sit," she said, her voice soft but firm, gesturing to the waiting area just outside the trauma bays. "I'm going to go in. I'll be right back."

Shane nodded. He sank into one of the hard plastic chairs, his gaze fixed on the swinging doors through which she had disappeared. He watched her through the small window in the door. She paused beside Ilya's gurney, raising a hand to her face for a brief, private moment of composure before she stepped into the fray, immediately taking charge. The muffled sounds of Ilya's raw, pain-filled screams filtered through the doors, a sound that would haunt Shane for the rest of his life. Then, the screaming stopped, replaced by the rhythmic beeping of machines, as they finally sedated him. Dana emerged a few minutes later, her expression a carefully constructed mask of professional calm, but Shane could see the exhaustion and fury in the lines around her eyes. She sat down next to him, close enough that their knees almost touched.

"Ilya is alive, Shane, and he's stable," she began, her voice level, giving him the most important fact first. "He has several broken ribs, a fractured eye socket, and a busted eardrum. There are second-degree burns on his thighs—it looks like they heated something and pressed it against him." She paused, steeling herself, and Shane felt the bottom drop out of his world. "And Shane... the evidence is consistent with a severe sexual assault."

The words ricocheted around the inside of Shane's skull, a horrifying, deafening echo that drowned out everything else. He felt lost, adrift in a sea of unanswered questions that churned with a black, nauseating tide. Why was Ilya with Hayden Pike? Why had two professional hockey players been brought into his ER, broken and bleeding, from his own home? Why had Cliff been there, riding in the ambulance with Ilya like a desperate next of kin?

He pushed himself out of the chair, his body moving on instinct, driven by a raw, primal need for answers. His gaze landed on Cliff, who was standing just down the hall, talking to two police officers in hushed, urgent tones. Their presence was a confirmation that this wasn't just an accident. This was a crime scene. Shane walked toward them, each step feeling heavy. He didn't bother with greetings or preliminaries. He reached out, his fingers closing around Cliff's bicep with a grip that was born of pure fury and desperation. "Cliff," he said, his voice a low, dangerous tremor. "What the fuck happened?"

Cliff flinched at Shane's touch, at the raw, bleeding anguish in his eyes. He looked from Shane to the cops, a clear conflict on his face. He hesitated, the words caught in his throat, clearly struggling with how to explain the impossible. "I... I don't know everything, Shane," he started, his own voice rough with exhaustion and something that sounded dangerously close to guilt. "I wasn't there until the end. I heard it over the phone." He took a shaky breath, running a hand through his already messy hair. "Roz was cooking dinner. He was on the phone with me, talking about the game. And then I heard the back door splinter. I heard yelling."

Cliff's gaze drifted, his focus turning inward as he replayed the memory. "I heard Comeau's voice. They were looking for you, Shane. They were pissed about Sasha. But Roz told them he was alone. Then... then Comeau said something about Elena." The name hung in the air. "I heard a fight start. Roz shouting. And then another voice burst in. It was Pike. He yelled at them to get away from Roz. He was trying to help him. Then I hung up and called 911 then got in my truck."

He couldn't finish. Shane saw the rest of it in Cliff's eyes—the impotent rage, the gut-wrenching helplessness of hearing a friend get beaten through a phone. The pieces clicked together with horrifying clarity. They'd come to hurt Shane, but finding Ilya alone, vulnerable, was a different kind of prize. And Pike, for reasons Shane couldn't yet comprehend, had somehow intervened. "They were there because of me," Shane whispered.

The police were still talking, their questions meaningless static against the roaring in Shane's ears. He tuned them out, his entire being narrowing to a single, burning point that pulsed in time with the frantic beeping of the monitors down the hall. His gaze drifted past Cliff, locking onto the trauma bays. A nurse, her face a mask of grim concentration, wheeled a bag of dark blood toward Ilya's room. The sight was horrible. Just weeks ago, when Sasha had the audacity to show up at their door, Shane had felt a flash of murderous rage so pure it terrified him. It was a hot, sharp thing, an omega's protective fury. But this... this was something else entirely.

This wasn't rage. This was a cold, calculated promise of oblivion. For what they had done to Ilya. For Comeau, for Sasha, for whoever the fuck else laid a hand on him. A hell of Shane's own making was coming for them, and he would be its architect. Kicked out of the league for the crime of his own biology, he now felt a fire coursing through him, fierce and untamed, hotter and more lethal than any alpha he had ever faced on the ice. Well, almost all of them. Ilya was the exception. Ilya was the bravest, the strongest, the most ferociously protective alpha he had ever known. And they had broken him. They had come into his home. They had touched Ilya. The thought wasn't a thought anymore; it was a vow, seared into his soul. This wasn't just revenge. This was war.

Two days later, the world returned in a agonizing, pixelated rush of pain. It was a thick, suffocating blanket of it, starting from a deep, throbbing ache behind one swollen eye and radiating through his entire torso with every shallow breath he managed to take. There was a sharp, stabbing fire in his side and a dull, persistent roar in one ear. A groan escaped his lips, dry and cracked. The lights were too bright, but one of them had a familiar shape, a familiar head of dark hair bent over him. Shane. The sight was a balm that momentarily soothed the raw edges of his consciousness. The first coherent thought, the only one that could cut through the fog of agony, was a name. "Elena," he rasped, his voice a fragile whisper. "Is she...?"

"She's fine, Ilya. She's safe," Shane's voice was rough, choked, and Ilya realized then that his face was wet with tears. "She's with my mom." The sight of Shane crying, of his strong partner shattered, sent a fresh wave of distress through Ilya, eclipsing even the physical pain. He tried to reach out, to comfort him, but a sharp, blinding pain in his shoulder stopped him

with a hiss. "Hey, no, don't move," Shane soothed, instantly leaning in, trying to gently press him back against the pillows. "Easy, Ilya. Just take it easy."

But Ilya was more concerned with the storm he saw in Shane's eyes than with the hurricane raging in his own body. He ignored the fire in his ribs, focusing on the raw grief and fury warring for dominance on Shane's face. "Moya lyubov'," Ilya murmured, the Russian endearment a soft, weak puff of air. "Don't cry. I'm here." The effort sent a cough racking through him, and white-hot agony flared in his chest, stealing his breath. He squeezed his eyes shut, riding out the wave, and when he opened them again, Shane's tears had stopped, replaced by that terrifying, cold fire. He was happy, yes, impossibly, overwhelmingly relieved to see Ilya awake and coherent. But underneath it all was a reservoir of anger so deep and vast it was terrifying to behold.

"You have a few broken ribs," Shane said, his voice now deceptively calm, the clinical tone a flimsy shield.

"They're going to heal, but you have to be still," Shane continued, his gaze fixed on Ilya's face, cataloging every wince and flicker of pain. "Your eye socket is fractured, but the swelling should go down. They had to put a tube in your ear to relieve the pressure from a busted eardrum. Your shoulder is dislocated and you have a hairline fracture, so that's in a sling." He paused, taking a slow, steadying breath, the clinical mask slipping for a fraction of a second to reveal the agony beneath. "The burns on your thighs... they're second-degree, but they're clean. No infection."

He stopped then, the words catching in his throat. This was the part he couldn't say, the violation that was not a bone to be set or a wound to be stitched, but a deep, festering wound on the soul. He saw the question in Ilya's one good eye, the unspoken "what else?" that hung in the sterile air between them. "Pike and Cliff saved you, you know," Shane said abruptly, changing the subject with a jarring lack of grace. "Pike. He's a couple of rooms down. He has a traumatic brain injury, a broken shoulder... he's in bad shape, but he's going to make it."

He let the words hang there, a story of bravery and sacrifice, but he was really just filling the space, avoiding the one truth that felt like it would burn them both to ashes. Ilya just watched him, his breathing shallow, his one good eye missing nothing. He could see the rage in the rigid set of Shane's jaw, in the way his hands were fisted at his sides, the knuckles white. He could feel it, a cold, palpable thing that was more terrifying than any physical pain. It was the quiet promise of a storm, and Ilya knew, with a certainty that chilled him to the bone, that this was far from over.

Shane's throat felt coated with glass. He couldn't say the words. To voice it would be to make it real, to breathe life into the monstrous violation that was already trying to poison Ilya's recovery from within. He was a nurse, he dealt with trauma and bodily functions every day, but this was different. This was the defilement of the man he loved, the father of his child, the very foundation of his world. He needed Ilya to rest, to heal, to not have to carry this particular horror while he was so fragile. He needed to take him home. An instinct, primal and fierce, clawed at him—the need to wrap Ilya in their own sheets, to tend to him in their own kitchen, to have their daughter's laughter be the medicine that knit him back together. Maybe they'd just disappear. Sell the house, leave the country. Go somewhere warm and

anonymous for the summer. But that was a fantasy. A warm daydream that did nothing to extinguish the ice-cold fire that burned in the pit of his stomach. There were two bodies that needed to be put in the ground before there could be any healing, any escape.

He forced a breath, pushed the murderous thoughts down, and met Ilya's gaze. "The police will want to talk to you, when you're up for it," he said, his voice strained but gentle. "They're trying to track down Comeau and the others. I just... I need to know, Ilya. What happened after they broke in?" He needed the story. He needed the facts to build the scaffold for his revenge, but he also needed to know what Ilya remembered, to understand the landscape of this new, horrific trauma.

Ilya's gaze drifted for a moment, his focus inward as he sifted through the shattered pieces of the memory. "The door," he began, his voice a dry rasp. "It just... exploded. Comeau. Two others. They were looking for you. They were angry about what you did to Sasha." He paused, wincing as a fresh wave of pain lanced through his side. "I told them you weren't there. Then... then he said something about Elena. And I just... saw red. I grabbed a pan. I was fighting them." He looked at Shane, his one good eye filled with a desperate, pleading clarity. "And then Pike was there. I don't know where he came from, but he came in fighting. He yelled at them to get away from me. It was weird. I thought he hated you and me. They hit him, and he went down... and that's all I remember. I think I hit my head."

Ilya's gaze, even clouded by pain and medication, sharpened with the familiar focus of an athlete calculating the angles of a game. "The playoffs," he said, the words strained. "They can't... they're not stopping the series, are they?" The idea of a season, a grueling campaign of blood and sacrifice, being derailed by something so sordid and personal was a fresh kind of violation.

Shane let out a short, bitter laugh that held no humor. "Roger Crowell? Pausing the playoffs for something like this? Not a chance." He ran a hand through his hair, the gesture laced with frustration. "The league is treating it like a non-event. No official statement. The media is going wild, but the league is silent. Comeau and two of their rookies, Matthews and Pitta, they've all gone missing. Haven't been seen since that night. It's bizarre. Why would three guys throw away their careers, their lives, for... this?"

"They're not the ones in charge," Ilya rasped, a flicker of old, weary understanding in his eyes. "They're just the muscle. This has Sasha's stink all over it." He shifted, wincing as the movement pulled at his injuries. "You have to understand, Shane. Sasha is filthy rich. Not just hockey player rich. His father is a near-billionaire. Sasha probably has Comeau and the others squirreled away somewhere, a private house in the middle of nowhere, while he hides from the police himself. He can buy people. He can buy anything he wants."

He took a shallow breath, the effort visible. "And what he wants... he always gets. Or he destroys whatever gets in his way. This isn't just about me, not anymore. It's about you. You beat him. You, an omega, beat him at our door. You embarrassed him. To him, that's a debt that can only be paid in blood. He wanted me, and you were the hurdle he couldn't get over. So he decided to burn the whole thing down."

A low groan escaped Ilya's lips as the effort of speaking sent a fresh wave of fire through his broken ribs. "Shane," he started, but Shane was already shaking his head, leaning forward to

gently press him back against the pillows. "Don't try to talk anymore," he urged, his voice soft but firm. "You need to rest. Let your body heal." The clinical tone was back, a thin veneer over the churning emotions beneath. Ilya's eyelids fluttered, the exhaustion finally pulling him under.

At that moment, the door to the private room swung open quietly. Troy Barrett stepped inside, a large bouquet of vibrant, slightly out-of-place flowers in his arms. He took in the scene—Shane hovering over a battered Ilya, the sterile smell of the hospital, the heavy weight of unspoken violence in the air. "Hey," Troy said softly, his gaze settling on Ilya before moving to Shane. "Brought you some... uh... flowers" But as he looked more closely at Shane, a strange expression crossed his face. He could smell it. A wild, sharp scent, metallic and coppery, like the taste of blood. It was a scent of pure, unrestrained intent, so potent it was almost a physical presence in the room. He knew instantly, with a predator's instinct, that Shane was on the verge of doing something monumentally stupid. He decided against commenting on it. Now wasn't the time. "I'll check on you later," he said, setting the flowers on a side table. "Get some rest, Roz."

Shane stood up, his movements stiff and deliberate. "I'm going to head home for a bit," he announced, the words sounding hollow even to his own ears. "Check on Elena. Make sure everything's okay with my mom." It was a plausible excuse, a necessary lie. He needed to get out of this sterile box, away from the constant reminders of Ilya's pain. He needed to move. Ilya's breathing was even, his eyes closed, but as Shane left the room, Troy looked down at Ilya from the bedside. "Troy," Ilya murmured, his eyes cracked open just enough to pin their other teammate with a look of desperate urgency. "Follow him. Don't let him out of your sight. He's going to hurt someone, and I can't stop him."

The next few days blurred into a monotonous, tense surveillance operation. Troy became a ghost in Shane's life, trailing him at a distance through the corridors of the hospital, the quiet suburban streets of Ilya and Yuna's home, and the lonely, empty shell of the home he shared with Ilya. He watched as Shane sat by Ilya's bedside, his face a mask of placid concern, but the coppery, blood-like scent never truly dissipated. Troy knew what Shane was doing—he was looking. He was calling old contacts, tapping into a network of people from a life he'd tried to leave behind. He was hunting for a ghost. Troy figured it was a doomed quest. Sasha, with his billionaire father's resources, was likely halfway across the globe, probably back in Russia, laughing at them all. Comeau and the rookies were surely stashed in some forgotten corner of the country, far from prying eyes. By the fifth day, Troy was almost ready to give up, to convince Shane that this path led nowhere but to more destruction.

Then, on a gray Tuesday morning, Shane didn't go to the hospital. He drove straight to Logan Airport, and Troy followed, a familiar knot of dread tightening in his gut. He watched from a distance as Shane parked in the long-term lot, his movements purposeful, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. "Fuck," Troy muttered to himself as he watched Shane disappear into the terminal. "Now I have to go through TSA." He pulled his hat down lower and joined the queue, keeping several people between them. He tracked Shane through the security checkpoint, wincing as he saw Shane's jaw clench when an agent gave him a friendly pat-down. He was heading for Terminal C. Troy's confusion mounted with every step. *What the fuck was he doing? Leaving Ilya? Leaving Elena? For what?* Then he saw it—a massive,

illuminated departure board. His eyes scanned the list of cities and flight numbers until they landed on one line, stark and clear. In twenty minutes, boarding would begin for Aeroflot Flight 92. Non-stop service to Moscow.

"Oh, fuck no," Troy breathed, the words a quiet curse against the backdrop of rolling suitcases and garbled airport announcements. He couldn't let this happen. He watched Shane find an isolated seat by the large window, a stark silhouette against the gray tarmac. Boarding hadn't been called yet. There was still time. Troy walked over, his footsteps sure, and sat down heavily in the chair beside him. Shane didn't look up, just continued to stare out at the planes, but the line of his jaw was rigid. "Shane, you can't do this," Troy said, keeping his voice low and steady. "They need you. Ilya and Elena need you right now. Not next week. Not when you're done. They need you here."

Shane finally turned, his eyes hollowed out, the coppery scent of rage now mingled with something sour, like despair. "How did you find me?" he asked, his voice flat.

"That's not important," Troy shot back. "What's important is that you can't get on that plane. You know you can't." He leaned in closer, his tone dropping to a near-whisper. "Shane, you're gay. Openly gay. The laws there... you'd be a target before you even cleared customs. If Sasha's people don't get to you, the public will. You'd be walking into a meat grinder."

The words seemed to crack something open inside Shane. He started to shake, a fine tremor that ran through his entire body. He looked away from Troy, his gaze unfocused, lost in a horrific vision only he could see. "Every night when I close my eyes," he began, his voice choked, "I see them. I see putting a bullet right between Sasha's eyes. I see Comeau bleeding out on a dirty floor. I imagine all the ways I can make them pay for what they did to him. I want them dead, Troy." Shane confessed. But then the shaking stopped, replaced by a profound, bone-deep weariness. He looked back at Troy, and for the first time, the hardened assassin's facade crumbled, revealing the terrified man beneath. "But I know," he whispered, a tear finally escaping and tracing a path down his cheek. "I know it's a horrible idea. I know. I want them dead... but I want my family more."

"Then let's go home, Shane," Troy said, his voice gentler now, the hard edges of urgency softening into something like understanding. He put a firm but steady hand on Shane's shoulder. "Let's get you back to them." The confession stayed in the air between them. Troy felt a surge of protectiveness so fierce it almost startled him, followed by a sharp pang of professional jealousy. He wanted to kill Ilya a little, for knowing Shane this well, for having the kind of hold that could pull a man back from the brink of a suicidal quest for vengeance. Fuck. Troy didn't blame him for wanting to go, not for a second. He understood the cold, precise calculus of it—the way Shane must have mapped out districts in Moscow in his mind, the way he'd planned the execution with the cold detachment of a surgeon. It was a dark, seductive logic. But not now. Maybe not ever. This had to be handled the right way.

With a shuddering breath, Shane finally nodded, the fight draining out of him. He was hollow, the rage temporarily extinguished, leaving only the aching emptiness. Troy didn't hesitate. He stood, pulling Shane up with him. "Come on," he said, steering him away from the boarding gate. "We're going home." He bypassed the ticket counters, guiding a compliant Shane back through the terminal and out into the cool air.

The ride to the hospital was silent, Troy's knuckles white on the steering wheel, Shane a statue of quiet devastation in the passenger seat. When they arrived, Troy walked him straight to Ilya's room. Ilya was awake, propped up slightly against the pillows. His one good eye, bruised and swollen, locked onto Shane's, and in that gaze, Troy saw no surprise, only a profound, weary relief. He'd known Shane would come back. He'd always known.

Chapter 17: What doesn't kill you.

April 20, 2017

The next day, the door swung inward with a soft hiss. Dr. Rose Parker entered, her white coat a stark slash against the hospital's muted palette. Two younger doctors followed, their presence creating a subtle current in the sterile air. Dr. Parker moved with an economy of motion that belied the weight of what she carried.

The chair scraped against linoleum as she pulled it closer to Ilya's bed. Her gaze didn't immediately meet his, instead drifting to where his hands lay clenched in the rough hospital blanket, knuckles white.

"Ilya," she began, her voice low and measured. "We have your preliminary results back."

Ilya's breath caught, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird. He stared at the ceiling tiles, counting their perforations.

Dr. Parker leaned forward slightly. "There's no easy way to say this." She paused, her fingers tightening around a pen in her coat pocket. "The examination revealed evidence of repeated blunt force trauma to your rectal area."

Ilya's vision swam. The ceiling tiles blurred into a meaningless pattern. He could feel his pulse in his throat.

"We believe," she continued, her voice unwavering, "that an object was forcibly inserted multiple times. Based on trace evidence, the shape and dimensions suggest it was likely the handle of a cast-iron pan."

Ilya's stomach dropped. The pan—he remembered the searing heat against his thighs, but this—this was a violation of a different order entirely. The curved handle took on a new, monstrous purpose in his mind.

"This isn't uncommon in these types of assaults," Dr. Parker added, her tone shifting subtly to something softer. "Perpetrators often use objects at hand. There was no biological evidence of sexual contact, if that provides any small comfort."

Ilya blinked, a single tear escaping and tracing a path down his temple. Part of him—the rational part—grasped at that small mercy, but the shame still burned, hot and absolute.

Dr. Parker's voice continued, "We've begun a protocol to prevent infection and promote healing. You'll need specialized care, both physical and psychological. The tissue will take time to recover—several weeks before any anal activity would be advisable, and even then, only with medical clearance."

Ilya's throat constricted, a desert of unspoken words. He swallowed, the action painful. "Can I... can I get Shane?" The words scraped their way out, raw and broken.

Dr. Parker nodded, her expression unreadable but not unkind. "Of course. I'll have him paged." She stood, the chair scraping again as she pushed it back. "Ilya, what happened to you—it wasn't your fault. The healing process will take time, but you're not alone in this."

As she reached the door, Ilya found his voice again, though it was barely a whisper. "Will it... will I ever feel normal again?"

Dr. Parker paused, her hand on the doorknob. "Normal looks different for everyone after trauma. But with proper care and support, many survivors find a new normal—one that includes healing and even joy. It's a journey, not a destination." She gave him a small, encouraging nod before exiting, leaving the door slightly ajar.

The room settled back into silence, but something had shifted. The weight on Ilya's chest remained, but it felt... manageable now. He stared at the ceiling again, but this time, he wasn't counting tiles. He was just breathing, in and out, waiting for Shane.

Shane was on the floor above, picking up a shift in the pediatric ward, needing the distraction, the purposeful rhythm of work to keep the darkness at bay. When the nurse found him, he took the stairs two at a time, bursting into the room, his heart a frantic drum against his ribs. "Ilya? What's wrong? Are you okay?" But Ilya couldn't form the words. A dam broke inside him, and a raw, wet sob tore from his chest as he reached for Shane with his one good arm. "Hold me," he choked out. This was a new side of Ilya that Shane hadn't yet seen. He'd seen him anxious and scared, furious and happy, sassy, sexy, and possessive. But this utterly broken version was uncharted territory. Yet, as he gathered Ilya carefully into his arms, a fierce, protective love swelled in his chest.

He felt the tremors wracking Ilya's frame, the damp heat of tears soaking into the shoulder of his scrubs. Shane just held on while rocking them both gently. He knew what this was about. He'd seen the preliminary report, had signed off on the evidence collection, had carried that particular horror in a locked box in the back of his mind since the night Ilya was admitted. Now that box had been pried open, and the poison was flooding Ilya's system. He let him cry, offering no platitudes, just the solid, unwavering presence of his own body. After a long moment, he felt Ilya's breathing begin to even out, the sobs receding into ragged hiccups. Shane pulled back just enough to see his face, his thumbs gently wiping the tears from Ilya's bruised cheeks. "What triggered everything?" he asked softly. Ilya's gaze was fixed on a point somewhere over Shane's shoulder, unable to meet his eyes.

"The doctors," he whispered, the words scraping out. "They told me. About... what they did to me." His face crumpled again, a fresh wave of humiliation washing over him. "While I was out. I just... I feel so powerless, Shane." He finally looked at Shane, his one good eye swimming in a pool of anguish. "How can I protect you, protect Elena, if I can't even protect myself?"

Shane's heart ached, a fierce, protective anger warring with a profound sadness. "Hey, look at me," he said, tilting Ilya's chin up. "This was not your fault. You're the strongest man I know. You fought them off, you protected our home until you couldn't. That's not failure." He kissed Ilya's forehead, a feather-light touch. "We're going to get through this. All of it. One day at a time. Right now, the only goal is healing you. We've cleared every other hurdle life has thrown at us, and we'll clear this one too." But even as he said the words, Shane's mind was

already working, a cold, calculating part of him filing away this new pain, this new violation, adding it to the list of reasons Sasha had to pay. His plan was already in motion.

April 21-22, 2017

On day eight of Ilya being in the hospital, it was the sound of their daughter crying herself to sleep, asking for her Papa, that finally broke him. On the morning of the ninth day, Shane made an executive decision. Papa was seeing his baby today, whether he was ready or not.

Ilya grumbled from the bed when discussing it before, trying to hide the flicker of anticipation in his eyes. "What if my face scares her?" The fear was real, a raw nerve exposed by trauma. "She's your daughter. She won't see a monster. She'll see her Papa."

Thirty minutes later after Shane made the decision for Ilya without him knowing, Shane opened the door, and Yuna stood there with Elena's small hand clasped in hers. The second Elena saw her Papa, she let out a joyful squeal and bolted, her little legs carrying her across the room faster than Shane could intercept. "Papa!" Ilya melted the instant her small body hit the bed. He carefully wrapped one arm around her, burying his face in her hair, and a deep, shuddering sob shook his entire frame.

"Moya princessa," he wept, the words thick with a love so overwhelming it bordered on pain. Shane rushed to the bedside, not to stop her, but to gently brace Ilya's back, to steady him as the force of his daughter's pure, unjudging love washed over him. In that moment, watching Ilya's tear-streaked face pressed against their daughter's bright hair, Shane felt something fractured inside of them all begin to knit back together.

Yuna rushed to Ilya's other side, her own eyes shining. "Oh, my baby," she murmured, her hand hovering over Ilya's back. "Are you feeling okay? I'm so sorry I wasn't here before." Ilya stiffened, unused to such direct concern from a parental figure. Yuna didn't hesitate; she laid her hand gently on the part of his chest not covered by Elena. "Oh, God, thank you, Jesus," she breathed, tears streaming down her face. "I can feel your heart. I prayed so hard for it to just keep beating. We just got you, Ilya. You can't leave us."

Ilya was gobsmacked, staring at her. "You... you care about me that much?" That earned him a light, almost playful flick to the ear.

"Of course I do, you stupid boy," Yuna said, her voice thick with emotion but her tone leaving no room for doubt. "I told you that you were getting a family." She leaned in and kissed his matted blonde curls again and again, a flurry of affection. "Eto materinskaya lyubov," she whispered, the Russian words sounding surprisingly natural on her tongue.

Ilya's tear-streaked face froze. He blinked, processing the sound of his native language in this most unexpected of places. "Yuna?" he rasped. "When did you... you speak Russian?" A slow grin, genuine and unburdened for the first time in days, began to spread across his bruised face, stretching the skin until it pulled at the stitches.

Yuna looked sheepish for a half-second before her usual confidence returned. "I've been learning it for you, dummy. So has Shane."

"Mom!" Shane groaned from the foot of the bed, pinching the bridge of his nose, but he was failing to hide his own smile.

The admission hit Ilya like a lightning strike of pure joy. He pushed himself up a little, his eyes wide with disbelief and delight as they locked onto Shane. "Shane!?" he demanded, his voice cracking with laughter and tears. "You're learning Russian?! What do you know? Tell me something!" The energy in the room had shifted entirely, the heavy pall of trauma momentarily lifted by this incredible, ridiculous revelation.

Shane walked to the side of the bed, a warm, affectionate look in his eyes. He leaned down, his lips close to Ilya's ear, and spoke with a careful, practiced accent. "Mne pora na rabotu. YA tebya lyublyu."

Ilya's reaction was immediate and dramatic; he threw his head back against the pillows with a theatrical groan of pure bliss. "What else do you know, Shane? No, don't go to work! Stay with me. Shane, come back!" he called out, but Shane was already backing toward the door, laughing. "I'll be back to check on you hourly," he promised. "And if you're very good, I'll bring McDonald's on my lunch break. Now, catch up with your daughter and our mom." Ilya was elated, but a wave of longing washed over him. He desperately wished it was the four of them curled up on their own couch, a movie playing, instead of in this room.

Before Shane disappeared through the doorway, he paused, turning back to the bed. He moved to Ilya's side and leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to his uninjured cheek. Then, he brought his lips even closer, his breath warm against Ilya's ear as he whispered, "Yesli vy ne zametili, na mne vash lyubimyy delovoy kostyum.." He pulled back with a smirk, gesturing to the seafoam green FIGS scrubs he was wearing. Ilya's eyes widened. They were the exact scrubs he'd bought Shane months ago, teasing him relentlessly about how the color would make his ass look phenomenal. A slow, knowing grin spread across Ilya's face. As Shane walked out, Ilya let out a low, appreciative whistle.

Shane murmured, rolling his eyes as he saw Dana stride purposefully down the hall. "Have fun with that."

Dana swept into the room like a force of nature, her energy immediately filling the space Shane had just vacated. "Rozanov! You don't have to cat-call me to get me to visit," she announced, her tone a perfect blend of sarcasm and genuine affection. Ilya let out a laugh that was a bit too heavy, a fresh ache blooming in his ribs, but he didn't care.

Dana introduced herself to Yuna, and the two women, finding a kindred spirit in their shared fierce loyalty, immediately fell into an easy, animated conversation about Raiders hockey. Ilya settled back against the pillows, Elena now perched beside him with her Squish Mallow, and watched SpongeBob on the small hospital TV. If it wasn't for the dull throb in his side and the sterile scent of the room, it could almost be a perfect day.

Then, it got better. Shane reappeared, a wide, genuine grin lighting up his face. He stood aside, and a small boy with dark, spiky hair and a constellation of freckles across his nose peeked into the room. "You have another visitor who wanted to say hi," Shane said, his voice filled with a warmth that made Ilya's heart swell. It was Robby. The kid was just as Shane had described to his mother—precocious and impossibly cute, with an earnestness that

reminded Ilya of a much younger Shane. Robby's eyes, wide and full of concern, immediately found Ilya in the bed. He walked right past Dana, his small frame full of purpose, and stopped before Yuna.

Robby bypassed Yuna's outstretched hand and instead, with a solemn gravity that belied his years, gently took her fingers and bowed his head, kissing the back of her hand. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Hollander," he said, his voice clear and confident. Yuna let out a surprised, delighted laugh. Then Robby turned to Elena, who was watching him with her father's intense curiosity. He presented her with a small, shrink-wrapped coloring book and a pack of crayons from the hospital gift shop. "And this is for Ms. Elena," he announced. Elena, channeling her papa's fearlessness, hopped off the bed with a grunt from Ilya and immediately declared, "I love it!" before carting her prize to the small table and starting to color.

Finally, Robby turned to Ilya. The boy's brave facade crumbled, and he looked at the big, broken man in the bed, his own eyes welling with unshed tears. "Oh, Robby," Ilya said, his own throat tight. "Come sit with me. Give me a hug, little man." Robby scrambled carefully onto the edge of the bed, burrowing into Ilya's one-sided embrace.

"I thought you were dead, Roz," he whispered into Ilya's shoulder. "You can't die before me." The raw, childlike honesty of the statement shattered something inside Ilya, and he held the boy tighter, a silent promise passing between them. He knew the experimental treatments were working; Shane's updates had been cautiously optimistic. "How about neither of us die, hmm?" Ilya murmured against Robby's hair. "And when I'm back on the ice, I can take you skating, da?" Robby pulled back, his tear-streaked face breaking into a wide, hopeful grin.

Yuna watched the interaction, a soft, knowing smile on her lips. Her gaze shifted to Shane, who was leaning against the doorframe, glowing with a fierce paternal pride. She pieced it together with an effortless intuition—the way Shane looked at Ilya, the way he looked at Robby, the quiet determination in his eyes. Oh, she thought, a warmth spreading through her chest. *Ilya and Shane are about to have another baby at home. She tucked the realization away, a precious secret to be kept for now.*

Shane pushed himself off the doorframe, his expression turning serious as he met Ilya's gaze. He spoke again, the Russian flowing from his tongue with a surprising fluidity that made Ilya's heart do a strange flip. "On dolzhen byl vstretit'sya s priyemnymi roditelyami segodnya, no oni otmenili vstrechu dva dnya nazad i tak i ne svyazalis' s agentstvom. Po krayney mere, tak skazal sotsial'nyy rabotnik." The words, though foreign, carried a clear, heavy meaning. Ilya's brow furrowed as he translated, the initial joy at Shane's linguistic skill immediately soured by the content. His meeting with potential adoptive parents for Robby had been cancelled. They hadn't even called the agency back. A hot, protective anger surged through him, and he shot a sharp, questioning look at Shane, who was already giving him a small, reassuring shake of the head.

"We can talk about it later. Okay?" Shane said softly, switching back to English. "Let's get you better first." But Ilya, never one to wait, especially when it came to protecting someone he considered his own, jumped the gun. He turned to Robby, who was looking at them with wide, curious eyes. "Robby," Ilya said, his voice suddenly bright and full of warmth. "How

would you feel about being one of my best men at the wedding? We'll get you a good tux and we can party the night away. What do you think?"

Shane's heart felt like it was going to combust right there in the sterile hospital room. He watched as Robby's face lit up with a pure, unadulterated joy. Dana gasped softly beside him, and Yuna put a hand to her chest, her eyes wide with wonder. They were all staring, transfixed by the scene—by how this big, gruff Russian hockey player had become so beautifully, unapologetically soft, all because of Shane Hollander. In that moment, surrounded by the chaotic, overlapping love of their makeshift pack, they weren't just a team. They were a family.

Robby's response was immediate, a supernova of pure, unadulterated delight that eclipsed every shadow in the room. He threw his head back and laughed, a sound so full of genuine joy it seemed to make the sterile walls of the hospital vibrate. "Really? Me? A best man?" He scrambled closer to Ilya, his small hands clutching at the hospital blanket as if to anchor himself to this wonderful new reality. "Do I get to wear a super cool tux? And a tie? I can tie a tie, Shane showed me how!"

Shane watched from the doorway, his heart a swollen, aching thing in his chest. The sight of Ilya, bruised and broken but beaming with paternal pride, holding the boy who was becoming so central to both their lives, was a picture he knew he would carry with him forever. "You'll be the handsomest best man there, buddy," Shane confirmed, his voice thick with emotion. "Better looking than me, even." That earned him a playful glare from Ilya, who was trying to look stern but failing miserably. Dana sniffled dramatically, fanning her face, while Yuna just smiled, her knowing gaze drifting from the boys on the bed to her own son, a silent acknowledgment of the beautiful, sprawling family they were all becoming.

April 23, 2017

On day ten, Ilya and Shane decide to pay a visit across the hospital. Ilya, moving slowly but under his own power, gripped Shane's hand, their fingers intertwined. They were heading to the neuro-ICU, a place of hushed monitors and hushed voices, to see the man whose unlikely intervention had saved Ilya's life. The sight that met them in Hayden Pike's room was a stark reminder of the violence. Pike was still, unnervingly so, a web of tubes and wires tethering him to the machines that breathed for him. His head was bandaged, one side of his face a swollen, mottled canvas of purple and yellow. The rhythmic beep of the heart monitor was the only sound, a steady, artificial pulse in the quiet room. A woman sat by the bed, her posture rigid with a fatigue that went deeper than sleep. She looked up as they entered, her eyes, red-rimmed and shadowed, held a flicker of recognition as they landed on Ilya, then widened slightly as they shifted to Shane. She was Jackie Pike, and in her face, Shane could see the ghost of the vibrant woman he'd once glimpsed at charity events, now hollowed out by worry.

Jackie Pike pushed herself to her feet, the motion stiff and weary. Her gaze flickered between the giant, bruised Russian at her husband's bedside and the man she hadn't talked to in nearly six years, the man whose career her husband had helped derail. Shane felt a jolt, a visceral memory of that locker room, of the cold disgust in Hayden Pike's eyes. But now, looking at

Jackie, he saw only exhaustion and a fragile, desperate hope. She smoothed her clothes, a nervous tic, and then took a hesitant step forward. "You're Ilya Rozanov," she said, her voice raspy. Her eyes then fixed on Shane. "And Shane Hollander. Thank you for coming." The words were formal, but the gratitude was real, cutting through the tension like a shard of light.

Shane could only nod, his throat tight. He felt Ilya's hand squeeze his, a silent whimper in the sea of conflicting emotions. "How is he?" Ilya asked, his voice a low rumble. "They said he woke up?"

"For a few minutes," Jackie confirmed, her gaze drifting back to her husband's still form. "He was confused. But he... he told me what happened. What he saw." She took a shaky breath, and the composure she was clinging to seemed to crumble. A single tear escaped, tracing a path down her cheek. "I'm sorry," she whispered, swiping at it impatiently. "I just... can I... is it okay if I hug you both? It's stupid, I know, after everything with Hayden and Shane, but... you're the reason my husband is alive. The reason he still has a chance." She looked at them with such raw, pleading vulnerability that Shane felt a knot loosen in his chest he hadn't even realized was there.

Before Shane could formulate a response, Ilya stepped forward, opening his one good arm. Jackie practically collapsed against him, a shuddering sob racking her frame. Ilya held her with a surprising gentleness, patting her back awkwardly. Over her shoulder, he caught Shane's eye, a silent question in his gaze. Shane felt a wave of something he couldn't name—gratitude, pity, and still, a simmering residue of old anger. He stepped closer and hesitantly wrapped his arms around them both, enveloping both the woman and Ilya in a clumsy, three-way embrace. He could feel Jackie's tears dampening his shirt.

After a long moment, Jackie pulled back, her face a blotchy mess of grief and relief. She gestured shakily to the pair of guest chairs against the wall. "Please, sit." She sank back into her own chair, the movement boneless. For a moment, she just stared at her husband, the machines breathing for him, her hands twisting a crumpled tissue. Then she turned to them, her expression raw and unguarded. "I need to explain," she began, her voice trembling. "Why he did what he did. What he did to you, Shane. And why he was in your house."

Shane stiffened, the old wound flaring fresh. He wanted to tell her it didn't matter, that apologies were useless now. But he held his tongue, compelled by the sheer agony in her eyes. He reached for Ilya's hand again, grounding himself in the familiar, calloused warmth. "Two years after... that day in the locker room," Jackie continued, her focus on a distant point on the wall, "my little brother, Kaden, was assaulted. He was a freshman at UBC, playing basketball. He'd just presented as an omega." Her breath hitched. "Hayden and Kaden... they were inseparable. Two peas in a pod, like you said. They did everything together. They talked every single day." She paused, the memory too painful. "The attack... it was brutal. He never woke up. He died three days later."

The room was silent except for the rhythmic beep of the monitor and the low hum of ventilator. The revelation knocking the air from Shane's lungs. His righteous anger, carefully cultivated for years, suddenly felt thin and hollow. Jackie's tears fell freely now, and she made no attempt to wipe them away.

"The case is still active," she said, her voice hardening with bitterness. "The police know it was the captain and a few of his friends, but they can't prove it. There was a cover-up. After Kaden died, Hayden was a ghost. He finally broke down and told me everything. What he'd said to you, how he'd thrown you out of that locker room. He said he'd spent two years hating himself for it, but after Kaden... it was something else entirely. It was a sickness he saw in himself, in the league, a problem he'd been a part of. He told me he'd spend the rest of his life making it up to you, in whatever small way he could." She finally looked directly at Shane, her gaze pleading for understanding. "He's been in therapy. He started a foundation with some of his own money, an anonymous support network for young omega athletes who feel they have nowhere to turn. He never wanted you to know." Her gaze drifted back to the bed, to the still figure of her husband.

"When he woke up two days ago, the first thing he did, once the nurses let him, was tell me everything. He said Comeau was in the locker room, talking to some of the other guys. Saying how they were going to 'teach you a lesson.' Sasha told them the plan was to put you in a coma."

The beep of the heart monitor seemed to slow, each pulse a leaden weight. Put you in a coma. The casual cruelty of it made Shane's stomach turn. He wasn't the target; he was just collateral damage in a war Ilya hadn't even known he was fighting. And then the full weight of Jackie's confession crashed down on him. The assault on her brother. The shame that had driven Hayden to this path of quiet atonement. It didn't erase the past, didn't take back the years of struggle and loneliness, but it cast it in a new, tragic light. It was a twisted, agonizing redemption arc, and Hayden Pike had nearly died trying to close the loop he had helped open. Shane looked at Ilya, whose face was a mask of grim understanding, the anger in his own eyes replaced by a deep, weary sorrow. They had been fighting the same monster, just on different battlefields.

Shane had carried for six years, a familiar companion that had fueled so much of his drive, now felt like a borrowed coat that no longer fit, scratchy and ill-suited to the man he was today. He looked over at Ilya, who had gently guided a still-shuddering Jackie into her seat, his large hand resting comfortingly on her shoulder. Seeing Ilya offer comfort to the wife of the man who had once been his rival's tormentor... it was a profound, quiet act of grace. It made something inside Shane ache.

With a deep, steadying breath, Shane pushed himself to his feet. The few steps to Hayden's bedside felt like the longest he'd ever taken. He stood over the still form, the machines a constant, mechanical chorus of life-support. He could see the faint pulse in Hayden's neck, a fragile thrum against the bandages. All the old hurts, the career-altering betrayal, the shame and isolation—it all receded, replaced by a single, overwhelming image: Ilya, covered in blood, whispering Hayden's name as the one who had helped. Slowly, deliberately, Shane reached out. His fingers brushed against the back of Hayden's hand, the skin cool and still. He wrapped his own hand around it, a firm grip.

"Hey, Pike," Shane began, his voice barely a whisper, rough with an emotion he couldn't name. "I don't know if you can hear me. But... thank you. Thank you for protecting Ilya. For being there when I... when I couldn't be." He swallowed hard, the lump in his throat a painful obstruction. "What you did... it means everything. You saved my life, too." He stood there,

holding the other man's hand, the steady beep of the monitor a counterpoint to the wild thrumming of his own heart. He was pouring all the conflicting, warring feelings—gratitude, sorrow, a lingering echo of pain, and a dawning, complicated respect—into that simple contact.

He was so lost in the quiet intensity of the moment that he almost missed it. A single, perfect tear welled in the corner of Hayden's closed eye, tracing a slow, clean path through the dried blood on his temple.

Shane froze, his breath catching in his throat as that single tear traced a path through the grime and dried blood on Hayden's temple. He wasn't imagining it. He watched, mesmerized, as Hayden's eyelids, previously sealed in unconsciousness, began to flutter. It was a slow, Herculean effort, but they finally cracked open, revealing hazy, unfocused pupils that struggled to find their bearings. The room's gentle hum seemed to fall away, the only sound Shane could hear was the frantic rush of blood in his own ears. Then, Hayden's lips, dry and cracked, parted, and a gravelly whisper emerged, thin as smoke but clear as a bell in the silent room. "No problem... buddy."

"Hayd!" Jackie's shriek was a thing of pure, shattered silence breaking. She was on her feet in a blur of motion, her chair scraping harshly against the linoleum as she lunged for the bed, her hands flying to her husband's face as if to convince herself he was truly there. Her earlier composure evaporated, replaced by a raw, overwhelming tide of relief and disbelief. "Oh, God, Hayd, you're awake. You're really awake." Her tears came in a fresh torrent, raining down onto the sterile white pillowcase.

Shane stood frozen, Hayden's hand still clasped in his, the words "no problem buddy" echoing in the sudden, chaotic stillness of the room. He was aware of Ilya rising slowly from his chair, the big Russian's face a mask of profound shock. This was not the stoic, guilt-ridden hero from Jackie's story. This was the cocky, infuriating captain from Shane's past, the man who had thrown him out of the locker room, now awake and thanking him as if they were old teammates sharing a handshake after a win. It was surreal, a collision of past and present so jarring it left Shane breathless, caught between the ghost of the man who had nearly destroyed him and the man who had just saved the love of his life.

Hayden's gaze drifted from Shane's shocked face to Jackie's tear-streaked one, a flicker of confusion in his clouded eyes. He tried to push himself up, a reflexive action from a lifetime of getting back on his feet, but the effort was too much; he sank back against the pillows with a ragged gasp. "The twins," he rasped, his panic overriding the fog of pain medication. "And Arthur... are the kids okay?" His words were slurred, but the paternal urgency was unmistakable, a raw thread of fear in his weakened voice.

"They're with my parents, Hayd, they're fine," Jackie soothed, gently stroking his hair back from his bandaged forehead. "They're safe and they have no idea what happened. They just think Mommy and Daddy are on a trip." A visible wave of relief washed over Hayden's features, the tension in his shoulders easing fractionally. The life-or-death concerns of a father briefly eclipsed all else. Through it all, Shane hadn't moved, his grip on Hayden's hand a silent, unbreakable link, a living connection between past and present. Ilya watched from across the room, a small, knowing smile gracing his bruised lips. He was seeing the real

Hayden Pike—not the caricature of an enemy he'd built up in his mind, but a flawed, complicated man who loved his family as fiercely as Ilya loved his own.

Hayden's breathing evened out slightly, the immediate panic for his children assuaged. His hazy eyes then slid past Jackie and locked onto Ilya's towering frame by the wall. He stared for a long moment, as if piecing together a puzzle in his damaged mind. "Rozanov," he said, the name a gravelly accusation. "Are you okay?"

A genuine, wide smile stretched across Ilya's face, pulling at the stitches on his cheek but he didn't seem to care. He pushed himself off the wall and took a step closer, a predatory glint returning to his eyes for the first time since the attack. "I'm good, Pike," he rumbled, the familiar hockey trash-talk a welcome return to normalcy. "But I will be a lot better when both of us are out of this hospital. So I can be mean to you on the ice again." The threat was delivered with a warmth that only someone who had stared down death with you could understand.

Ilya's threat hung caused a wheezing laugh that immediately devolved into a pained grimace. "Looking forward to it, Rozanov," he rasped, a spark of the old captain's fire returning to his eyes. Jackie let out a watery chuckle, her relief so palpable it seemed to lighten the entire room. Even Shane felt a genuine smile tug at his lips, the absurdity of the situation cutting through the tension. They were injured men, one in a hospital bed and one barely standing, threatening each other over a future game of hockey while the specter of a real-world violence loomed over them all. It was perfectly, beautifully insane.

"We'll let you rest," Shane said, finally releasing Hayden's hand but patting it once more. "Get better, Pike. We'll come back by tomorrow." It was the closest he could come to forgiveness in that moment, an acknowledgment of a rivalry that had, in its own twisted way, forged them both. As they turned to leave, Ilya gave Jackie a firm, supportive nod. "He will be okay," Ilya said, not as a question, but as a statement of fact. "He is too stubborn to die." Jackie managed a real smile through her tears, a flicker of the vibrant woman she'd been before this nightmare began.

The heavy door to Hayden's room clicked shut behind them, muffling the rhythmic beeping and plunging them back into the hospital's quiet hum. They walked side-by-side down the long, sterile corridor, their footsteps a slow, synchronized rhythm on the linoleum. The silence between them was heavy, filled with the echoes of everything they had just learned. After a moment, Shane broke it, his voice low. "Did you hear what Jackie said? About Comeau... that Sasha told them the plan was to put me in a coma?"

The question landed like a stone in Ilya's gut. He could feel the tension instantly coil back into his shoulders, the fragile peace of the last few moments fracturing. He gave a short, sharp nod, not trusting himself to speak. He stared at the scuffed floors, the fluorescent lights overhead feeling harsh and clinical. He stopped walking, turning to face Shane, his expression a mixture of fear and ferocious determination. "I'll never let that happen, Shane," he said, his voice raw and certain.

Shane's gaze held Ilya's, the blue of his eyes dark and turbulent like the sea before a storm. He saw the fear warring with the defiant promise in Ilya's expression, and it mirrored the

conflict within himself. "I know, lyubov," Shane said, his own voice strained but firm. "I know you wouldn't." He reached out, his fingers ghosting over the bandage on Ilya's cheek before resting on the nape of his neck, pulling him closer until their foreheads touched. "But it's not just on you. We're not going to live scared, Ilya. I won't allow it." The words were a vow, spoken in the sacred space between them, a buffer against the darkness that wanted to seep in.

They stood there for a long moment, a silent island in the middle of the bustling hospital corridor, their shared breath a shield against the world. Then Ilya pulled back, his posture straightening, the warrior re-emerging from the wounded man. "You are right," he affirmed, a steely resolve hardening his features. "We are not afraid. Da." He took Shane's hand, lacing their fingers together, the simple, grounding act a promise of their united front. As they began to walk again, the tension in Ilya's shoulders receded, replaced by a grim certainty. He had spoken the truth. They would not live in fear.

Unseen by Ilya, a flicker of something cold and calculating crossed Shane's face. His promise was true, but it was also a shield for a different truth. He had no intention of simply waiting; he was already working in the background.

FLASHBACK: April 18, 2017

Just a few days ago, the world had been a different kind of hell. Troy had been his shadow, a well-meaning but suffocating presence. "Shane, man, you need to sit down," Troy had pleaded as Shane paced the hospital corridors, a caged animal searching for an escape he couldn't name. "You haven't eaten anything." But Shane just shook his head, his mind racing, his heart a frantic drum against his ribs. He'd slipped away, dodged into a stairwell, and let instinct guide him out a side door and into the cool night air. He didn't think, just drove, the city lights blurring through the tear tracks on his cheeks until he found himself parked on Kent Street, staring up at the familiar brick facade of Sveta's building.

He knocked, and when Sveta opened the door, her cheerful "Shane! What a surprise!" died on her lips at the sight of him. He must have been a ghost, a hollowed-out shell of a man, because she simply pulled him inside without a word. The warmth of her apartment, the smell of her son's leftover pizza, the soft glow of a lamp in the corner—it all felt like a different planet.

"Shane? What happened? Are you okay?" she asked, her voice laced with concern as she guided him to the couch.

He broke then, a silent, violent collapse of sobs that shook his entire frame. "Ilya... someone... attacked him," he managed to gasp out, the story spilling from him in broken, disjointed pieces.

Sveta listened, her face growing paler and harder with each word, her initial shock curdling into a cold, terrifying fury. The moment he finished, she was moving.

"Stay here," she commanded, her voice like steel. She snatched her phone from the counter, her fingers flying across the screen before she pressed it to her ear and began pacing her

small living room. The Russian that poured from her was a torrent of sharp, clipped commands and raw, guttural anger.

"Da, eto ya," she began, her voice low and urgent. "Vy slyshali, chto sluchilos' s Il'yey Rozanovym? Syn diplomata, Sergeyevich, eto on i sdela." Shane, huddled on her couch, understood enough to feel a chill snake down his spine. He heard "Sasha" followed by "syn diplomata." Then came a phrase that made his blood run cold: "Yemu nuzhno zaplatit'." *He needs to pay.*

"Yes, that Shane Hollander." Shane flinched at hearing his own name, the details of the attack being relayed with such brutal clarity to an unknown party on the other end of the line. He was too exhausted, too shattered to correct her, to explain that some of these details weren't meant to be shared.

She was on the phone for over twenty minutes, her pacing relentless. "Naydi yego, Papa. Naydi etogo Sasha." When she finally hung up, the silence that crashed down was deafening. She turned to him, her chest heaving, her eyes still burning. "I am sorry," she said, though she didn't look it.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, her breathing evening out as she reined in her fury. "That was a reaction out of anger." She sank onto the couch beside him, the cushions dipping with her weight. "My father is police. My brother is police. Both in Moscow."

Shane stared at her, dumbfounded. "Your father... and brother?"

"Da," she confirmed, a faint, sad smile touching her lips. "They continued to be fans of Ilya even after he came out as bisexual and for having a family with a man by the name of Shane Hollander." She looked away for a moment, as if seeing a different room, a different time. "My father... he is also a fan of you. For the season you played for the Metros."

Shane couldn't help it; a weak, disbelieving laugh escaped him. "You're kidding me."

"No," Sveta insisted, her gaze returning to him, her eyes shining with a warmth that disarmed him completely. "My father would take me and my brother to local high school games where the one and only Ilya Rozanov played and grew up. Imagine my surprise when he was in my apartment complex months ago."

"Imagine my surprise," Sveta said, her words eased the storm of Shane's grief, "when the boy my father used to point at on the rink, the one with the impossible shot and the scowl that could freeze water, ended up being my neighbor." She let out a soft, humorless laugh. "My brother, Dmitri, he had Ilya's poster on his wall for years. He called him 'The General.' He was not happy when Ilya signed with the Raiders and left Russia."

The image was so absurd, so far removed from the sterile nightmare of the hospital, that it cut through some of the fog in Shane's mind. The Ilya she described wasn't the international superstar or the fearsome captain; he was a local kid, a prodigy, a source of hometown pride for a family of cops in Moscow. "They know about me?" Shane asked, his voice barely a whisper. "About us?"

"Of course," Sveta said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "My father, he reads all the North American sports sites. He knows the scores, the trades. He was so proud of your season in Montreal. He said you played with 'an old soul's intelligence.' And when he found out about you and Ilya... he said he was happy for Ilya." She reached out and placed a hand over Shane's, her touch warm and firm. "Shane, you and Ilya, you are not some scandal to them."

"Which is why," Sveta continued, her voice dropping again, losing its softness and regaining that edge of cold resolve, "my father will find this Sasha. And my brother will help him."

Chapter 18: You can never hurt me (us) again

April 25, 2017

Two days later, the early morning light seeped through the partially closed blind, casting long, shadows across the linoleum floor. The air was thick with the scents of the hospital. It was the complete opposite of home, of Ilya's scent, and Shane felt it in his bones. Ilya stood slowly beside the bed, each movement a cautious, measured calculation. Beneath the soft cotton of his shirt, the white bandages wrapping his ribs were a stark reminder. The violent bruising on his cheekbone had begun to fade into a sallow mosaic of yellow and purple, but the thin, pink lines of stitches across his cheek and eyebrow were still stark. The fatigue was palpable in the careful way he held himself, a constant battle against his own body's pain.

Shane was a flurry of focused, quiet energy. He helped Ilya pull a worn hoodie over his head, guiding the fabric carefully so it wouldn't catch on the stitches or pull at the bandaged ribs. One hand stayed pressed firmly to the small of Ilya's back as he took a hesitant step, a silent offer of support. His eyes never left Ilya, watching for the slightest flinch, the subtle tightening of a jaw that signaled pain. He checked the paper bag of discharge medications twice, running a finger over the pharmacist's labels as if committing them to memory. "One of these with food, the other at bedtime," he murmured, more to himself than anyone else. "Follow-up is Friday." Every detail was a fortress he was building, brick by painful brick. Through it all, an instinct he couldn't suppress kept drawing him closer. He would lean in, feigning an adjustment to Ilya's collar or a check of the neckline, just to get close enough to inhale quietly from the warm skin of Ilya's neck and shoulder. The fear had been a cologne he hadn't realized he was wearing, and now he was desperate to wash it off.

And then it was there. Faint at first, then stronger, cutting through the hospital's sterile veil. Mint. Cool, sharp, and undeniably Ilya. The scent of his alpha, returning to its full, natural strength. It was a signal. A declaration that the man who had been broken was now healing, that the strength was coming back.

Shane felt the tension that had been a permanent resident in his shoulders for the last week suddenly dissolve, a tight knot finally coming undone. He let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, the minty scent a potent anesthetic for the soul. He hadn't understood the sheer depth of the fear he'd been carrying until this moment, until this proof of life washed over him. Keeping one hand on Ilya's back, he guided him toward the door. Shane stuck close as they stepped into the hallway, a silent, hovering guardian. He inhaled again when they paused for the elevator, the clean, sharp scent mingling with the recycled air of the hospital. He could finally breathe Ilya again. Though in little strokes, he could smell his Alpha.

The automatic doors hissed open, and a wave of cool, damp air washed over them. It smelled of rain on city pavement and car exhaust. Ilya paused on the threshold, overwhelmed by the sudden cacophony of sounds and smells, the sensory overload of the outside world. Shane steadied him instantly. Out here, in the open air, Ilya's scent seemed to carry further, more potent. Shane breathed deeply, not even trying to hide the instinct, pulling the crisp, clean

scent of mint deep into his lungs. Ilya watched Shane with a large smile across his face and just giggled at his Omega taking in his scent for the first time in days.

The house looked exactly as Shane had left it. He had the door fixed. The kitchen was cleaned meticulously. But, still, as they pulled into the driveway, it felt different. The cheerful exterior held the memory of violence, and the simple act of opening the front door felt heavy with significance. Shane pushed it open slowly, and the familiar warmth of home enveloped them. The scent of the hospital was banished, replaced by the comforting trio of brewing coffee, a hint of a home-made meal, and the clean, homely smell of laundry detergent. I'll need to change the sheets tonight, Shane thought, his mind already cataloging the tasks ahead. Fresh linens, everything sanitized, no trace of the trauma that was left in our home. He'd scrub the house clean if he had to, purify it until only the scents of their pack remained.

Inside, Yuna was already waiting with Elena. She stood up as they entered, her expression a careful mask of relief. "We've been keeping busy in the kitchen," she said softly, her eyes darting between Ilya and Shane. "Borscht, just the way you like it, Ilya." She had always been good at reading rooms.

Before Ilya could respond, a small blur launched itself from the couch. Elena. She ran toward Ilya with the pure, unthinking joy of a child who has missed her Papa.

"Papa!" Her voice was a high, delighted squeal.

Shane intercepted her just enough to soften the impact, a gentle, "Easy, baby" before she climbed carefully onto the couch beside Ilya, burrowing into his side as if she could fuse herself to him.

The moment Elena's small, warm body pressed against him, Ilya's scent shifted in the air. It was an instantaneous, breathtaking transformation. The sharp, cool mint remained, the bedrock of his alpha strength, but blooming directly beneath it was something Shane had not spoke to Ilya about yet, something rich and sweet. Cinnamon. The scent of pack contentment, of an alpha surrounded by his *family*, feeling safe and utterly secure. It filled the room, a warm and tangible wave of happiness that made the air feel thicker, richer.

Shane stopped where he stood by the door, his hand still on the knob. The scent hit him like a brick to the face. There it is, his mind whispered. That's the scent of my alpha healing. He closed his eyes for a split second, pulling it in, letting the pure, unadulterated joy of it wash away the last lingering ghosts of fear. His own body answered instinctively. A warm, sweet aroma began to drift from him, a counterpoint to Ilya's. Maple syrup. The scent of home, of comfort, of an omega content in the safety of his pack. The three scents—mint, cinnamon, and maple—settled into the room naturally, weaving together into a tapestry that was uniquely theirs. The tension drained from Shane's shoulders again, he felt like he could finally breathe. The hospital and getting Ilya home was a release but seeing him with Elena right now. That was something totally different. A new release of endorphins.

"Papa, are you still owie?" Elena asked, her small fingers carefully tracing the bandage peeking from Ilya's collar.

Ilya winced slightly as her fingers prodded the edge. "A little, moya sladkaya," he murmured, his voice raspy. "But seeing you makes it better."

Shane watched, his heart clenching. He needs more rest, he thought. More food. More comfort. I'll make sure he gets it. He moved into the kitchen, checking the borscht simmering on the stove, stirring it gently. The rich, earthy aroma of beets and dill mingled with their pack scents, creating something new and comforting.

When he returned to the living room, Elena had arranged her coloring books around them. "Papa, draw with me," she demanded, pushing a purple crayon into Ilya's hand.

Ilya took it carefully, his movements still stiff. "What should we draw, solnyshko?"

"A purple cat! Like in my dream!"

Shane smiled to himself as he moved to adjust the blanket over Ilya's legs. A purple cat. Of course. He let his fingers brush against Ilya's thigh, a casual touch that was anything but. Later, he promised himself. Later I'll make sure he knows how much I need to touch him, how much I need to know he's really here.

The afternoon settled into a gentle, healing rhythm. Elena, content to be close to her Papa, set up her coloring books on the coffee table, her small fist gripping a purple crayon with fierce concentration. Ilya sat beside her on the couch, his movements still slow, but his posture was relaxed, one arm resting along the back of the cushions behind her. Shane drifted between the living room and the kitchen, the domestic tasks of preparing dinner and making sure Ilya was content.

After their arrival, Yuna quickly left after she caught the glimmer in Shane's eye. Something that said he needed some bonding time with his Alpha and Pup. She smiled and told them all she would be next door if anyone needed anything then disappeared into the backyard that was indeed connected to her own Boston home.

April 28, 2017

Three days had passed since Ilya's return home, but the hospital still called. The shift was a familiar escape, a return to a world of clean lines and controlled chaos. Hours later, Shane walked through the automatic doors, the mingled scents of Ilya's mint, Elena's sweetness, and his own maple clinging to his clothes like a shield against the generic horrors of being a nurse that awaited. He slipped back into the role, the professional calm settling over him like a second skin, a stark contrast to the hyper-vigilance he wore at home.

Dana was on duty with him, moving through the nurses' station with a practiced weariness that went beyond the usual end-of-shift fatigue. Her scrubs seemed a little looser, her movements a fraction slower. "Pulling a double," she explained around a yawn, rubbing at her tired eyes. "Call rooms are full again. Gonna try and catch a few hours in my car before the next wave hits." She gave him a weak smile before grabbing her keys and heading toward the elevator that led down to the parking lot.

Two hours bled into three. The charts were updated, the rounds made. There was no sign of Dana. A knot of unease began to form in Shane's gut, a prickle of instinct that had nothing to do with the usual hospital anxieties. It was the same feeling that jolted him awake in the middle of the night, the silent, irrational compulsion to go check that Elena was still breathing. He brushed it off at first, told himself she was just a heavy sleeper. But as another hour ticked by on the clock, the feeling sharpened into a low-grade alarm.

The alarm in his gut was no longer a low-grade hum; it was a full-blown klaxon. He made an excuse to the charge nurse about needing some air, a flimsy pretext that she barely acknowledged, and headed for the elevator. The ride down to the parking garage was a slow descent into a pit of dread. The heavy steel doors opened onto a dim space. Most of the overhead lights worked, but a few on the far row flickered erratically, casting stuttering shadows that danced and warped. The pavement was still dark and slick in places from the different fluids that cars leaked and the rain tracking from outside.

His eyes scanned the rows of cars, searching. He found her car parked near the back, almost tucked into a corner, away from the direct glare of the functioning lights. He saw her silhouette slumped over the steering wheel, her head resting on her arms. A fresh wave of relief washed over him, so potent it made him dizzy. See? Just asleep, he told himself, but his feet were already moving, breaking into a jog.

The closer he got, the more unnatural she looked. Something was wrong. The angle of her body, the absolute stillness of it. Something wasn't right. He was twenty feet away when a scent hit him, stopping him cold.

Roses. But not the real, living scent from a garden. This was artificial, cloying, and thickly sweet, the smell of cheap air freshener and funeral parlors. It was wrong. A figure detached itself from the shadows between two large SUVs, stepping into the intermittent light. He had smelled that before.

Sasha. Sasha holding a handgun, and it was pointed at Shane. The smile on his face was serene.

"She's fine," Sasha said, his voice a smooth, casual baritone. "Just a little sedative so she wouldn't interrupt our conversation." He gestured with the gun toward the car. "I thought it would be a nice touch, don't you think? For her to wake up and find her favorite nurse bleeding out in the parking lot. A little drama before her night shift" He took a step closer, the cloying scent of roses intensifying.

"Let's get to the point, Ilya belongs with me," he stated, as if reciting a simple, undisputed fact. "He just doesn't know it yet."

Fear pierced through Shane's practiced calm. It was a primal, visceral thing, crawling up his spine like icy fingers. His heart hammered against his chest, a frantic drumbeat of terror that drowned out the distant hum of the hospital above. Gun. He has a gun. The thought repeated in his mind, a stark, pulsing litany.

His eyes darted around, a desperate, animal scan for an escape route. Elevator. Too far. He'd shoot me in the back.

His gaze swept over the rows of cars. Hide? No. Trapped. He's in the middle of the open area with nothing but the sedan beside of Dana's own car to hide behind.

The cold, damp air suddenly felt thick, hard to breathe. The scent of roses, cloying and suffocating, was making him dizzy. He was a cornered animal, and Sasha was the wolf.

A desperate, flimsy hope. "What do you want?" The words came out rougher than he intended, the tremor in his voice betraying the terror clawing at his throat. "You'll never have Ilya. He's my Alpha."

Sasha's smile didn't waver. "Oh, but I will. And you're just a loose end I need to tie up."

The casual cruelty in Sasha's voice sent a fresh wave of nausea through Shane. This wasn't really about obsession over Ilya. Sasha really wanted Shane dead. Shane's mind raced, a frantic, disjointed reel of possibilities. Also, Sasha is a psychopath. Sasha isn't thinking through the logic of it all. If Shane was dead, Ilya would never have anything to do with him. Which is why, Shane concluded, Sasha just wanted to hurt Ilya using Shane as a tool to do so.

I could run. Zigzag. Maybe he misses.

The thought was immediately followed by a cold splash of reality.

He's probably shot plenty of guns before. He won't miss.

He could see it in Sasha's steady stance, the easy way he held the weapon.

I could talk. Reason with him.

The idea was almost laughable. Reason had no place here. Sasha's eyes held the flat, dead certainty of a fanatic.

I could surrender. The omega part of him, the part that craved safety and peace, screamed it. Just give in. Live. For Ilya. For Elena. But the image of Ilya, broken and bleeding on their kitchen floor, flashed behind his eyes. The memory of Elena's small, worried face. He knew, with a certainty that settled like lead in his gut, that surrendering would not save them. Sasha would come for Ilya. And if Ilya resisted... if Ilya died because Shane was too afraid to act... the thought caused him to feel more sick than his own personal death.

The terror was still there. But beneath it, something else was stirring. It was slow, hot, and alien. It was the memory of their home violated, the scent of Ilya's blood in their kitchen. It was the thought of Elena's world shattering. The fear didn't vanish, but it began to change, to curdle into something hard and sharp.

He thought of what the Metros, the ones that Sasha was ordering, violating and hurting Ilya in way that he may never recover from.

He was still scared but he was no longer paralyzed. He was fueled.

A slow, dangerous smirk stretched Shane's lips, a chilling mimicry of confidence he didn't feel. "You know, I'm beginning to think you're obsessed with me more than you are Ilya," he drawled, his voice a low, steady counterpoint to the thumping of his own heart. He watched Sasha's serene expression fracture, a flicker of raw fury in the depths of his eyes. But beneath the facade of defiance, Shane's mind raced, a frantic calculation of odds and outcomes.

Gun pointed at my chest.

Distance: maybe ten feet.

Sasha's stance: steady, but something a little shaky despite the initial assessment of Sasha and his expertise.

No witnesses around.

The omega in him screamed to de-escalate, to submit, to survive. The protector in him roared with a different instinct.

They came into our home. The thought surfaced unbidden, sharp and corrosive.

They put their hands on my alpha. The ~~defiled~~ him.

His instincts, honed by years on the ice prior to becoming a father and presenting as an omega now refined in the ER, screamed at him.

In the split second it took for Sasha to process the insult, for his finger to tighten on the trigger, Shane moved. He didn't think, he lunged. A low, explosive burst of energy from his legs, a desperate dive to the right. The roar of the gunshot was deafening in the concrete cavern, a violent crack that echoed off the pillars. Shane felt the sizzle of the bullet pass by his shoulder, a hot wind of displaced air. He hit the ground hard, the rough asphalt scraping through the thin fabric of his scrubs and tearing at the skin of his palms. He rolled, coming up behind the solid safety of a sedan's engine block.

Sasha, looking momentarily shocked that his target was no longer standing still, recovered with a snarl. He fired again, the bullet punching a neat, star-shaped hole in the sedan's rear windshield. The tinkling of falling glass was a deadly music. But Sasha's fury made him sloppy. The recoil from the gun burned in his hand and just at that moment Sasha took a step forward and his feet slide on the damp oil-slicked pavement. He stumbled, flailing to regain his balance, and the gun slipped from his grasp.

For a heartbeat, it seemed to hang in the air before clattering across the concrete with a sound that was both mundane and utterly terrifying. It spun and settled just a few feet from the front tire of the sedan Shane was using for cover. A desperate, shared thought passed between them. Both men broke from their positions, a frantic, clumsy scramble for the weapon on the ground. Shane was faster, fueled by the image of Elena's face, his lungs burning. His fingers just brushed the cold metal grip when Sasha's body slammed into his side, driving him into the hard steel of a truck door with bone-jarring force.

The impact drove into Shane's lungs Sasha's weight was on him, heavy and suffocating, his face a mask of pure, unadulterated rage. "You think you're clever?" he spat, his breath hot and foul against Shane's cheek. "I'll peel your skin off while you're still breathing." But as Sasha reared back to slam Shane's head against the truck, Shane's mind didn't register the immediate threat.

It was somewhere else, somewhere two weeks ago, in the bright, warm kitchen of their home. He saw the back door of their home shatter inward. He saw Comeau and two other players, their faces contorted with drunken aggression, stepping over the threshold like they owned the place. He saw Hayden Pike, a blur of motion, bursting through the doorway right after them, a desperate roar in his throat as he tried to help. He saw Ilya. He saw his Alpha in pain.

That thought was the lit fuse of the earlier mentioned fuel. The terror and grief, compressed into a singularity of pure, incandescent rage, detonated inside him. The fear vanished, burned away in the inferno. A deep, guttural snarl ripped from Shane's chest. A scent, powerful and overwhelming, exploded from him. The sweet, warm aroma of maple syrup intensified a thousand-fold, thick and cloying, a promise of sticky, slow destruction.

With a surge of adrenaline-fueled strength, he bucked his hips, twisting violently and throwing Sasha's balance off for the slightest of seconds. He used the opening, shoving the larger man away from him with every ounce of power he could muster. Sasha stumbled back, and Shane drove forward, slamming him bodily into the side of a parked minivan with a clang of metal. Sasha grunted, the wind knocked out of him, but he recovered fast, driving a sharp knee into Shane's ribs. Pain lanced through Shane's side but he only laughed, a harsh, bloody sound. "You're really bad at this," he wheezed, spitting a glob of blood onto the concrete.

Sasha's face contorted with fury. He lunged, grabbing a fistful of Shane's scrub top and hauling him sideways, slamming him into the side mirror of the truck. The glass exploded outward in a glittering shower, and a sharp, stabbing pain erupted along Shane's forearm as a shard of the mirror sliced deep through the fabric. He grunted, the sound torn between pain and anger. Before Sasha could pull away, Shane drove his shoulder forward, tackling him around the midsection and driving him backward until they crashed through a flimsy plastic barrier marking off construction work. They landed in a tangle of limbs and broken plastic, Sasha's hands scrabbling at the gritty pavement, reaching for the gun that had skittered just out of reach. Shane dragged him back by the collar of his jacket, the fabric straining and ripping.

He hauled Sasha to his feet, only to slam him against the cool metal of the truck fender. Shane's mind was a red haze of memory and rage. "You touched my Alpha," he snarled, the words a punch of their own, driving his fist into Sasha's stomach. Sasha doubled over, gasping. "You broke into my house." Another punch, this one to the jaw, the crack of bone loud in the empty garage. "You terrified my child." A third punch, brutal and final, sent Sasha stumbling. Shane grabbed him by the front of his shirt, yanking him close, their faces inches apart. "And you'd just come back here and try to kill me?"

Shane's grip on Sasha's collar was iron, the fabric digging into the man's throat. He shoved him hard against the driver side door of the van, pinning him there with a forearm. His other

hand came up, fingers wrapping around Sasha's throat, not to kill, but to control, to make him feel the same helpless terror he had inflicted. He leaned in, his voice a low, venomous whisper that was barely human. "You should have run. You should have ran back to Moscow and never came out of hiding. After what those men did to Ilya, I should break your neck right here and smile about it." The pressure increased, cutting off Sasha's air. He watched the man's eyes widen, the smug confidence finally replaced by genuine fear. This was it.

The pressure on Sasha's throat was immense, a starved thing finally being fed. The world narrowed to the frantic pulse beating against Shane's thumb, the wide, terrified eyes staring back at him. His grip tightened. He could feel the cartilage begin to give, the delicate trachea buckling under the force.

He was going to kill him. He was going to break his neck and leave him here, another piece of trash in a hospital parking lot.

Then, a scent drifted up from the collar of his own scrubs. It was faint, almost lost beneath the acrid tang of Sasha's fear and the coppery smell of Shane's own blood, but it was there. Cinnamon. Warm, sweet, and Ilya. It was the scent of their couch, of Ilya reading to Elena, of quiet evenings and the feeling of being home. It was the scent of the man who would look at him with disappointed, exhausted sorrow if he saw what he was doing now. The pressure vanished.

He shoved Sasha away from him with a guttural cry, the sound tearing from his throat like wounded animal. Sasha collapsed in a heap, gagging and clutching at his throat, a pathetic writhing mass on the grimy pavement. He wasn't a threat anymore. He was just a man. A broken, pathetic man who had tried to take everything from him.

Shane stumbled back, his chest heaving, the rage receding like a tide, leaving behind the wreckage of pain and exhaustion. He looked down at the blood dripping from the gash on his arm, the dark red stark against the blue of his scrubs. He looked at Sasha, unconscious or close to it, and then at the gun lying a few feet away. With a surge of revulsion, he kicked the weapon, sending it skittering under a car many rows away, out of reach. He then reached down, grabbed Sasha by the hair of the head with his left hand, and bounced his forehead off of the pavement twice, guaranteeing him to be unconscious.

His job wasn't to kill. It was to protect. He turned, his eyes finding Dana's still-slumped form in her car. He had to get help. For her. For himself.

Adrenaline was a fleeting currency, and Shane's account was suddenly, brutally overdrawn. The fire in his veins extinguished, leaving a profound, bone-deep chill. Every throb of the gash in his arm, every breath that aggravated the bruising in his ribs, was a screaming reminder of the fight. He lurched the few feet to Dana's car, yanking the driver's side door open. He fumbled for her pulse at the side of her neck, his own fingers slick with blood. There. A steady, rhythmic beat against his fingertips. She was breathing normally, her chest rising and falling in a peaceful, drugged slumber. A wave of relief so intense it made him dizzy washed over him, followed immediately by a fresh wave of nausea as he looked down at himself. His arm was a mess, the blue fabric of his scrub top soaked through and clinging to the deep, ragged cut. He was losing blood. A lot of it.

He couldn't call. He couldn't wait. He was a nurse; he knew the signs of shock when he felt them. The cold sweat, the light-headedness, the way the edges of his vision were beginning to soften and blur. Leaving Sasha unconscious and Dana safe in her locked car, he started to run. Each step was a jarring agony, a fresh punishment for the violence he had unleashed. The automatic doors of the emergency entrance seemed miles away, a shimmering, unreachable oasis of help. He pushed through the heavy doors with a last, desperate surge of strength, stumbling into the familiar, chaotic brightness of the ER lobby. "Help," he gasped, the word torn from a throat that was raw and burning. He collapsed, the polished floor rushing up to meet him as the world finally went black.

Consciousness returned in pieces. First, the rhythmic beep of a monitor. Then, the sterile scent he had come to loathe. And finally, the dull, heavy throb of pain radiating from his arm and his side. Shane blinked, the bright white of the ceiling slowly resolving into a familiar pattern. A hospital room. He was in a bed. He tried to sit up, and a fresh wave of agony washed over him, forcing him back against the pillows. His left arm was heavily bandaged, wrapped in clean white gauze from wrist to elbow. He could feel the tight pull of more bandages around his ribs beneath the thin hospital gown.

The door to the room swung inward with a soft whoosh, not bursting open as he'd half-feared, but gliding quietly on its hydraulic arm. Ilya stood in the doorway, his body outlined by the fluorescent light of the hallway. The fresh, clean scent of mint preceded him, cutting through the sterile room. He wasn't running, but there was no mistaking the tension in his frame, the way his shoulders were squared, the slight limp in his step that appeared only when he was truly agitated. His gaze swept the room, cataloging the IV drip, the monitor displaying Shane's heart rate, and finally, landing on Shane himself, pale and bandaged in the bed. Ilya let out a long, slow breath, the sound barely audible in the quiet room. He walked to the side of the bed, his movements deliberate and careful, and rested a hand on the blanket over Shane's good leg.

The words caught in Ilya's throat, replaced instead by a shaky exhale that sounded too close to a sob. He moved to the side of the bed, his usual predatory grace replaced by a hesitant, almost fragile tread. The scent of mint was sharp, tinged with the acrid bite of anxiety. He looked down at Shane, his pale face, the stark white bandages against his skin, and the fear he'd been holding at bay crashed over him.

"Shane," he breathed, his voice thick with an emotion that sounded dangerously close to breaking. He reached out, but his hand stopped short, hovering over Shane's cheek as if afraid to touch, afraid that he might shatter him. "Moy milyy... moy khoroshiy. Chto sdelali oni s tobey?"

Shane managed a weak, one-sided smile, though it felt more like a grimace. "Oh look we got another room at the best hotel in town," he rasped, his voice dry.

The joke didn't land. Ilya flinched as if struck. His hand finally came to rest, his thumb gently stroking the unbruised skin near Shane's temple. "Ne shuti," he whispered, his English fraying at the edges. "Don't... joke. Not now. I see you... see..." He couldn't finish, his gaze

falling to the heavily bandaged arm, then back to Shane's face. His other hand clenched into a fist at his side, a tremor running through it. "I was scared, Shane. So scared."

He leaned in closer, his forehead nearly touching Shane's, the scent of his fear a palpable thing. "They say... there was a man. In parking lot. Is this...?" He couldn't bring himself to say the name, but it hung in the air between them, ugly and thick.

Shane's smile faded, replaced by a look of grim finality. He reached up with his good arm, his fingers catching the front of Ilya's shirt, pulling him just that little bit closer. "Sasha," he said, the name a curse on his lips. "He's never going to be a problem again, Ilya. Never."

Ilya pulled back just enough to search his eyes, his own a storm of fear and disbelief. "What did you do?" he asked, the English coming clear now, sharp and precise.

"Nothing," Shane said, the single word heavy with the weight of everything he had done. "He's arrested. They have him. He can't hurt us. He can't hurt Elena. He can't hurt you again."

Ilya's entire body seemed to sag with a relief so profound it was almost painful to witness. He closed his eyes, his breath coming out in a long, shuddering wave. "Arrested," he repeated, the word a prayer in Russian. "Arestovan." He opened his eyes again, and they were filled with a new, terrifying clarity. "You are safe." It wasn't a question. It was a mantra, a desperate, repeated truth. He leaned in and pressed a soft, trembling kiss to Shane's forehead, his lips cool against his feverish skin.

Ilya's shoulders slumped, the rigid line of them finally giving way to a tremor that ran down his entire frame. He leaned forward, the movement slow and deliberate, and pressed his lips to Shane's. It wasn't a kiss of passion, but one of profound, shattering relief. His lips were cool and soft, a stark contrast to the fevered skin of Shane's brow. When he pulled back, he rested his forehead against Shane's, the mint of his scent a soothing balm in the sterile room. "Now," Ilya whispered, his voice thick. "You tell me everything. From the beginning."

Shane took a breath, the simple action pulling at the bandages around his ribs. "Dana was pulling a double," he started, his voice raspy. "She went to her car to sleep. When she didn't come back, I... I just knew." He recounted the scene in the dim, flickering garage, the cloying scent of roses, and Sasha's cold, smiling face. He described the sedative, the gun, the chillingly casual threat. As he spoke, Ilya's grip on the blanket tightened, his knuckles turning white. Shane didn't shy away from the details of the fight—the crash of glass, the brutal impacts, the memory of the kitchen invasion that had ignited his rage. "I just saw him, and all I could see was them, Лёва," Shane finished, his voice barely a whisper. "I saw them breaking down our door. I saw you on the floor. I just... snapped."

A sound escaped Ilya, a raw, wounded noise that was half-sob, half-snarl. He straightened up, turning away for a moment to press the heel of his palm against his eyes. When he looked back at Shane, the gratitude there was so intense it was almost painful to witness. "You saved her," he breathed, the words heavy with meaning. "You saved everyone." But then his face crumpled, the fierce pride in his alpha giving way to a devastating vulnerability. "But it should have been me," he choked out, tears finally spilling down his cheeks. "I am your Alpha. I should have been there to protect you. To protect our family. My mate... my omega... had to fight for us."

Shane's good arm moved, a slow, careful gesture against the sharp pull in his ribs. He cupped Ilya's face, his thumb stroking over the damp, stubbled skin, wiping away the tears. "Hey. Look at me," Shane murmured, his voice a low, soothing balm. "This is not about you being an 'adequate' alpha. This is about us. A team. And tonight, it was my turn." He held Ilya's gaze, letting the conviction in his eyes sink in, letting the steady beat of his own heart speak the reassurance his words couldn't fully convey. Ilya leaned into the touch, a soft sigh escaping him, the storm of inadequacy in his scent slowly calming under Shane's unwavering presence.

After a moment of silence, Shane took a steadying breath, the question that had been simmering beneath the surface for months finally bubbling up. He was so tired of the constant, low-grade hum of worry that accompanied every shift, of the ache of being away from them. "Ilya," he began, his voice quiet but serious. "Do you remember when we talked about me staying at home and quitting my job? How we laughed about it?"

Ilya frowned. "A joke. We said it would be a joke."

Shane looked at him, his gaze unwavering and clear. "Can we still do that? Not as a joke." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "After today... after the past few weeks... I'm so tired, *moya lyubov*'. I just want to take care of you and Elena. After today, all I can think about is that I need you. I don't need a big house. I don't need a nice car. We have the money, but I don't need any of it. I just need you and our daughter. Would that be okay?"

The dam broke. A sob tore from Ilya's throat, raw and guttural. He didn't just cry; he crumbled, a full-body shudder wracking his frame as tears streamed down his face. He bent over Shane's bed, pressing desperate, reverent kisses to the bruised and scraped knuckles of Shane's good hand. "Yes," he choked out, the word muffled against Shane's skin. "Of course it's okay. Yes. Yes. A thousand times, yes."

Shane let Ilya's weeping run its course, a silent, solid presence in the storm of emotion. He gently stroked the back of Ilya's head, feeling the fine strands of hair between his fingers. When the sobs subsided into quiet hiccups, Shane continued, his voice soft. "I don't want to stop doing things. But I was thinking... instead of treating these kids one by one, we could do more." He met Ilya's tear-bright eyes. "We could start a charity. A foundation. We raise the money for other hospitals to do what this one does, to fund research for the causes we care about. We still help, but from a different angle. Together."

Ilya stared at him, the tears in his eyes slowly clearing as he processed the words. A slow, beautiful smile spread across his face, transforming it. "That..." he said, his voice thick with wonder. "That is a beautiful idea, Shane. So beautiful." He leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to Shane's lips, tasting the salt of his own tears. "You are so loving. So caring. To think of that, even now, after everything... you amaze me."

Then, a familiar spark returned to Ilya's eyes, a mischievous glint that Shane knew so well. He laughed, a real, genuine laugh that was still a little shaky. "I can't wait for your next heat," he murmured, his lips brushing against Shane's ear. "I am going to treat you like a king. And I am going to get you pregnant again." He pulled back with a wide grin, a lightness returning to him. "I'm only joking, of course."

Shane looked at him, his expression unreadable for a long moment. The beeping of the monitor filled the silence between them. "Would that be such a bad idea?" he asked quietly, his voice barely a whisper. "Having another pup... with me?"

A slow smile spread across Shane's face, the exhaustion in his eyes momentarily replaced by a familiar, teasing glimmer. "You say that now," he murmured, his voice low and conspiratorial. "But you've never had to go on a midnight hunt for pickles and strawberry jam sandwiches. Or get up at three in the morning because the baby suddenly has an aversion to the smell of our laundry detergent. You'd be my personal chef, my chauffeur, my bodyguard. Think you can handle that, Ilyusha?" He watched Ilya's face, enjoying the slight widening of his eyes.

The teasing light in Ilya's expression faltered, replaced by a shadow of profound sorrow that caught Shane completely off guard. The thought of missing five years was still a raw wound, but the idea of missing another entire pregnancy—the subtle changes in Shane's body, the first flutters of movement, the profound metamorphosis that created their child—was a fresh agony. His smile vanished. "I missed it all," he said, the words barely audible, thick with a grief he rarely let surface. "I missed you carrying our Elena. I was not there to see you glow, to feel her move." The regret was a palpable thing, a cold weight in the sterile room.

But as the thought settled, it began to transform. The grief didn't vanish, but it was pushed aside by a wave of possessive, aching want. The image of Shane, round and radiant with their child, filled his mind. He wouldn't just be a spectator this time. He would be there for every craving, every mood swing, every kick against his palm when he laid a hand on Shane's belly. He would be the one cooking those ridiculous meals at three in the morning, the scent of their home mingling with the sweet, warm spice of Shane's pregnancy. The mental picture was so vivid, so overwhelmingly domestic and right, that a jolt of pure, unadulterated lust shot through him. He had to shift in his chair, a sudden, embarrassing warmth spreading through his groin. The thought of seeing Shane like that, of taking care of him, of having him in that state again... it was almost too much. He leaned forward, his eyes dark, the scent of his want rising to mingle with the mint and Shane's own lingering scent of maple and blood. "Yes," he growled, the word a low, gravelly promise. "I can handle that. I will handle anything."

Shane's teasing expression softened into one of gentle seriousness, the playful mood giving way to a more cautious tone. He reached out with his good hand, his fingers tracing the line of Ilya's jaw, feeling the slight rasp of stubble against his skin. "Ilya," he began, his voice quiet but firm, "before we start planning nursery themes and ordering prenatal vitamins in bulk, we need to talk." He saw the eager light in Ilya's eyes dim slightly with concern. "The doctor who delivered Elena... Dr. Evans. He told me that the pregnancy was... incredibly dangerous. Far more than I let on at the time." He paused, choosing his words with care. "He said that given the complications, the stress my body was under... it would be nearly impossible for me to get pregnant again naturally. The odds are not in our favor." Shane watched the words land, seeing the flicker of disappointment and the familiar ache of loss in Ilya's gaze before it was quickly masked. "I'm not saying no," Shane added quickly, squeezing Ilya's hand. "I want to try. I want that with you more than anything. But I need you to understand that it might not happen. We could try for a long, long time and... nothing. I just need to set expectations, for both of us."

Ilya listened, the hopeful energy draining from him to be replaced by a solemn, heavy quiet. He absorbed the information, the raw reality of the situation settling over him like a shroud. He turned his head, pressing a kiss into the palm of Shane's hand, his lips warm and lingering against the scraped skin. He held Shane's gaze, his own eyes filled with a deep, unwavering resolve that transcended the new, painful reality. "Nearly impossible," Ilya repeated, his voice a low, steady murmur. "That is not impossible, moya lyubov'. It is not 'no'." A ghost of a smile touched his lips, a sad but determined thing. "Then we will try. For as long as it takes. We will be patient. We will be hopeful." He brought Shane's hand to his chest, holding it over the steady beat of his heart. "And if it does not happen... then we will have this. We will have each other, and we will have our Elena. And it will be enough. *But I will never stop hoping.*"

Chapter 19: Boundaries

Chapter Notes

This chapter was really fun for me to write because it let me explore a different side of Shane. Without the NHL holding him back, he doesn't have to be so self-conscious about being out in public anymore. Ilya is safe in his career as one of the best players in the league, if not the best, and that opens the door to a lot of new possibilities for their life together. There's something really beautiful about Shane stepping into the role of fiance/omega so openly, Ilya being able to provide the kind of life he always wanted to give his family, and Elena just being the perfect little light in the middle of it all.

But of course, with the fun also comes the harder parts. This chapter starts digging into conversations about boundaries, expectations, and what their life actually looks like moving forward. As much as we love them, we all know our boys are not exactly champions of communication. That becomes pretty clear here, and some of the tension in this chapter comes from them learning how to start that open line of communication.

Also, sorry for the length of this one. I've honestly had most of this fic sitting around for months. I started writing it right after reading the books for the first time back in October, but I never really thought I'd actually post my fics anywhere. Now here I am somehow editing chapters almost every day and sharing them with all of you.

Next chapter, Ilya and Shane in Mickey ears?

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

The world, for the first time in what felt like a lifetime, settled into a rhythm. Life became normal. Shane's last shift at the hospital was quiet, filled with hugs from colleagues and a tearful but understanding farewell from Dana, who, upon being given the new door code to Shane and Ilya's home, declared herself an official, permanent annex of their pack.

Days bled into a peaceful routine: workouts side-by-side in the gym, the comfortable silence of cooking together, the joy of watching Shane and Elena in the box seats, their faces alight with pride. They traveled for the playoffs, a small, self-contained unit of happiness, and Ilya felt a happiness that he didn't know was possible. This was the dream: his omega, his pup, his love, all basking in the life he had fought to build. He was a fiancé, a father, a captain both on and off the ice.

Then Denver happened. A brutal, sickening crunch of bodies against the boards, and a fire that lit up Ilya's side with every breath. The Raiders fought hard, their spirits unbroken, but they were a wounded animal. Anyway, as Yuna said, it was Scott Hunter and the Admirals' year. The loss was a hollow ache, a dream deferred, but it hurt less than it should have.

Walking into the kitchen of their Boston home days later, the sting of defeat still fresh, he went to pour a coffee. His eyes scanned the monthly whiteboard calendar on the fridge, an artifact of Shane's old life that had found new purpose in their collective one.

June 15th, 2017. 'Elena's Birthday!!!' was written in bright, happy letters, surrounded by little hand-drawn stars. The cup slipped from his fingers, shattering on the marble floor in an explosion of glass and dark liquid.

Shane came running from the bedroom, his face etched with alarm. "What's wrong?" he asked, taking in the mess and Ilya's ashen face.

Ilya could only point. He pointed a shaking finger aimed at the calendar. "Her birthday," he managed, the words catching in his throat. "I... I didn't even ask. I didn't know." He looked at Shane, and the full weight of the last year crashed down on him.

"Oh, Ilya, no," Shane said, rushing to his side. He carefully navigated the broken glass and wrapped his arms around Ilya's waist, pressing a kiss to the tense muscles of his shoulder. "It's okay. It's okay." But Ilya stood rigid.

How had he failed to plan for the most important day of the year? The day his daughter, his own flesh and blood, came into the world? He felt sick, a cold dread coiling in his stomach.

"We went so fast, Ilya," Shane murmured, reading the turmoil in Ilya's silence. "We were just trying to survive and figure all of this out, to catch up. Some things... they just slipped through the cracks. Simple, silly things like birthdays." He pulled back just enough to look Ilya in the eye. "To be honest, I'm not big on them anyway. They just remind you that you're getting older. I'd rather just celebrate our pack every single day."

Ilya shook his head, "no," he said, his voice rough. "I want to celebrate them. I want to celebrate you, and her. I never had that. My father... he never celebrated anything after my mother died. There was no cake, no presents. I want to give you both what I never had. I want Elena to feel like a princess on her birthday. I want you to feel like... like everything." He looked at Shane, his eyes pleading for understanding. "I want to give you that."

Shane's expression softened with a tenderness that made Ilya's chest ache. "I know you do," he said softly. "And it's the most beautiful thing in the world." He hesitated for a moment, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes. "Ilya... my birthday was a few weeks ago. May 12th."

Ilya gasped. *May 12th*. The day they had been in Toronto, the day before the final game of the playoffs. He had been so focused on the next round, on the stats, on the grind, that it had completely passed him by.

He had missed it. He had missed their first birthday together as a reunited pack. A fresh wave of nausea washed over Ilya, hot and bitter. This was worse than missing a game, worse than a loss on the ice.

He wanted to throw something, to punch the wall, to do something to vent the roaring inadequacy that was tearing him apart from the inside. But he just stood there, frozen in the

wreckage of his coffee mug, the bitter scent of spilled coffee filling the air.

"Ilya, hey, look at me," Shane's voice was gentle. He reached up, cupping Ilya's face with both hands, forcing their eyes to meet. "It's okay. It really is. I didn't tell you. I don't like the fuss. But that's not the point." Shane took a deep breath, and Ilya could see the sincerity, the unwavering love in his gaze. "The point is, we're learning. We're still figuring this out. We've got a lifetime of birthdays to get right."

He looked back at the calendar, at the cheerful 'Elena's Birthday!!!' and then something else *clicked*, a connection so startlingly obvious he felt like a fool for not seeing it sooner. His gaze snapped to Shane, his eyes wide with a sudden, dawning realization. "No," he breathed, the word barely a whisper. "It can't be."

Shane frowned, confused. "What can't be?"

"Elena's birthday... June 15th," Ilya said, his voice trembling. He looked at Shane, a desperate hope warring with the sheer impossibility of it. "Moya lyubov'... that's my birthday."

Shane's face went slack with disbelief, his jaw slightly agape. He felt a surge of nausea, a dizzying realization of how much they had both been treading water, just trying to stay afloat. "Oh my god," he whispered, his free hand flying to his mouth. "Ilya... I never asked. I didn't know. All this time..." He looked like he was going to be sick, the guilt of his own oversight plain on his face.

But Ilya wasn't looking for an apology. A slow, wondrous smile began to spread across his face, chasing away the last remnants of despair. This wasn't a sign of their failure; it was a miracle. *A cosmic wink.*

"Don't you see?" Ilya said, his voice filled with a newfound, infectious energy. He reached around grabbing Shane's hand, his grip firm and excited. "This is it. This is the universe telling us we're a pack." He laughed, a real, joyous sound that echoed in the kitchen. "How about we celebrate all three of us on June 15th?"

The suggestion was a joyful solution to the morning's despair. Shane's expression transformed from horror to elation. "All three of us?"

"Yes!" Ilya insisted, his mind already racing, planning. "You make your plans for some of the day, I'll make plans for the rest. We'll surprise each other, and we'll spoil Elena rotten. A big party, right here in the backyard. We'll invite our pack, her preschool friends. Dana and Sveta, Yuna, the team." The competitive spark in Ilya's eyes ignited, a playful challenge that Shane immediately understood and accepted.

The next two weeks transformed their home into a secret war room of affection. The calendar on the fridge became a strategic grid, dotted with coded appointments and clandestine errands. Ilya would disappear for hours on end, returning with the smug, self-satisfied look of a predator that had just secured its kill. He'd spend his evenings on the phone, speaking in hushed, urgent tones to travel agents and event planners, while Shane, feigning disinterest, would scroll through recipes on his tablet, the screen angled just so Ilya couldn't see. The

veto on paying Taylor Swift eight million to appear for three songs during their daughter's birthday had been a tactical loss, but Ilya was already plotting a new, grander offensive. His love language was grand gestures, a symphony of extravagance, and he was determined to compose a masterpiece for Shane and Elena.

For Shane, the campaign was waged in silence and flour-dusted kitchens. While Ilya was at the rink and Elena was at preschool, Shane would slip away, a student in a secret culinary academy run by a stern, Russian babushka he'd found online. He learned the patient art of pelmeni, the fragrant dance of dill and sour cream in borscht, the comforting heft of a perfect beef stroganoff. His hands, so skilled at saving lives, learned a different kind of craft. He wasn't just cooking; he was archaeology. He was digging through layers of Ilya's past, uncovering the flavors of a childhood that was mostly pain, hoping to find the small, buried moments of joy. The thought of Ilya one day teaching Elena the name of each dish, the taste connecting her to a heritage she barely knew, made every burnt dumpling and fumbled slice of onion worth it.

One evening, Ilya found Shane hunched over a laptop at the kitchen island, a frown of intense concentration on his face. "What are you doing?" Ilya asked, casually grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge. He feigned indifference, but his alpha instincts were on high alert. Shane quickly minimized the screen. "Just looking into preschool summer camps for Elena," he lied smoothly, the words tasting like ash in his mouth. He felt a pang of guilt, but it was quickly overridden by the thrill of the secret.

Ilya wasn't fooled. He had caught the slight panic in Shane's eyes, the way his fingers had flown across the keyboard. He knew Shane was planning something, and the mystery was a delightful, maddening itch. He upped the ante. His own covert operations became more elaborate. He had Yuna run interference, creating fake workout schedules and team meetings to buy him hours of uninterrupted planning time.

He was on the phone with a charter company, finalizing the details for the Disney cruise, when Shane walked into the room. "Yeah, that's great," Ilya said loudly into the receiver, adopting the bored, professional tone he used with sports agents. "No, the new contract negotiations can wait. Just send the paperwork over." He hung up and gave Shane a look of manufactured exhaustion, but he could see the flicker of doubt in Shane's gaze. The game was afoot.

The rivalry, while fierce, was also a constant source of amusement. One afternoon, Ilya came home to find a small, perfectly wrapped box on his pillow. He opened it to find a single, exquisite custom-made cufflink, a tiny replica of the Stanley Cup. Shane was nowhere to be found, but the gesture was a clear shot across the bow. Ilya smirked, his competitive spirit roaring to life.

The next day, a massive bouquet of Shane's favorite flowers arrived at the house with a card that simply read, "A hint of summer to come." He watched from the kitchen as Shane brought them inside with smile spreading across his face, and felt a surge of triumph.

Through it all, their domestic life continued to be the steady, comforting beat beneath the excitement of their secret plans. They still cooked together. They still fell asleep tangled together, the scent of their shared skin a balm against the world. But there was a new layer of

electricity, a silent conversation happening in every glance, every touch. They were two spies in the same house, each with a mission to overwhelm the other with love, and the tension was intoxicating. Ilya would catch Shane staring at him with a soft, knowing look, and he would have to fight the urge to pull him into a hug and demand to know what he was planning.

On June 15th, Shane was the first to wake, a knot of nervous energy tightening in his stomach. He wanted today to be perfect. It was their first, their very first, celebration as a complete pack. He was pouring a second cup when the pitter-patter of small feet announced a new arrival.

Elena burst into the kitchen, her dark hair a wild halo around her head, her eyes bright with an excitement that was almost tangible. "It's my birthday!" she announced to the quiet room, her voice a happy shout. "I'm five now!" She threw her arms around Shane's legs, burying her face in his pajama pants. Shane laughed, ruffling her hair, the familiar warm scent of shampoo from her morning bath was calming to his nerves. "Yes, you are," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "You're the biggest five-year-old in the whole world."

Leaning against the doorway to the hall, Ilya watched them, a silent observer to the intimate scene. He breathed in the mingled scents of the kitchen: the bitter aroma of coffee, the sweet, warm maple that was uniquely Shane, and the clean, bright scent of their daughter. In that moment, the reality of it all washed over him with a force that left him breathless. This was it. This was the first birthday they were celebrating together, the three of them, a whole, unbroken pack. The thought was so profound, so overwhelming, that he had to consciously remind himself to breathe. The quiet domesticity of the morning was a gift he never knew he needed, a precious, fleeting moment of peace before the joyful chaos of the day began.

The peace was shattered by the doorbell, a cheerful, two-note chime that sent Elena scrambling to the front door. Sveta stood on the porch, a bright smile on her face, two of her children peeking out from behind her legs. "The party has arrived!" she announced, stepping inside as her kids immediately made a beeline for the backyard, drawn by the promise of the pool.

The backyard began its transformation into a dream. Sveta and Shane worked in tandem, a whirlwind of crepe paper and ribbon. Soft pink balloons were tied to the pool fence, their gentle bobbing a cheerful counterpoint to the morning light. Gold ribbons were wound around the legs of the patio chairs, and streamers in shimmering shades of rose and champagne were draped artfully across the pergola, creating a canopy of filtered sunlight. Mason jars, filled with simple, elegant wildflowers, were placed on every available surface. The centerpiece was the long food table, draped in pink linen and dusted with a shower of gold confetti. Above it, they hung a large, beautifully crafted sign.

The lettering was elegant and playful, and Ilya stopped in his tracks as he read it: 'Happy Birthday Elena, Shane, and Ilya!' He had not expected to see his own name there. The gesture, so simple yet so all-encompassing, caught him completely off guard.

The Raiders began to arrive, a boisterous wave of large, affectionate men who immediately made the backyard their own. Elena, in her element, became a whirlwind of motion. "Uncle Evan!" she squealed, launching herself at Evan Dykstra, who caught her with an easy laugh. "Uncle Cliff! Uncle Luca! Uncle Troy!" She ran from one to the next, hugging every player she knew, proudly introducing them to her preschool friends as her official uncles.

The team showered her with gifts that bordered on the absurd: a stuffed Raiders mascot nearly as big as she was from Evan; a massive, sparkly pink bicycle from Cliff that required two men to carry it in; a professional-grade art set from Luca; a custom Raiders jersey with 'ROZANOV #81' on the back from Troy; a giant plush teddy bear from Wyatt that she could sit on; a real, albeit small, hockey net from Viktor; and a mountain of candy and snacks from Harris that made Shane's eye twitch.

As the party thrummed with life, Sveta found herself lingering by the now-decorated food table, refilling a plate of snacks for one of her sons. A preschool mother with kind eyes and a gentle smile approached the buffet, her daughter, a small girl with dark hair and bright, inquisitive eyes, holding tightly to her hand. "It's a wonderful party," the woman said, her voice warm. "Raya hasn't stopped talking about it all week." Sveta smiled, but something about the woman's face, the quiet intelligence in her gaze, struck a chord of familiarity. It wasn't a memory, not exactly, but a feeling, like a song you half-remember from a dream. "I'm Rose," the woman said, extending a free hand. "And this is Raya." Sveta took her hand, the contact sending an unexpected chill up her arm. "Sveta," she replied, her own smile softening. "It's lovely to meet you both." The conversation began there, a tentative exchange about children and schools that quickly deepened, flowing with an ease that felt as natural as breathing. As they talked, Raya tentatively let go of her mother's hand and drifted toward Sveta's children, the three of them instantly falling into a game of chase near the balloons, the pack instinctively finding its own.

Shane eventually clapped his hands, drawing the attention of the chattering guests. "Everyone, if I could have your attention for just a moment," he called out, a proud, nervous smile on his face. He gestured toward the overflowing buffet table. "I wanted to say that... all of this is my gift to Ilya." A murmur went through the crowd. "For the past two weeks," Shane continued, his gaze finding Ilya's in the sea of faces, "while Ilya was at the rink and Elena was at preschool, I've been taking secret cooking lessons. I wanted to learn how to make the food from his home. So, if you don't like it ... we also ordered pizzas and they should be arriving momentarily. Thanks and enjoy!"

Ilya stood frozen. He saw the platters of pelmeni and vareniki, the deep ruby red of the borscht, the rich, hearty stew of the beef stroganoff. These weren't just dishes; they were memories. They were the scent of his mother's kitchen on a cold Moscow afternoon, the taste of comfort after a long day of practice, the flavors of a childhood that had been more pain than joy, but which held these small, bright islands of warmth.

A vision of his mother, flour dusting her apron as she pinched the edges of dumplings, flashed behind his eyes. She was humming a sad, beautiful folk song. He saw her small, tired hands, the way they would push a stray strand of hair from her forehead. The memory was so

sharp, so unexpectedly painful and beautiful, that he felt his knees weaken. Shane hadn't just cooked a meal; he had reached back in time and pulled a piece of Ilya's lost history into the light.

Shane watched the play of emotions across Ilya's face and he knew he had succeeded. He moved through the crowd, his eyes locked on his alpha, and stopped just in front of him. He didn't say a word. He simply reached out and took Ilya's hand, his thumb stroking over the knuckles. Ilya's fingers squeezed back, a desperate, grounding pressure. He finally drew a shuddering breath, the scent of dill and beef and home filling his lungs, and met Shane's gaze. There were no words for this. There was only the profound, staggering realization that this man, his omega, had seen the deepest, most wounded parts of him and had spent weeks learning how to heal them.

Eventually, the spell broke, and the guests swarmed the table, their curiosity piqued. Children ran around with plates piled high with unfamiliar foods, their laughter echoing off the fence. Elena stood on a chair, her chest puffed out with pride, telling anyone who would listen, "My Daddy made it all! He's a great cooker!"

Later, a massive, three-tiered cake was carried out, decorated in soft pink frosting and cascading with edible gold stars. Five candles flickered on top, their flames dancing in the early evening light. The entire yard erupted into a loud, off-key rendition of 'Happy Birthday,' with the Raiders' voices booming above the rest, a chaotic, loving wall of sound. Elena squeezed her eyes shut, her small face scrunched in concentration, and made a wish.

She wished for more birthdays just like this one. With a mighty puff that sent her dark hair flying, she blew out all five candles, and the backyard exploded in cheers. The gift-opening frenzy that followed was a spectacle of flying wrapping paper and delighted squeals. Toys began to form a colorful mountain around Elena, who was sitting atop her new throne-like teddy bear. As she tore open the last present, a sparkling art kit, Cliff Marlowe stood up and stretched, a grin on his face.

"Hey, hold on a second," he boomed, his deep voice carrying over the happy chaos. "I know it's the birthday girl's big day, but are we gonna forget something? I hear it's a couple of other guys' birthdays today, too." He winked at Ilya and Shane, and a chorus of playful jeers and 'Happy Birthday's' erupted from the team.

Ilya stepped forward, a small, cream-colored envelope in his hands. He waited for the noise to die down, his gaze fixed on Shane. "For you, my love." He held out the envelope. Shane opened it with trembling fingers, pulling out a printed reservation. His eyes scanned the page, and he looked up at Ilya, his own eyes wide with disbelief. It was for a private rental in Provincetown. The dates were clear as day: July 1st through July 8th. A week. A week alone. Together.

Before the wave of emotion could crest, Ilya produced another, larger box, this one with a bright blue bow. He handed it down to Elena. "And for our birthday girl," he said, his smile softening. Inside was a thick folder filled with glossy pages. Elena, unable to decipher the official-looking text, dutifully carried the folder over to her most trusted uncle. Cliff took it from her, his brow furrowing in concentration. He let out a low whistle as he read. "Whoa,

kiddo," he said, looking from the papers to Ilya and back again. "Papa is really pulling out all the stops." He cleared his throat and announced to the entire backyard, "Elena Rozanova, you and your parents are going on a Disney Cruise!"

The backyard erupted. The Raiders let out a deafening roar that probably set off car alarms three streets over. Parents clapped and whooped, and Elena was immediately swarmed by her preschool friends, all desperate to see the pictures of the giant ship. In the middle of the beautiful chaos, however, Shane stood frozen, the cruise documents in his hand.

He looked at Ilya, holding the cruise papers like they were a starting pistol. "That's a beautiful name," Shane said, his voice quiet but cutting through the noise. "Rozanova. But hold on... I forgot something." A ripple of confusion went through the guests. Ilya's smile faltered, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. Shane didn't wait for him to respond. He turned and walked back into the house, leaving a wake of silence in his wake. The lively music suddenly seemed too loud, the laughter faded. Guests glanced at each other, their cheerful expressions tinged with confusion and a touch of worry. Ilya was already moving, pushing through the crowd, intending to follow him, to understand.

But he didn't have to. Shane reappeared in the doorway, a small, blue gift bag in his hand. He wasn't smiling anymore. His expression was serious, intense, focused entirely on Ilya. He walked forward, the crowd parting for him until he stood directly in front of his alpha. "You give all these big, grand gestures, Ilya," Shane said, his voice low and steady. "The trips, the parties... you show everyone how you feel." He held out the bag. "I'm not as good at that. But I hope you love this." Ilya took the bag, his heart hammering against his ribs. He reached inside, his fingers brushing against a small, familiarly shaped box. He opened it.

He expected to find something thoughtful, something personal—a watch cuff, maybe, or a monogrammed money clip. Instead, nestled in the black velvet, was a ring. It was a stark, beautiful piece of masculine engineering: a wide band of brushed titanium, dark and strong. In the center, set flush with the metal, was a single, flawless blue sapphire. It was simpler than the platinum, sapphire, and diamond cluster.

Shane watched the raw shock and overwhelming love flood Ilya's face. He saw the way Ilya's thumb reverently traced the line of the sapphire, the slight tremor in his usually steady hand. He had given a gift that could never be bought, a gesture that spoke to the very core of who they were as alpha and omega, as mates.

"You mark me," Shane said, his voice dropping to an intimate, possessive whisper that only Ilya could truly hear over the sudden, profound silence of the yard. "I wear your claim. But you're my alpha. You need a claim of your own. Everyone needs to know you're mine." He stepped closer, his gaze unwavering. "I love you, Ilya Rozanov."

The door to the Provincetown rental slammed shut, the final barrier between them and the world. A week. An entire, uninterrupted week. The realization hit them hard, a wave of raw, unadulterated want. Shane was backed against the cool, painted wood of the door before he could even drop their bags, Ilya's body a furnace against him, his scent a dizzying,

proprietary minty musk that had Shane's omega instincts slicking him open, ready. There was no preamble, no gentle exploration. Ilya's hands were rough, demanding, tearing at Shane's shirt, the buttons skittering across the hardwood floor. He buried his face in the crook of Shane's neck, inhaling deeply, a guttural groan vibrating against his skin. "Mine," he growled, the word a raw, possessive claim. Shane could only arch against him, a breathless moan his only answer as Ilya's teeth scraped over the sensitive skin of his mating gland, not biting, not yet, just reminding him of the bond that thrummed between them like a live wire.

He yanked Shane's pants down, the fabric pooling around his ankles, and then Shane was airborne, Ilya's powerful arms lifting him as if he weighed nothing. He carried him not to the bedroom, but to the large windows overlooking the bustling Commercial Street below. The afternoon sun was bright, the world outside alive with color and sound. "I want everyone to see," Ilya rasped, his voice a dark, intoxicating promise as he pressed Shane's bare chest against the cool glass. The shock of it, the sheer, breathtaking thrill of being so exposed, sent electricity straight to Shane's cock.

Ilya kicked his own legs apart, the position one of absolute dominance, and then he was pressing inside, one slow, inexorable, devastating inch at a time. Shane cried out, his palms flat against the window, the pleasure so intense it was almost pain, the stretch and burn a perfect, welcome violation.

Ilya set a punishing rhythm, each thrust a deliberate act of ownership, his hands gripping Shane's hips hard enough to leave bruises, marks Shane would wear with pride. The sounds coming from him were obscene—grunts and growls, harsh Russian words of praise and possession that Shane felt in his very bones. He angled his hips just so, and on the next thrust, he nailed that spot deep inside, the one that made Shane see stars.

A strangled cry tore from Shane's throat as Ilya struck that perfect, electrifying spot again and again. His hands were splayed against the glass, the panorama of Provincetown's vibrant street life a dizzying, exhilarating backdrop to their raw intimacy.

A strange, heady cocktail of shame and primal pride coursed through him. He was being claimed, displayed, owned by the most powerful alpha he knew, and the rush was intoxicating. "You like this, moya lyubov'?" Ilya's voice was a low, guttural purr against his ear. "You like them watching? Seeing how beautiful you are, how perfectly you take my knot?" The words were filthy, a dark fantasy given life, and Shane's body responded with a helpless shudder, his cock leaking a steady stream against the cool pane of glass. He was lost in the sensation, the sheer, unbridled alpha possession that left no room for thought, only feeling.

Ilya's rhythm grew more erratic, his grip tightening as he neared his peak. "We could have more," he breathed, the words a tantalizing, dangerous whisper. "We could let someone join us. Let them watch up close. Let them see what it looks like when I ruin you for anyone else." The suggestion was like a splash of ice water on Shane's fiery arousal.

The heady pride curdled instantly into a cold, sharp dread. They had only found their way back to each other in September, barely nine months ago after years of pain and distance.

Was Ilya already bored? Was he not enough? The thought was damning, a sickening lurch in his stomach that had nothing to do with pleasure.

But Ilya's hips were still moving, his knot beginning to swell, and the alpha's need was a palpable force. "Please, Shane," Ilya groaned, mistaking Shane's sudden silence for consideration. "Imagine it. Imagine someone else's hands on you while I'm inside you, my mark all over you." The idea sent a thrill through Ilya, a possessive, exhibitionist fire he'd never truly explored, a chance to show off the magnificent omega he had won. He was so caught up in the fantasy of it, in the sheer visual of his beautiful Shane being admired, that he completely missed the way Shane's body went rigid, the way the soft gasps of pleasure died in his throat.

Swallowing the lump of ice that had formed in his throat, Shane forced a breathy moan, arching his back to press more firmly against Ilya. He let his head fall back onto Ilya's shoulder, turning to nuzzle against the sweat-slicked skin of his alpha's neck. "Anything for you," he managed to whisper, the words tasting like ash.

The lie was bitter, but the need to please, the deep-seated omega drive to give his alpha what he desired, was stronger. He would do this. He would be good. He let his legs go pliant, his body melting into the fantasy Ilya was spinning, even as a part of him shattered. He was a good actor; years in the public eye had taught him how to wear a mask. He just never imagined he'd have to wear one for Ilya, especially not like this, with the scent blockers they still wore from the train muting the truth of his distress, the acrid tang of hurt hidden under the blockers.

Ilya however mistook Shane's moans for eager consent, for the desire to share in the thrill of his new, bold fantasy. A triumphant, possessive roar ripped from his chest. With one final, powerful thrust, he drove himself home, his knot swelling and locking them together in a searing, binding heat. He bit down, not on the mating gland which was still muted by the blockers, but on the meat of Shane's shoulder, a primal, claiming bite. "Mine," he snarled against Shane's skin, the word a final, definitive punctuation mark. "You'll let them see you're mine." The force of it, the finality, sent Shane over the edge. He came with a broken sob that Ilya, lost in the haze of orgasm and victory, mistook for pure ecstasy. As they stood, locked together, bathed in the afternoon sun and the gazes of strangers below, Shane closed his eyes and let the tears of silent pain track down his face, lost in the sweat of their exertion.

Later that night, the Provincetown air carried the distant thump of bass and the cheerful hustle of bar life through the open windows. Shane stood in the shower, the hot water a futile attempt to wash away the chill that had settled deep in his bones. He reached for a fresh scent patch, his fingers clumsy as he peeled the backing and pressed it firmly over the gland on his neck. The lie was now a physical barrier. He couldn't risk Ilya smelling the sharp, acrid tang of his despair, the sickening cocktail of inadequacy and fear. The artificial, clean scent of the patch was a sterile, necessary armor.

The bathroom door swung open without warning. Ilya strode in, naked, his phone in hand, a predatory gleam in his eyes. He slid open the glass door to the shower, the cool rush of air making Shane flinch. "What about this one?" Ilya asked, his voice a low, excited rumble as

he held the phone out. On the screen was the profile of a handsome, smiling man. "His name's James. He's a beta. I'd love to see him running his hands all over you while I knot you so good. No claiming instincts to worry about. Just fun." Shane forced a tight smile, the muscles in his face aching with the effort. "Sure," he said, the word barely audible over the spray of the water.

But inside, Shane was screaming. He knew that interface, the stark profile pictures and the little yellow and blue speech bubbles. *Grindr*. He had only seen it once, years ago, when a friend had shown him the app, but the design was unmistakable.

Had Ilya made an account without even asking him? Or worse, had he always had one, lying dormant in his phone like a loaded gun?

The implications were staggering, a fresh hell of betrayal. Ilya slid the phone back into his pocket and leaned in to kiss him, a brief, possessive press of lips. "Good," he murmured, mistaking Shane's rigid stillness for anticipation. "I'll see if he's free." He left the bathroom, and a moment later, Shane heard it—the distinctive series of pings and buzzes from a new match, from a conversation starting. Each notification was a needle in his heart.

Shane turned his face into the scalding spray, letting the water wash away the single, hot tear that escaped. He felt like he was drowning, suffocating in the tight confines of the shower stall, the scent blocker a suffocating lie against his skin. The pings from the other room continued, each one a fresh, vivid image of Ilya's hands typing messages to another man.

But why? Was Shane not enough? Had the quiet, domestic bliss they'd fought so hard for become a cage for Ilya's vibrant, wild spirit?

He squeezed his eyes shut, a wave of nausea rolling through him. He was going to be sick. But maybe... maybe this was what his alpha needed to feel truly alive, to feel the thrill of the hunt again. If Shane couldn't provide that excitement on his own, maybe he had to be the one to allow it, to be the vessel for Ilya's happiness, even if it shattered him in the process. The thought was a bitter pill, a sacrifice he felt honor-bound to make. *Fuck, it was breaking his heart.*

An hour later, a sharp, confident knock echoed through the quiet rental. Shane's heart seized in his chest. This was it. He emerged from the bedroom, drawn by Ilya's call from the living room, and found a veritable giant standing in their entryway. James was easily six-four, slightly taller than Ilya, with a physique that spoke of countless hours in a gym. His arms were huge, straining against the sleeves of a simple workout t-shirt, and a pair of grey sweatpants hung low on his lean hips.

Ilya was seated on the couch, a calm, confident smile on his face as he held out a pen and a stack of papers. "Just a quick formality," Ilya explained, his tone smooth. "An NDA. We value our privacy." A small, bitter part of Shane registered the irony, but at least it meant Ilya was still thinking, still protecting their future. Once James signed, Ilya tossed the papers onto the coffee table. "Shane," he said, his voice laced with a dark, proprietary pride. "Your present is here."

Ilya noticed the fresh scent patch on Shane's neck as he walked closer, but he dismissed it with a surge of misplaced understanding. Of course. His omega was nervous, and protective. He wouldn't want to give a stranger even a hint of his precious scent. It was just another sign of Shane's utter devotion, and it made Ilya's cock harden. He pulled two armchairs from against the wall, placing them side-by-side, a perfect viewing platform.

"James, sit," he commanded, gesturing to one chair as he took the other. Then, his eyes fixed on Shane. "Stand there," he ordered, pointing to the exact spot in front of the living room windows where he had claimed him hours before. "Undress. Touch yourself. Show our guest how beautiful you are." Shane's hands trembled as he reached for the hem of his shirt. He pulled it over his head, his movements feeling stiff and robotic. He could only look at Ilya. If he looked at James, at the tall, silent observer, he knew he would break, he would cry, and the game would be up.

Shane fumbled with his belt, his zipper, letting his pants pool around his ankles. He was now in only his briefs, the fabric doing little to hide the half-hearted swell of his erection, a physical response to Ilya's commanding presence rather than true arousal.

Shane's breath hitched as James rose from his chair, the scent of clean sweat and something vaguely metallic filling the space between them. The beta's voice, a low rumble that vibrated through Shane's bones, cut through the heavy silence. "Alpha," James said, his gaze fixed solely on Ilya. "May I approach your omega?" Ilya's response was a growl of assent, a sound that should have comforted Shane but now felt like a death knell. "He's all yours to appreciate," Ilya said, then his eyes found Shane's, a dark challenge. "But first... Shane, do you give permission?" Shane's head moved in a wooden nod, the motion barely perceptible, but it was enough.

James closed the distance, his presence overwhelming. Shane flinched as hot breath ghosted across his nape before rough, calloused fingers traced the curve of his ass, squeezing with confidence. The touch was invasive, a violation that sent shockwaves of repulsion through him, yet his body betrayed him with a treacherous twitch of interest. "Such a perfect ass," James murmured, now speaking directly to Ilya but loud enough for Shane to hear every degrading word. "May I touch more?" Ilya's answer was a sharp bark of "Yes."

Shane's stomach churned as James's other hand snaked around his waist, fingers curling around his half-hard cock with practiced ease. A thumb swiped over the sensitive head, smearing pre-cum, the intimate gesture feeling like a violation. Shane's hips bucked involuntarily, a gasp escaping his lips. Then James's mouth was on his neck, hot lips pressing against the scent patch as if trying to taste the lie beneath. "May I?" James asked again, his fingers tightening their grip on Shane's shaft. "May I taste what's yours?" Ilya's response was immediate, "No. Shane is allowed to pull that off if he is comfortable." James did not push the issue instead he continued to explore Shane's body.

The air crackled with tension as James's other hand moved between Shane's cheeks, thick fingers probing, testing his entrance with clinical curiosity. "May I prepare him for you, Alpha?" James asked, his voice thick with lust. Ilya's hand was now inside his jeans, stroking his own erection as he watched. "Yes," Ilya breathed. "Stretch him. Make him ready." Shane's

eyes widened in horror as James's fingers, slick with something from god knows where, pushed inside him. The sensation was foreign and uncomfortable.

Shane's gaze remained locked on Ilya, a silent plea for rescue, but all he saw was raw, unbridled lust. James's fingers worked him open, then withdrew "Please, Alpha," James begged, his voice strained with desire. "Let me have him, just for a moment."

The sound of James's zipper being pulled down was the catalyst. A red haze descended over Ilya's vision. He shot out of the chair, the movement so fast and violent it sent it skittering backward across the floorboards. "Stop." James froze in his spot.

"You do not get to penetrate my omega. Not with your cock. That is mine." He was practically vibrating with a territorial rage that was barely leashed. He'd wanted to show Shane off, not have him used the way Ilya would be doing with him.

James, taken aback by the sudden shift in mood, held his hands up in a placating gesture. He sighed, a sound of disappointed resignation. "Of course, Alpha. My apologies." He leaned in, his gaze still fixed on Shane's exposed neck. He understood the rules of this new game. Instead of pushing further, he pressed his open mouth against the skin just above the patch, sucking hard, determined to taste some part of this forbidden fruit. His fingers dug into Shane's ass as he tried to pull a reaction from him, a sign of shared pleasure.

That was the moment everything broke. As James's lips created suction, they pulled the edge of the scent patch away. A wisp of scent escaped, but it wasn't the warm, inviting sweetness of maple syrup Shane usually exuded. It was pure, concentrated acid, the smell of something curdled and spoiled, like old cheese left to rot in the sun.

It was the stench of profound, soul-deep distress, a chemical alarm of an omega in agony. It hit Ilya like a puck to the mouth. He'd never smelled anything so vile, so horrifying, and the knowledge that it was coming from his Shane sent a shockwave of pure terror through him.

"GET OUT!" The roar that tore from Ilya's chest was feral, animalistic. His eyes bled red, alpha rage consuming him entirely. "GET THE FUCK OUT!" The beta scrambled backward, the acrid scent of distress triggering his own primal fear. He could smell the agony now, thick and suffocating, and he knew he had stepped into a minefield of epic proportions.

Shane didn't wait for the beta to leave. He fled, a raw, wounded sound tearing from his throat as he scrambled back toward the master bedroom. He slammed the door, his fingers fumbling with the lock until it clicked shut, the small sound a final, desperate barrier. He pressed his back against the wood, sliding down to the floor as sobs wracked his body, tearing themselves from his lungs with a violence that left him gasping. The air in the room was thick, but it was his own despair, and that was a thousand times more bearable than the suffocating performance he had just endured. Outside the door, he could hear Ilya's furious growls, the beta's stammering, terrified apologies, and the frantic rustle of clothes being hauled on.

"Jesus, Alpha, I'm sorry," James pleaded, the sound muffled by the door but laced with a genuine fear. "I didn't... I couldn't smell it until... I'm so sorry." The footsteps retreated quickly, a desperate scramble, followed by the front door slamming shut with a finality that

echoed through the silent apartment. For a moment, there was only the sound of Ilya's harsh, ragged breathing, the low, dangerous rumble of an alpha whose entire world had just been detonated from the inside out.

Ilya stood frozen in the living room, his fists clenched so tightly his knuckles were white, the red glow in his eyes slowly receding to reveal nothing but raw, naked horror. The scent of Shane's distress was still thick in the air, a toxic cloud that clung to the furniture, the windows, and his own skin. It was the smell of failure, the scent of an omega he had driven to the brink. The confident, dominant alpha from an hour ago was gone, replaced by a man drowning in the consequences of his own arrogance. He had wanted to show Shane off like a priceless trophy, and instead, he had treated him like a cheap party favor, shattering the very foundation of trust they had built.

He took a hesitant step toward the bedroom door, then another, the sound of his own footsteps unnaturally loud in the suffocating quiet. "Shane?" he called out, his voice a broken rasp. He stopped just short of the door, not daring to touch it, not trusting himself not to break it down. "Shane, please... open the door." He could hear the muffled sobs from the other side, each one a shard of glass embedding itself in his heart. "I'm so sorry," he whispered, pressing his forehead against the cool wood.

"I didn't know. I swear to god, I didn't know." He had been so blinded by his own selfish fantasy, so caught up in the thrill of exhibition, that he had ignored every subtle sign, every silent plea. He had seen the scent patch and thought it was a token of possessiveness, not a desperate shield. He had forced a nod and mistaken it for eagerness. The weight of his own stupidity was crushing.

Ten minutes stretched into an eternity, the silence from the bedroom a heavier punishment than any shouting could have been. Then, with a soft click, the lock disengaged. The door swung open, revealing Shane standing there, still naked and vulnerable, tear tracks stark on his pale face. The acrid scent of his distress billowed out. Without a word, Shane lunged forward and shoved Ilya hard in the chest, the force of it surprising them both.

"Am I not enough?" he choked out, his voice ragged with a pain so deep it was terrifying. "Was I ever? Did you ever once stop to ask me what I was comfortable with? Did you ever think to just... talk to me?" He wrapped his arms around himself, a futile attempt to hold together his shattered pieces. "I don't want anyone else, Ilya. The thought of you wanting someone else disgusts me."

"Never," Ilya whispered, the word catching in his throat, the alpha in him shrinking under the weight of the omega's anguish. He reached for Shane, but flinched back when Shane recoiled.

"Shane, listen to me. I don't want to share you. That was never about wanting someone else." He pulled his phone from his pocket, his hands shaking as he unlocked it and thrust it toward Shane. "The Grindr account... I downloaded it this afternoon. For this. This stupid, fucked-up fantasy. The password is your birthday. Here, take it. Look through it. I have nothing to hide from you. I'll give you access to everything."

Shane snatched the phone, his fingers flying across the screen, confirming the story. But it did little to soothe the raw wound.

"After everything," he spat, his voice rising with a mixture of fury and devastation. "After what Comeau and those animals from the Metros did to you, you turn around and do this? You invite a stranger into our space to use me?" His anger faltered, replaced by a wave of self-loathing. "I know I should have said something. I know I should have told you no, but I didn't want to disappoint you! But you shouldn't want anyone but me anyway!"

"It's not about that!" Ilya pleaded, his own voice cracking. "It's not about wanting someone else. It's about... you. It's about giving you experiences I thought you deserved, things you missed out on because your life was put on hold for me, for Elena. I wanted to give you a taste of the wild. I feel like I've held you back, Shane."

Shane's own pain was momentarily eclipsed by a surge of white-hot rage at Ilya's self-deprecation. Before he could think, before he could process the impulse, he drew back his fist and punched Ilya square in the center of his chest. The impact was a dull thud, more shocking than painful.

"Don't you dare," he snarled, his voice shaking with a ferocity that startled them both. "Don't you ever say that. You're not holding me back, Ilya. You're my everything!" Tears streamed freely down his face now, hot and angry. "I don't want anything else! I don't want those experiences! I want a beautiful vacation with my alpha, my fiancé. I want lazy mornings and long walks on the beach and to fall asleep next to you every single night. I just want you. That's all I've ever wanted."

Ilya stood frozen, the spot on his chest where Shane had punched him tingling, a phantom echo of the omega's fury and pain. He looked at Shane, truly looked at him. And in that moment, the grand, misguided, alpha-centric fantasy he had built in his head crumbled into dust, leaving only the simple, devastating truth. He had almost destroyed the most precious thing in his life for a cheap thrill. He had been so obsessed with the idea of giving Shane a world of experiences that he had forgotten he was Shane's world.

A choked sob escaped Ilya's throat, a sound of utter defeat and profound remorse. He closed the small distance between them, not with the possessive dominance he had shown earlier, but with the tentative hesitancy of a man approaching a wounded animal. He sank to his knees on the floor in front of Shane, a position of absolute submission.

He reached out, his hands hovering for a second before gently, reverently, resting on Shane's hips. "I'm sorry," he whispered, the words inadequate but spoken with every fiber of his being.

"I'm so sorry, moy omega. I'm a fool. A blind, arrogant fool." He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against Shane's stomach. "I'll burn it all down," he vowed, his voice muffled by Shane's skin. "I'll delete the account. I'll spend the rest of this trip, the rest of my life, making this right. Just you and me. That's all I want. That's all I'll ever want."

Shane's body shuddered, the fight draining out of him all at once, leaving him hollowed out and exhausted. He brought a shaking hand up and threaded his fingers through Ilya's hair, the

gesture instinctual, a lifeline. He could feel the tremors running through Ilya's frame, the alpha's fear and regret a palpable force. "Just you and me," Shane echoed, the words a fragile whisper.

Later, wrapped together in the expansive bed, the scent of salt and tears replaced by the warm, comforting aroma of pure maple syrup and clean alpha musk, the raw emotions began to settle into a heavy silence. Shane shifted, propping himself up on an elbow to look down at Ilya, whose face was etched with a vulnerability Shane rarely saw. "We have to promise," Shane said, his voice serious but soft, no longer shaking with anger or pain. "No more assumptions. No more grand gestures without talking. I'm sorry I wasn't clear, that I let my fear of disappointing you stop me from communicating. But you can't just assume you know what I want, Ilya. We have to be a team in this, even in the fantasies."

He ran a gentle hand over Ilya's chest, right over the place he had punched him. "We promise to just... talk. No matter how hard it is."

Ilya met his gaze, his own eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "I promise," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "I promise, Shane."

There was no frenzied coupling, no desperate claiming. Instead, they simply held each other, a tangle of limbs and shared warmth in the moonlit room. Ilya's large hands traced soothing patterns on Shane's back, while Shane's fingers carded through Ilya's hair, a silent, rhythmic reassurance.

In the morning, the sun streamed through the windows, promising a new day. They lay intertwined, the events of the previous night a lingering shadow between them. Shane turned in Ilya's arms, looking up at him with a renewed resolve. "Ilya," he began gently, "I want you to know... you can always talk to me. About anything. Even... even about that. The attack. You don't have to carry it alone. I want you to be able to lean on me." His scent was a comforting wave, full of love and unwavering support, a safe harbor for whatever storm Ilya might be weathering internally.

A flicker of the old Ilya surfaced for a moment, a shadow passing over his features as Shane mentioned the attack. He tensed, a familiar, defensive wall automatically rising. But then he looked into Shane's steady, unwavering gaze, at the raw, earnest love offered without condition, and the wall crumbled. He let out a long, shuddering breath, the tension draining from his shoulders.

"I know," Ilya said, his voice quiet. "I know I can. And maybe... maybe someday I will." He leaned in, pressing a soft, grateful kiss to Shane's forehead. "But not today."

He shifted, rolling so he was half-propped on his elbow, a renewed energy in his eyes. "Let me do this for you, Shane. Let me plan five days of fun in this beautiful town, just for us. No more stupid fantasies, no more pushing boundaries. Just you and me. We'll go to the beach, we'll eat seafood until we're sick, we'll walk down Commercial Street and hold hands like a normal couple. I want to give you the vacation you deserve. The one I should have given you from the start."

"Okay," Shane whispered, a small, genuine smile finally touching his lips. "Okay, Ilya. Show me Provincetown." The relief that washed over Ilya's face was palpable, a weight being lifted he hadn't realized he was still carrying. He pulled Shane into a tight, almost desperate embrace, burying his face in Shane's hair and inhaling the clean, comforting scent of his omega, of his home. "I love you," Ilya murmured, the words a sacred vow. "Only you. Always you."

They started the next two days the same way. First, Herring Cove Beach, the rhythmic crash of waves a soothing backdrop to their easy conversation. They ate fried clams and lobster rolls from paper plates at weathered picnic tables, their fingers sticky with butter, laughing as they fed each other. They wandered the vibrant, chaotic streets of Provincetown, hands clasped tightly, Ilya pointing out historic landmarks while Shane dragged him into quirky art galleries filled with vibrant, chaotic energy. In the evenings, they'd Facetime Yuna and Elena, their faces pressed together on the small screen, sharing stories of their day as they tucked the girls into bed from hundreds of miles away. Once the calls ended, the airbnb became their private sanctuary, the daytime's gentle affection melting into the desperate, feverish need that only they could satisfy, their lovemaking a fierce and wordless reclaiming.

On the third day, after a leisurely lunch and a nap, they decided to go for a walk. As they strolled down Commercial Street, a flamboyant figure in a stunning sequined gown and towering heels broke away from a small crowd and sashayed directly toward them. "Well, look what the cat dragged in!" the queen exclaimed, her voice a theatrical boom. "If it isn't the couple from that viral hockey video! I'm Tina Burner, and I'm a huge fan." She fanned herself dramatically. "I have a show at The Wave tonight, and I would be absolutely honored if you would come be my guests. Front row, on me." Neither of them had ever been to a drag show before, and they exchanged a look. To Shane's surprise, the idea didn't spark a flicker of anxiety. The past few days had been so peaceful, so restorative, that the thought of a loud, celebratory night out felt exciting, not threatening. "We'd love to," Ilya said, and Tina winked before handing him a small card with the show details. "I'll save you two seats," she promised, before disappearing back into the crowd.

The bar was a burst of sound and color, a pulsing throb of bass that vibrated through the soles of Shane's shoes. He weaved through the throng of bodies, the air thick with the sweet, fruity scent of frozen cocktails and excited chatter. He felt good, truly relaxed for the first time in what felt like years. The knot of anxiety that had lived in his stomach since that awful night had finally loosened its grip, replaced by a light, buzzing anticipation. He leaned against the polished wood of the bar, catching the bartender's eye and ordering two ridiculously elaborate frozen drinks in souvenir cups shaped like mermaids. As he waited, a familiar, deep voice cut through the noise beside him. "Shane?" Shane froze, his blood turning to ice. He turned slowly, every muscle in his body tensing, and there he was. James. He was wearing a tight-fitting NYU hockey shirt and a forced, pained smile.

The color drained from James's face the moment their eyes met. The confident beta from the apartment was gone, replaced by a terrified young man who looked like he'd seen a ghost. He immediately stepped forward, holding up a placating hand. "Please," he said, his voice strained. "Let me. Just... let me get these." Before Shane could protest, James had already

shoved his credit card across the bar, rattling off the order to the bartender. "Shane, I..." he started, stumbling over his words. "I am so, so sorry about the other night. About everything. I can't... I haven't slept. I went too far, and I caused you stress, and I feel sick about it. I wish I had known. I am just... so incredibly sorry."

Shane listened, a strange sense of detachment washing over him. The man in front of him wasn't a monster; he was just a piece of a terrible, misguided puzzle that Ilya had created. "It's fine," Shane said, his own voice softer than he expected. "It's in the past." James seemed to sag with relief, then he gestured with his chin toward a rowdy group of guys in matching team jackets a few feet away. "I'm here with my team, from NYU.," he explained, trying for a normal, friendly tone. "If you and your fiancé wanted to hang out after, we'd love to have you. Drinks are on me, all night." Shane managed a small, genuine smile.

"That's really kind of you, James," Shane said, the words coming out with a surprising ease. "But I think we're just going to enjoy the show, just the two of us tonight." The rejection was gentle but firm, a clear boundary that James accepted with a nod of understanding, a flicker of something akin to relief in his eyes. "Of course," he said quickly. "I get it. Well, you two have a great night. And again... I'm sorry." With a final, awkward nod, James retreated, melting back into the safety of his hockey team. The bartender set the two mermaid-shaped cups on the bar, the frozen drinks a swirl of electric blue and shocking pink. Shane picked them up and turned back toward the stage.

He had to navigate the thickening crowd, the bass of the music thumping a frantic rhythm against his chest. As he got closer, he could see Ilya leaning forward in his seat, his attention fixed on the stage where Tina Burner was delivering a blisteringly funny monologue. When Shane reached their row, Ilya turned, his face lighting up when he saw the drinks. "Took you long enough," he teased, but his smile was warm as he reached for the blue concoction. "What'd I miss?" he asked, taking a long sip. His eyes, however, were scanning Shane's face, a flicker of concern cutting through his relaxed demeanor. He could sense a subtle shift, a residue of something. "You okay?" he pressed, his voice dropping slightly. Shane slid into the seat beside him, setting the pink mermaid cup on the small table between them. "You're not going to believe who was at the bar," he said, his tone flat.

He took a sip of his own drink, the cold, sweet liquid a welcome shock to his system. "James," Shane said simply, watching as Ilya's easy expression instantly vanished. He went on, recounting the brief, awkward encounter with a strange sense of calm, explaining the beta's profuse apology, the offer of drinks, and the invitation to join his team. "He seemed really shaken up, Ilya," Shane concluded, searching his fiancé's face. "I think he genuinely feels terrible."

A protective fire ignited in Ilya's eyes at the mention of James's name, but it wasn't the destructive rage from the other night. This was a cooler, more calculated burn, the spark of an alpha seeking to reassert control not through dominance, but through a grand, corrective gesture. "I know what to do," he said, his voice a low, confident rumble. He leaned in, pressing a quick, hard kiss to Shane's temple. "Trust me. I'll make it right." Before Shane could ask what he meant, Ilya was out of his seat and pushing back through the crowd with single-minded purpose. Shane watched as he spoke to the bartender, gestured toward James's

table, and soon a cheerful waitress was heading toward the group of young men with a tray laden with shots.

When Ilya returned, he slid back into his seat, a self-satisfied smirk on his face, just as the lights dimmed and Tina Burner strode onto the stage. Shane instinctively leaned into him, nestling his head into the warm, secure space of Ilya's armpit. The show exploded into life. It was a riot of campy perfection, a whirlwind of flawless lip-syncing, dazzling costume changes, and biting, hilarious commentary. Ilya, swept up in the joyous energy, became a one-man money machine, pulling a thick wad of one-dollar bills from his wallet and showering the stage, tipping Tina and her backup dancers with such enthusiastic generosity that Shane lost count somewhere around three hundred. He was laughing so hard his sides ached, the pure, unadulterated fun of it all washing away the last lingering shadows of their fight.

Partway through the show, Tina struck a dramatic pose, one hand on her hip. "Alright, my loves, settle down for a minute," she boomed, her smile wide. "I want to see the hands of all you P-town virgins! Anyone here for their very first drag show?" Without a second's hesitation, Ilya grabbed Shane's wrist and shot his arm into the air, a proud, beaming grin on his face. Tina's eyes locked onto them immediately. "Well, well! What do we have here?" she purred, striding over to the edge of the stage on her impossibly high heels. She grabbed Shane's hand, pulling him effortlessly up onto the stage next to her.

Shane stood on the stage, the heat of the spotlights making his face flush, the roar of the crowd a deafening, exhilarating wave. Tina slung a companionable arm around his shoulders, her sequined gown cool against his bare skin. "And what's your name, honey?" she asked, her voice magnified by the microphone. "Shane," he managed, a giggle escaping him as the sheer absurdity of the situation hit him. "Shane!" Tina repeated to the cheering crowd. "And who are you here with tonight, handsome?" Shane's eyes found Ilya in the front row, who was holding up his phone, recording the entire spectacle with a look of pure, unadulterated joy. "I'm here with my fiancé, Ilya," Shane said, the word "fiancé" feeling brand new and powerful on his tongue.

A collective "aww" went through the audience, but Tina wasn't finished. "A fiancé! Are we celebrating something special?" Shane glanced back at Ilya, who gave him an encouraging thumbs-up. "Yeah," Shane said, a genuine, happy smile spreading across his face. "Kinda. We got engaged a while back, but we haven't really had a chance to celebrate, just us. This trip is kind of it for us." The crowd erupted again, this time with even more fervor, a wave of genuine happiness for the two men on display. "Well, now time better than the present!" Tina declared, snapping her fingers. A stagehand materialized with two shot glasses. Tina handed one to Shane. "To new beginnings," she toasted, clinking her glass against his. "And to celebrating your goddamn selves!" They threw back the shots, the liquid burning a warm, fiery trail down Shane's throat.

He gave Tina a quick, grateful hug before stumbling back to his seat, the applause following him. Ilya grabbed him the moment he sat down, wrapping his arms tightly around him and kissing him soundly on the cheek, his own face split by a massive, proud grin. "You were a natural," he laughed, clicking his phone off and shoving it back into his pocket. From the stage, Tina watched them for a moment, a soft, knowing smile on her face. She picked up her

microphone again, silencing the band. "You know," she said, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone that still filled the entire room. "I see a lot of love in this town. But that kind of love... that's the real...deal," she continued, a wicked glint in her eye as the crowd leaned in, hanging on her every word. She paused for dramatic effect, letting the silence build before delivering the punchline with the force of a gospel sermon.

"May that love find me... and punch me right in the dick!" The bar erupted. A wave of laughter, applause, and cheers so loud it shook the rafters. Shane doubled over, burying his face in Ilya's shoulder as he howled with laughter, the sheer, joyful vulgarity of it a perfect, cathartic release. Ilya was laughing too, a deep, rumbling sound that Shane felt more than heard, his arms wrapped securely around Shane, anchoring him in the midst of the glorious chaos.

When the final bows had been taken and the house lights came up, the mood was still electric. Ilya was still buzzing, a wide, unselfconscious grin plastered on his face. He pulled Shane close, speaking directly into his ear to be heard over the crowd. "You were incredible up there," he said, his voice warm with affection. "So damn proud of you."

The walk home was a giddy, stumbling affair, their hands laced together, the leftover energy from the show thrumming between them. As soon as the door of the rental clicked shut behind them, Shane turned to Ilya, his eyes bright with an exhilarated light. "That was the most fun I've had in... ever," he declared, a wide, infectious smile spreading across his face. "We have to do more of that when we get back to Boston. We have to find shows, Ilya. All of them." Ilya couldn't help but laugh, pulling him into a tight embrace and lifting him off the ground for a moment. "Anything you want, moy omega. Anything."

The next morning, Shane was already awake, watching the steady rise and fall of Ilya's chest. An idea, born from the profound peace and security of the night before, took root. He slipped under the covers, his movements slow and deliberate, until he was settled between Ilya's thighs. He took Ilya's half-hard cock into his mouth, the taste of sleep-warm skin familiar and intoxicating. He began to work him with a slow, languid rhythm, his tongue tracing sensitive veins, his lips creating a gentle, suctioning pressure.

Ilya woke with a gasp, the sensation of Shane's mouth on him so intensely pleasurable he was sure he was still caught in a vivid, beautiful dream. But then he looked down and saw Shane's dark head bobbing under the sheets, and the reality was a thousand times better. He tangled a hand in Shane's hair, his hips beginning to move of their own accord. For the next thirty minutes, the world outside the bedroom ceased to exist. There was only the slick heat of Shane's mouth, the desperate sounds Ilya made, and the building, undeniable tide of his orgasm. With a hoarse cry, he came, spilling down Shane's throat in a shuddering release. He pulled Shane up, claiming his mouth in a deep, possessive kiss, tasting himself on Shane's tongue. "God, you're incredible," he breathed against Shane's lips. "Now let me get you off in the shower." Shane's answering smile was pure sunshine.

Shane scurried off toward the bathroom with a playful wiggle of his hips, leaving Ilya sprawled on the bed, a boneless, satisfied mess. He watched him go, a lazy grin on his face, before he rolled over and grabbed his phone from the nightstand. The screen lit up with a

flurry of notifications, a cascade of texts from Cliff. They all said the same thing: "Look at this link." and "Just wanted you to know." Ilya's stomach tightened, a familiar knot of dread coiling in his gut. He tapped on the link, a Boston News article loading onto his screen.

The headline: "*Former Montreal Metros Apprehended in Virginia.*" His breath hitched as he read the details. An anonymous tip. Comeau spotted buying groceries at a small market in Alexandria. Police raiding a rundown shack. The final piece of the puzzle had been captured.

He wanted to be the one to confront Comeau, to deliver the beating he so richly deserved, to finally get that lick back. He wanted to feel bone break under his fists. But the feeling was fleeting, washed away by an overwhelming tidal wave of pure, unadulterated relief. It was over. Comeau was in custody, just like Sasha. The threat was gone. He could breathe. A profound sense of peace settled over him, so deep and all-consuming it left him feeling lightheaded. He and Shane could finally, truly put the whole Sasha saga behind them.

The sound of the shower starting pulled him from his thoughts. He stood up, the phone still clutched in his hand, and walked toward the bathroom, a sense of lightness in his steps he hadn't realized he'd been missing. He pushed open the door, the room already filling with steam. Shane was standing under the spray, his back to the door, the water cascading over his shoulders and down the curve of his spine. Ilya stepped into the shower behind him, wrapping his arms around Shane's waist and pulling him flush against his chest. He pressed a soft kiss to the nape of Shane's neck, the scent of his soap and the steam mixing with Shane's own comforting aroma.

The steam swirled around them, cocooning them in a warm, misty world. Shane leaned back into Ilya's embrace, a soft sigh of contentment escaping his lips. "I thought you got lost," he murmured, his voice a sleepy, contented rumble. Ilya tightened his arms, resting his chin on Shane's wet shoulder, the news still buzzing in his head like a distant, happy hum. "Just had to check something," he said, his voice low and even. He didn't want to break the spell of the morning, not yet. This was their sanctuary, and the grim reality of the world could wait a few more minutes. He kissed Shane's shoulder again, then his neck, his lips trailing a path of warm water and soft kisses. "Now, where were we?" he growled playfully, nipping at Shane's earlobe.

Shane turned in his arms, the water plastering his dark hair to his forehead, his eyes sparkling with mischief and arousal. "I believe you were about to make good on a promise," he said, his hands coming up to rest on Ilya's chest. Ilya captured one of Shane's hands, bringing it to his lips and kissing his palm. "A promise I fully intend to keep," he said, his voice dropping to a husky whisper.

The water sliced over Ilya's shoulders as he knelt, the powerful spray hitting his back as he looked up at Shane. There was a raw, unfiltered worship in Ilya's gaze, a stark contrast to the playful energy from moments before. He took Shane's hard length into his mouth without preamble, setting a deep, punishing rhythm from the very start. Shane's head fell back against the cool tile with a soft thud, a choked gasp tearing from his throat as Ilya worked him with a desperate hunger. His hands, slick with water and soap, tangled in Ilya's soaked hair, gripping tight, not to guide, but to ground himself against the overwhelming sensations. He began to

move, a slow, shallow thrusting of his hips, fucking Ilya's face with a growing urgency, the slick sounds of it echoing off the shower walls.

Just as Shane felt the familiar tightening coil of release, Ilya pulled back, leaving him gasping. With a firm, deliberate tug on the handful of hair he still held, Ilya guided Shane to turn around, pressing his chest against the slick tile. "Spread your legs," Ilya commanded, his voice a low growl that vibrated through Shane's entire body. He did, bracing himself against the wall as Ilya's hands gripped his ass, spreading him open. Ilya's tongue was hot and insistent, licking a bold stripe over his most intimate place before delving inside, a wet, possessive claiming that made Shane's knees buckle. The pleasure was sharp, almost too intense, a current that ran straight up his spine. He arched back, a silent plea for more, for everything.

After a long, torturous moment, Ilya pulled away, giving Shane's ass a sharp, appreciative slap. He turned Shane back around to face him once more, their bodies close in the steamy confines. Ilya's fingers, still slick, found Shane's entrance, pressing inside, one, then two, scissoring and stretching as he simultaneously took Shane's cock back into his mouth. The dual sensations were devastating. The fullness of Ilya's fingers curling inside him, hitting that spot that made stars burst behind his eyes, combined with the relentless, sucking heat of Ilya's mouth on him. It was a perfect, overwhelming assault, and Shane couldn't hold back. He cried out Ilya's name as he came, his body convulsing, his release pulsing down Ilya's throat.

After a quick, messy breakfast of pastries and coffee at a small, sun-drenched café overlooking the harbor, they decided to spend their last full day simply enjoying the beach. They were sitting at a small wrought-iron table, the sounds of gulls and the gentle lapping of waves creating a peaceful backdrop. Ilya watched as Shane licked a flake of croissant from his lip, a small, unconscious gesture that made Ilya's chest ache with affection. Now was the right time. There would never be a perfect moment, but this was close.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, the screen still displaying the article. He didn't say a word, simply sliding it across the table until it stopped in front of Shane. Shane looked up from his coffee, a question in his eyes, before his gaze dropped to the screen. He read the headline, and the color slowly drained from his face. His fork clattered onto his plate as he read the details, his eyes scanning the words with a growing intensity. He looked up at Ilya, his own eyes wide with a disbelief that was slowly being replaced by a dawning, tidal wave of relief.

The silence stretched between them until it finally snapped with the force of Shane's exhale. He looked up from the screen, his eyes meeting Ilya's, and the raw, unguarded relief shining there was so profound it made Ilya's chest ache. "They caught them," Shane whispered. "It's actually over." He reached across the small table, his fingers finding Ilya's, which were clenched into a loose fist on the wrought iron. He gently unfurled them, lacing their fingers together. "Okay," he said, his voice gaining strength, a new resolve hardening in his tone. "Okay. We read this, we acknowledge it. And now we put it away. This is our last full day, and I want to spend it with my fiancé." He squeezed Ilya's hand, a small, determined smile touching his lips. "Let's go to the beach. And tonight... let's go dancing."

A slow grin spread across Ilya's face, chasing away the last lingering shadows in his eyes. "Dancing?" he repeated, the word a pleased rumble in his chest. "You hate dancing."

"I hate a lot of things I do for you," Shane shot back with a playful smirk. "You love it. So I want to go. I want to see you happy. I want to spin you around a ridiculously loud dance floor." The easy banter was back, a familiar, comforting rhythm. Ilya leaned across the table, ignoring the wobble of the coffee cups, and pressed a lingering, coffee-flavored kiss to Shane's lips. "Anything you want, moy lyubov," he murmured against his mouth. "Anything." They paid for their breakfast, and walked hand-in-hand toward the sun-drenched expanse of Herring Cove, the sand already warm beneath their feet.

They found a spot away from the main crowds, spreading their towels on the sand.

Ilya immediately abandoned all pretense of relaxation and was on his feet in seconds, dragging Shane toward the water with boyish enthusiasm. The initial shock of the Atlantic was breathtaking, a cold, clean shock that stole the air from their lungs. But Ilya, ever the powerhouse, plunged right in, disappearing under a turquoise wave before surfacing with a triumphant whoop. Shane, more hesitant, eased himself in, shivering as the water swirled around his waist. Ilya closed the distance between them, pulling him into a warm, salty embrace that was immediately disrupted by Ilya tackling him sideways into an oncoming wave. They erupted from the water sputtering and laughing, engaging in a splashing war that was less about winning and more about the pure, uninhibited joy of it all.

Hours later, exhausted and pleasantly sun-drowsy, they lay back on their towels to dry. Ilya lay on his stomach, head resting on his arms, watching as Shane sat up and began applying sunscreen with methodical care. The afternoon light caught the droplets of water still clinging to the fine hairs on Shane's arms and the nape of his neck, making them glitter like tiny diamonds. Without a word, Ilya propped himself up on an elbow. "Let me," he said softly, taking the bottle from Shane's hands. He warmed the lotion in his palms before touching Shane's back, spreading it in slow, circular motions over his shoulders and down the sensitive groove of his spine.

As the sun began its slow descent, painting the sky in strokes of apricot and lavender, they walked the length of the beach, their footprints a temporary mark on the damp, packed sand at the water's edge. The conversation flowed easily, a comfortable stream of shared thoughts, quiet jokes, and future plans that felt solid and real for the first time in a long while. They talked about nothing and everything—the best way to grill a steak, a stupid movie they'd seen, what kind of dog they might get.

Back at the airbnb, the comfortable, sun-soaked lethargy of the day clung to them. As soon as the door clicked shut, Shane turned, a mischievous glint in his eye. "Alright," he announced, tapping Ilya on the chest. "Your turn to wait. I'm getting ready, and you're not allowed to see me until I'm done." Before Ilya could protest, Shane ducked into the bathroom, and the soft click of the lock echoed in the quiet living room. Ilya was left standing there, a slow grin spreading across his face. The mystery was intoxicating. He settled onto the edge of the bed,

the anticipation a thrumming, restless energy in his veins, as he listened to the muffled sounds of shuffling and music starting up from behind the closed door.

For nearly an hour, Ilya waited, the silence from the bathroom broken only by the occasional thump of a shoe or the blast of a hairdryer. He finally dressed himself, pulling on a pair of slim-fitting black trousers and a black silk button-up shirt, leaving the top few buttons undone. The stark monochrome was a perfect canvas, designed to recede and put all the focus on Shane. Just as he was checking his reflection in the darkened window, he heard the bathroom lock click open. He turned, his breath catching in his throat as the door swung inward.

Shane stepped out, and Ilya's world compressed to a single, blinding point of light. He was wearing a pair of high-waisted, black leather pants that clung to him like a second skin, tapering down to hit perfectly at the ankle where they met sleek black Chelsea boots. Just above the pants was a sheer, shimmering silver crop top, so fine it was like woven starlight, offering a tantalizing glimpse of the smooth skin of his midriff. He wore no jacket, allowing the summer heat to kiss his exposed skin, the delicate chain resting against his collarbones drawing the eye down. He looked like a deity.

A low, guttural sound rumbled in Ilya's chest, something between a growl and a whimper. He took an involuntary step forward, then another, closing the distance between them until he could feel the warmth radiating from Shane's skin. "Too much?" Ilya repeated, his voice a husky, strangled whisper. He reached out with a trembling hand, his fingers hovering just above the shimmering fabric of the crop top before they brushed against the smooth, warm skin of Shane's stomach. His touch was reverent, worshipful, tracing the defined lines of muscle with a feather-light pressure. "Shane... you look like... you're not real."

His other hand came up to rest on the small of Shane's back, pulling him flush against his own body. He dipped his head, pressing a hot, open-mouthed kiss to Shane's abdomen, right above the waistband of the leather pants. He couldn't stop touching him, his palms smoothing over the sheer fabric, tracing the delicate silver chain, memorizing the texture of Shane's skin against the cool leather. He looked up, his dark eyes blazing with an almost feral intensity. "I'm the luckiest man alive," he breathed, the words a sacred vow. "I'm going to have to fight off every person in that club tonight, and I will happily do it." He straightened up, framing Shane's face with his hands, his thumb stroking Shane's cheekbone. "You're perfect."

A faint blush colored Shane's cheeks, a shy, pleased smile touching his lips. "So... not too much, then?" he teased, his voice a little breathless from the intensity of Ilya's reaction. He felt powerful, desirable, a feeling he was only just beginning to truly own. He watched as Ilya's eyes drifted down again, lingering on the sliver of exposed skin. Ilya's hands slid from Shane's face back down to his waist, his thumbs hooking just inside the waistband of the pants, a possessive, claiming gesture that sent a shiver of anticipation down Shane's spine. "Not too much," Ilya confirmed, his voice a low, confident rumble.

Strobe lights sliced through the dim, hazy air, painting the gyrating crowd in fleeting flashes of neon. They pushed their way to the bar, and Shane, fueled by a newfound confidence, ordered them both a shot of tequila followed by a brightly colored, deceptively strong

cocktail. The alcohol hit him fast, a warm, liquid courage that melted away the last of his dance-floor hesitation. He finished his drink, set the glass down with a decisive click, and grabbed Ilya's hand, pulling him toward the heart of the pulsing crowd.

At first, their dancing was a little awkward, a joyful but uncoordinated shuffle as they found the rhythm. But with each passing song and each sip from their second round of drinks, Shane loosened up, his movements becoming more fluid, more uninhibited. He was all over Ilya, his hands roaming freely over the alpha's chest and back, pressing their bodies together until there was no space left between them. The music swelled, a heavy, seductive beat, and their dancing shifted into something raw and primal. Shane turned, grinding his ass back against Ilya's front in a slow, deliberate roll of his hips that made Ilya groan against the shell of his ear. Ilya's hands slid down to grip Shane's hips, holding him tight as he buried his face in Shane's neck, their bodies moving as one in a sea of sweat and light.

They were lost in their own world, a tangle of limbs and desperate, open-mouthed kisses, when a firm tap landed on Ilya's shoulder. He broke away from Shane's lips, a flash of annoyance in his dark eyes, ready to fend off an unwanted advance. But standing there, framed in a cascade of purple and blue lights, was Tina Burner in all her glorious drag. "Well, look who it is!" she boomed over the music, her smile wide and genuine. A wave of pure joy washed over them, and they both immediately pulled her into a tight, three-way hug. "You two clean up nice!" Tina laughed, pulling back. "Listen, I'm off to my next gig, but you need this," she said, pulling a sharpie from her cleavage and scribbling a number on Ilya's cocktail napkin.

"You call this number anytime," Tina said, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial but still-commanding level. "P-town in the summer, New York the rest of the year. We'll party." Then, leaning in, she planted a loud, theatrical kiss on each of their cheeks, the scent of hairspray and expensive perfume hanging in the air for a moment after she pulled away. With a final, dazzling smile and a little finger wave, she turned and sashayed back through the crowd, a vision of sequined confidence disappearing into the neon chaos.

As soon as she was out of sight, they reactivated. Ilya's hands, which had been resting on Shane's hips, slid possessively onto the sliver of exposed stomach, his thumbs stroking the skin just above the waistband of the leather pants. He pulled Shane back against him, the movement hard and deliberate, grinding their hips together to the beat of a new, even heavier track. He lowered his head, his mouth finding the sensitive skin just below Shane's ear, sucking gently at first, then with a possessive pressure that was sure to leave a dark mark.

Shane's head lolled back, resting on Ilya's shoulder as a breathy moan escaped his lips, a sound that was swallowed by the pounding music. The sensation of Ilya's mouth on him, the wet heat and the claiming bite, sent tingles of pleasure straight through him. He could feel the weight of Ilya's gaze on the crowd, a dark, predatory warning to anyone who might dare to watch. But Shane didn't care. He reveled in it. He pushed back harder, rolling his body in a sinuous wave, one arm reaching up to curl around Ilya's neck, fingers tangling in the hair at his nape, holding him right where he was. They were a spectacle, a raw, unapologetic display of desire, two bodies perfectly in sync, lost in their own world under the watchful, pulsing lights.

Shane pressed himself flush against Ilya, the hard line of the alpha's erection a stark promise against his hip. With a boldness that felt both new and utterly right, Shane slid his hand between them, palm pressing firmly against the bulge in Ilya's pants. He leaned in, his lips brushing the shell of Ilya's ear, the words a hot, breathy whisper against the roar of the music. "Take me home," he begged. He didn't need to be asked twice.

The walk back was a blur of tangled limbs and muffled laughter, a stumbling, giddy procession under the soft glow of the streetlights. They leaned on each other to stop the world from spinning. The door to the airbnb clicked shut. But before Ilya could even kick off his boots, Shane was moving. He stood in the center of the room, bathed in the moonlight streaming through the large front windows, and began to undress. The silver crop top was the first to go, pooling on the floor like liquid starlight. Then, with a slow, deliberate shimmy, he unzipped the leather pants, letting them slide down his legs until he stood there, beautifully bare and bathed in silvery light.

Shane turned, walking slowly toward the windows, placing his palms flat against the cool glass. He looked out at the quiet, sleeping street, but his attention was all for the man behind him. "Ilya," he whispered, his voice a fragile thread of need. "Come here. Knot me. Please. Right here. Just like this." He looked over his shoulder, his eyes dark with a plea that was worlds away from the frantic need of the previous week. This was different. This was a deliberate choice, an act of vulnerable, profound trust. "Eat me out," he begged, his voice cracking slightly. "Please, alpha. Let me feel you."

Ilya crossed the room with a slow grace. He didn't speak, letting the soft sounds of his clothes shifting and the thud of his boots hitting the floor be the only prelude. When he reached Shane, he didn't immediately touch. Instead, he dropped to his knees behind him, the sight of his powerful frame submitting in such a way a silent vow of worship. He placed a single kiss on the small of Shane's back, then another, lower, tracing the elegant curve of his spine with his lips until he was face-to-face with the most intimate part of him.

The first touch of Ilya's tongue was a soft, exploratory thing, a gentle, wet heat that made Shane shudder and press his palms harder against the window. There was no urgency, no frantic pace. Ilya took his time, lavishing Shane with slow, deliberate licks, circling the tight muscle before pressing inside, just a little, a teasing promise of what was to come. Shane's head fell forward, resting against the cool glass as he surrendered to the pleasure, a soft, continuous moan escaping his lips. He was completely exposed, bathed in moonlight for the quiet street outside to see, but he felt only the profound, all-consuming safety of Ilya's touch.

When Ilya finally rose to his feet, the movement was seamless. He kicked off his own pants and boxers, his hard cock jutting proudly. He didn't enter immediately, instead pressing the full, hot length of himself against Shane's back, wrapping one arm around his waist and the other across his chest, holding him in a tight, possessive embrace. "I love you," he murmured against Shane's shoulder blade, the words a warm puff of air. "I love you so much." Then, with one smooth, unhurried thrust, he pushed inside, sheathing himself to the hilt in Shane's welcoming heat.

Their bodies began to move together in a slow, rocking rhythm, a timeless dance in the silver light. Ilya's hands roamed over Shane's torso, mapping the exposed skin, his touch both

possessive and tender. He sucked a slow, deliberate mark onto the side of Shane's neck, not a bite of passion but a brand of belonging. When the base of his cock began to swell, the pressure a gentle, insistent stretch, Shane pushed back against him with a soft, desperate cry.

The knot locked them together, a perfect, immutable union that sent a wave of pure bliss through Shane's entire body. Ilya stilled his hips. He wrapped both arms securely around Shane's chest, pulling him upright so Shane's back was flush against his own chest. Ilya's hands splayed across Shane's stomach. One of Ilya's hands drifted up to gently tweak a hardened nipple while the other slid lower to wrap around Shane's weeping cock, stroking him in a slow, firm rhythm that matched the lazy roll of Ilya's hips.

Shane's head lolled back onto Ilya's shoulder, his lips parted in a silent gasp of pleasure. He felt utterly consumed, every nerve ending alight with sensation. He was caught between Ilya's body and the cool glass of the window, the moonlight illuminating the sheen of sweat on their skin, the powerful lines of Ilya's arms holding him, the desperate arch of his own throat. The world outside faded into a blurry backdrop; the only reality was the feeling of Ilya inside him, stretching and filling him, the possessive grip on his cock, and the deep, rumbling words of love that Ilya murmured against his skin. "You're everything," Ilya groaned, his hips beginning a slow, grinding motion that sent sparks of pleasure shooting up Shane's spine with every thrust.

A deep, guttural moan was torn from Shane's throat as Ilya's strokes became more insistent, the pressure at the base of his spine building to an unbearable, exquisite peak. His body arched, a taut bowstring of pure sensation, and with a sharp, broken cry, he came. Thick, white ropes of his release splashed against the cool glass of the window. As his orgasm wracked him, he felt Ilya's knot swell to its fullest size, a final, intense stretch that locked them together in an indescribable bond of completeness.

They stayed like that for a long moment, a tangle of limbs and heavy breathing, their bodies locked together in the silvery light. Ilya held Shane close, pressing soft, reverent kisses to the side of his neck and shoulders, murmuring quiet words of praise and love in Russian. When the knot finally began to subside, Ilya carefully, gently disengaged. He scooped Shane up into his arms, his omega limp and sated against his chest, and carried him away from the window and toward the bed, leaving their temporary mark on the world to fade in the night.

Ilya laid Shane down on the cool, clean sheets with a tenderness that belied the raw passion of moments before. He disappeared into the bathroom, returning with a warm, damp cloth and a bottle of water. He meticulously cleaned Shane's stomach and chest, his touch gentle and worshipful. He coaxed Shane to drink, holding the bottle to his lips and stroking his hair back from his forehead. He pulled the duvet over them, tucking Shane in securely before sliding in beside him, pulling him into a tight, protective embrace.

They lay there in the quiet darkness, the rhythmic sounds of their breathing the only noise in the room. Ilya's fingers traced lazy patterns on Shane's back, a soothing, repetitive motion. Shane burrowed deeper into the alpha's embrace, feeling a profound sense of peace settle over him, a feeling of being utterly safe, cherished, and home. Ilya pressed a final, lingering kiss to Shane's temple. "Spokoynoy nochi, moya zvezda," he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Some readers may find Ilya's behavior in this chapter confusing given what he experienced earlier in the story.

A few chapters ago, Ilya was assaulted. Because of that, it may seem strange that he later pushes toward a sexual situation involving another person without first having a clear conversation with Shane. The tension is intentional.

At this point in the story, Ilya has compartmentalized what happened to him. In his mind, the assault exists in a place he has not yet allowed himself to examine. He has not encountered strong triggers yet because he has separated himself from the experience. On a psychological level, it does not fully feel like something that happened to him. This distance allows him to keep moving forward without confronting the pain directly.

That distance will not last forever. In later chapters Ilya will be forced to face what happened and begin taking healthier steps forward.

In this moment, both characters are acting from instinct rather than reflection. Ilya and Shane are driven by their need to comfort each other and to be what the other person needs. Their relationship is still new and they have not developed the language or emotional distance required to discuss trauma, boundaries, or therapy in a meaningful way.

Because of that, their dynamic in this period becomes unhealthy. They have been living inside a protective bubble where their focus is almost entirely on each other. The outside consequences of their choices have not fully reached them yet.

It is also important to note that Shane does give consent during the scene. He nods and verbally agrees when asked. However his consent is complicated by his fear of disappointing Ilya and his strong desire to please the person he loves. Shane shows hesitation and tension that Ilya reads as nervousness about a new experience rather than genuine discomfort.

Ilya should have recognized those signals. His failure to see them is one of the mistakes that drives the conflict in this chapter.

From Ilya's perspective he is not placing himself in a vulnerable position. In the fantasy he imagines he is the one in control. He is not the one being physically touched and he believes he is giving Shane an experience that Shane deserves. That belief allows him to avoid confronting the emotional impact of his own assault.

The events that follow are meant to show how suppressed trauma and poor communication can harm people who care deeply for each other. This moment becomes an important turning point in their relationship and eventually pushes them toward healthier ways of understanding one another. Shane will continue to push for that conversation that Ilya is avoiding in later chapters.

Chapter 20: Hey Mickey!

The train rocks gently, a steady, hypnotic rhythm against the rails. Early morning light, thin and silver, pours through the large windows, turning the world outside into a watercolor painting. Sand dunes, bleached and windswept, slide past, followed by the churning, blue water of the Cape Cod Canal. Inside the car, the air is quiet, filled only with the occasional rustle of a newspaper. Shane sits by the window, his knee pulled up to his chest, a lukewarm coffee cup balanced in his hand. He watches the scenery fade, the Cape releasing its hold on him piece by piece.

Beside him, Ilya sits stiffly. He hasn't slept; Shane can see it in the tense set of his shoulders and the way he keeps rubbing the bridge of his nose as if to press a thought back into place. His own coffee, untouched, has grown cold. Shane knew this conversation was coming. The inevitable reckoning for the crack that had appeared in their perfect few days. But now, with the distance of the sea and land between them and the events, Shane feels a calm settle in his chest, a strength he didn't have before. It is time to talk.

The silence stretches, thin but tense, until Ilya finally breaks it. He doesn't turn to look at Shane, keeping his gaze fixed on the blurring landscape. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about that night," he says, his voice low and rough, stripped of its usual confidence. "The moment I smelled your distress." He pauses, the words clearly costing him something, a visible tremor in his hand as he sets down the cold cup. "Until that point, I thought... I thought you were nervous, but interested. That you trusted me. That we were exploring something new." He finally turns his head, his eyes meeting Shane's, and the raw guilt in them hits hard.

"The scent told me something else. Something was very wrong." He takes a shaky breath. "I should have stopped sooner." Then comes the words he's been holding back. "I'm afraid I broke something between us."

"Ilya... stop." The words aren't angry. They are firm. It cuts through Ilya's spiraling guilt, and he immediately falls silent, turning to face Shane fully. The shift in the space between them is palpable. Shane carefully sets his own coffee cup down on the small table, the quiet click a final punctuation. He turns his body, bringing all of his focus to bear on the alpha beside him.

"Before we go any further, you need to remember something," Shane says, his tone controlled, direct. "I was the center on the ice. My job was literally standing in the middle of chaos and controlling it. I saw problems before they happened, and I directed the play." He holds Ilya's gaze, a glint of hard-earned self-possession in his eyes. "Becoming your omega didn't erase that part of me. It just gave me a new job. But the player is still here."

He takes a breath, the steady rise of his chest a marked contrast to the tension still coiled in Ilya's frame. "I'm mad about what happened," Shane admits, the words chosen with precision, no room for misinterpretation. "When we were in that situation with James, I felt like I was losing control of the moment. Not physically. Emotionally." He watches the understanding

dawn on Ilya's face, the way the alpha's brow furrows. "I felt like I wasn't enough for you," Shane continues, the memory leaving a bitter taste. "Like I had to be more to deserve your attention. I said yes because I didn't want to disappoint you. That's not the same thing as wanting it. That realization is where the hurt comes from."

The words land heavily, and for a moment, there is only the rhythmic clatter of the train on the tracks. Ilya's face has gone pale, the guilt in his eyes now mingling with a dawning horror. Shane's gaze doesn't waver; he holds the alpha in a steady, unwavering look that is both an accusation and an invitation. "When you asked me to stand there," Shane continues, his voice softer now, but no less direct, "and touch myself... I did it because you told me to. It was an order I felt I had to follow to please you."

He pauses, swallowing past a sudden thickness in his throat. This is the hardest part to say aloud. "When you asked if I gave permission for him to touch me... I nodded because I didn't know how to say no in that moment. The words wouldn't come. All I could think was, 'This is what Ilya wants.'" He looks down at their joined hands, then back up, his own eyes glassy. "And when it went further... I kept waiting for you to look at me and realize I didn't want it. I kept waiting for you to see me, the way you always do."

Shane sees the raw, unguarded terror that surfaces in Ilya's eyes at his admission. He reaches out, his thumb gently stroking the back of Ilya's hand, the gesture both comforting and grounding.

"I know you're hurting," Shane says, his tone shifting to one of deep, resonant empathy. "I see how you're carrying this, what happened a few months ago and how it's weighing on you." He holds Ilya's gaze, letting the sincerity of his words sink in. "But we can't let it define us, or where we go from here. Whenever you're ready to talk about it I am right here."

He pauses, his voice softening further. "What matters now that we understand and support each other."

The heaviness in the car begins to lift as Shane lets the moment breathe. He leans back slightly against the worn upholstery, the tension in his own shoulders easing. "I need you to know," he says, a faint, genuine smile touching his lips. "If this conversation hadn't happened today, on this train, I would have brought it up later. Probably after our cruise with Elena." The smile widens as he looks at Ilya. "I wasn't going to let it fester. We were going to talk about it because I think that's what we need to do. We just need to communicate better."

"But the rest of this trip," Shane continues, his voice warm with memory, "the beach walks, seeing the drag show, the mornings waking up tangled together, laughing over ridiculous seafood, exploring all those little shops... those days were everything I could have dreamed of." He looks at Ilya, letting all the love he feels for him show plainly on his face. "I want to do that again someday. Another trip. Another vacation. But next time... without the whole situation."

A shaky breath escapes Ilya's lips, and he finally breaks eye contact, his gaze dropping to their intertwined hands on the seat between them. He looks at them as if they're strangers, as if he's seeing himself and Shane for the first time.. "I remember watching you on the beach... so relaxed. And for the first time in a long time, the noise in my head about the... the

attack... it went quiet." He struggles for a moment, the words catching. "Instead... I made part of our trip ugly."

He looks up. "You're right. What... it didn't just mess with my head, Shane. It made me feel like I was less than an alpha. That I couldn't protect what was mine, or even myself. And that night... I think I was trying to prove something. I wanted to be in control so badly that I didn't see *I was losing it*."

He swallows hard. "I was so focused on not being a victim anymore... that I didn't see I was making you feel like one. And that... that is a failure I will have to live with."

Ilya's raw confession is heavy with a self-loathing that makes Shane's own chest ache. But Shane tightens his grip on Ilya's hand. "That's not how this works," he says, his voice firm but laced with a deep tenderness. "We help each other. We get through this together. We can both make mistakes but it's really all about how we handle it going forward."

"We don't get to pretend it didn't happen, and we don't get to walk away from it. We face it together." The simple act of defining it as a shared burden, a "*we*" problem instead of a "*you*" problem, seems to physically unknot a muscle in Ilya's back. The alpha lets out a long and shuddering breath.

"I want to be strong for you," Ilya whispers, his voice cracking. "But I don't know how."

"You're already so strong. But if you feel like you need to do more then we learn that together, too," Shane answers simply. "Which is why I want us to go to therapy. Together."

Shane anticipates the immediate flinch, the instinctive recoil he knows so well from Ilya, and he presses on before the alpha can build a wall. "This isn't a punishment, Ilya. We both have things that we need to work on. And in a few months, we're going to stand in front of our friends and family and promise each other forever. I want us to be strong before we make that promise."

He offers a gentle compromise, a way to navigate this without disrupting the next precious memory they have planned. "We can start after the cruise. We take that week with Elena, and we give her the most amazing vacation. Just our pup, her papa, and her daddy having fun. Then we come back, and we start the work. Because you're the man I chose to spend my life with," Shane says, leaning in, his forehead nearly touching Ilya's.

Ilya gives a slow, deliberate nod. It isn't reluctant acceptance, but the sagging relief of a man who has been waiting for a sentence to be handed down and instead has been offered a path to redemption. "Okay," he breathes out, the single word a release of all the tension he's been holding since the night in question. "Okay, Shane. *Together*."

Shane and Ilya step off the train together, the comfortable silence between them a stark contrast to the station's clamor. As they move toward the main concourse, Ilya instinctively reaches for Shane's rolling bag. "I've got it," he murmurs, but Shane just nudges him with his shoulder.

Shane pulls out his phone as they navigate the tide of commuters. The screen lights up with a text from Yuna. He reads it aloud, a smile touching his lips. "Your daughter has asked when Daddy and Papa will arrive approximately thirty-seven times."

A genuine laugh escapes Shane, the sound echoing lightly. Ilya, walking beside him, looks over and a slow smile spreads across his face, transforming it. It's a smile that crinkles the corners of his eyes and erases the lingering shadows, pure adoration for the daughter he so clearly missed. They fall into an easy rhythm, moving toward the taxi stand.

The taxi ride is a blur of late afternoon sunlight glinting off glass skyscrapers and the familiar, stop-and-go rhythm of Boston traffic. As they cross the river and the landscape shifts to their quiet neighborhood, Shane feels a lightness expand in his chest. "She's probably jumping up and down excited to see us," he says, watching the trees blur past.

"I bet there are drawings. A detailed itinerary for the next week." Ilya glances over, a teasing glint in his eye. "She's definitely your daughter." Shane shakes his head, a soft smile playing on his lips.

"No," he says, turning to meet Ilya's gaze. "She's definitely ours."

Shane barely has his wallet out to pay for the taxi before the front door bursts open and a small whirlwind of bare feet and boundless energy explodes onto the porch. "DADDY! PAPA!" Elena shrieks, a sound of pure, unadulterated joy, launching herself off the top step. Ilya moves with practiced ease, catching her mid-air and swinging her up into his arms. She immediately wraps her legs around his waist, one arm locked tight around his neck while the other reaches frantically for Shane.

"Did you go to the ocean? Did you see whales? Did you miss me? Did you bring me anything?" The questions tumble out of her in a breathless, rapid-fire stream, her small body vibrating with an intensity that fills the cool evening air.

Shane and Ilya exchange a look over her head, a silent, shared moment of overwhelming love. This is the chaos they missed, the beautiful, demanding, wonderful center of their world. They both lean in, pressing kisses to her cheeks, her hair, inhaling the scent of their little girl, and in that instant, the world is right again.

Standing in the doorway, a steaming mug cradled in her hands, Yuna watches the reunion with a fond, knowing smirk. "Your child has been vibrating with excitement for three hours," she announces, her voice warm. She steps forward, pulling Shane into a quick, tight hug before doing the same to Ilya, who is still managing to hold onto a squirming Elena. "She insisted on staying up to meet you," Yuna adds, raising an eyebrow at the little girl.

Elena pulls back from Ilya's neck, puffing out her small chest. "I wasn't tired," she declares, even as a massive yawn betrays her, a clear sign of the late hour and the long wait.

Once inside, the house immediately becomes the domain of their daughter. "I have to show you! I have to show you!" Elena chants, wiggling to be put down. The moment her feet hit the hardwood floor, she grabs both of their hands, dragging them toward the living room like a tiny, determined tugboat. The coffee table is a curated exhibition of her week's work: a

series of crayon drawings taped to the surface, a meticulously scribbled "packing list" featuring several pairs of her glitteriest shoes, and a collection of her most beloved stuffed toy arranged in a semi-circle, ready for inspection.

She points to one drawing in particular, her expression deadly serious. "This is us. That's you, Papa," she says, pointing to a tall stick figure with what appears to be a hockey stick. "And that's you, Daddy," indicating a figure next to him. "And that's me in the middle," she finishes, pointing to the smallest figure, who is grinning with a distinctly oversized red smile.

Below them all, she has drawn a large, wobbly shape. "And that's the boat. It's very big." Ilya leans down studying the crude masterpiece. He traces the outline of the boat with his finger. "Is very good drawing, solnyshko," he says quietly. Shane leans against him, a smile playing on his lips as he whispers, "That's going on the fridge."

After the grand tour of her artwork, Shane reaches into his carry-on and pulls out a small, flat gift bag. "We did bring you something," he says.

Elena's eyes go wide as she peeks inside, her small hands carefully retrieving a bracelet made of tiny, polished shells and a keychain shaped like a lighthouse, its paint still smelling faintly of the sea. "A treasure!" she gasps, holding the bracelet up to the light. The keychain is immediately claimed for her backpack, and she slips the bracelet onto her wrist, admiring it with the solemn gravity of a queen admiring her crown.

Yuna gives them a final, warm hug, promising to check in when they return from the cruise, and then the house is truly theirs again. Shane orders a simple pizza, and the three of them eat it at the kitchen table, with Elena perched on a booster seat between them. She narrates the entire meal, her words a constant, happy stream about Mickey Mouse, the possibility of a swimming pool on the ship, and her firm belief that dolphins will swim alongside their windows. Ilya listens with an unwavering focus, nodding seriously and asking clarifying questions, completely enraptured by every word.

Later, the pre-cruise packing chaos commences in their bedroom, with suitcases open on the floor. Elena insists on "helping," which mostly involves taking neatly folded t-shirts out of one pile and creating her own, and carrying on an intense debate with herself about whether her stuffed unicorn or her plush bear deserved to come on the boat more. For a moment, Shane and Ilya just stand in the doorway, watching her.

Finally, the adrenaline of the day begins to wane, and Elena's yawns become more frequent. They guide her through the familiar rhythm of her bedtime routine, herding her into the bathroom to brush teeth and then into her bedroom. She insists they both tuck her in, and they do.

Ilya's deep, accented voice reads the story, and as the pages turn, Elena's eyelids grow heavier, her breathing softer. Just before sleep claims her, she whispers the most important question of the day, her small voice full of hope. "Will Mickey really be on the boat?"

Shane smiles, smoothing her hair back from her forehead. "Yes, baby," he promises. "We'll find him."

Back in their own bedroom, the atmosphere is intentionally soft and undemanding. They move around each other with a comfortable, domestic grace, pulling a few things from their suitcases for the morning's flight and setting their phones to charge. There are no grand gestures, no heavy conversations. Eventually, they slide into bed, the cool sheets a welcome relief. Shane shifts, curling instinctively into Ilya's chest, and Ilya's arm comes around him, holding him carefully, securely.

Shane presses a soft kiss to the center of Ilya's chest, the steady, rhythmic thump of his heart a comforting anchor. "Today was a good day," he murmurs into the darkness.

Ilya's hold tightens almost imperceptibly, a silent agreement. He presses a kiss to Shane's hair. "Is very good day," he whispers back. They fall asleep like that, wrapped around each other.

Morning arrives with the insistent beep of an alarm and a small, excited patter of feet in the hall. "TODAY IS THE BOAT DAY!" Elena's voice rings out, a joyful herald for the day's chaos. The house erupts into a symphony of activity: the gurgle of the coffee maker, the zipping of suitcases, and Elena's constant, thrilled commentary as she bounces from room to room, already dressed in a bright red shirt with a mouse on it. Ilya scoops her up as she races past, spinning her once before setting her down with a laugh, the sound filling the kitchen with sunlight.

The final suitcase is clicked shut and stationed by the door. With a final, shared glance that says we're ready, they move as a unit toward the door. Ilya hefts the largest bag, Shane grabs their carry-ons, and Elena, still buzzing with an infectious, joyous energy, grabs the handles of her own small, glittery suitcase, her chest puffed out with the importance of her role.

The front door closes behind them with a solid thud, sealing the quiet of their home behind them. As they walk down the driveway toward the waiting car, Elena positions herself precisely between them. Her small hands find theirs, one slipping into Shane's, the other into Ilya's, her fingers a perfect, snug fit. "To the airport!" she commands, her small voice ringing with authority. They fall into step, a connected chain of three, moving forward into the bright, promising morning.

Shane and Ilya stand on either side of Elena, a tiny island of calm in the sea of bustling families. Their daughter, however, is frozen. Her small head is tilted back, her mouth slightly agape, her eyes wide as she takes in the impossible size of it all. "Is that the boat?" she whispers, her voice filled with a reverent awe that makes both men smile.

Shane kneels, putting himself at her eye level. "That's the boat," he confirms softly.

Boarding is a seamless wave of organized chaos. Crew members in crisp white uniforms greet every family with genuine smiles, and a booming, friendly voice announces each name as they cross the threshold. "Welcome aboard, Rozanov family!" Elena's entire face lights up at the official proclamation. She immediately grabs both of their hands, her small grip surprisingly tight, and physically pulls them into the grand atrium.

The space is a spectacle of light and color, a sweeping three-deck-high lobby crowned by a magnificent, shimmering chandelier. In the center, a life-sized bronze statue of Mickey Mouse stands, one hand extended in welcome. Elena spins in a slow circle, head craned back, trying to take it all in. Ilya watches her, a look of pure, unadulterated wonder on his own face. Shane leans in close, murmuring so only Ilya can hear. "She's going to remember this forever." Ilya just nods, his throat suddenly tight, as he watches their daughter, for the first time, truly understand the meaning of magic.

When Ilya slides their keycard and pushes open the door to their suite, Elena's sneakers squeak against the plush carpet as she darts inside. Her breath catches in a delighted gasp at the floor-to-ceiling window revealing the sparkling port waters, but her attention quickly shifts to the adjacent door. Pushing it open, she discovers her own private domain—complete with bunk beds that fold neatly from the wall, decorated with Mickey Mouse bedding.

"The top one's mine!" she declares immediately, scrambling to examine the mechanism with wide-eyed wonder.

Ilya follows her into the main bedroom, his expression uncharacteristically nervous. He watches Shane's reaction closely as he takes in the spacious quarters, the king-sized bed with ocean view, the elegant sitting area, and the adjoining room where Elena is already claiming her territory.

"So," Ilya begins, his voice softer than usual, "is room okay? Too much?" His fingers flex at his sides, betraying his uncertainty. "I know you just suggested a balcony cabin, but..."

Shane turns to him, and Ilya sees moisture gathering in his eyes. Shane doesn't speak immediately, just steps close and wraps his arms around Ilya's waist, burying his face in the crook of his neck.

"Ilya," he whispers, his voice thick with emotion. "This is... beyond anything I could have imagined."

He pulls back slightly, his hand coming up to cup Ilya's cheek. "This is all I've ever wanted for her—to have moments like this, to be happy, to know she's loved and cared for." Shane's gaze shifts toward the doorway where Elena is still excitedly exploring her room. "And to have it with you... it's everything."

A tear escapes and tracks down Shane's cheek, but he's smiling. "Thank you."

In Elena's room, she emerges from her exploration to find Ilya now standing in her doorway with a serious expression. He runs a finger along the bunk bed frame, knocks gently on the wall, and gives a solemn nod.

"This vessel appears seaworthy," he proclaims, his voice back to its familiar playful tone.

Elena immediately stands at attention and gives him a crisp salute, her face beaming with pride. "Aye, Captain Papa!" she responds, making both men laugh as the first of many perfect memories begins to settle around them like a warm blanket.

The afternoon dissolved into a symphony of chlorine and sunshine. The moment Elena's eyes landed on the twisting water slides—a brilliant blue vortex spilling into the sparkling pool below—she grabbed both of their hands with force.

"Water! Now!" she commanded, tugging them forward with the determination of a tiny general leading her troops.

While Shane guided Elena toward the changing facilities, Ilya secured three lounge chairs near the shallow end, arranging towels with military precision. He was just settling into his chair, sunglasses perched on his nose, when he felt an unfamiliar coldness spreading across his chest. He looked down to find a dark patch soaking through his charcoal t-shirt.

A conspiratorial giggle drew his attention to the edge of the pool where Shane and Elena stood armed with miniature water guns, their expressions identical in mischief.

"What is—" Ilya began, but was cut off by another direct hit, this time to his sunglasses.

"Dad's got one too!" Elena squealed with delight, bouncing on her toes.

Shane winked. "Got you."

"You realize," Ilya said, rising slowly from his chair, "this means war."

In one fluid motion, he took off his shirt and he scooped Elena into his arms, spinning her around before launching himself into the pool with a dramatic splash that sent water flying in all directions. Elena surfaced sputtering but laughing, while Shane stood at the edge, clutching his sides.

"Oh, you're in trouble now," Shane called out, joining them in the water with a cannonball that sent another wave crashing over Ilya.

The three of them created their own corner of chaos, their laughter cutting through the pool's ambient noise. Ilya, despite his athletic build, found himself outnumbered as Elena and Shane formed a tactical alliance, cornering him against the pool wall.

"Surrender, Papa!" Elena demanded, her small hands gripping his shoulders.

Ilya raised his hands in mock defeat while spitting out chlorine. "I surrender!"

As Shane wrapped his arms around both of them, pulling them into a group hug in the waist-deep water, Elena looked between them with a knowing smile.

As the sun begins to dip toward the horizon, painting the sky in brilliant strokes of orange and pink, the deck transforms for the Sail-Away Party. Music pulses from giant speakers, and crew members dressed as their favorite characters lead the crowd in dances. Ilya easily lifts Elena onto his shoulders, giving her the best seat in the house. She waves excitedly at the people still on the shore, a tiny queen greeting her subjects. Shane wraps an arm around Ilya's waist, leaning into him. The vibration of the horn seems to travel right up through Ilya's spine

into Elena, who lets out a delighted shriek that cuts through the music. "We're moving! Papa, we're really moving!" she squeals, pointing a small finger toward the shrinking shoreline. Shane tightens his arm around Ilya's waist, pressing a soft kiss to his shoulder blade.

Afternoons on the ship quickly developed a rhythm, one that often involved Shane surrendering to the gentle rock of the ocean for a nap on the plush loveseat in their cabin. The steady hum of the vessel and the warm sunlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows created the perfect lullaby. This, of course, became prime entertainment for his two favorite troublemakers, who found no greater joy than disrupting his peaceful slumber.

One afternoon, as Shane slept peacefully, his breathing soft and even, a covert operation was underway. Ilya and Elena, communicating in elaborate, exaggerated hand gestures like secret agents on a mission, prepared their assault. Elena, clutching her beloved stuffed Mickey, nodded solemnly at Ilya's command. Ilya, with a mischievous glint in his eyes, counted down on his fingers—three, two, one—and they sprang into action. Ilya leaned over the back of the loveseat, his warm breath disturbing the hair near Shane's ear, and let out a soft, ghostly "Booo..." that sent shivers down Shane's spine. Meanwhile, Elena held up her plush Mickey and proclaimed in her loudest whisper, "Mickey has come for you!" Shane jolted awake with a yelp that was equal parts surprise and indignation, his arms flailing comically as if fending off an actual ghost.

This sent Elena into peals of laughter that echoed off the cabin walls, while Ilya doubled over, his shoulders shaking in silent, uncontrollable laughter at his omega's priceless expression.

On another occasion, the tables turned when Ilya found himself drifting off to sleep in the king-sized bed after a long day of chasing Elena around the pool deck. The afternoon sun had warmed their skin and salt spray clung to their hair, a pleasant reminder of their water battles. Exhaustion had claimed Ilya unexpectedly, his tall frame sprawled diagonally across the white comforter, his long limbs seeming even more relaxed in sleep than during their occasional lazy Sundays at home. One arm was draped protectively over Elena who had snuggled up beside him, her small body tucked against his side like a perfect puzzle piece, her head nestled in the crook of his armpit. From the doorway, Shane watched them, his heart swelling with a warmth that had nothing to do with the tropical sun streaming through the porthole.

The sight of Ilya's peaceful face, usually so animated and expressive—whether he was teasing Shane with that mischievous glint in his eyes or watching Elena with such intense love—was now softened in sleep, his features relaxed into an unguarded vulnerability that Shane rarely saw. The slight furrow between his brows had smoothed out, his lips parted slightly as even breaths escaped, and his dark eyelashes created delicate shadows against his cheekbones. Elena, meanwhile, had kicked off her blanket in her sleep, her small fingers still clutching a piece of Ilya's t-shirt as if afraid he might disappear. Her cheeks were flushed from the day's activities, and occasionally her small body would twitch, perhaps chasing imaginary characters in her dreams. The sight of their daughter's complete trust in slumbering beside the man who had once been so guarded with his emotions created a portrait of

domestic bliss that took Shane's breath away. Shane leaned against the doorframe, content to just observe, to memorize every detail—how Elena's hand rested on Ilya's chest, rising and falling with each breath; how their breathing synced in a rhythm that was uniquely theirs, Ilya's deeper inhalations punctuated by Elena's softer, quicker exhalations. He imagined them both dreaming—Elena of castles and princesses and the special Mickey Mouse ears she'd received that morning, perhaps riding down the water slides in her dreams; Ilya of quieter, simpler things, maybe just moments like this one, or memories of their first date that Shane didn't even know Ilya still cherished so clearly.

After several minutes of quiet observation, Shane quietly slipped into the room, his movements careful. He grabbed the discarded blanket from the foot of the bed—a soft, navy blue throw that Elena had insisted they bring from home—and gently covered them both, tucking the edges around their shoulders. His fingers lingered on Ilya's shoulder for a moment longer than necessary, tracing the familiar lines of muscle beneath the cotton t-shirt, feeling the steady warmth radiating from his skin. He resisted the urge to press a kiss to Ilya's temple, not wanting to risk waking them.

The highlight of Elena's cruise experience came during a special character breakfast in the grand dining room. As they approached the entrance, Elena's eyes widened at the sight of the famous mouse himself, standing in all his red-shorted, white-gloved glory, greeting children with hugs and high-fives. When it was their turn, Elena, who had been chattering nonstop about meeting Mickey all morning, suddenly fell silent, overcome with shyness. Ilya knelt beside her. "It's okay, solnyshko," he murmured, using his nickname for her. "Go say hello." Encouraged, Elena took a hesitant step forward, and Mickey immediately knelt to her level, extending his gloved hand. Elena's face lit up, and she rushed into his arms for a hug that lasted several seconds. When they pulled apart, Mickey reached behind his back and produced something special—a pair of glittery, custom-made Minnie ears with a tiny silver unicorn charm hanging from one bow.

"For the special princess," Mickey seemed to say with his characteristic gestures and head tilts. Elena's jaw dropped, and she immediately placed the ears on her head, turning to show her fathers with a grin so wide it threatened to split her face. For the rest of the day, she refused to take them off, even during their swim in the pool, insisting that unicorns needed proper headwear at all times. The ears became her crown, her declaration of her special meeting with the magic of the ship, a tangible reminder of a moment when dreams and reality collided in the most wonderful way.

The last night on the ship settled around them with a sweet, melancholy air. In their cabin, the only sounds were the gentle lapping of waves against the hull and the soft, rhythmic breathing of their daughter. Ilya knelt beside Elena's bunk, his movements fluid and careful as he tucked the unicorn blanket snugly under her chin. Her new Mickey ears, now slightly bent from a day of adventures, lay on the small nightstand beside her bed, a glittery testament to the magic she'd experienced. Ilya smoothed a stray piece of hair from her forehead, his touch impossibly gentle. He leaned in, pressing a feather-light kiss to her temple, his lips lingering for a second. "Spokoynoy nochi, solnyshko," he whispered.

After closing the adjoining door with a soft click, Ilya turned to find Shane already in bed, propped up against the pillows, the soft glow from the porthole painting his features in gold and shadow. The space between them was charged with an unspoken awareness of their daughter sleeping just feet away, a silent agreement that their intimacy tonight would be expressed not through touch. Ilya slid under the covers, and before he could settle, Shane reached for him, pulling him close. The kiss was deep and searching, a silent conversation that spoke volumes more than words could. When they finally parted, their foreheads rested together, their breathing mingling in the dim light.

"I need to tell you something," Shane began, his voice low and raw with emotion. He took a shaky breath, gathering his thoughts. "I've told you thank you for this, for giving her this perfect week, for being here with me... but I haven't told you everything." He paused, his fingers tracing the line of Ilya's jaw. "Last September, when we met again... when I realized we might actually have a future... I was so scared, Ilya. Not for me, but for her. I wasn't sure... I wasn't sure you could step into this so easily, so perfectly. I thought it would be complicated, that it might take years for you to find your footing as her Papa." Shane's eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

"But you did," Shane continued, his thumb stroking Ilya's cheekbone. "You stepped in like you were always meant to be there. You've given her all that I've ever wanted for her, Ilya. A pack. Two strong, loving parents who would do anything for her." He looked down for a moment, a small, self-deprecating smile touching his lips. "You know I always thought of myself as her protector. But watching you with her. Ilya, you are a perfect alpha."

Ilya's breath hitched, and he could only stare, his throat too tight to form words. This raw, unguarded praise from Shane left him utterly undone.

Shane leaned in, pressing another soft kiss to his lips. "I want to do this with you every year," he whispered against Ilya's mouth. "Every single one. I want every vacation, every Christmas morning, every scraped knee, every silly drawing on the fridge. I want all of it with you, for the rest of our lives." He pulled back just enough to meet Ilya's gaze, his own eyes shining with a love so profound it felt almost physical. "I want all the love and all the experiences, but only if they're with you. You, me, and her."

Ilya finally found his voice, though it came out as a rough, uneven whisper, thick with the emotion that had overwhelmed him. He shook his head slightly, as if trying to dispel the weight of Shane's words, not because they were unwelcome, but because they were almost too much to bear. "Shane..." he breathed out, his name a prayer on his lips. "You make me sound like hero. I just... I just love her. She is my heart. When I look at her, I see future I never let myself dream I could have." He paused, searching Shane's face in the dim light. "To be her papa... to be your Alpha... I just... I love you both so much."

He pulled Shane impossibly closer, their bodies fitting together with an ease that defied the complexities of their journey. "And you," Ilya murmured, his lips brushing against Shane's temple. "You taught me what family is supposed to be. This pack... it started because you were so brave and took so good care of her before I came around."

They lay there, tangled together in the dark, the gentle rocking of the ship a constant, reassuring presence. There was nothing left to say, so Ilya simply held him, and Shane, for

the first time in a long, long time, let go completely. They fell asleep like that, a single, breathing entity, cocooned in warmth and an unwavering certainty that this was only the beginning.

Chapter 21: Would you like to keep that hand?

August 2017

Dr. Sharma was an older woman with kind, intelligent eyes and a calm, unassuming presence that immediately put them at ease. She didn't have a notepad, only a small, smooth stone she rolled between her fingers as she spoke. Her gaze was gentle but observant. "So, tell me why you're here," she began, her voice soft. "Not the problem, but the goal. What do you hope to build together?"

Shane took the lead, explaining how they had fallen into a comfortable but potentially dangerous reliance on scent communication, especially when wearing scent patches. He spoke of wanting to build a foundation that was as strong with words as it was with instinct, a language that would never fail them. "Our life moved so quickly," he admitted, his maple scent deepening with honesty. "We've packed a lifetime into less than a year. Ilya moved us into his home within two days of meeting Elena. I ended my career at the hospital after becoming a nurse and going through school. We moved my mother from Canada to be our neighbor. We fell in love hard and got engaged within months."

Ilya leaned forward, his mint scent softening as he added his perspective. "None of it was wrong," he said, his deep voice thoughtful. "But I worry. I made decisions quickly. What if one day I make the wrong one? What if my instinct fails me and I can't read your needs when scent patches are on?" He looked at Shane, his dark eyes vulnerable. "I want to be the alpha you deserve, not just through action and protection, but through understanding. Through words."

Dr. Sharma listened intently, nodding slowly. When they finished, she smiled. "You're not here to fix a broken bond," she said, her insight cutting to the heart of the matter. "You're here to reinforce a strong one that's been built at lightning speed. That's the best kind of work to do! I can work with this."

The session was a series of small exercises designed to translate their instinctual language into verbal ones. Dr. Sharma had them describe the moment Ilya first saw Elena's face, focusing not just on the events, but on the internal feelings—the subtle shifts in scent, the rise of warmth in the chest, the feeling of rightness that made Ilya uproot their lives so quickly. Ilya found it more challenging than he expected, used to expressing himself through decisive action, but Shane's patient encouragement and the therapist's gentle guidance helped him find the words to express the overwhelming certainty he'd felt that day. They left the office an hour later, the silence in the car on the way home comfortable, not heavy. The scent of cinnamon began to mingle with Ilya's usual mint, a subtle but undeniable signal of contentment, a warmth that stemmed directly from the connection they had just strengthened with deliberate words.

As August settled into a rhythm, the weekly therapy sessions became their new ritual, a designated hour to pause and translate the unspoken. The changes were subtle but profound, woven into the fabric of their daily life. Mornings, once a flurry of getting Elena ready for

daycare, now included a quiet moment at the kitchen counter where Ilya would ask, "What do you need today to feel good?" It was a simple question, but it shifted everything. It gave Shane permission to voice a need before it became a discomfort, to say, "Could you grab my heat suppressants from the cabinet?" or "I'd love it if you could make the coffee." Each small request was a thread of trust, reinforcing the idea that relying on words was not a weakness, but a new kind of strength for their pack. Shane's maple syrup scent became more pronounced in these moments, a warm and constant signal that he felt safe and heard.

One therapy session ended with homework: "Take down what you've built," Dr. Sharma had said, her voice gentle but firm, "and rebuild it together. A nest built by both of you, for both of you. The challenge loomed large for Shane, a test of his ability to let go of control even in a space so deeply personal. That evening, he stood in their bedroom, staring at the carefully arranged nest.

Shane drew in a slow breath, the air catching in his chest, before he began the deliberate process of dismantling their old nest. His movements were precise at first, pulling away the cool-toned sheets he had always insisted upon. Ilya moved to join him, his hands careful as they worked together to strip away the old foundation, piece by piece. As they worked in silence, Ilya suddenly crossed to their closet. He disappeared into the depths, emerging a moment later with something folded neatly in his large hands.

"This," he said, his voice low and thick with an emotion that made Shane pause in his work. Ilya unfolded a patchwork blanket, its colors faded with time but still vibrant, each square a testament to a story. In one corner, embroidered in delicate white thread that had yellowed slightly with age, were the words: *I. Rozanov*.

Shane reached out, his fingers tracing the precise stitches, mesmerized not just by the craftsmanship but by the history woven into every thread. "Did your mother make this?"

"Before I was born," Ilya confirmed softly, his voice barely above a whisper, as if speaking the words aloud might shatter the fragile moment. His usual cool mint scent mingled with something warmer, something nostalgic. "She made it from scraps of her old clothes. I hid it from my father for years after she died." There was a shadow in his eyes that spoke of a childhood where such small treasures needed protection, where love had to be concealed rather than celebrated.

Shane's heart constricted at the vulnerability in Ilya's admission, at the quiet tragedy of a boy who had to hide his mother's love. Without hesitation, Shane drew the blanket to his chest, burying his face in the fabric that carried the faintest whisper of Ilya's childhood scent alongside his present one. The fabric was worn soft in places where a small body must have clung to it, seeking comfort. Shane could almost imagine a young Ilya, his curly hair falling over his forehead as he held this same blanket close. "This," Shane said, his voice muffled by the blanket but thick with emotion, "this is the center."

They rebuilt the nest around Ilya's childhood blanket, creating a patchwork of past and present that spoke volumes about their journey. Shane insisted on placing his favorite sweater—the one he had stolen from Ilya last winter, now softened with wear—beside the blanket. It smelled of Ilya's current scent, but also of Shane himself now, their mingled aromas creating something entirely new. "I love the way you smell," Shane had explained once, and that

hadn't changed. Now they worked in tandem, their movements synchronized as if they'd been building nests together for years. Ilya suggested a soft cotton throw he'd found comforting as a child, while Shane arranged pillows just so, his preferences balanced by Ilya's contributions. Their hands occasionally brushing as they created something entirely new together, the space between them charged with quiet understanding and a growing intimacy that needed no scent to communicate its depth.

When they finished, the nest was a fusion of them both: Ilya's history stitched into Shane's comfort, Shane's preferences balanced by Ilya's contributions. That night, as they settled into their shared creation, the air around them thickened with the mingling scents of maple syrup and warm cinnamon.

September 2017

The last week of August melted into a new kind of routine. Pre-season training camp began, pulling Ilya back into the familiar world of early morning practices, strategy meetings, and the sharp, clean scent of ice that clung to his gear. For Shane, it marked a return to a quieter role, but one he embraced with newfound purpose. While Elena navigated the thrilling new world of kindergarten—coming home each day with stories of new friends and the elaborate rules of the playground—Shane channeled his energy into the foundation. He spent afternoons on conference calls, reviewing grant proposals, and sketching out the architectural plans for a community center he envisioned, a place that would offer the kind of support he wished he'd had. The shift was good for all of them. Ilya came home to the warm, domestic scent of maple syrup and a purpose-driven omega, and Shane found a fulfilling outlet that was entirely his own, bolstering his confidence outside the roles of 'mate' and 'father.'

The change also reignited their courtship. With the hockey season looming, Ilya became almost fiercely attentive, treating every non-hockey night as a precious commodity. He planned dates, from quiet dinners at their favorite neighborhood spot to moonlit walks along the Charles River, always checking in with Shane about the ambiance, the noise level, the crowd. He'd open every door, his hand a steady presence at the small of Shane's back, a silent but constant reinforcement of his protective instincts. Shane noticed it all. The way Ilya would subtly angle his body to shield him from a bustling crowd, the way he'd ask, "Is this okay?" before suggesting a change of plans. It was Ilya learning to use words to express the things he'd previously communicated only through action and scent, and Shane found it profoundly touching, a tangible result of the work they were putting in.

He also noticed something else. How Ilya seemed to intuitively understand certain needs without needing to be told, like how the chaos of a surprise party would be overwhelming, or how Shane needed a quiet space to decompress after a long day. He didn't have a word for it, not yet, but he saw the patterns with a clarity that was both comforting and a little unnerving. Finally, one quiet evening, a few days before their planned dinner out, Shane found the words. "Ilya," he began, his heart pounding a little, "I'm autistic." Ilya, who had been quietly watching him from across the couch, didn't look surprised.

Ilya simply nodded slowly, as if Shane had confirmed a theory he'd been carefully piecing together. "Okay," he said, his deep voice soft, lacking any hint of surprise. "This is why you

get quiet in crowds sometimes? Why you need your nest to be... perfect?" He didn't wait for an answer before leaning forward, his expression earnest. "Shane, I do not need word. I know you. I see you. This does not change anything. I love how your mind works. I love you. All of you." There was no pity in his eyes, only a profound acceptance that washed over Shane, relieving a tension he hadn't even realized he was carrying. Ilya hadn't needed the label to see him, to understand the intricate wiring that made him who he was. He'd just needed to love him.

The following Friday, Ilya was free of all hockey obligations, and he'd planned the perfect evening: a cozy, dimly lit Italian restaurant in the North End, known for its quiet corners and impeccable service. The conversation flowed easily, a comfortable rhythm of shared stories and comfortable silences, their mingled scents of maple syrup and warm cinnamon a private language in the public space. They were laughing over a story about Elena's latest playground adventure when a shadow fell over their table.

A young woman with perfectly styled blonde hair and a dress that clung in all the right places stood there, her eyes fixed on Ilya with a predatory gleam. "Ilya Rozanov?" she purred, her smile too bright, too practiced. "I didn't expect to see you here. It's been forever." Ilya's posture stiffened almost imperceptibly, his scent shifting subtly. "Hello, Melissa," he said, his tone cordial but distant, as he subtly moved to place himself more squarely in front of Shane. "I'm having dinner with my fiancé."

The woman, Melissa, barely glanced at Shane, her dismissal so pointed it was almost a physical blow. "Fiancé?" she repeated with a light, disbelieving laugh. "I don't see her." Before Ilya could respond, she slid into the booth beside him, her movements liquid and confident. Her hand came to rest on Ilya's chest, her fingers tracing the fabric of his shirt with an intimate familiarity that made Shane's blood run cold. For a split second, he was frozen, a silent observer to this violation of their space. But then, something primal and fierce roared to life inside him.

A strange clarity descended over Shane. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on the table, his movements fluid and deliberate, like a cat preparing to pounce. His maple syrup scent, usually so warm and comforting, sharpened, acquiring a smoky, dangerous edge that cut through the restaurant's ambient noise. "Excuse me," he said, his voice deceptively soft, but it carried the sharp, undeniable authority of a man whose patience had just run out. "He's at dinner with his fiancé. Me."

Melissa finally turned her head, her condescending gaze sweeping over Shane. Her lips curled into a sneer. "Honey, I know Ilya's type. And you're not it." Shane smiled, a slow, utterly menacing smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Oh, I know Ilya's type, too," he countered, his voice dropping to a silky, dangerous purr. "Intelligent. Loyal. Someone who doesn't reek of desperation." He lifted his wine glass, swirling the deep red liquid.

"I'm also the only person who knows what it feels like to be knotted by him," Shane continued, his voice low but clear, each word a deliberate strike. "The only person who has a pup with him. The only person who knows he hums Russian lullabies to our daughter before they both pass out in her bed." He paused, letting the images settle in the air between them. "I

know he's so ticklish behind his knees that he'll accidentally kick you if you touch him there. I know that he mixes his whites with colors just to get a reaction out of me on Sundays. I know he likes his coffee with four spoons of sugar and a splash of oat milk, and that he sprinkles pepper on his pepperoni pizza—which doesn't make any sense." Shane's eyes darkened as he leaned in closer. "I know that he has twenty-seven different beauty marks from head to toe. And I also know," he finished, his voice dropping to a near whisper, "that if you don't get your hand off of his chest, you're going to lose it. Now, are you going to leave our table or do I need to help you find the exit?"

The air crackled with tension. Ilya watched him, utterly mesmerized. He had always known Shane was strong, but this was something else entirely. It was intoxicating. His scent bloomed, the warm cinnamon of his contentment thickening with the hot, spicy notes of arousal, a private, powerful broadcast meant only for Shane.

Melissa's face went from smug to shocked, then to furious. She snatched her hand back as if burned, shooting daggers at Shane before scrambling out of the booth. Without another word, she turned on her heel and stalked away, the clicking of her heels on the floor a satisfying punctuation mark to her exit.

The silence that settled in her wake was heavy, charged. Ilya's gaze was fixed on Shane, an expression of raw, unadulterated awe etched onto his features. He slowly reached across the table, his large hand engulfing Shane's. The scent of his arousal was a heady, spicy cloud, potent and private, cutting through the lingering aroma of garlic and tomatoes. "I have never," Ilya breathed out, his deep voice husky with an emotion that went far beyond simple desire. "In my life, Shane. Nobody has ever... done that for me." His thumb stroked over Shane's knuckles, a gesture that was both possessive and tender. "You were... magnificent."

Shane felt a thrill course through him, a potent cocktail of residual anger, triumph, and the sudden, overwhelming effect of Ilya's reaction. The protective, territorial omega that had surged forward moments ago now receded, leaving behind a flushed, breathless man. "She was touching you," Shane said, a simple statement of fact, though the defensive edge in his tone hadn't fully vanished. "In our space. She didn't belong there." He watched as Ilya's dark eyes deepened, the alpha practically glowing with a pride that was all for him.

"I know," Ilya murmured, leaning closer over the small table, his focus entirely on Shane. The restaurant, the other diners, the half-eaten plates of pasta—it all faded into an irrelevant blur. "But the way you... the words you used. The things you know about me." He shook his head slowly, a soft, incredulous laugh escaping him. "You fought for me, *zlotse*. Not with your body, but with everything that makes you who you are. With your mind, your words, your love." He lifted Shane's hand to his lips, pressing a lingering kiss to the inside of his wrist, right over his racing pulse. "You have no idea what that does to me."

The check was forgotten, paid for in a rush with a couple of bills slapped onto the table. Ilya was out of the booth and pulling Shane to his feet, the need to leave and to be alone. The cool night air of the North End did little to douse the fire Ilya had stoked. He pulled Shane into a nearby alleyway, away from the prying eyes of the sidewalk, caging him against the cool brick wall.

The brick was cool and rough against Shane's back, a stark contrast to the furnace-like heat radiating from the alpha pressing against him. Ilya's gaze was intense, a dark, hungry fire that devoured every inch of Shane's face. He didn't speak, not with words. Instead, he lowered his head, burying his face in the crook of Shane's neck, inhaling deeply. The sound he made was a low, guttural groan of pure, unadulterated want. The scent of cinnamon was overwhelming, a force that made Shane's knees feel weak, his own body responding in kind, a wave of slick heat building in response to the alpha's undisguised lust.

"Here," Ilya rasped against his skin, one hand fisting in Shane's hair, tilting his head to give him better access. "Right now, solnyshko." His teeth scraped gently over the bonding gland, a possessive, claiming gesture that sent a jolt of electricity straight through Shane's core. "Watching you. The fire in your eyes when you told her to leave. Claiming what was yours." He punctuated his words with a hard, demanding kiss that was all teeth and tongue, a claiming that left Shane breathless and clinging to Ilya's broad shoulders for support. The world narrowed to this alleyway, to the alpha's body pinning him in place, to the undeniable proof of Ilya's desire pressing insistently against his hip. There was no question of where this was going. "I am taking you home," Ilya growled, pulling back just enough to capture Shane's gaze, his dark eyes blazing with an intensity that promised a long, thorough night. "And I am going to fuck my possessive, brilliant omega until he forgets his own name."

And that's exactly what Ilya did. Thank God for Grandma Yuna being next door.

October 2017

As October settled in, a different kind of scent began to change within the sanctuary of their home. Shane noticed it first, a subtle shift in the air he carried, the familiar aroma of maple syrup warming, deepening, becoming heavier, sweeter. It was the earliest, most subtle herald of his approaching heat cycle. Ilya noticed it, too. His alpha senses were finely tuned to Shane, and the change was as distinct as a chord being struck. He found himself unconsciously seeking Shane out, drawing in deeper breaths when they were near, a low, possessive hum vibrating in his chest. One evening, while Ilya was at the rink, Shane pulled up the cycle tracking app on his tablet. He stared at the projected dates, a frown creasing his brow. Everything was shifted forward by six weeks. When Ilya came home, still carrying the faint, sharp scent of ice and exertion, he found Shane sitting at the kitchen table, the tablet screen glowing between them.

"It's early," Shane said, not looking up from the screen. "My heat. It's coming in about a week and a half."

Ilya came to stand behind him, placing a large, warm hand on Shane's shoulder, his touch immediately grounding. His own scent, a clean, cool mint after practice, warmed slightly at the news. "Okay," he said, his voice calm but with an undercurrent of alertness. "We will be ready." But as they prepared, a new conversation hovered between them, unspoken. Normally, by this point, Shane would have already called his doctor for a prescription, a carefully measured dose of suppressants or birth control to manage the cycle. This time, there was silence. The prescription sat unfilled. The decision to pause wasn't a conscious one at first, but as the days ticked by, the choice not to act became a choice in itself.

Finally, one evening after they'd put Elena to bed, Shane broached the subject. He sat on the edge of their bed, his hands clasped loosely in his lap. "We should talk about the heat," he began, his voice steady. "About birth control." He laid out the facts with the same clear-eyed realism he applied to his foundation plans. "The doctor said another pregnancy would be unlikely, after... everything. He said the risks are higher. She wasn't discouraging it, but he was clear that it's not a guarantee." He looked at Ilya, searching his face.

Ilya listened, his expression unreadable for a long moment. He didn't address the statistics or the risks directly. Instead, he moved to sit beside Shane, the mattress dipping with his weight. He took Shane's hands, engulfing them in his own. "I understand what doctor says," he said, his deep voice quiet but firm. "But I love you, Shane. If it our pack is meant to grow then it will. I look at our life, at our love, at Elena... and I'm over the moon. But I will always have space and love for another pup with you." He paused, looking down at their joined hands. "I hope. I will always hope." The room was silent, the air thick with unspoken emotion and the sweet, heavy scent of Shane's impending heat. There was no right or wrong answer, only a path they had to choose together, a gamble that carried the weight of their entire future.

A week of quiet contemplation followed. Shane thought about Ilya's words, about the hope that was so antithetical to his own pragmatic nature. He thought of the doctor's caution, of the physical and emotional toll of another potential loss. But then he thought of the crib they had stored in the attic, of the way Ilya's eyes softened whenever he saw a new baby in public, of the easy, unthinking way their little family of three sometimes felt like it was waiting for another member to complete the circle. One night, as Ilya was reading to Elena, Shane made his decision. He walked into their daughter's room and leaned against the doorframe, watching them. When the story was over and Elena was tucked in, he met Ilya in the hallway.

"No birth control," Shane said, the words simple, final. He met Ilya's gaze, letting him see the vulnerability, the sheer depth of trust he was offering. "For this cycle... we can try." The effect was instantaneous. Ilya's scent bloomed in the small space of the hallway, the clean, cool mint of his presence dissolving completely, replaced by a wave of overwhelming warmth. The rich, sweet scent of warm cinnamon, of affection, pack, and deep, abiding attachment, washed over Shane, a tangible answer to the question he hadn't needed to ask. Ilya didn't speak, just pulled Shane into a fierce hug, burying his face in Shane's hair and inhaling deeply. He understood the significance of this gift, this leap of faith, without another word needing to be said.

The decision made, a new kind of energy permeated the household. The signs of Shane's heat grew stronger, more undeniable. The maple scent in the house thickened, settling into the fabrics, a constant, sweet invitation that Ilya's alpha instincts found impossible to ignore. He went to the coaching staff, his request for a week off delivered with a quiet gravity that required no further explanation. The team, understanding the primal importance of an alpha/omega cycle, granted it without question. Ilya's world shrank to the four walls of their home, his singular focus becoming the care and comfort of his mate. He cooked simple, nourishing meals that he knew Shane's system could handle. He kept the house unnaturally quiet, a peaceful sanctuary where Shane could rest as the waves of pre-heat fatigue began to pull him under. When he took Elena to the park or to visit Yuna, it was with the deliberate intent of giving Shane uninterrupted peace to prepare, to listen to the instincts that were beginning to roar to life.

Those instincts had Shane in their thrall. He found himself craving Ilya's presence with an intensity that bordered on desperation. When Ilya was in the room, Shane would gravitate toward him, pressing against his side or tucking his feet under Ilya's thigh on the sofa. He needed the reassuring weight of Ilya's arm around him, the cool, clean scent of the alpha that sharpened to icy mint when he had to leave the room for even a moment, then bloomed back into a warm, comforting cinnamon the second he returned. The nest became their singular project. Shane started it, a pile of soft blankets and pillows arranged just so in the center of their bed. Ilya reinforced it instinctively, bringing armfuls of his own worn t-shirts and hockey hoodies, infusing their sanctuary with the potent, layered scents of both of them. By the eve of the heat, the nest was a perfect, cocooned world, the air inside so thick with the mingled sweetness of maple and the spicy promise of cinnamon that it was almost intoxicating.

Then the cycle broke. For five days, the world outside their bedroom ceased to exist. Time blurred, marked only by the shifting of their bodies, the rhythm of their breathing, and the overwhelming symphony of their scents. The heat was a fire in Shane's blood, a demanding ache that only Ilya could soothe. His maple syrup scent was impossibly sweet, a lure and a plea all at once.

The first night of the heat was a primal symphony of need and fulfillment. Ilya responded with a ferocity that stole the air from Shane's lungs, a raw possessiveness that was both answer and prayer. He claimed Shane's mouth in a brutal kiss, all teeth and tongue, a desperate tangle that left them both gasping. There was no gentleness here, only the truth of their biology, the driving need to connect, to merge, to create.

Ilya's hands roamed Shane's body, mapping every curve and hollow with a possessiveness that bordered on worship. He flipped Shane onto his stomach, spreading his legs wide with a rough grip on his thighs. The heady, sweet scent of Shane's slick was intoxicating, and Ilya didn't hesitate. He buried his face between Shane's cheeks, his tongue delving deep, lapping at the slick, tasting the essence of his omega. Shane bucked against his face, his cries muffled by the pillows, a litany of pleas for more. "Please, Ilya, please," he begged, his voice ragged with need. "Fuck me. Fill me up."

Ilya rose over him, his cock thick and heavy, the tip already leaking with anticipation. He positioned himself at Shane's entrance, the slick a perfect invitation. With one powerful thrust, he was inside, burying himself to the hilt. Shane cried out, a sound of pain and pleasure that was music to Ilya's ears. He set a punishing rhythm, his hips pistoning, driving into Shane with a force that shook the bed. The sounds of their bodies slapping together, their ragged breaths, and Shane's desperate moans filled the room, a raw, primal chorus.

Ilya leaned down, his breath hot against Shane's ear. "You're mine," he growled, his voice a low rumble. "My omega. Mine to fill, mine to claim." He punctuated his words with a deep, biting kiss on Shane's shoulder, leaving a mark that would surely bruise. Shane arched into him, his body a perfect match for Ilya's intensity. He wanted it rough, wanted to feel it for days, a tangible reminder of Ilya's possession.

They came together in a shattering climax, Ilya's seed flooding Shane's channel, a possessive claiming that left them both breathless. But it wasn't enough. They were insatiable, their

bodies still humming with a desperate need. Ilya pulled out, his cock already hardening again. He flipped Shane onto his back, their gazes locking. The second round was slower, more deliberate. Ilya's gaze was intense, his eyes burning with a primal fire. He entered Shane again, this time in the missionary position. Their bodies were slick with sweat, their movements fluid and instinctual. They bit and bruised each other, leaving marks of possession on necks and shoulders, a testament to their raw, unbridled passion.

The third round was a blur of frenzied movement, a desperate race towards another climax. Ilya's knot began to swell, a sign of his peak rut. He locked them together, his body pinning Shane's to the bed. They stayed like that for a long moment, their bodies fused, the shared weight a comforting presence. Then, Ilya slowly pulled out, his knot receding. He trailed kisses down Shane's body, his tongue tracing a path to his entrance. He lapped at the cum leaking from Shane's hole, tasting their combined essence. Then he rose, his mouth glistening, and kissed Shane deeply, their flavors mingling, a final, intimate act of sharing.

Shane was spent, his body aching, but his desire was still burning. "Again," he whispered, his voice hoarse. "Please, Ilya, one more time."

But Ilya, ever the caretaker, even in the throes of his rut, knew his limits. He shook his head, a small, fond smile playing on his lips. "No, lyubov'," he murmured, his voice gentle. "You need to rest. Let me get you some water."

He brought a glass to Shane's lips, supporting his head as he drank. Then he settled beside him, pulling the blankets around them, their bodies entwined. The night was still young, their passion far from spent, but for now, there was a quiet moment of peace, a shared understanding that this was just the beginning, a preview of the days to come.

When the fifth day dawned, the intensity began to subside. The fire in Shane's blood cooled to a low ember, the demanding ache softening into a pleasant, pervasive soreness. Ilya's rut faded in its wake, the overwhelming cinnamon scent of his possession gradually mellowing into the warm, familiar spice of affection. They remained tangled in their nest, a heap of sweaty, sated limbs and soft, scent-soaked fabrics. The exhaustion was profound, a bone-deep weariness that went beyond the physical, but it was laced with a profound sense of peace. They didn't speak of the future, of what may or may not have taken root within Shane. To speak of it would be to tempt fate, to break the fragile magic that had held them for five days. They simply lay there, a single, breathing entity, their bodies still attuned to one another, their hands finding each other in the quiet aftermath.

November 2017

Five weeks after the cycle, Shane started noticing things. He'd be folding laundry and have to sit down, a wave of exhaustion washing over him so strong it felt like he'd run a marathon. The smell of Ilya's coffee in the morning, something he usually loved, suddenly made his stomach clench. His own scent was changing too; it felt heavier, warmer. Ilya noticed without realizing it. He'd come up behind Shane while he was washing dishes and just inhale deeply, resting his chin on his shoulder.

"Your scent is different," Ilya murmured one evening, his face pressed into Shane's neck. "Sweeter."

"Probably just lingering hormones from my heat," Shane had replied, trying to sound casual. He'd been telling himself the same thing for days. It was just his body getting back to normal.

That's what he told himself, right up until the morning of the *pickles*.

He woke up with a single, overwhelming thought: pickles. Sour, crunchy dill pickles. It was so specific, so intense, that it woke him up. He lay there in the dim light, the craving so real he could almost taste it, and then the memory hit him. The last time he'd woken up like this, craving one specific, random food, had been the morning he found out he was pregnant with Elena. The idea was insane. "No," he said out loud to the empty room. "The doctor said..." He got out of bed, trying to shake the thought, but it stuck to him like glue.

He tried to ignore it, going through the motions of getting Elena ready for school. "Here's your backpack, Elena. Did you brush your teeth?" he asked, his voice on autopilot while his mind raced.

The possibility circled him like a shark. What if? No. Don't be stupid. But what if?

After he dropped Elena off, the silence of the house was deafening. He couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed his keys and left.

At the pharmacy, he walked straight to the family planning aisle, his heart thumping against his ribs. He grabbed three different boxes of tests, not wanting to take any chances. The cashier gave him a knowing smile, and Shane felt his face flush. Back in the car, he stared at the bag in the passenger seat. He felt like he was dreaming. His hands were shaking when he pulled out his phone to call his mom.

"Mom? Can you come over? Now?" he asked, his voice tight.

"I'll be right there," Yuna said, her tone instantly serious. She could hear the tremor in Shane's voice that went beyond simple stress. Within five minutes, her keys were jingling in the back door.

"Shane? What is it?" Yuna asked, stepping into the foyer and immediately halting. The air was thick with the sharp, anxious tang of Shane's maple scent. "Honey, you smell like you're nervous, what's going on?."

Shane just held up the pharmacy bag, unable to form the words. He led her to the master bathroom, closing the door behind them. He ripped open one of the boxes with unsteady hands.

"Okay," Yuna said, taking the test from the box and handing it to him. "Let's do this. Just breathe."

He followed the instructions, his movements mechanical. When it was done, he placed the small plastic stick flat on the marble counter. They both stood there, staring at it, the only sound the tick of the wall clock and their own shallow breathing. Shane felt like he was standing on a precipice. The three minutes felt like three hours. Then, slowly, a second pink

line began to materialize next to the first, faint at first, then darkening into a clear, unmistakable plus sign.

Yuna gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. "Oh, Shane."

Shane just stared, his mind refusing to connect the lines on the stick to the reality of his life. "It's... positive," he whispered, the words feeling foreign in his own mouth. A sob escaped him, then another. Yuna wrapped her arms around him, and he buried his face in her shoulder as they both cried, a messy tangle of shock, joy, and a sudden, sharp fear of all the risks the doctor had warned him about.

"I don't understand," Shane choked out, pulling back to look at the test again, as if it might have changed. "They said it was practically impossible."

"Well, Ilya apparently didn't get that memo," Yuna said, managing a watery laugh through her tears. She squeezed his arm. "That man is just stubborn enough to make the impossible happen."

The joke broke the tension slightly, and Shane managed a small, hiccuping laugh. He looked at the test, then at his own reflection in the mirror. The whole thing felt completely unreal. "I can't tell him yet," Shane said, a new resolve settling in.

"I want it to be special," Shane explained, wiping at his face with the back of his hand. "He's been hoping so much. I don't want to just blurt it out over the phone."

"You're right," Yuna agreed, her expression softening. "This needs its own moment." She gave him one last, tight hug. "Okay. I'll go back home and try to act normal. Call me the second he knows." She pointed a finger at him. "And don't you dare lift anything heavy."

After Yuna left, the house was quiet again, but it felt different now. The silence was full of a secret, buzzing with an energy that made Shane's skin tingle. He waited until he heard Yuna's front door close next door, then grabbed his wallet and keys. He had an idea. He drove to the sprawling sports complex near the arena, a place he usually avoided.

He walked into the massive team store, the air thick with the smell of new jerseys and popcorn. He walked past the racks of adult-sized apparel and found the small corner dedicated to kids' merchandise. And there it was: a tiny, baby-sized onesie in the Boston Raiders' black and gold, with the team's logo stitched on the front. He picked it up, the fabric impossibly small and soft in his hands. Seeing it, a future with another little one in Ilya's colors suddenly felt terrifyingly, wonderfully real. He bought it without a second thought and walked out of the store clutching the small bag like it was made of glass.

That evening, after Elena was bathed and tucked into bed, her room filled with the soft glow of her star-shaped nightlight, Shane went into the kitchen. He took a deep breath, his hands trembling slightly as he carefully unfolded the tiny onesie. He laid it flat on the granite of the kitchen island. Then he opened the small box from the pharmacy and placed the positive pregnancy test right beside it, the pink plus sign stark against the white plastic. The setup was simple, but the message was undeniable.

He stood there for a long moment, just looking at it, his own maple syrup scent so potent in the quiet house it felt like a physical presence. He was nervous, a bundle of excited energy and pure terror. He couldn't stop glancing at the counter, checking to make sure the scene was still there, that this moment was actually happening.

It was almost eleven when he heard the garage door open, then the click of the front door.

Shane heard the heavy thud of Ilya's hockey bag hitting the floor near the door, followed by the familiar squeak of his shoes being toed off. His heart started pounding against his ribs. He took a deep breath, trying to steady himself, but the scent of his own anxious excitement was already flooding the house. He needed Ilya to come to the kitchen, but he couldn't just call him in; that would ruin the surprise. An idea, born of pure panic, sparked in his mind.

"Ilya? Can you come here for a second?" Shane called out, trying to keep his voice even. "I think I broke the garbage disposal."

The heavy footsteps paused, then started again, this time heading toward the kitchen. "Again, solnyshko? What did you put in it this time? I told you to stop trying to put your bird food down it." Ilya's voice was tired but laced with fond exasperation. He walked into the kitchen, his scent still carrying the sharp, clean scent of icy mint from the rink. "Okay, show me what you..."

He stopped dead in the doorway, his gaze falling on the kitchen island. His eyes scanned the tiny black and gold onesie, then landed on the small plastic stick beside it. He just stared, his face a complete blank, his mind clearly refusing to connect the objects. For a long, silent moment, the only sound was the low hum of the refrigerator.

"Shane... what is this?" Ilya's voice was quiet, cautious, as if he were approaching a skittish animal. He took a step closer, his movements slow and deliberate. His eyes were fixed on the two items, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Is this... a joke?"

Shane couldn't speak. He just stood there, shaking his head, a fresh wave of tears blurring his vision.

Ilya reached out a trembling hand, his fingers hovering over the onesie before finally making contact. He picked it up, the tiny piece of fabric dwarfed in his large palm. "The baby clothes," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. Then his gaze shifted to the pregnancy test. He picked that up too, holding them both like sacred objects. He stared at the pink plus sign, then back at Shane. "Is this...? Shane, tell me."

Shane finally found his voice, a raw, broken whisper. "Yes."

Ilya stood there for another second, completely still, his face a mask of stunned disbelief. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, his composure shattered. A guttural sound ripped from his throat, and he dropped to his knees right there on the kitchen floor. The pregnancy test and onesie tumbled from his grasp.

"Shane," he gasped, his voice cracking. He crawled forward, his hands scrabbling for purchase on the cool tile, and wrapped his arms around Shane's waist, burying his face in his stomach. The scent of icy mint was gone, replaced by a tidal wave of warm, overwhelming cinnamon that flooded the room. He was a mess of a human, a big, strong alpha reduced to a blubbering, sobbing mess.

"Solnyshko," he choked out, his body shaking with the force of his tears. "My solnyshko. How?" He couldn't form a coherent sentence, his mind a chaotic jumble of shock, joy, and an overwhelming, all-consuming love. He just held on, his grip tight, as if he were afraid Shane might disappear if he let go.

Shane sank to the floor with him, the hard tiles a stark reality against his knees. He gently cupped Ilya's face, his thumbs wiping away the steady stream of tears. "Hey, hey, look at me," Shane said, his own voice thick with emotion. Ilya lifted his head, his dark eyes swimming, looking utterly lost and overwhelmed. "We're okay," Shane murmured, leaning their foreheads together. "Whatever happens, we're in this together. We knew the risks, and we're here. But we did it Ilya."

The raw honesty seemed to anchor Ilya. His sobs quieted to ragged hitches of breath. He didn't let go of Shane, but one of his hands moved instinctively, flattening against Shane's stomach, a possessive, protective gesture that was pure alpha instinct. The warm cinnamon scent of his pack, of home and safety, intensified, a comforting cloud that enveloped them both on the kitchen floor. "Another pup," Ilya whispered, the words sounding like a prayer against Shane's lips. "My Shane is pregnant with our second pup."

They stayed like that for a long time, a tangle of limbs and quiet tears, the two small objects on the counter a silent witness to their new reality. The initial shock gave way to a quiet, profound joy that settled deep in Shane's bones. He could feel the steady, strong beat of Ilya's heart against his palm. The fear was still there, a quiet hum in the back of his mind, but it was overshadowed by the solid, unwavering presence of the alpha in his arms.

Later, much later, after Ilya had helped him off the floor and they were curled up on the sofa, the conversation turned practical, grounded by the weight of what they had to protect. "Elena," Ilya said, his arm tight around Shane's shoulders. "We can't tell her yet."

Shane nodded in immediate agreement. "No. We wait. I want to wait for the first-trimester appointment. We need to know that everything is... stable." He couldn't bring himself to say the word 'healthy,' the fear of the alternative too sharp. "I don't want to get her hopes up, Ilya. If something were to happen..." He trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

"Okay," Ilya said, his tone firm and decisive. "We wait. Just us. Our secret." He tightened his grip, a silent promise. They both knew it was the right thing to do, to guard this fragile new life, this unexpected miracle, until they were certain it was strong enough to be shared with the rest of their world.

Shane shifted, pulling back just enough to see Ilya's face, still puffy and blotchy from crying.

"Well, it's not just our secret." Shane said, his voice still a little shaky. "I didn't do this alone today. I called my mom as soon as I got the tests."

A slow, wide grin spread across Ilya's face, chasing away the last traces of his earlier shock and sorrow. "Yuna knows?" he asked, a deep, happy rumble starting in his chest.

"She knows," Shane confirmed, a small smile touching his own lips. "She was here with me when I took the test. And she's waiting for a call. She's probably been staring at her phone for the last four hours."

Ilya's grin softened, his eyes growing incredibly tender. He reached up, brushing a stray strand of hair back from Shane's forehead. "My mama," Ilya said, his voice thick with emotion. "She would have been so proud of us. She would have loved you and Elena so much. I wish she was here to see this."

The gentle words hit Shane with unexpected force, and he felt his throat tighten. He blinked back fresh tears, shaking his head slowly. "She is here, Ilya," he whispered, his voice filled with a quiet certainty. "I didn't know her, but I see her in you every day. I see her in Elena's eyes. And I thank her, everyday, for giving me you both."

Ilya's grin faded into a look of profound, tender grief, the kind that was old and worn smooth with love. He pulled Shane closer, pressing a kiss into his hair. "You are my biggest blessing, Shane," he murmured, the words a low, rumbling vibration against Shane's ear. "You and Elena, you are my everything. Now this little one... God, my heart could explode." He paused, a new thought dawning on him, a flicker of his old, stubborn self returning through the tears. "We need to call your mother."

Shane let out a small, watery laugh, the tension of the day finally starting to bleed away, leaving him feeling exhausted and lighter than air. "Okay, Alpha," he teased gently, swiping a thumb across Ilya's damp cheek. "Let's call her."

Chapter 22: Safe and Sound.

Chapter Summary

TW: I'm new to the MPREG world and my knowledge of birth is very limited to my own research. Do not come here for biblically accurate medical terminology on child birth for omega men. :)

In this chapter, Shane and Ilya attend an important medical appointment where the reality of Shane's pregnancy becomes much more serious. The risks are real and frightening, and the weight of what could happen begins to settle between them. Fear, love, and stubborn determination collide as they face the future together.

Life at home quickly becomes chaotic with pregnancy symptoms, strange cravings, and Ilya doing everything he can to keep Shane comfortable. Just when the stress begins to feel overwhelming, the next appointment brings unexpected joy and a moment that changes everything.

December 2017

Dr. Martinesi entered with a warm smile. "Shane, Ilya. Thank you for coming in." She gestured to the ultrasound machine. "Let's start by taking a look at this little one. Seeing is often believing."

Shane positioned himself on the exam table. Ilya stood beside him, hand on his shoulder. Dr. Martinesi applied the gel. Shane flinched. On screen, a flicker appeared. "There's the heartbeat," she said. "Strong and steady at 155 bpm." She moved the wand, tracing the spine. "Everything looks as it should."

She wiped the gel away and helped Shane sit up. "Now, let's talk about what we're facing." She pulled up her tablet, expression serious. "Shane, I've reviewed your records from Elena's birth. The third-degree tear and internal trauma... you healed well, but there's substantial scar tissue. That changes how we approach this pregnancy."

She leaned forward, her gaze steady. "I'm going to be direct. We're monitoring for three major concerns. First, placental issues. With omega pregnancies, the placenta can attach too deeply to the uterine wall—accreta—or cover the cervical opening—previa. Given your history and anatomy, both would require surgical intervention to prevent life-threatening hemorrhage."

She paused, letting that sink in. "Second, pre-eclampsia. Omega biology already predisposes you to blood pressure complications. Your previous delivery and resulting scar tissue significantly elevate that risk. We'll need bi-weekly monitoring for the first two trimesters." She made eye contact with both of them. "Third, as your uterus expands against the scar

tissue from your emergency C-section with Elena, there's a substantial risk of dehiscence—partial tearing—or complete rupture. The latter would require immediate emergency care and potentially a hysterectomy."

Dr. Martinesi set down her tablet. "Given the location of your previous tearing and the nature of omega reproductive anatomy, natural delivery would present extreme risks. The scar tissue in your birth canal makes tearing almost inevitable. We'd have to schedule a C-section at 36 weeks, but even that carries higher risks due to the adhesions from your first surgery. Because of these compounded factors, I need to discuss termination as an option. It would eliminate these immediate dangers, but this is entirely your decision."

Shane's hand went to his stomach. "What would monitoring look like exactly? And if we had to deliver at twenty-eight weeks, what would be the baby's chances? What if my blood pressure spikes at home?" His voice was steady.

Dr. Martinesi answered each question. "Twice weekly for non-stress tests and blood work. At twenty-eight weeks, with proper neonatal care, survival rates are over ninety percent. For home monitoring, you'd have a blood pressure cuff and specific parameters on when to call us or go directly to the hospital."

After she finished, Shane looked at Ilya, then back to the doctor. "I'm continuing the pregnancy," he said, his voice firm. "I want this baby."

Shane reached out, his hand finding Ilya's. He squeezed, hard. Ilya returned the grip, then turned to the doctor. "What are the earliest warning signs of placental problems we should watch for? What symptoms would indicate a potential rupture of the scar tissue? Are there any specific dietary changes or activities that could help reduce these risks?"

Dr. Martinesi nodded. "Warning signs include sudden severe abdominal pain, entry bleeding, or rapid uterine growth. For scar tissue, watch for localized sharp pain. As for prevention, we recommend avoiding heavy lifting and staying hydrated. I'll provide you with a comprehensive list of safe exercises." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "Additionally, we recommend regular, gentle sexual activity. Intercourse can help the entry tissues remain pliable and prepare for the physical demands of delivery. We're talking about slow, careful penetration with ample lubrication. The goal is to encourage natural expansion without causing stress to the scar tissue."

Ilya's grip on Shane's hand tightened. "And if complications happen during delivery, what are the exact steps your team would take? How quickly can you assemble a surgical team for an emergency hysterectomy? What are the survival statistics for others in similar situations who undergo that procedure?"

"We have a 24/7 on-call surgical team that can be assembled within minutes," Dr. Martinesi replied. "The procedure itself takes about an hour. Survival rates for emergency hysterectomies due to hemorrhage are approximately ninety-five percent when performed promptly."

Ilya nodded, absorbing the information. "And what about postpartum recovery in the event of a hysterectomy? What are the long-term implications for Shane's health?"

"Recovery would be more extensive than a standard delivery," she explained. "We'd be looking at a hospital stay of 4-6 days, with several weeks of recovery at home. As for family planning, a hysterectomy would mean no future pregnancies, but there are options for surrogacy or adoption if you choose to expand your family later."

Shane watched Ilya, his thoughts racing as his fiancé fired off one precise question after another. The fluency stunned him—medical terminology, survival statistics, recovery timelines flowing with an ease that told Shane this wasn't just attention in the moment. Ilya must have been researching, digging into every journal article, every medical forum since they'd scheduled this appointment. That realization struck something warm in Shane's chest, even as worry coiled around it.

He waited for any hint of Ilya's usual reaction to sex talk, that familiar spark in his eyes. Nothing. Not even a flicker when the doctor mentioned "gentle sexual activity." Instead, when Ilya finally met his gaze, all Shane saw was the worried glint beneath his determined expression, the tight set of his jaw speaking volumes about the fear he was trying so hard to outrun.

The elevator doors slid open, and they walked into the cavernous parking garage. The scent blockers they'd worn for the appointment had worn off, and the enclosed space of the car was immediately saturated with the conflicting scents of their distress: Shane's anxious, sweet maple and Ilya's sharp, metallic fear. The moment the car doors clicked shut, the dam broke. "No," Ilya said, his voice a low, raw growl that didn't sound like his own. He wasn't looking at Shane, but staring straight ahead at the concrete wall in front of them. "Absolutely not. We are not doing this."

Shane turned in his seat, his brows furrowed in confusion and disbelief. "Ilya, what are you talking about? We just left the appointment. We have a plan."

"A plan? A plan is you lying on a table while they tell us there's a ninety-five percent chance of you surviving if something goes wrong? A plan is you bleeding out on an operating table and our daughter growing up without a father?" Ilya's hands were clenched so tightly on the steering wheel that his knuckles were white. He finally turned to face Shane, "that is not a plan, Shane. That is a nightmare. I cannot lose you. I will not let you do this."

Shane felt a cold dread creep up his spine, followed by a hot wave of anger. This was the fear he'd sensed in Ilya at the appointment, the one he'd tried to ignore. "Don't you dare put this on me," Shane shot back, his own voice rising with emotion. "Don't you dare stand there and talk about 'letting' me do anything. This is my body, Ilya. Mine. You sat there and asked about hysterectomies and postpartum recovery because you were already mourning me, weren't you?" He could feel tears pricking at the corners of his eyes, but he fought them back. "We made this decision together when you tried for a pup during your rut. We knew the risks. I will not choose to live in fear. This baby is real, Ilya. It has a heartbeat. I am not terminating it."

He watched as Ilya's face crumpled. Replaced by a stark, naked fear that was worse. He let out a shuddering breath, the sound loud in the confined space of the car. He unclenched one

white-knuckled hand from the steering wheel and reached across the console, his fingers finding Shane's arm. He didn't try to pull him closer, just held on, a desperate anchor.

"I'm not asking you to terminate," Ilya whispered, the words rough, broken. "God, Shane. I would never... I can't." His gaze dropped to where his hand rested on Shane's arm, then lifted to meet Shane's eyes. "I'm just so scared. I hear 'ninety-five percent chance of survival' and all I can think is the other five percent. I think about that doctor talking about hemorrhaging, about a hysterectomy, and I see you pale and still on a table. I see Elena asking why her daddy won't wake up."

He finally gave in to the pull, sliding his arm around Shane's shoulders and tugging him across the console, burying his face in the crook of Shane's neck. The rich, warm cinnamon of his pack scent was now tainted with the acrid sting of pure terror. "I can't lose you," he choked out, his hot tears dampening Shane's collar. "This pup, this miracle... it's everything. But you are my everything. You are my life. I don't know how to do this without you."

Shane melted against him, the anger of moments ago dissolving into a wave of fierce, protective love. He wrapped his arms around Ilya's broad back, holding him as tightly as he could. "You're not going to lose me," he murmured, pressing a kiss into Ilya's hair. "We're a team, remember? We're going to be scared together, and we're going to fight like hell together. I need you with me on this, Ilya. Not against me." He felt Ilya's nod against his shoulder, a silent, shaky agreement. They stayed there for a long time, just holding each other in the quiet of the car.

January 2018

January settled in, bringing with it a secret the house had to hold. The pregnancy symptoms intensified, a relentless barrage of nausea and exhaustion that made mornings a battle. Shane would wake up, the mere scent of toothpaste enough to send him scrambling for the bathroom, and then spend hours huddled in the nest, waiting for the world to stop spinning. His sense of smell became a liability; he could track Ilya's progress through the house by the trail of his minty scent and the faint, coppery tang from the hockey bag he'd left by the door.

The cravings became Ilya's new full-time job, a relentless whirlwind of culinary demands that left him stumbling through grocery aisles at odd hours and questioning his very existence. It started with what Ilya privately dubbed the Pickle Apocalypse—an era that would haunt his dreams for years to come.

For three torturous weeks, Shane became convinced that pickles were the fifth food group, if not the entire food pyramid. Breakfast was dill chips on pancakes. Lunch featured sweet gherkins on pizza. For hydration, Shane insisted on whole pickle spears floating in his orange juice. Ilya's car began to smell permanently like a vinegar factory, and he developed an impressive system of pickle stashes throughout the house—pantry, fridge, bathroom cabinet, and the bedside table for those midnight emergencies.

"Ilya," Shane called out one evening from the nest, where he'd been camped out since morning. "We're out of bread-and-butter chips."

Ilya glanced at the pantry, where no fewer than seven jars of various pickles resided. "Shane, we have three unopened jars in there. And two in the garage."

Shane's face appeared over the edge of the nest, eyes narrowed. "I specifically said bread-and-butter. Not dill. Not sweet gherkins. Bread-and-butter."

"But they're all—" Ilya started, then stopped when he saw the tears welling in Shane's eyes.

"Don't you 'but' me, Ilya Rozanov," Shane's voice trembled. "Do you have any idea how it feels to want something so badly you can taste it, only to be told you can't have it? It's like the universe is mocking me. Like this baby is already testing my patience."

Ilya found his keys without another word. Forty-five minutes later, he returned with five jars of bread-and-butter pickles. Shane inspected each one before nodding curtly, then spent the rest of the evening methodically consuming an entire jar while Ilya sat beside him, occasionally running a hand over his growing stomach.

Just as Ilya had memorized every pickle brand in a fifty-mile radius, Shane woke up one morning and announced he never wanted to see another pickle again as long as he lived. The sight of the pickle jar on Ilya's breakfast tray sent him scrambling for the bathroom.

The Barbecue Chip Era followed, accompanied by what Shane called "lava heartburn." Ilya became an expert in antacid brands, buying them in bulk and developing a system for maximum efficacy based on time of consumption and chip intensity. He'd return from road trips with suitcases full of barbecue chips and industrial-sized Tums containers, drawing suspicious looks from airport security.

Then came the Chip Crisis. After an exhausting practice, Ilya stopped at three different stores before finding Shane's preferred brand. He returned home, triumphant, hockey bag still slung over his shoulder.

"I found them," Ilya announced, dropping the bag by the door and holding up the chip bag like a trophy. "The last bag in Boston."

Shane took one look and burst into tears. Full, body-shaking sobs that had Ilya rushing to his side.

"What? What's wrong?" Ilya knelt beside the nest, his hands hovering, uncertain where to touch.

"They're wrong," Shane managed between hiccups. "They're so, so wrong."

Ilya picked up the bag, examining it as if he'd suddenly forgotten how to read. "They're... still barbecue chips? Same brand as always."

Shane shook his head, sending tears flying. "Kettle-cooked. I need ridged. The texture is entirely different. How could you not know that?"

It was 11 PM when Ilya finally returned with the ridged chips, having driven to a fourth store. Shane ate three chips, declared them too salty, and fell asleep.

The midnight missions became routine. At precisely 2:17 AM—always 2:17 AM—Shane would bolt upright like he'd been electrocuted. "Ilya," he'd whisper urgently, "I need..." and thus would begin Ilya's journey through their dark house, half-asleep but fully committed.

The most infamous was The Great Sandwich Disaster of January. Shane provided specifications with military precision: "Toasted sourdough, extra sharp cheddar, two slices of tomato—but not too ripe, and definitely not green—no crust, cut diagonally, not horizontally."

Ilya executed every step with the focus of a surgeon, presenting the masterpiece to Shane in the dim light of their bedroom. The clock read 3:42 AM. He had driven to a 24-hour grocery for sourdough, painstakingly selected the tomatoes, and measured the diagonal cut with a protractor.

Shane took one bite, his face crumpled, and he whispered, "It's wrong," before rolling over and immediately falling back asleep.

One morning, Ilya walked into the kitchen to find Shane meticulously placing dill pickle slices (yes, after saying he never wanted to see another one again) on top of blueberry muffins. He didn't even blink. He just opened the fridge and pulled out the milk. Some battles weren't worth fighting, especially when the combatant was growing another human being. \

Ilya's world had shrunk to the four walls of their home and the four walls of the rink, with the silent, terrifying statistics from Dr. Martinesi echoing in the space between. He attended every single appointment, sitting stoically through the blood pressure checks and the non-stress tests, his large frame seeming to fill the small exam room with a palpable aura of protection. On the ice, he was a force of nature, playing with a ferocity that left commentators scrambling for adjectives, scoring goals with a precision that was almost cruel. His teammates didn't understand the new fire in his belly, the way he'd sprint off the ice after practice, phone already in hand, before the locker room door had even swung shut. They just saw the points on the board.

The nights were the hardest. After Shane and Elena were asleep, Ilya would sit in the quiet of the living room, the glow of his tablet illuminating his face as he scrolled through medical journals and omega pregnancy forums. Words like "placenta accreta" and "uterine rupture" burned into his retinas. Then he would creep into their bedroom, careful not to wake Shane, and just watch him breathe. He'd place his palm flat against Shane's back, feeling the gentle rise and fall, and try to match his own breathing to it. He was living two lives now: one as the Raiders' star center, a god on skates, and the other as a terrified expectant father, clinging to the fragile hope that the statistics would work in their favor.

The decision to keep the pregnancy from Elena was a unanimous one, sealed with a kiss in the dark of their bedroom after one of Shane's particularly rough mornings. "She needs to know it's real," Shane had whispered, his head on Ilya's chest. "Soon, after we've passed the scary part." So the house became a stage. Ilya became an expert at distracting their daughter with elaborate stories about why Papa couldn't go to the zoo ("He's working on a very important, secret project!"), and why he was so tired all the time ("Grown-ups need to recharge their batteries, too!").

The morning of the big reveal dawned with a fragile, bright sunlight that seemed to promise good things. The doctor had called yesterday with the words they'd been waiting to hear for two months: "Everything looks perfect. You've safely cleared the first trimester." The relief in the house was insane. Now they could tell their daughter.

"We're not just going to sit her down and tell her," Shane declared, a mischievous glint in his eye that Ilya hadn't seen in weeks. "It's a celebration. This is the best news in the world, and she deserves to have the best morning to go with it."

So Operation Baby Reveal was launched with military precision. Ilya, the designated logistics officer, was dispatched to the bakery with strict instructions. He returned with the goods and a small, wrapped box.

Shane arranged the spoils on a tray: the blueberry muffin for himself, the bear cookie for Ilya, and in the center, a single cupcake with pristine white frosting. On top of the frosting sat a single, perfect blueberry. Ilya watched, a fond smile playing on his lips. "You know, for someone who's been violently ill for three months, you've suddenly become very particular about pastries."

"Asshole," Shane said, carefully placing the small wrapped box next to the cupcake. "Go get our girl."

Ilya returned with a sleepy-eyed Elena, her hair a riot of dark curls, her small body tucked against his chest. He settled her at the kitchen table, her eyes widening at the sight of the special breakfast.

"Is it a special day?" she asked, her voice still husky with sleep.

"The most special day," Shane confirmed, pushing the tray closer. He pointed to the items one by one. "This is Daddy's special muffin." He slid the bear cookie toward Ilya. "And that is Papa's special cookie." He tapped the small box. "And this... this is for later."

Elena's brow furrowed in concentration, her gaze moving from the muffin to the cookie to the mysterious box. "But... what about the cupcake?"

Shane leaned forward, his expression serious and full of theatrical gravity.

"This," Shane said, pointing to the cupcake with the blueberry on top, "is for the baby."

"The baby?" she repeated, her voice soft with confusion.

"The baby," Ilya confirmed, his own smile widening. He reached across the table and gently rested his hand on Shane's stomach, a gesture both familiar and suddenly charged with new meaning. "There's a baby in there. And it's going to be your little brother or sister."

The realization hit her. Her mouth formed a perfect 'O' of shock. "A BABY?!" she shrieked, the sound so full of joy and disbelief that it seemed to shake the very foundations of the house. She scrambled out of her chair, launching herself at Shane, wrapping her arms tightly around his middle. "Daddy, there's a baby in your tummy!"

Shane laughed as he hugged her back. "That's right, Elena. That's our secret."

"A secret?" Elena pulled back, her face alight. "I'm the best at secrets! Can we name it Sparkle? If it's a girl? And if it's a boy, can we name it Mushu?" The questions tumbled out in a breathless stream. "Can I read stories to the baby in your tummy? Can I help paint the room? Can it have a hockey stick? Can we tell everyone? Can we call Mommaw Yuna?"
There was going to be no secret kept.

Ilya watched them, his heart so full it ached. He reached for the small wrapped box and handed it to her. "For you," he said. "To help you remember you're going to be the best big sister in the world."

Elena tore off the paper with feral excitement. Inside, nestled in a bed of tissue paper, was a small, silver frame. On one side was a picture of the three of them, taken during Christmas. On the other, protected by a new pane of glass, was the grainy, black-and-white ultrasound photo from their first appointment. She stared at it, her small finger tracing the indistinct curve of a head and spine.

Elena carried the frame with her everywhere, its silver surface smudged with the oils from her constant, adoring touches. She would set it on her pillow during the day, propping it up so "the baby" could see out the window, and at night, she'd tuck it carefully beside her own pillow, whispering, "Goodnight, Sparkle-Mushu," to the empty frame. The nest, once a sanctuary for Shane's pregnancy-related misery, was now a sacred storytelling corner. Every afternoon, without fail, Elena would drag her favorite picture books into the pile of blankets and pillows, arranging herself with solemn importance beside Shane.

"Okay, baby," she'd begin, her little voice pitched with the gravity of a professor delivering a lecture. "This is 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar.' On Monday, he ate through one apple. But you can't have apples yet, you have to stay in Daddy's tummy. On Tuesday, he ate through two pears..." She'd narrate the entire book, one hand resting gently on Shane's stomach, as if she could feel the baby listening. One evening, Ilya walked in to find her lying with her ear pressed against Shane's bump, her face scrunched in concentration. "I think it's dreaming about hockey," she announced with authority. "I can hear the little skates."

The house soon filled with a new kind of chaos: the joyful noise of a five-year-old planning a sibling's entire existence. Crayon drawings of cribs and mobiles covered the refrigerator, each meticulously labeled "4 BABY." A running list of potential names was pinned to the cork board in the kitchen, a mix of Disney characters, hockey players, and her own brilliant inventions. Her boundless enthusiasm was a potent antidote to the quiet, persistent fear that still lived in the corners of Ilya and Shane's minds. Seeing her so fiercely in love with someone she hadn't even met yet made the risk feel, for the first time, not just manageable, but worthwhile.

The weeks flew by in a blur of hockey practices and kindergarten art projects, of midnight Tums runs and quiet evenings with Ilya's hand resting on the growing curve of Shane's stomach.

The waiting room at the maternal-fetal clinic was a carefully constructed bubble of calm, all muted colors and soft music designed to soothe frayed nerves. It didn't work. Shane's leg bounced, a nervous rhythm against the vinyl chair, and he gripped Ilya's hand, the bones of his knuckles pressing together with enough force to leave pale marks. "Should I have drunk more water before we came?" he asked, his voice a little too tight. "The technician said a full bladder helps get a better view, but I feel like I'm going to burst." Ilya just squeezed his hand in response, his thumb stroking slow, steady circles over Shane's wrist. His focus was a single, unwavering point aimed squarely at Shane.

They were here for the anatomy scan, nearly the twenty-week mark. The moment where the abstract "baby" could become a "boy" or a "girl," where the fuzzy outline might resolve into tiny fingers and toes.

On the table, the cool gel was a familiar shock against Shane's warm skin. The room was dark, save for the glowing monitor. The heartbeat filled the space, a strong, rapid thrumming that was the sweetest sound they knew. Shane's eyes were glued to the screen, trying to decipher the grayscale shapes, the floating skeleton that was theirs. He felt Ilya's gaze on him, not the monitor, a heavy, protective weight. Dr. Martinesi moved the wand with practiced care, pausing to take measurements. Then she smiled. "Well, everything is measuring perfectly. The heart, the spine, the little kidneys... all look great. Are you two ready to know if you're having a hockey player or a figure skater?"

Shane's breath hitched. He nodded, unable to speak. Ilya's "Yes" was a low rumble beside him.

"Hey, girls can be hockey players too," Shane managed, his voice strained with emotion.

Dr. Martinesi chuckled warmly. "Of course they can. I stand corrected."

"But... It's a boy," she said softly.

A sob broke from Shane's chest. A son. The word echoed in the suddenly small room. He looked at Ilya, whose face was a study in stillness. For several long seconds, Ilya just stared at the screen, at the grainy image of their son. Then, slowly, a smile bloomed across his face, so wide and so bright it seemed to push back all the shadows.

Dr. Martinesi printed out a few crisp, black-and-white images of their son, pointing out a button nose and a stubborn chin she swore was all Rozanov. She left them with a final, encouraging smile and the promise to see them in two weeks. Shane wiped furiously at his eyes with the back of his hand, glaring at Ilya. "Stop looking at me like that," he whispered, his voice thick. "You're going to make me cry, and I hate crying in public places." But Ilya couldn't stop. With a shaky breath, Ilya reached out, his large, calloused palm resting gently on the pronounced curve of Shane's stomach. "He's in there," Ilya murmured, his gaze unwavering. "Our boy."

A distinct, definite thump—stronger than a gas bubble, more purposeful than a muscle twitch—pressed up against Ilya's hand. It was a hello. A sharp, undeniable poke from the inside. A yelp of pure, unadulterated shock and joy burst from Ilya's lips, a sound so loud and uncharacteristic that the nurse outside poked her head in. "Everything alright in here?" Ilya

could only laugh, his wide eyes locked on Shane's belly, a goofy, disbelieving grin splitting his face.

As they walked down the corridor, Ilya was a man transformed. He was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. He stopped at the nurses' station, beaming at the woman who was clipping charts. "Excuse me," he announced, his booming voice echoing in the hallway. "I just wanted to let you know. We're having a boy!" The nurse blinked, then broke into a wide smile, congratulating them warmly. But Ilya was already moving. He spotted another omega sitting anxiously in a nearby waiting area and strode over. "Hi," he said, with no preamble whatsoever. "We're having a little boy!" The man stared, bewildered, as Ilya clapped him on the shoulder and moved on, a one-man parade.

Shane followed behind, a half-amused, half-mortified smirk playing on his lips as he clutched the ultrasound photos. Ilya, radiating an infectious joy, was a force of nature. He hailed the coffee cart guy across the street as if they were old friends. "Hey! My friend! We're having a son!" The cart operator, a burly man named Sal who had seen a thousand different kinds of morning grouchiness, broke into a grin and gave them a coffee for Ilya and an extra pastry on the house for Shane, or rather, "the future hockey star."

Back in the car, the deluge continued. The drive-thru speaker at the McDonald's crackled to life with a dispassionate "Welcome to McDonald's, may I take your order?" Ilya leaned across Shane, practically shouting into the speaker. "We're having a boy!" A moment of stunned silence was followed by a tinny, cautious, "Congratulations... sir? Would you like to try a McFlurry with that?" Ilya ordered two, one for each of them.

The scent of fried food and sugar filled the car as they pulled into their driveway, the two melting McFlurries forgotten in the cupholders. The moment the front door clicked shut behind them, the adrenaline that had been carrying Shane since the appointment evaporated. He dropped his keys and the precious ultrasound pictures on the entryway table and practically face-planted onto the living room couch with a groan of pure exhaustion. He sank into the cushions, the weight of the day—and the baby—pressing down on him. For a blissful minute, he allowed himself to simply lie there, a boneless heap,

But reality, in the form of a five-year-old's dinner, intruded. "Shit," he mumbled into the cushion. Elena would be home from school soon. He heaved himself upright, his lower back protesting with a sharp twinge, and trudged into the kitchen. He had just pulled open the fridge, staring blankly at its contents, when the sound of the shower starting upstairs reached him. By the time Ilya came back down, his hair damp and curling at the nape of his neck, Shane had managed to assemble a pathetic-looking plate of cheese and crackers.

Ilya leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms. His biceps, already impressive, seemed to strain against the thin fabric of the grey tank top he'd thrown on. A look of quiet seriousness settled over his features, replacing the earlier manic joy. "We need to talk," he said, his tone gentle but firm. "About this." He gestured vaguely at Shane's stomach. "I can't keep it in anymore, Shane. I want to tell everyone. The team, our friends. I want to tell the world we're having another pup." He pushed off the doorframe, closing the distance between them. "I know you're scared. I am too. But this is too big to hide. I want people to enjoy this with us. We don't have to hide anymore."

Shane sighed, resting a hand on the curve of his belly. He was right. The secret was becoming physically impossible to contain. "I know," he admitted quietly. "It's not fair to keep him from everyone. Okay. You tell the team. I'll call Dana. I'll go to the hospital and see the nurses. We tell them." The words felt like a release, a letting go of a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding for months. A brilliant, blinding smile lit up Ilya's face, the kind of smile that could power a small city.

Just as Ilya's smile reached its peak, Shane gasped, a sharp, hitching breath. His face went pale, and he bent at the waist, one hand flying to the small of his back. "Fuck," he gritted out, the word clipped with pain. "He's kicking. It feels like he's trying to kick his way right through my spine." Ilya was at his side in an instant, the joy on his face replaced by a deep, concerned frown. He could see the distinct, hard bulge protruding from the side of Shane's belly, a temporary monument to their son's restless energy.

Without hesitation, Ilya slid his large hand beneath the taut spot. "Here," he murmured, his other arm wrapping around Shane's waist to steady him. "Let me." He applied a gentle, upward pressure, lifting the baby's weight just enough to ease the strain on Shane's back muscles. The effect was instantaneous. Shane's whole body went limp with relief, a long, shaky sigh escaping him as he melted against Ilya's chest, his head tucking under Ilya's chin. "God, yes," he breathed. "Don't move." They stood there for a long moment, Ilya a solid, supportive wall, his hand a custom-made cradle for their shifting child.

"Go," Ilya said softly, his lips brushing against Shane's hair. "Go lie down on the couch. I'll handle dinner for you and Elena. No problem." His tone left no room for argument, a gentle command that Shane, in his state of boneless relief, was more than happy to obey. He shuffled to the living room, sinking back into the cushions with a grateful moan, watching as Ilya moved around the kitchen with an easy competence, pulling out chicken and vegetables. From this angle, Shane had a perfect view. And what a view it was. The slutty grey tank top was stretched tight across Ilya's shoulders, the muscles of his back flexing and shifting as he chopped at a cutting board. His worn blue jeans hugged his ass in a way that should be illegal, and his bare feet, planted firmly on the floor, looked... strangely compelling.

A wave of heat washed over Shane, so sudden and intense it made him dizzy. He was suddenly, achingly hard, his dick a rigid line pressing urgently against the fabric of his own pants. He blinked, momentarily disoriented. He was horny, yes, he was always a little horny for Ilya, but this was different.

It was a primal, all-consuming ache that short-circuited rational thought. He found himself staring at Ilya's feet, the high arch, the strong line of his ankle, and a truly bizarre thought intruded: I want to put those in my mouth. He blinked again, the heat in his face intensifying. Was this the pregnancy? Was this what happened when your hormones were raging hard enough to power a nuclear reactor? He'd had plenty of kinks, but foot worship had never been on the list. He glanced down and was shocked to see that, at some point during his internal monologue, he had managed to shuck his pants and boxers. His erection was jutting proudly over the curve of his belly, flushed and insistent. His pants were in a pathetic heap by the couch leg.

His brain, fogged with lust and hormones, provided a simple, direct solution. Lube. They kept a bottle in the side zip of the couch cushion for... convenience. His movements were clumsy, fumbling, as he retrieved it and slicked up his fingers. The cool gel was a shock against his heated skin. He propped himself up on an elbow, giving himself a better vantage point to watch the utterly oblivious Ilya humming along to some pop song on the radio while he sautéed garlic. A shudder ran through him as he worked a finger inside, then two, the stretch a welcome, grounding pressure. He was stroking himself in a slow, deliberate rhythm, eyes locked on the tantalizing display of Ilya's biceps as he lifted a pan, completely lost in the primal haze. The innocent domestic scene in the kitchen and the raw, desperate act happening on the couch created a dizzying, intoxicating contrast that sent a fresh wave of arousal straight to his groin.

Garlic and chicken sizzled on the stove, the scent a heady mix with the musky arousal filling the living room. Ilya turned to grab a bowl, and the movement brought Shane's writhing form on the couch directly into his line of sight. He stopped dead, the wooden spoon clattering into the sink. The domestic tableau dissolved. His eyes, dark and intense, swept over the scene: Shane's flushed face, the sheen of sweat on his brow, the desperate pump of his fist, and the slick fingers disappearing inside himself. A growl rumbled in Ilya's chest, a sound of pure, possessive alpha. He crossed the room after turning off the stove, the domestic cook forgotten, replaced by a predator who had found his mate in need.

He hooked his powerful hands under Shane's arms, hauling him up with an effortless display of strength that made Shane's head spin and his dick throb in anticipation. Ilya flipped him over the arm of the couch, positioning him on his knees, chest pressed into the soft cushions, his ass high and completely exposed. The cool air on his heated, slick skin made Shane shudder.

Ilya dropped to his knees behind him, his large hands gripping and spreading Shane's cheeks wide. "Look at you," he growled, his voice low and gravelly. "Already so ready for me." His tongue was hot and wet and utterly shameless as it laved over Shane's puckered hole, tasting the artificial cherry of the lube mingled with the deeper, musky taste of Shane himself. He ate him out with a devouring hunger, licking and sucking until Shane was a trembling, whimpering mess, fisting the couch cushions.

"God, yes," Shane moaned, pushing back against Ilya's face. "More. Please."

Ilya obliged, his tongue replacing Shane's fingers, fucking into him with long, deliberate strokes. He alternated between deep thrusts and fluttering circles around the rim, driving Shane insane with pleasure. He reached around to stroke Shane's cock, which was leaking copiously against his belly.

"Are you okay, love?" Ilya murmured between licks, his concern evident even in his haze of lust.

"Fuck, yes," Shane gasped. "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

Ilya increased his pace, his tongue pistoning in and out of Shane's hole while his hand worked Shane's shaft with expert precision. He could feel Shane's balls tightening, signaling

his impending release. With a final, deep thrust of his tongue and a firm twist of his wrist, Ilya sent Shane over the edge.

Shane came with a sharp cry, spilling onto the seat beneath him, the orgasm ripping through him with the force of a tidal wave. His entire body convulsed, waves of pleasure coursing through him as Ilya continued to lap at his sensitive hole, prolonging his ecstasy.

When Shane finally came down from his high, panting and boneless, Ilya gently flipped him over onto his back. His eyes were dark with desire as he gazed down at his mate.

"You're so beautiful like this," Ilya whispered, leaning down to capture Shane's lips in a deep, passionate kiss. Shane could taste himself on Ilya's tongue, a heady combination that only fueled his insatiable desire.

"I want you," Shane breathed against Ilya's mouth. "I want you inside me."

Ilya chuckled, a low, throaty sound that vibrated through Shane's entire body. "Always so demanding," he teased, though his eyes were filled with adoration. "But I think I can accommodate that request."

He stripped off his tank top, revealing the chiseled muscles of his chest and abdomen that Shane had been admiring earlier. Then he undid his jeans, pushing them down along with his boxers, freeing his rock-hard erection. Shane's mouth watered at the sight. He wanted to taste, to touch, to worship every inch of the man before him.

Ilya positioned himself between Shane's legs, his cock nudging against Shane's still-sensitive entrance. He paused, searching Shane's face. "Are you sure? The doctor said—"

"I'm sure," Shane interrupted, his voice firm. "I need you. Now."

With a nod of understanding, Ilya began to push inside, entering him with a slow, steady pressure that stretched and filled him completely. They both groaned at the exquisite sensation of being joined so intimately.

"So tight," Ilya grunted, his arms trembling with the effort of holding back. "So perfect for me."

He began to move, his strokes shallow at first, gradually deepening as Shane's body adjusted to his size. The angle allowed him to hit Shane's prostate with every thrust, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through Shane's entire body.

"Harder," Shane begged, wrapping his legs around Ilya's waist. "Fuck me harder."

Ilya complied, setting a punishing rhythm that had the couch creaking in protest. He leaned down to capture one of Shane's nipples in his mouth, sucking and biting gently, then moving to the other. His hands roamed over Shane's body, touching and caressing, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

"You feel so good," Ilya groaned against Shane's chest. "Taking me so well."

Shane could only moan in response, lost in a haze of pleasure as Ilya fucked him with wild abandon. He felt another orgasm building, this one even more intense than the first.

"I'm close," he warned, his voice strained.

"Then let go for me," Ilya commanded, his voice a low, velvety growl that vibrated through Shane's very bones. He reached between them, wrapping his fingers around Shane's cock, which was once again hard and leaking against his stomach. His thumb swirled over the tip, smearing the precum, and that was all it took. With a strangled cry, Shane came for the second time, spilling over Ilya's hand and his own stomach in hot, thick pulses. His entire body arched off the couch, a bow pulled taut and then released, the pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. The rhythmic clenching of his muscles around Ilya's cock was the final push Ilya needed. He buried himself to the hilt one last time with a guttural roar, emptying himself deep inside Shane, his body shaking with the force of his release.

They collapsed together in a sweaty, sated heap, the only sounds their ragged breaths and the frantic beating of their hearts. Ilya carefully rolled them onto their sides, staying buried inside Shane, not wanting to break the connection just yet. He brushed the damp hair from Shane's forehead, pressing a soft kiss to the skin there. "You okay, love?" he murmured, his voice husky with spent passion.

Shane hummed in contentment, nuzzling into Ilya's chest. "Better than okay," he slurred, utterly boneless. "So much better than okay." He tightened his arm around Ilya's waist, holding on tight. "Don't move."

Ilya's deep laughter rumbled against Shane's cheek, a comforting vibration. "As much as I'd love to stay right here, a certain five-year-old is going to be expecting dinner soon," he murmured, pressing another soft kiss to Shane's temple. With a gentle reluctance, he carefully disengaged, hissing softly as he slipped free. He stood up, stretching his powerful body with a satisfied groan, then grabbed his discarded tank top from the floor to clean them both up with a tenderness that belied the raw intensity of moments before. He redressed slowly, his movements unhurried, watching as Shane burrowed deeper into the couch cushions, a blissful, sated mess. "You just rest," Ilya said, his voice soft but firm. "I'll handle everything."

He walked back into the kitchen, leaving Shane to bask in the afterglow. The domestic scene resumed, the sizzle of chicken hitting the hot pan once more filling the quiet house. Shane watched from the couch, his body thrumming with a deep, contented lethargy. He could see Ilya's broad back, the muscles shifting smoothly as he worked, the worn denim of his jeans stretching over powerful thighs. There was something profoundly right about this moment, about watching the father of his children cook their dinner while he rested.

March 2018

The Raiders' locker room at 6:30 AM was usually filled with the sounds of equipment clattering, music blasting from speakers, and players shouting across the room. Today, it was nearly silent except for the hum of the ventilation system. Ilya arrived first, his keycard beeping as he unlocked the door. He walked directly to his assigned stall, number 81, and

began laying out his gear in his usual organized manner - pads stacked neatly, skates positioned side by side, jersey hanging on the hook.

Today, he added special items to his stall. From his gym bag, he extracted a miniature replica of the Raiders' home jersey, sized for a newborn. The black and silver colors were sharp against the small garment, and across the back, ROZANOV – 81 was embroidered in white. Next, he carefully placed a pair of baby hockey skates on the shelf beside the jersey. These were actual functional skates, size 2, with white leather boots and stainless steel blades that would barely fit across Ilya's palm.

Finally, Ilya removed a sealed envelope from his bag. Inside were five ultrasound photos from Shane's most recent scan. He selected the clearest three images - one showing the full profile, another of the tiny hands, and the third of feet. He taped these to the inside of his locker door, arranging them at eye level. The images showed clear details: a small nose, distinct fingers, and the curve of a spine. He paused to examine the largest image, which included measurements indicating the baby was approximately 10 inches long and weighing about 10 ounces. His hand lingered near the photo, his fingers tracing the outline through the locker door. The due date written at the bottom - **August 15** - seemed to jump off the page.

The quiet was broken by the locker room door swinging open. Zane Boodram entered, already on his phone with his wife Cassie. "I know you want to do brisket, but it takes eight hours minimum," Zane said, adjusting his voice to a normal volume as he noticed Ilya. "For fifteen people? We'd be eating at midnight. Ribs are more practical." He ended the call and began changing. "Another weekend, another barbecue at our place. I swear my grill gets more use than I do."

Troy Barrett arrived next, his phone in hand. "Harris posted another picture of me asleep on the couch during movie night." He shook his head, but there was affection in his voice. "My followers have seen more of my drooling face than my hockey highlights."

Wyatt Hayes entered, already pulling on his practice jersey. "My sister wants me to assemble this triple-decker bunk bed she bought online this weekend. The instructions look like they were translated by a robot. I think she's trying to kill me."

Luca Haas, the rookie, changed quietly at first before speaking up. "Does anyone know a good coffee place downtown? Not a chain, but somewhere locals actually go?" Several teammates offered suggestions, and Cliff Marleau mentioned a place near the arena that did pour-over coffee.

The conversations continued as more players arrived - talk of family gatherings, recent home improvement projects, and weekend plans. As they changed, their paths took them past the rows of stalls, but no one noticed the new additions to Ilya's locker yet. Cliff Marleau, who had been watching Ilya with a knowing look since arriving, continued to observe him silently as he organized his gear, occasionally glancing at the items inside the locker door.

Troy was the one who finally broke the spell. He'd been meandering toward the equipment closet when he passed Ilya's stall, did a double-take, and backtracked. His footsteps stopped abruptly. "Whoa," he said, his brow furrowed in confusion. He leaned closer, pointing with a chin-tilt. "Roz, why do you have baby skates in your locker?" A few heads turned. Wyatt

ambled over, curious. Luca, ever the newcomer, followed cautiously behind the veterans. Zane, already halfway into his gear, squinted from across the room. The tiny jersey drew snorts of disbelief. "Is that a real thing?" Luca asked, peering at the miniature ROZANOV stitched across the back.

Then Troy's eyes caught the taped-up photos inside the locker door. He went quiet, leaning past Ilya to get a better look. The playful smirk on his face softened, replaced by a slow-dawning comprehension. "No way," he whispered, tracing the air over the image of the tiny spine. Wyatt crowded in beside him, and a collective gasp went through the small group. "Is that...?" Zane was on his feet now, crossing the room in three long strides. The locker room, once filled with casual chatter, fell into a charged silence as the realization rippled outward. These weren't props or a joke. This was Ilya. This was Shane. This was real.

The silence lasted about two seconds before it exploded. Wyatt let out a whoop that bounced off the concrete walls, clapping Ilya so hard on the shoulder he nearly stumbled. "A baby! Roz, you're having a baby!" Luca looked utterly gobsmacked, his eyes wide as saucers. "Shane? But... how? When?" he stammered, a barrage of questions pouring out of him. Troy, recovering with characteristic speed, grinned wickedly. "Well, that explains why he's been so grumpy during bag skates. Shane probably hasn't let you sleep," he teased, though his eyes were bright with genuine happiness. "My money's on the kid having your shot but Shane's pretty face."

Amidst the chaos, Cliff Marleau pushed through the group, his movements deliberate and quiet. He ignored the noise, his focus fixed on the ultrasound photos taped to the locker door. His calloused fingers gently traced the outline of the baby in the clearest image, a rare softness in his eyes. He turned to face Ilya, his expression uncharacteristically vulnerable. "I'm so happy for you, kid." Before Ilya could respond, Cliff pulled him into a fierce hug, patting his back hard. When he pulled back, his eyes were glassy. "Congratulations, brother. Truly."

Zane, ever the planner, was already in motion. "Okay, we're doing a cookout. This weekend. Cassie will want to host a proper baby shower later, but we need to celebrate now. Just us. I'll get the brisket going early." Harris, the team's social media guru, appeared from nowhere, camera already in hand, documenting the cluster of teammates around the stall.

Ilya's head swiveled toward Troy, a glint of amusement mixed with warning in his eyes. He reached out and cuffed the back of Troy's neck lightly, just enough to make him flinch. "Careful, Barrett," he said, his voice low and teasing but with an undeniable edge beneath it. "That's still my fiance you're talking about." A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth as he squeezed once before releasing him.

Then he turned back to the group, his chest swelling as he took in the cascade of congratulations. He wrapped his arm around Wyatt, pulling him into a rough hug. "Thanks, man," he murmured into his shoulder before clapping him on the back. He met Luca's wide-eyed questions with a patient smile. "We found out a few months ago. Wanted to wait until we were sure." He even managed a genuine laugh at Zane's immediate planning. "Of course you're already thinking about food. Let us breathe for a second, would you?" The warmth in the room was palpable, each teammate's reaction a different shade of joy, all reflecting back

at him. Ilya felt it wash over him, solidifying the miracle of it all. This was his team, his family. And soon, he'd have another one to add to the fold.

The team's joyous energy had barely settled as Coach's whistle pierced through the locker room, signaling it was time to head to the ice. As they filed out, the conversation continued, a wave of warmth following them down the tunnel. Zane was already texting his wife, muttering about adjusting the guest list for the cookout. Troy, walking beside Ilya, nudged him with an elbow. "So, are we doing godfather applications now, or is that just an automatic thing for me?" Ilya just shook his head, a grin firmly plastered on his face. Harris had gotten a few more shots, including one of Wyatt actually holding one of the tiny skates up to his own massive ones, a picture that would undoubtedly be gracing the team's social media by lunchtime. The lighthearted babble about names and nursery themes and who was going to teach the kid to skate first slowly faded as they stepped onto the ice, the sharp cold and the familiar sounds of blades cutting into the rink shifting their focus to the work ahead.

Ilya stayed behind just a moment longer, watching them go. The locker room was empty again, but the atmosphere was entirely different from when he'd arrived. The quiet was now filled with the ghost of laughter and the lingering warmth of congratulations. He walked back to his stall, his eyes landing on the tiny jersey, then on the ultrasound photos taped to the door. He traced the outline of their son's profile with his fingertip. August. It was just a few months away on the calendar, but it suddenly felt like a breath away, real and solid and hurtling toward them. He pulled out his phone, thumb hovering over Shane's contact before he pressed the call button.

Shane picked up on the second ring, his voice sounding a little sleepy. "Hey, you. Practice already done?"

"Not yet," Ilya said, leaning against his stall, a smile still playing on his lips. "I just wanted to call. I told them."

He heard a soft rustle on the other end, imagined Shane sitting up on the couch, attention fully captured. "Yeah? How'd it go?"

Ilya let out a soft chuckle, picturing the scene. "It was so funny, Shane. Troy's already trying to claim godfather rights. Zane's planning a barbecue for this weekend. Wyatt practically picked me up in a hug. And Luca... I think Luca's brain short-circuited. He just stood there with his mouth open for a solid minute." He paused, his voice softening.

Ilya paused, his gaze dropping to the worn concrete floor of the locker room. The noisy, celebratory energy of his teammates faded into the background as a quieter, more profound emotion surfaced in his chest. "And Cliff..." he started, his voice lower now, almost private. "He saw the pictures and just got really quiet. You know how he is. He was looking at them for a long time, and then he just pulled me into this hug." He swallowed past a sudden thickness in his throat, the memory hitting him with unexpected force. "He just said he was so happy for me, that he knew how much this meant. It was... Shane, it was like he understood everything without me having to say a word."

A small, watery sound came through the phone, and Ilya could picture the sheen in Shane's eyes. "He's a good man," Shane said, his own voice thick with emotion. "He's been there with

you through it all."

"He was the first person here who really felt like family in Boston," Ilya agreed, looking back at the tiny jersey hanging in his locker. The reality of the day settled over him, a warm, heavy blanket. "They were all so happy, Shane. Not surprised, not weird about it, just... happy. For us. For him." He rested a hand on his own stomach, a phantom echo of Shane's. "It feels real now. Not just our secret anymore. He's coming in August, and our whole pack is already waiting for him."

On the other end of the line, Shane let out a shaky breath that was half a laugh, half a sob. He swiped at the tears that were now freely tracking down his cheeks, the sound of Ilya's joy bringing a fresh wave of overwhelming emotion. "God, I'm so happy for you, Ilya," he managed. Hearing about the raw, genuine happiness of Ilya's team, the easy acceptance of this unconventional pack, made a lump form in his throat. He was so incredibly grateful Ilya had that. "It sounds perfect," he whispered, rubbing a hand over the solid curve of his belly.

"I was just thinking," Shane continued, his voice gaining a little strength as he pulled himself together, "I need to go down to the hospital soon. I need to tell Dana and the others in person. They deserve to hear it from me, not as some rumor floating through the ER." He pictured the chaos of the nurses' station, the sharp wit and fierce loyalty of the people he'd worked with for years. It wouldn't be the same as a locker room full of hockey players, but it was his team, in a way. His pack. The thought buoyed him, giving him a clear next step. Then another thought surfaced, a more immediate, craving-fueled one. "Hey," he said, a sly note creeping into his voice. "While you're there, can you get Cassie's number from Zane for me?"

Ilya's laugh was a warm, surprised bark through the phone. "Cassie's number? Should I be worried, Hollander?"

"Only if you consider an desperate, pregnancy-fueled craving for those apple fritters she made at your last cookout a threat to our relationship," Shane replied, a genuine smile finally breaking through the tears. "I've been dreaming about them, Ilya. I need one. Or twelve. And before you say it, no, the ones from the bakery down the street are not the same. Hers have, like, cinnamon clouds in them."

"Ah, yes," Ilya chuckled, the sound so full of affection it made Shane's chest feel tight. "The cinnamon clouds. A delicacy. I will get you the number, my love. I will brave Zane's inevitable interrogation about why you need it. I will do this for you and for our son's sudden desire for pastries."

The craving, as silly as it was, was real. The need to tell his own people was real. The quiet ache for the camaraderie of a locker room was real, but so was the fierce love for the makeshift family he was building. He had Dana, a friendship forged in the high-stakes world of the hospital. He had his mother, steady and unwavering. And now, strangely, he had Jackie Pike, a tentative but growing connection born from a shared, traumatic event. Oh! And he could also tell Svetlana now! She would be really excited for him and Elena. These people. They were his pack, scattered and different, but his nonetheless.

"I'm just so excited for you," Shane said again, the words softer now, imbued with a sincerity that cut through the phone line. "For all of you. Go be with your pack." He pushed himself up

from the couch, the movement an effort. "Actually, I'm going to go start something for this cookout. Maybe that layered dip with the jalapeños. I just... I need to be in the kitchen. I need to be eating on something at all times. It's a problem."

Ilya's warm laugh was the perfect response. "You and the baby, you have one mind. Eat. Eat. Eat. I will see you after practice."

"Wait, before you go," Shane added, already pulling open the fridge door to a disappointing landscape of condiments and leftovers. "Can you stop at the store on your way home? We need... uh..." His mind went blank, suddenly unable to form the words for the mountain of items required to sate this particular beast. "You know what? Never mind. I'll just text you a list. It's going to be long. Like, really long. Be prepared. I love you!"

With a final laugh, Shane hung up, already typing furiously into his phone: cream cheese, three kinds of shredded cheese, jalapeños (fresh and pickled), sour cream, those little mini sausage things, crackers, and... did he have enough ice cream for the fritters that he was going to steal from the cookout and take home? Better be safe. He added two pints to the list, then sent it off to Ilya.

Chapter 23: You'll have the best (I promise you).

May 2018

The fluorescent lights of Boston Children's Hospital had become as familiar to Ilya as the ice at TD Garden. Every Tuesday that he wasn't on the road, wasn't playing a game, he made the drive from their brownstone in the South End to the sprawling medical complex in Longwood. The playoffs were in full swing—the Raiders had swept their first-round series and were deep into the second—but Tuesdays were sacred. Tuesdays belonged to Robby.

He found Dana in the staff break room, hunched over a sad-looking salad from the cafeteria. She looked up when he knocked, her tired face breaking into a genuine smile. "You're late," she said, but there was no heat in it. "Traffic?"

"Practice ran long." Ilya set the bag from her favorite Thai place on the table. "My hero." Dana abandoned the salad without ceremony, diving into the pad thai with a grateful moan. "You know you don't have to do this every week, right? I can feed myself."

"I know." Ilya settled into the chair across from her, his large frame making the plastic furniture look like it belonged in a dollhouse. "But then I would have to eat lunch alone, and Robby would ask why I did not bring you food, and I would feel like asshole."

Dana laughed, the sound warm and familiar. They'd fallen into this routine months ago, back before Shane had even been in the picture. Ilya would visit Robby, bring Dana lunch, and for an hour or two, he could pretend the world was simpler than it was. That a kid with brain cancer could just be a kid who loved hockey. That an alpha built for violence could be gentle. "How is he today?" Ilya asked.

Dana's expression shifted, something complicated passing behind her eyes. "Good. Really good, actually. The trial is working better than we hoped. His latest scans show the tumor is shrinking."

Ilya felt something loosen in his chest. "That is good news."

"It is." Dana set down her fork, her gaze steady on him. "But we need to talk about something else." The way she said it made Ilya's instincts prick. He'd learned to read Dana over the months—she was direct, pragmatic, didn't waste words. When she hedged like this, it meant the news was bad. "The state is considering moving him," she said quietly. "To a long-term care facility. Somewhere he can continue receiving treatment from the trial, but... not here."

Ilya's hands curled into fists on his thighs. "Why?"

"Because he's been in the system for years and no one has stepped up to adopt him." Dana's voice was carefully neutral, but he could hear the anger underneath. "He's thirteen years old with brain cancer. The state doesn't think he's going to find a family, so they want to move him somewhere more 'appropriate' for long-term pediatric cases."

"That is bullshit."

"I know." Dana reached across the table, her small hand covering one of his fists. "I'm fighting it. So is his case worker. But unless someone comes forward to foster or adopt him in the next few weeks..." She trailed off, the implication clear.

Ilya felt the word rise in his throat before he could stop it. *Robka*. The diminutive, affectionate. The name he'd started using in his head months ago, when Robby had shyly asked if Ilya thought he'd ever be good enough to play in the NHL. When Ilya had seen the kid's eyes light up at the iPad he'd brought him, loaded with every hockey highlight from the last decade. If he didn't have to run things by Shane first, he would have already snatched Robby up himself. Would have given him a home, a family, a life beyond these sterile walls. But he *did* have to consider his very pregnant husband and their daughter. Elena was five and excitable and needed so much attention. Shane was seven months along and exhausted, his body stretched and aching, barely able to move some days without Ilya's help.

And yet. Ilya thought about the way Shane had looked last week when he'd come home from a visit with Robby. The way his scent had gone soft and warm, that particular sweetness that meant his omega instincts were engaged. Shane had curled up against Ilya on the couch and said, *He asked about the baby today. Wanted to know if we'd picked a name yet*. They'd talked about this before. Months ago, just after Ilya's attack, when they were both still healing and the future felt uncertain. They'd agreed that Robby deserved stability, deserved the best medical care, deserved not to have his treatment disrupted by the chaos of an adoption. As long as he was here, in Boston, at one of the best pediatric hospitals in the country, they could visit. They could be part of his life without adding stress. But now the state wanted to take that away.

"I will talk to Shane," Ilya said.

Dana squeezed his hand. "I thought you might say that."

Robby's room was at the end of the hall, the walls covered in posters of hockey players—most of them Ilya, though there were a few of Crosby and Ovechkin mixed in for variety. The boy was propped up in bed, the iPad balanced on his knees, his thin face intent on the screen. He'd lost more hair since the last round of treatment, but his eyes were bright, alert. He looked up when Ilya knocked, and his whole face transformed. "Ilya!" He scrambled to sit up straighter, nearly dropping the iPad in his excitement. "Did you see the goal you scored against Tampa? I've watched it like fifty times. The way you deked around Hedman was *insane*."

Ilya felt his chest tighten. This kid. This brave, brilliant kid who should have been worrying about algebra homework and girls, not whether his next scan would show the tumor growing back. "Hedman is slow," Ilya said, settling into the chair by the bed. "I am just fast."

"You're the fastest." Robby turned the iPad around, showing Ilya the highlight reel he'd been watching. "Dana says you brought her lunch again. You know she's going to get spoiled, right?"

"She deserves to be spoiled. She takes care of you."

Robby's smile dimmed a little. "Yeah. She's pretty great." They watched highlights together for a while, Robby providing enthusiastic commentary on every play. He had a good eye for the game, could break down defensive strategies like a coach. Ilya found himself wondering, not for the first time, what Robby could have been if the universe had been kinder. If his body hadn't betrayed him before he'd even had a chance to grow into it. "My birthday's next month," Robby said suddenly. "I'll be fourteen."

"Fourteen is good age," Ilya said. "Old enough to be trouble."

Robby laughed, but it was a little hollow. "Yeah. Maybe."

Ilya stayed for another hour, until Robby's eyelids started to droop and the nurses came in to check his vitals. He ruffled the kid's hair on his way out—gently, always gently—and promised to come back next week. In the hallway, Dana was waiting. "He doesn't know yet," she said quietly. "About the move. I didn't want to tell him until I knew for sure."

Ilya nodded. His throat felt too tight for words.

"Talk to Shane," Dana said. "And Ilya? Whatever you decide... thank you. For caring about him. It means more than you know."

The house smelled like Yuna's cooking when Ilya got home—something rich and savory that made his stomach growl despite the protein bar he'd eaten in the car. He found his mother-in-law in the kitchen, stirring a pot on the stove while Elena sat at the table, carefully coloring a picture of what might have been a dinosaur or possibly a dog. It was hard to tell. "Papa!" Elena abandoned her crayons and launched herself at him. Ilya caught her easily, swinging her up into his arms.

"Lenochka. What are you drawing?"

"It's a T-rex," she said, very seriously. "For the baby. So he knows what dinosaurs look like when he's born."

"That is very thoughtful."

Yuna smiled at him from the stove. "Shane is upstairs. He tried to help with dinner, but I sent him to rest. He looked exhausted." Ilya felt a familiar pang of guilt. Shane was so pregnant now, his belly round and heavy, his body struggling under the weight of growing their son. And still he tried to do everything—take care of Elena, manage the house, help Yuna cook. Ilya had tried to hire a nanny three times. Shane had refused every time, insisting they didn't need the help, that Yuna was right next door and happy to pitch in. Ilya was still getting used to this. To the idea of a family dynamic that just *did things* for each other without money being the center. Yuna helped because she wanted them happy. Because she loved her son and her granddaughter and the alpha who'd claimed them both. It was foreign and wonderful and sometimes Ilya didn't know what to do with the enormity of it.

"Thank you," he said to Yuna. "For taking care of them."

"You're my family," Yuna said simply. "It's what we do."

Ilya carried Elena upstairs, her small body warm and solid against his chest. She chattered the whole way, telling him about her day at kindergarten, about the boy who'd pulled her hair at recess, about the book Miss Sarah had read them about a caterpillar who ate too much. He found Shane in their bedroom, propped up against a mountain of pillows, one hand resting on his belly. His eyes were closed, but Ilya could tell from his breathing that he wasn't asleep. Just resting. Conserving energy. "Daddy's sleeping," Elena whispered.

"No, I'm not." Shane's eyes opened, and he smiled at them both. "Come here, baby girl." Elena squirmed out of Ilya's arms and climbed onto the bed, careful not to jostle Shane too much. She pressed a kiss to his belly, then settled against his side.

"How was school?" Shane asked.

"Good! I made a dinosaur for the baby."

"I can't wait to see it."

Ilya watched them, his heart doing something complicated in his chest. This. This was what he'd been fighting for. What he'd nearly died for. His omega, heavy with their child. Their daughter, bright and loving and safe. A home that smelled like family. And now he had to ask Shane to make it bigger.

They waited until after dinner, after Elena was in bed and Yuna had gone home. Shane was curled up on the couch, his feet in Ilya's lap, while Ilya absently massaged his swollen ankles. The playoffs were on TV—Rangers and Capitals, a series that had gone to seven games—but neither of them were really watching. "I need to talk to you about something," Ilya said.

Shane's scent shifted immediately, a thread of anxiety cutting through the warm vanilla-and-honey smell of contentment. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. No. I do not know." Ilya took a breath. "It is about Robby." He told Shane everything. About Dana's news, about the state's plan to move Robby to a long-term facility. About the experimental trial that was working, about Robby's upcoming birthday. About the way the kid's face had lit up when Ilya walked into his room. By the time he finished, Shane's scent had changed completely. The anxiety was gone, replaced by something sharp and fierce. Something that made Ilya's alpha sit up and take notice.

Shane sat up, his movements awkward with the weight of his belly. "They want to move him? Away from Boston? Away from his doctors?"

"The trial can continue at the other facility—"

"I don't care about the facility." Shane's eyes were blazing now, his protective instincts fully engaged. "He's a kid. He's *our* kid, Ilya. We've been visiting him for months. He asks about

Elena. He asks about the baby. And they want to just... ship him off somewhere because no one will adopt a child with cancer?"

"Shane—"

"No." Shane was on his feet now, pacing despite the obvious discomfort. His hand was pressed to his lower back, his belly jutting forward. "No. That's not happening. We're not letting that happen." Ilya felt something warm and fierce bloom in his chest. This. This was his omega. This was the man who'd fought his way through nursing school. Who'd delivered their daughter despite the trauma it caused his body. Who'd stood up to Ilya's own protective instincts and demanded to be treated as an equal.

Shane was already reaching for his phone. "I'm calling Dana."

"Solnyshko, it is almost nine o'clock—"

"I don't care." Shane's fingers were flying over the screen. "Dana? It's Shane. I know it's late, but I need to ask you something. Can we come see Robby tonight? I know it's past visiting hours, but—" He paused, listening. "Thank you. We'll be there in twenty minutes." He hung up and looked at Ilya, his scent sharp and determined. "Get your keys."

Ilya didn't argue. He could smell the shift in Shane's scent, could see the set of his jaw. His omega had made a decision, and nothing—not visiting hours, not hospital protocol, not even his own heavily pregnant body—was going to stop him. They were in the car five minutes later, Shane's hand tight on Ilya's thigh as they drove through the dark streets of Boston. The city was alive around them, people spilling out of bars and restaurants, the playoffs bringing an electric energy to the spring air. But inside the car, there was only Shane's scent—fierce and protective and utterly uncompromising. Ilya had never loved him more.

Dana met them at the entrance to the pediatric wing, her expression carefully neutral. "He's awake," she said. "Watching your highlights from the Tampa game. Again." Shane didn't wait for permission. He moved past Dana with single-minded focus, his hand pressed to his belly, his gait awkward but determined. Ilya followed, one hand hovering near Shane's lower back in case he stumbled. Robby looked up when they entered, his eyes widening. "Shane? Ilya? What are you doing here? It's late."

Shane crossed to the bed and sat down on the edge, his movements careful. He took Robby's hand in both of his, and Ilya watched the kid's expression shift from confusion to something more vulnerable. "Robby," Shane said gently. "We need to ask you something important."

The boy's eyes darted between them. "Okay?"

"How would you feel," Shane continued, his voice steady despite the emotion Ilya could scent rolling off him, "about coming to live with us? Permanently. As part of our family."

Robby went very still. "What?"

"We want to adopt you," Ilya said, moving to stand beside Shane. "If you want that. If you would like to have Elena as sister, and new baby as brother. If you would like to have home

with us." For a long moment, Robby just stared at them. Then his face crumpled, and he started to cry—great, heaving sobs that shook his thin frame. Shane pulled him close, careful of the IV line in his arm, and held him while he wept.

"I thought—" Robby's voice was muffled against Shane's shoulder. "I thought no one would want me. Because of the cancer. Because I might not—"

"Stop," Shane said firmly. "Don't finish that sentence. You're going to be fine. The trial is working. And even if it wasn't, even if things were different, we would still want you. Do you understand? You're ours, Robby. You've been ours for months. We're just making it official."

Robby pulled back, swiping at his eyes. "Really? You really want me?"

"Really," Ilya said. His own throat was tight, his eyes burning. "We will start paperwork tomorrow. And we will bring you phone, so you can call us anytime. Day or night."

"And when the baby comes," Shane added, "you'll be there. You'll be his big brother. Elena's big brother. You'll be part of everything."

Robby looked between them, his expression awed and disbelieving and so full of hope it made Ilya's chest ache. "I'd like that," he whispered. "I'd really, really like that." Shane hugged him again, and Ilya watched his omega cradle this broken, brave kid against his chest. Watched the way Shane's scent went soft and nurturing, the way his hand came up to stroke Robby's hair. This was what Shane was made for—not just bearing children, but protecting them. Loving them. Building a family out of the broken pieces the world left behind. Ilya had never been more in awe of him.

They stayed for another hour, until Robby's eyes started to droop and the nurses gently suggested it was time to let him rest. Shane promised they'd be back tomorrow with the phone, with updates on the adoption process, with anything Robby needed. On the way out, Shane was already on the phone with their attorney, leaving a voicemail about expediting adoption paperwork. Then he called Yuna, waking her up to ask if she could stay with Elena tomorrow while they met with social services. Ilya drove in silence, one hand on the wheel, the other resting on Shane's thigh. His omega was in full protective mode now, his scent sharp and focused, his mind already three steps ahead. Planning. Organizing. Making sure Robby would be safe.

They were almost home when Shane suddenly grabbed Ilya's arm. "Pull in there." Ilya looked where Shane was pointing. The golden arches of a McDonald's glowed against the night sky.

"You want McDonald's?" Ilya couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. Shane, who'd spent months lecturing him about proper nutrition. Shane, who meal-prepped every Sunday and refused to let Ilya eat gas station hot dogs. Shane, who'd once thrown out an entire pizza because Ilya had ordered it with extra cheese.

"Yes," Shane said. "I want McDonald's. Pull in."

Ilya pulled in, trying not to laugh. "You know, you used to tell me this food was poison."

"Shut up," Shane said, but there was no heat in it. "I'm pregnant. I'm allowed to eat poison." They pulled up to the drive-through speaker, and Shane leaned across Ilya's lap—his belly pressing against Ilya's thigh, his scent flooding the car—and said, very clearly, "I'd like a ten-piece nugget meal, a Big Mac, and a large vanilla shake."

Ilya stared at him. "That is... a lot of food."

"I'm eating for two."

"I do not think baby needs Big Mac."

"The baby wants what the baby wants." Shane settled back into his seat, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "Drive." Ilya drove. He paid for the food, handed the bags to Shane, and watched in fascination as his omega tore into the first nugget before they'd even left the parking lot.

"Good?" Ilya asked.

Shane moaned around a mouthful of processed chicken. "So good. Oh my god. Why did I ever stop eating these?"

"Because you have self-control?"

"Self-control is overrated." Shane dipped another nugget in sauce, his eyes half-closed in bliss. "Don't judge me."

"I am not judging. I am... impressed." By the time they got home, Shane had demolished half the nuggets and was working on the Big Mac. Ilya helped him out of the car, one hand steadying his elbow, the other carrying the remaining food. Shane waddled up the front steps, still chewing, and Ilya thought: *This is my life now. My pregnant omega eating McDonald's at ten o'clock at night because we just adopted a teenager with brain cancer.* It was perfect.

The next morning, Ilya woke to an empty bed. He could hear the shower running in the bathroom, the sound of water against tile. He lay there for a moment, letting himself surface slowly, his body still heavy with sleep. The water shut off. Ilya pushed himself up, padding across the bedroom to the bathroom door. He opened it without knocking—they were long past that kind of privacy—and stopped dead.

Shane was standing in front of the mirror, a towel wrapped around his hips, his skin still damp from the shower. His belly was round and full, the skin stretched tight over their son. And there, across his hips and thighs and the lower curve of his stomach, were stretch marks. Thin silver lines that caught the light, evidence of his body's transformation. Ilya felt his mouth go dry. His cock went from half-interested to fully hard in the space of a heartbeat.

Shane caught his eye in the mirror, and a slow, knowing smile curved his lips. "See something you like?"

Ilya couldn't speak. He could only stare at those marks, at the proof of what Shane's body was doing. Growing their child. Changing. Becoming something new and beautiful and *his*. "I

hate them," Shane said, still watching Ilya in the mirror. His tone was light, teasing. He knew exactly what he was doing. "They're everywhere. I look like a roadmap."

Ilya finally found his voice. "You look like mine."

Shane's scent shifted, going warm and pleased. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Ilya crossed the bathroom in two strides, his hands coming up to rest on Shane's hips. His thumbs traced the marks there, following the silver lines across Shane's skin. "These are mine. You are mine. This—" He pressed his palm flat against Shane's belly. "—is ours."

Shane leaned back against him, his head resting on Ilya's shoulder. "I need to put lotion on them. They itch."

"I will help."

"Will you?" Shane's voice had gone low, seductive. "That's very generous of you."

Ilya's hands were already moving, sliding around to cup Shane's belly, to trace the marks that spread across his skin like lightning. "I will do more than help. I will worship every single one."

Shane shivered. "Ilya—"

"Can I kiss them?" Ilya's lips were against Shane's ear now, his voice a rough whisper. "Can I lick them? Can I show you how beautiful you are?"

"Yes," Shane breathed. "God, yes." Ilya turned Shane around, gentle despite the urgency thrumming through his veins. He dropped to his knees on the bathroom tile, his hands sliding up Shane's thighs, pushing the towel aside. The stretch marks were everywhere—across Shane's hips, his thighs, the soft skin of his lower belly. Ilya leaned in and pressed his lips to the first one, then the second, then the third.

Shane's hand came down to tangle in Ilya's hair. "Ilya, please—"

"Shh." Ilya's tongue traced a line across Shane's hip, following the silver mark. "Let me take care of you." He worked his way across Shane's body, kissing and licking every mark he could find. Shane was trembling now, his breathing ragged, his scent thick and sweet in the small space. When Ilya finally reached for the lotion on the counter, Shane made a small, desperate sound.

"Bedroom," Ilya said. "Now."

They barely made it. Ilya guided Shane to the bed, his hands never leaving his omega's skin. He laid Shane down on his side, his belly supported by pillows, and knelt behind him. The lotion was cool against his palms as he warmed it, then began to smooth it across Shane's skin. "You are so beautiful," Ilya murmured, his hands gliding over Shane's hips, his thighs, the curve of his ass. "So perfect. Look at you, solnyshko. Look at what you are doing for us."

Shane was panting now, his hips shifting restlessly. "Ilya, I need—"

"I know what you need." Ilya's hands spread Shane's cheeks, and he leaned in, his tongue tracing the cleft. Shane cried out, his hand fisting in the sheets. Ilya took his time. He licked and sucked and worshipped, his hands holding Shane steady as his omega writhed and begged. He could taste Shane's slick, could smell the desperation in his scent. When Shane finally came—his whole body going taut, a broken sound tearing from his throat—Ilya didn't stop. He kept going, kept licking, until Shane was sobbing with oversensitivity.

Only then did Ilya pull back, his own cock aching and leaking. He wrapped a hand around himself and stroked once, twice, and came across Shane's ass with a groan that seemed to come from the depths of his soul. They lay there for a long moment, both of them breathing hard. Then Shane laughed, the sound breathless and satisfied.

"We're going to be late," he said.

"I do not care."

"We have a meeting with the social worker at ten."

"Still do not care."

Shane turned his head, his eyes soft and warm. "Well, I do. I love you. But it's time to go get our kid."

Ilya leaned down and kissed him, slow and deep. "I love you too, solnyshko. More than anything."

June 2018

The baby shower was Cassie Boodram's idea. She'd cornered Ilya in the parking lot after practice one afternoon in early June, her expression determined in that way that meant she'd already made up her mind and was just informing him of the decision. "We're throwing you and Shane a baby shower," she'd said, hands on her hips. "We're hosting at our place. You just need to show up."

Ilya had tried to argue—Shane was tired, they didn't need a fuss, it was too much—but Cassie had steamrolled right over him with the same efficiency her husband used on the ice. "Shane deserves to be celebrated. You both do. You're having a baby, you're adopting Robby, you're building this beautiful family, and we want to be part of it. So you're going to let us throw you a party, and you're going to smile and say thank you." She'd softened then, reaching up to pat his arm. "Besides, the girls are already planning it. You try telling them no."

So when the day came, Ilya and Shane showed up at Bood's sprawling colonial in Brookline, Shane moving slowly with one hand pressed to his lower back, his belly round and heavy at eight months along. The backyard was already full of people—teammates and their families, Shane's former coworkers from the hospital, even some of the front office staff. And there, sitting on the back porch with Elena on his lap, was Robby. Shane's face lit up the moment he saw him. He made a beeline for the porch, moving faster than Ilya had seen him move in weeks. Robby looked up and grinned, and Elena squealed, "Robby! You came!"

"Of course I came, Dana brought me" Robby said, hugging her. "I wouldn't miss it." Ilya hung back, watching. The adoption paperwork was still in progress—bureaucracy moved slowly, even with the best lawyers—but Robby had been granted weekend visits. He'd spent the last two Saturdays at their house, sleeping in the guest room that would eventually be his, playing video games with Elena, helping Shane fold tiny onesies for the baby. He looked good. Better than he had in months. The experimental trial was working—his latest scans showed continued shrinkage of the tumor. He'd even started to gain a little weight, his face less gaunt, his eyes brighter.

Dana appeared at Ilya's elbow, a glass of lemonade in her hand. "He's doing really well," she said quietly. "The doctors are cautiously optimistic."

"Cautiously optimistic is good?"

"In cancer terms? It's great." She smiled. "You're doing a good thing, Ilya. Both of you." Ilya watched Shane settle onto the porch swing next to Robby, Elena climbing into his lap despite his protests that there wasn't room. Robby was laughing at something Shane said, his whole face transformed. God, he loved moments like this.

Inside the house, Cassie had transformed the living room into something out of a magazine. Blue and white streamers hung from the ceiling, a banner reading "Welcome Baby *Leonid*" stretched across one wall, and a table groaned under the weight of gifts wrapped in silver paper. But it was the women gathered in the kitchen that made Ilya pause. Cassie stood at the center, directing traffic with the ease of someone who'd done this a hundred times before. Around her, the other WAGs were laughing and talking, arranging platters of food, pouring drinks.

"Shane!" Cassie called out when she spotted them. "Get in here. We've been waiting for you." Shane was immediately swept into the kitchen, surrounded by warm hugs and excited chatter. Ilya watched as Cassie pulled Shane into an embrace, careful of his belly, then passed him off to the next woman, and the next. They fussed over him, asked about the baby, admired his belly, made him sit down in the most comfortable chair. Someone pressed a plate of food into his hands. Someone else brought him water. The love in that room was thick and sweet, and Shane's scent went soft with contentment.

Ilya found himself ushered out to the backyard with the other men. Cliff was manning the grill, Boody was setting up a game of cornhole, and the rest of the team had scattered across the lawn with beers in hand. It was easy, comfortable, the kind of gathering that felt less like an obligation and more like coming home. Hayden Pike arrived late, Jackie's hand on his elbow as he navigated the back steps with his cane. The team went quiet for a moment—old rivalries dying hard—but then Cliff set down his spatula and crossed the yard to shake Hayden's hand, and the tension broke like a wave against rocks.

"Glad you could make it," Cliff said, and he meant it. Hayden's expression was complicated, grateful and uncertain all at once. "Wouldn't have missed it. Shane invited us. Would've been rude not to come."

"How are you feeling?" Ilya asked, moving to stand beside them.

"Like I got hit by a truck." Hayden's smile was wry. "But I'm alive, so I can't complain." Jackie touched Ilya's arm, her eyes warm. "Thank you for having us. It means more than you know."

"You saved my life," Ilya said simply. "That makes you family. Or it will be, if you want it." He watched as understanding dawned on Hayden's face, watched the way the man's throat worked as he swallowed hard. Jackie's eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"We'd like that," Hayden said quietly. "We'd really like that."

The afternoon passed in a blur of food and laughter and gifts. There were onesies and blankets and more stuffed animals than any one baby could possibly need. Cliff gave a speech that made Shane cry—something about pack and family and how proud he was of both of them. Bood presented them with a ridiculously expensive stroller that Shane immediately declared was "too much," but Ilya could see the way his eyes lingered on it, the way his fingers traced the sleek lines. Inside, the women had gathered around Shane in the living room, Cassie orchestrating the gift-opening with the precision of a general. They oohed and aahed over every tiny outfit, every soft blanket, every thoughtful present. Shane sat in the middle of it all, his hand resting on his belly, his scent warm and happy and so full of love it made Ilya's chest ache.

As the sun started to set, Robby fell asleep on the couch inside, Elena curled up next to him like a kitten. Shane sat on the porch swing, his hand resting on his belly, his eyes half-closed. Ilya settled next to him, pulling Shane against his side, and looked out at the backyard. At their teammates laughing in the fading light. At Yuna helping Cassie clean up in the kitchen, the two women chatting like old friends. At Dana sitting with Jackie Pike on the back steps, their heads bent together in conversation. At Hayden showing Cliff pictures of his own kids on his phone, the two alphas finding common ground in fatherhood.

"Good day?" Ilya asked.

"The best," Shane murmured. "Look at them, Ilya. Look at our family." Ilya looked. At Robby and Elena sleeping on the couch. At the pack they'd built, piece by piece, out of broken things and second chances. At the life they were creating together.

"Yeah," Ilya said softly. "I see them." This was what they'd built. This was what they'd fought for. And in just a few weeks, it would grow even bigger.

July 2018

Shane stood in the kitchen, one hand braced against the counter, the other pressed to his lower back. The house was too quiet. Elena was at Grandma Yuna's—had been since that morning, when Shane had dropped her off with a promise to pick her up later. Ilya was at the rink, working out with some of the guys who'd stuck around Boston for the summer. Shane had insisted he go, had practically pushed him out the door. *You've been hovering for weeks. Go play hockey. I'll be fine.* And he had been fine. He'd folded laundry, put away the last of the baby shower gifts, made himself lunch. The house was ready. The nursery was ready. They were as prepared as they could be for Leonid's arrival in a few weeks.

Except the baby had other ideas.

Shane felt it first as a low, cramping sensation in his belly. Not unusual—Braxton Hicks contractions had been plaguing him for days. But then he felt the gush of fluid between his legs, warm and unmistakable, soaking through his sweatpants and pooling on the kitchen floor. His water had broken. "No," Shane whispered, staring down at the puddle spreading across the tile. "No, no, no. Not yet. Not now."

His hands were shaking as he reached for his phone. He tried Ilya first, his fingers fumbling over the screen. The call went straight to voicemail. *You've reached Ilya Rozanov. Leave message.* "Ilya, it's me. My water broke. I need you to come home. Please call me back." He hung up and immediately tried again. Voicemail. Again. Voicemail. Panic was starting to claw at his throat now. He tried Yuna next, but her phone rang and rang before going to voicemail too. She was probably outside with Elena, playing in the yard, her phone forgotten on the kitchen counter like always.

Shane was alone. He was in labor, and he was alone. The memories came flooding back—Elena's birth, the tearing, the blood, the way his body had felt like it was splitting apart. Dr. Martinesi had warned him that this pregnancy was high-risk, that there was a chance of complications, that they'd planned for a C-section at 36 weeks to avoid exactly this scenario. But Leonid was coming now, and Shane was standing in a puddle of amniotic fluid in his kitchen with no one to help him.

Another contraction hit, stronger this time, and Shane doubled over with a gasp. His vision swam. His omega instincts were screaming at him to nest, to find his alpha, to be safe. But Ilya wasn't here. Ilya was at the rink with his phone in his locker, unreachable. Shane forced himself to breathe. In through his nose, out through his mouth. He was a nurse. He knew what to do. He knew the signs of labor, knew when to go to the hospital, knew how to keep himself calm. Except he wasn't calm. He was terrified.

With shaking hands, he dialed 911. "911, what's your emergency?"

"I'm in labor," Shane said, his voice tight with pain. "My water broke. I'm alone. I need an ambulance."

"Okay, sir, stay calm. What's your address?" Shane rattled it off, his hand gripping the counter so hard his knuckles went white. Another contraction was building, a wave of pressure that made his knees buckle. "How far apart are your contractions?"

"I don't know. Two minutes? Maybe less. They're coming fast." Too fast. This wasn't supposed to happen this fast.

"Is there anyone with you?"

"No. I'm alone. My fiancé is—he's not answering his phone. I can't reach him." Shane's voice cracked on the last word, and he hated himself for it. For being weak. For being scared.

"The ambulance is on its way. They'll be there in five minutes. Can you get to the door?"

"I think so." Shane shuffled toward the front door, leaving a trail of fluid behind him. Every step was agony. His body felt like it was tearing itself apart from the inside. He unlocked the door and sank down onto the floor in the entryway, his back against the wall, his phone clutched in his hand. He tried Ilya again. Voicemail. "Ilya, please," he whispered to the empty house. "Please pick up. I need you."

The ambulance arrived in what felt like hours but was probably only minutes. Two paramedics—a beta woman and an alpha man—came through the door with a stretcher and a calm efficiency that Shane desperately needed. "Hi there," the woman said, kneeling beside him. "I'm Sarah. This is Tom. We're going to take care of you, okay?"

"My fiance," Shane gasped. "I can't reach him. He doesn't know—"

"We'll keep trying to contact him," Sarah said. "Right now, let's focus on getting you to the hospital. Can you tell me how far along you are?"

"Thirty-five weeks. High-risk pregnancy. I was supposed to have a C-section. This wasn't supposed to happen yet." Another contraction hit, and Shane cried out, his hand flying to his belly. Tom was already moving, checking Shane's vitals, preparing the stretcher. "We're going to get you on the stretcher now, okay? On three. One, two, three—" They lifted him, and Shane bit back a scream. Everything hurt. His back, his hips, his belly. The pressure was unbearable, like his body was trying to turn itself inside out.

The ride to the hospital was a blur of pain and fear. Sarah held his hand, talking to him in a low, soothing voice, but Shane couldn't focus on her words. All he could think about was Ilya. About how he wasn't there. About how Shane was doing this alone, just like he'd done everything alone before Ilya. Except he wasn't supposed to be alone anymore. They were supposed to be a team. They were supposed to do this together.

At the rink, Ilya was flying. The ice was smooth beneath his skates, the puck a blur as he deked around Bood and fired a shot at the net. It felt good to move, to push his body, to lose himself in the rhythm of the game. He'd been too wound up lately, too focused on Shane and the baby and making sure everything was perfect. Shane had been right to push him out of the house. He needed this. The game ended, and Ilya skated off the ice, his body pleasantly tired, his mind clear for the first time in weeks. He was pulling off his skates in the locker room when Bood called out, "Hey, Roz! Your phone's been going crazy. You might want to check it."

Ilya's stomach dropped. He crossed to his locker and grabbed his phone, his hands suddenly clumsy. Seven missed calls from Shane. Three from Yuna. Two voicemails. His heart was pounding as he opened the first voicemail, and Shane's voice—tight with pain and fear—filled his ear. *Ilya, it's me. My water broke. I need you to come home. Please call me back.*

"No," Ilya breathed. He was already moving, grabbing his bag, his keys, not bothering to change out of his workout clothes. "Bood, I have to go. Shane—the baby—"

"Go," Bood said, his face pale. "Go. We'll lock up." Ilya ran. He tried calling Shane as he sprinted to his car, but the call went straight to voicemail. He tried Yuna. No answer. Panic was a living thing in his chest now, clawing at his ribs, making it hard to breathe. Shane had

been alone. His omega had gone into labor, and Ilya hadn't been there. He'd been playing hockey, his phone in his locker, completely unreachable while Shane needed him.

The drive to the hospital was a nightmare. Traffic was thick, the summer heat making everyone slow and irritable. Ilya laid on his horn, weaving between cars, his hands white-knuckled on the wheel. He tried calling the hospital, but they wouldn't tell him anything over the phone. He tried Yuna again. This time, she answered. "Ilya? Oh, thank God. Where are you?"

"I am on my way to hospital. Where is Shane? Is he okay? Is baby okay?"

"He's in labor. They took him by ambulance. I just got here—I didn't have my phone, I didn't know—" Yuna's voice was shaking. "He's asking for you. He's scared, Ilya."

"I am coming. Tell him I am coming." Ilya hung up and pressed harder on the gas. He made it to the hospital in fifteen minutes. He abandoned his car in the emergency lane and ran inside, his heart pounding so hard he thought it might burst. Yuna was waiting in the lobby, Elena on her hip, both of them looking pale and worried.

"Where is he?" Ilya demanded.

"Fourth floor. Labor and delivery. Room 412." Ilya didn't wait to hear more. He took the stairs two at a time, his lungs burning, his mind a mess of fear and guilt and desperate need. He burst through the door to room 412 and found Shane on the bed, his face pale and drawn, his hand pressed to his belly. Dr. Martinesi was there, checking monitors, her expression calm but focused.

Shane's head turned at the sound of the door, and when he saw Ilya, his face crumpled. "You're here," he sobbed. "You're here."

"I am here." Ilya crossed to the bed in two strides and took Shane's hand, bringing it to his lips. "I am so sorry, solnyshko. I am so sorry I was not there."

"I was so scared," Shane whispered. "I thought—I thought I was going to have to do this alone."

"Never." Ilya pressed his forehead to Shane's, breathing in his scent—fear and pain and underneath it all, that sweet maple that meant *home*. "I am here. You are not alone. We will do this together." Dr. Martinesi looked up from the monitors. "Good timing, Mr. Rozanov. We're getting close. Shane's progressing quickly."

"Too quickly," Shane gasped. Another contraction hit, and he gripped Ilya's hand so hard Ilya thought bones might break. But he didn't pull away. He stayed right there, murmuring encouragement in Russian and English, pressing kisses to Shane's sweat-dampened hair. The contractions came faster, harder, each one tearing a cry from Shane's throat. Ilya could see the fear in his omega's eyes, could smell it in his scent. Shane was remembering Elena's birth, the tearing, the blood, the trauma. Dr. Martinesi had warned them this could happen, that Shane's body might not be able to handle another natural delivery. But there was no time for a C-section now. The baby was coming.

"I need to push," Shane gasped.

"Not yet," Dr. Martinesi said. "Just a little longer—"

"I need to push *now*." And then everything happened very fast. Shane pushed, his whole body straining, his scent spiking with pain and effort. Ilya held him, anchored him, whispered every word of love and encouragement he knew. The room was a blur of movement—nurses, monitors, Dr. Martinesi's calm voice cutting through the chaos. And then—

A cry. High and thin and perfect.

"It's a boy," Dr. Martinesi said, and Ilya felt something in his chest crack wide open. Their son. Their Leonid. Shane was crying, reaching for the baby, and Ilya was crying too, his vision blurring as the nurse placed their son on Shane's chest. Leonid was pink and squalling, his tiny fists waving, and he was the most beautiful thing Ilya had ever seen.

"We did it," Shane sobbed. "Ilya, we did it."

"You did it, solnyshko. You—"

"Shane, I need you to stay with me." Dr. Martinesi's voice cut through the moment, sharp and urgent. Ilya looked up. The doctor's face had gone pale, her hands moving quickly. There was blood. Too much blood.

"What is happening?" Ilya demanded.

"He's hemorrhaging." Dr. Martinesi didn't look at him, her focus entirely on Shane. "We need to stop the bleeding. Shane, can you hear me?" Shane's eyes were fluttering, his grip on Leonid going slack. The nurse quickly took the baby, and Ilya's hands went to Shane's face.

"Shane. Shane, look at me."

"I'm tired," Shane mumbled. His scent was fading, going thin and distant.

"No. No, you stay with me. You hear me? You stay—"

"Sir, I need you to step back." A nurse was pulling at Ilya's arm, trying to move him away from the bed.

"No. I am not leaving—"

"Sir, we need room to work. Please." Ilya looked down at Shane. His omega's eyes were closed now, his face waxen. There was so much blood. Too much. The machines were beeping, alarms going off, and Dr. Martinesi was shouting orders Ilya couldn't process. The room was chaos—nurses rushing in with equipment, someone calling for blood, Dr. Martinesi's hands moving with desperate efficiency.

"Shane," Ilya whispered. He pressed his lips to Shane's forehead, breathing in his fading scent. "I love you. Please. Please do not leave me." Shane didn't respond. His chest was still

rising and falling, but barely. His scent was almost gone now, just a thread of maple underneath the copper smell of blood.

"Sir, you need to leave. Now." Hands were on Ilya, pulling him away. He fought them—his alpha roaring, demanding he stay, demanding he protect—but there were too many of them. They pushed him out into the hallway, and the door slammed shut behind him. Ilya stood there, his hands shaking, his chest heaving. He could still smell Shane's blood. Could still see the way his eyes had gone unfocused, the way his body had gone limp. He sank down against the wall, his legs giving out, and buried his face in his hands.

Yuna was there suddenly, her small hand on his shoulder. "Ilya—"

"He was bleeding." Ilya's voice didn't sound like his own. "There was so much blood. I could not—I could not stop it."

"They'll take care of him. The doctors will—"

"What if they cannot?" Ilya looked at her, and he knew his eyes were wild, desperate. "What if I lose him?" Yuna pulled him into a hug, and Ilya collapsed against her. This tiny woman, Shane's mother, holding up a man twice her size while he fell apart.

"You won't lose him," she said fiercely. "Shane is strong. He's a fighter. He'll come back to you." Ilya wanted to believe her. But all he could think about was the blood, the machines, the way Shane's scent had faded to almost nothing.

Fifty minutes. That's how long Ilya waited in that hallway. Fifty minutes of pacing, of praying to a God he wasn't sure he believed in, of replaying every moment in his head. Wondering what he could have done differently. Wondering if he'd said enough, if Shane knew how much he was loved. Wondering if the last thing Shane heard was Ilya begging him not to leave. Yuna sat on the floor with Elena, the little girl quiet and wide-eyed, sensing the fear in the air. Ilya couldn't sit. Couldn't be still. He paced the length of the hallway, his hands clenched into fists, his alpha instincts screaming at him to break down the door, to get to his omega, to protect.

When the door finally opened, Dr. Martinesi looked exhausted. There was blood on her scrubs, and Ilya's heart stopped. "He's stable," she said, and Ilya's knees nearly gave out. "It was close. We had to give him two units of blood, and there were some complications, but he's stable. He's going to be okay."

Ilya couldn't speak. He could only nod, his throat too tight for words.

"The baby is fine too," Dr. Martinesi continued. "Healthy and strong. You can see them both in a few minutes, once we get Shane settled in recovery." She paused, her expression softening. "It was touch and go for a while there. But he's tough, your omega. Tougher than most."

"Thank you," Ilya managed. "Thank you." Dr. Martinesi squeezed his shoulder. "He'll need rest. And he'll need you. But he's going to be okay."

When they finally let Ilya into the recovery room, Shane was unconscious, his face pale against the white sheets. But his chest was rising and falling, steady and sure. And in the bassinet next to the bed, Leonid was sleeping, his tiny face peaceful. Ilya stood between them, one hand on Shane's arm, the other resting on Leonid's chest. He could feel his son's heartbeat, quick and strong. Could feel Shane's pulse under his fingers, slower but steady.

"I am here," Ilya whispered. "I am here, and you are both safe. I will keep you safe." Leonid stirred, his eyes opening. They were dark, unfocused, but they seemed to find Ilya's face. Ilya carefully lifted him from the bassinet, cradling him against his chest.

"Hello, Leonid," he murmured. "I am your papa. And this—" He looked at Shane, still unconscious but alive, so beautifully alive. "—this is your daddy. He is the bravest person I know. And he loves you so much already." Leonid made a small sound, his tiny hand curling around Ilya's finger. Ilya sat down in the chair next to Shane's bed, his son in his arms, his omega within reach. The fear was still there, sharp and present. But underneath it was something else. Something bigger.

Gratitude. Relief. Love so overwhelming it felt like drowning. They'd made it. All of them. His family was whole. And Ilya would spend the rest of his life making sure it stayed that way.

Chapter 24: All of me.

Chapter Notes

best read from a phone due to formatting.

Also, I LOVE FLUFFY AND LOVEY DADS. 🥰

The recovery room smelled of milky newborn sweetness. Ilya had been awake for so long. He watched the clock on the wall tick forward while Shane slept. The nurses came and went, and Leonid made small, snuffling sounds from the bassinet beside the bed.

He'd reorganized the flowers three times. Straightened the blankets. Adjusted the blinds. Moved the chair closer to Shane's bed, then farther away, then closer again. He'd folded and refolded the tiny hospital-issued baby blanket until a nurse gently suggested he might want to sit down before he wore a hole in the fabric.

He couldn't sit down.

Shane was *breathing*. That was the only thing that mattered. But Ilya needed him to be *awake*. Needed to see those brown eyes open and focused. Needed to hear his voice—sharp and pragmatic and alive. Dr. Martinesi had said Shane would wake up when his body was ready. That the blood transfusions had gone well. That his vitals were stable. That he was *fine*.

Ilya didn't believe in *fine* anymore.

He paced. He checked on Leonid—still sleeping, perfect and impossibly small in his little knit cap. He paced again. He rearranged the water pitcher on the bedside table so the handle faced exactly the right direction for Shane to reach it when he woke up. *When*. Not if.

When.

The scent in the room had shifted over the past few hours—Shane's exhaustion giving way to something deeper, the honey smell of healing. Ilya had pressed his face to Shane's neck more times than he could count, breathing him in, reassuring himself that Shane was still *here*.

He was adjusting the damn blinds again when he heard it.

A breath. Deeper than the others. Followed by a soft, pained sound.

Ilya spun around so fast he nearly tripped over his own feet.

Shane's eyes were open.

"*Solnyshko*," Ilya breathed, and he was across the room in two strides, his hands hovering over Shane's face, his shoulders, afraid to touch, afraid not to. "You're awake. *Bozhe moy*, you're awake."

Shane blinked slowly, his gaze unfocused for a moment before it sharpened on Ilya's face. His lips parted. When his voice came, it was hoarse and thin. "You look like shit."

Ilya laughed—a wet, broken sound that might have been a sob. "You *died*," he said, and he didn't care that it wasn't true, not technically. It had *felt* true. "You died and they kicked me out and I couldn't—" He stopped, his throat closing around the words.

Shane's hand moved, slow and deliberate, until his fingers wrapped around Ilya's wrist. His grip was weak, but it was *there*. "Didn't die," Shane said. "Still here."

"*Da*. Yes. You are here." Ilya brought Shane's hand to his mouth, kissing his knuckles, his palm, the inside of his wrist where his pulse beat steady and strong. "You are here and I am never letting you out of my sight again. Never. You understand? I'm moving into this hospital. I'm getting a job here. I'm—"

"Ilya."

"—sleeping in this chair. I don't care if they try to remove me. I'll fight them. I'll fight *everyone*—"

"*Ilya*."

Ilya stopped, his chest heaving, and met Shane's eyes.

Shane's mouth twitched. "You're being ridiculous."

"*Good*," Ilya said fiercely. "I'm going to be like this forever. You almost *left me*—"

"Didn't."

"You *almost did*." Ilya's voice cracked. He pressed his forehead to Shane's, careful not to jostle him, breathing in the scent of him—alive, *alive*, still his. "You are my oxygen, *solnyshko*. You understand? I can't breathe without you."

Shane's fingers tightened on his wrist. "Breathing fine now."

"Are you?" Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him, his gaze sweeping over Shane's face—pale, exhausted, but *awake*. "*Are you?*"

Shane's eyes softened. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I'm okay."

Ilya closed his eyes, a shudder running through him. He stayed there, forehead pressed to Shane's, until his heartbeat slowed and the panic receded enough for him to think clearly.

When he finally pulled back, Shane was watching him with that steady, unreadable expression he got sometimes—the one that meant he was cataloging everything, filing it

away.

"How long was I out?" Shane asked.

"Long enough for our beautiful baby boy to steal my heart from you."

Shane's gaze flicked to the bassinet. His breath hitched. "Is he—"

"Perfect," Ilya said immediately. "He's perfect. Healthy. Strong. The doctors checked him three times." His voice broke. He cleared his throat. "He's beautiful, Shane. He looks like you."

Shane's eyes went bright. He tried to push himself up, winced, and Ilya was there instantly, hands on his shoulders.

"Careful. You tore—they had to repair—" Ilya stopped, his jaw clenching. He didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to remember the blood, the way Shane's scent had gone thin and distant, the fifty minutes he'd spent in the hallway convinced he was about to lose everything.

Shane stilled under his hands. "I'm okay," he said again, and this time there was something firmer in his voice. "I'm okay, Ilya."

Ilya nodded, not trusting himself to speak. They stayed like that for a long moment—Ilya's hands on Shane's shoulders, Shane's fingers still wrapped around his wrist. The room was quiet except for the soft beeping of monitors and Leonid's tiny, snuffling breaths.

Finally, Shane said, "Can I hold him?"

Ilya's chest tightened. "Yes. *Da*. Of course." He moved to the bassinet, his hands shaking slightly as he lifted Leonid—so small, so impossibly light—and carried him back to the bed. Shane shifted, wincing again, and Ilya helped him adjust the pillows behind his back until he was sitting up enough to cradle the baby safely.

"Careful," Ilya murmured as he placed Leonid in Shane's arms with the kind of reverence usually reserved for something holy.

Shane's breath caught.

For a moment, he just stared down at their son, his expression unreadable. Then his arms tightened, drawing Leonid closer to his chest, and his scent shifted—flooding the room with something warm and protective and overwhelmingly *omega*.

"Hi," Shane whispered, his voice so soft Ilya almost didn't hear it. "Hi, baby."

Leonid stirred, his tiny face scrunching up before relaxing again. His eyes stayed closed, but his mouth worked in a suckling motion, and Shane made a sound that was half-laugh, half-sob.

Ilya sat on the edge of the bed, unable to look away.

Shane's fingers traced over Leonid's face—his nose, his cheeks, the dark shock of hair peeking out from under the knit cap. "He's so small," Shane said.

"Five pounds, four ounces," Ilya said. "The nurses said that's good for thirty-five weeks."

Shane nodded, his gaze still fixed on Leonid. He carefully pulled the cap back, revealing more of that dark hair—thick and slightly curly, just like Ilya's. "This is why I had heartburn," Shane said, wonder threading through his voice. "All this hair."

Ilya huffed a quiet laugh. "Old wives' tale."

"It's *true*," Shane said. He ran his fingers through the soft strands, his expression awed. "Look at him."

Ilya was looking. He couldn't stop.

Leonid's eyes opened then—just barely, dark slits that didn't quite focus. But even in that brief glimpse, Ilya could see it: Shane's eyes. Deep and brown, almost black in the dim hospital light. The same eyes that had looked at Ilya across a crowded rink and changed his entire life.

"He has your eyes," Ilya said, his voice rough.

Shane's throat worked. "Yeah," he said quietly. "He does."

But the rest of him—Leonid's nose, small and slightly upturned. His mouth, with that perfect cupid's bow that Ilya saw every time he looked in the mirror. Those were Rozanov features, unmistakable even on a newborn.

"He has your mouth," Shane said, echoing Ilya's thoughts. His thumb brushed over Leonid's lips, gentle and reverent. "And your nose."

"Good," Ilya said. "He should look like both of us."

Shane glanced up at him, and there was something raw in his expression—gratitude and love and bone-deep exhaustion. "He's perfect."

"*Da*," Ilya agreed. "He is."

They sat in silence for a while, Shane holding Leonid, Ilya watching them both. The room felt smaller somehow, the three of them cocooned in their own little world. Outside, the hospital continued its endless rhythm—footsteps in the hallway, distant voices, the hum of machinery. But in here, time seemed to slow. It was just them.

Shane shifted slightly, adjusting his hold on Leonid, and winced.

Ilya's hand was on his shoulder immediately. "You need to rest."

"I'm fine."

"You almost *bled out six hours ago*," Ilya said, and his voice came out harsher than he intended. He took a breath, forcing himself to gentle. "You need to rest, *solnyshko*."

Shane's jaw tightened, but he didn't argue. He looked down at Leonid again, his expression softening. "I just want to hold him a little longer."

Ilya's chest ached. "Okay," he said quietly. "Okay."

Another silence settled over them. Leonid made a small sound—not quite a cry, just a soft murmur—and Shane's scent spiked with something protective and fierce.

"I can't believe he's here," Shane said. "I can't believe he's *ours*."

"He is," Ilya said. "He's ours. And you're here. And we're—" He stopped, his throat closing again.

Shane looked up at him. "We're okay," he finished.

Ilya nodded. He leaned in, pressing a kiss to Shane's temple, then another to the top of Leonid's head. "We're okay," he repeated, and this time he almost believed it.

They stayed like that—Shane holding Leonid, Ilya's arm around Shane's shoulders, the three of them breathing in sync. The fear was still there, lurking at the edges of Ilya's mind, but it was quieter now. Manageable.

Shane was here. Leonid was here. They were *okay*.

After a while, Shane said, "You know what the worst part is?"

Ilya pulled back slightly to look at him. "What?"

Shane's mouth twitched. "I don't even remember the birth. I remember the contractions. I remember you telling me to breathe. And then—" He shook his head. "Nothing. I don't remember meeting him."

Ilya's heart clenched. He opened his mouth to say something comforting, but what came out instead was:

"Well, look at the bright side—at least you don't remember shitting yourself."

Shane's head snapped up, his eyes wide. "*What?*"

Ilya kept his expression perfectly serious. "It's very common during labor. The nurses said—"

"*Ilya*."

"—it happens to almost everyone—"

"I did *not*—"

"You were very calm about it," Ilya continued, fighting a smile. "Very composed. I was impressed."

Shane stared at him for a long moment, his face cycling through shock, horror, indignation—before he seemed to realize Ilya was fucking with him.

"You're being an asshole. Yeah. You're being an *asshole*," Shane said, but his lips were twitching now too.

"*Da*," Ilya agreed. "But I made you smile."

"I almost *died*," Shane said, "and you're making jokes about me shitting myself during labor."

"You didn't shit yourself," Ilya said. "I checked."

Shane's laugh was startled and a little breathless, but it was *real*, and Ilya felt something in his chest unclench.

"You're unbelievable," Shane said.

"You love me," Ilya countered.

Shane's expression softened. He looked down at Leonid, then back up at Ilya. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I do."

Ilya leaned in and kissed him—soft and careful, mindful of Shane's exhaustion and the baby in his arms. When he pulled back, Shane's eyes were bright again, but this time it wasn't from unshed tears.

"I love you too," Ilya said. "Both of you. So much it makes me stupid."

"You were already stupid," Shane said.

Ilya grinned. "See? You're feeling better already."

Shane shook his head, but he was smiling now, and that was enough. That was everything.

Leonid stirred again, his tiny fist escaping the swaddle to wave aimlessly in the air. Shane caught it with his finger, marveling at how small it was, how perfectly formed.

"He's going to be tall," Shane said. "Look at his fingers. And his feet—did you see his feet?"

"I saw," Ilya said. "He's going to be a giant. Like his papa."

Shane's smile widened. "Poor kid."

"He'll be fine," Ilya said. "He has you to keep him humble."

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. He looked down at Leonid again, his expression going soft and wondering. "I can't believe we made him," he said. "I can't believe he's *real*."

"He's real," Ilya said. He reached out, brushing his fingers over Leonid's dark hair. "And he's perfect. Just like you."

Shane's scent spiked—warm and overwhelmed and so full of love it made Ilya's chest ache. *Maple syrup pancakes on a summer morning*, Ilya thought.

"We're going to be okay," Shane said, and this time it didn't sound like a reassurance. It sounded like a promise.

Ilya nodded. He wrapped his arm around Shane's shoulders again, drawing him close, and pressed his face to Shane's hair.

"*Da*," he said quietly. "We are."

The rest of that first day passed in a haze of exhaustion and wonder. Shane held Leonid for hours, only relinquishing him when the nurses came to check vitals or when his arms grew too tired to support the weight. Even then, Ilya was there immediately, cradling their son with the same reverence that made Shane's chest ache. They took turns—one holding Leonid from the bed while the other dozed in the uncomfortable hospital chair, neither willing to leave the room, neither willing to miss a single moment of their son's first day in the world.

The trauma of the birth lingered at the edges of Shane's awareness like a shadow he couldn't quite shake. Every time he shifted in the bed, pain flared through his abdomen—a sharp reminder of the tearing, the hemorrhaging, the fifty minutes Ilya had spent in the hallway certain he was losing everything. Shane didn't remember most of it. He remembered the contractions, the overwhelming pressure, Ilya's voice telling him to breathe. And then—nothing. A blank space where the birth should have been, filled only with the vague sense that something had gone terribly wrong.

He didn't ask Ilya about it. Not yet. He could see the fear still written across his alpha's face, could smell it in the faint edge of distress that clung to Ilya's scent despite his best efforts to mask it. So Shane focused on what was in front of him: Leonid's tiny fingers curling around his thumb, the soft snuffling sounds he made in his sleep, the way his dark eyes—*Shane's* eyes—would blink open briefly and stare up at him with unfocused wonder before drifting closed again.

"He's perfect," Shane murmured for what felt like the hundredth time. He was lying on his side in the hospital bed, Leonid tucked carefully against his chest, Ilya stretched out beside them with one arm draped protectively over them both. The room was dim, the overhead lights turned off in favor of the soft glow from the bathroom. Outside, the hospital continued its endless rhythm, but in here, it was just the three of them.

"*Da*," Ilya agreed. His voice was rough with exhaustion, but there was a contentment in it that Shane hadn't heard in weeks. "He is perfect. Like his father."

Shane's lips twitched. "Which one?"

"Both," Ilya said immediately. He pressed a kiss to Shane's temple, then another to the top of Leonid's head. "He has your eyes. Your stubbornness. My nose. My—what did you call it? Cupid's bow?"

"Yeah," Shane said. He traced his finger over Leonid's upper lip, marveling at the delicate curve. "He's got your mouth. And your hair color, I think. It's hard to tell when it's this dark, but—" He paused, running his fingers through the thick, dark strands. "I think it's going to be like yours. Maybe a little wavy."

"He'll be beautiful," Ilya said. "Like you."

Shane huffed. "You're biased."

"*Da*. I'm allowed to be biased. He's my son." Ilya's arm tightened around them both, his scent flooding the small space with something warm and possessive and utterly devoted. "You're my omega. I'm biased about both of you."

Shane closed his eyes, breathing in the mingled scents of his alpha and his newborn son. It should have been overwhelming. But underneath all of that was something deeper, something that made Shane's chest feel too full: the scent of *family*. Of pack. Of home.

"I love you," Shane said quietly.

Ilya's breath hitched. "I love you too, *solnyshko*. So much."

They stayed like that until a nurse came to check Shane's vitals and gently suggested that Leonid should go back in the bassinet for a while so Shane could rest properly. Shane wanted to argue, wanted to keep holding his son, but his body was already betraying him—his arms trembling with exhaustion, his eyelids growing heavy. So he let Ilya take Leonid, watched as his alpha settled their son carefully in the bassinet and adjusted the blankets with meticulous care, then let himself drift off to the sound of Ilya's quiet humming and the soft, rhythmic beeping of the monitors.

When he woke, it was to Leonid crying—a thin, reedy wail that cut straight through Shane's chest and had him struggling to sit up before he was fully conscious. Ilya was already there, lifting Leonid from the bassinet and murmuring soft reassurances in Russian as he checked the diaper, tested the temperature of a bottle the nurse had left, then finally settled into the chair with Leonid cradled against his chest.

Shane watched, his heart doing something complicated in his chest, as Ilya coaxed Leonid to take the bottle. It took a few tries—Leonid fussing and turning his head away, Ilya's patience never wavering—but eventually the baby latched on and began to suckle, his tiny hands curling into fists against Ilya's shirt.

"You're good at that," Shane said, his voice still rough with sleep.

Ilya glanced up, his expression softening when he saw Shane awake. "I have been practicing," he said. "While you were sleeping. The nurse showed me how to hold him, how to make sure he doesn't choke." He paused, his jaw working. "I am trying to be useful."

Shane's throat tightened. "You are useful. You're—" He stopped, searching for the right words. "You're everything to us, Ilya. You know that, right?"

Ilya's eyes went bright. He looked down at Leonid, his thumb brushing over the baby's cheek. "I am trying," he said again, quieter this time. "I am trying to be the father he deserves. The alpha you deserve."

"You already are," Shane said. He pushed himself up carefully, wincing at the pull in his abdomen, and reached out to touch Ilya's arm. "You already are, Ilya."

Ilya didn't respond, but his scent shifted—less fear, more warmth. He finished feeding Leonid, burped him with the same meticulous care he'd shown earlier, and then brought him back to Shane. They spent the rest of the night like that, passing Leonid back and forth between them, learning the rhythms of their son's needs, adjusting to the reality of being parents together.

By the time morning came, Shane felt like he'd been awake for a week. But when the nurse came in with breakfast and asked how he was feeling, he smiled despite himself.

"Tired," he said. "But good. Really good."

The nurse—a kind-faced woman in her fifties with graying hair and laugh lines around her eyes—smiled back. "That's normal. You've been through a lot, but you're doing great. Both of you." She glanced at Ilya, who was hovering near the bassinet like a guard dog. "Your alpha hasn't left your side since you woke up. That's a good sign."

Shane's chest warmed. "Yeah," he said quietly. "He's pretty great."

Ilya's ears went red, but he didn't deny it. He just moved closer to the bed, his hand finding Shane's and squeezing gently.

The nurse finished her checks and left them alone again. Shane ate his breakfast—bland hospital food that tasted like cardboard but at least filled the hollow ache in his stomach—and then dozed off while Ilya kept watch. When he woke the second time, it was to voices in the hallway and the unmistakable scent of his mother.

Yuna arrived like a force of nature, sweeping into the room with Elena in tow and immediately zeroing in on Shane with the kind of maternal intensity that made him feel six years old again. She didn't say anything at first—just crossed to the bed and pulled him into a careful hug, mindful of his injuries, pressing her face to his hair.

"You scared me," she said, her voice muffled against his temple. "You scared me so much, Shane."

"I'm okay," Shane said, though his voice came out thinner than he intended. "I'm okay, Mom."

Yuna pulled back, her hands framing his face as she studied him with the kind of scrutiny only a mother could manage. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her scent sharp with lingering fear,

but she was smiling. "You look terrible," she said.

Shane huffed a laugh. "Thanks."

"But you're alive." Yuna's voice broke slightly. "You're alive and you're here and that's all that matters."

Shane's throat tightened. He nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and let his mother fuss over him a moment longer before she finally stepped back and turned her attention to the bassinet.

"Oh," Yuna breathed, her entire expression transforming. "Oh, Shane. He's beautiful."

Elena, who had been hovering near the door with wide eyes and nervous energy that made Shane's chest ache, finally moved closer. She wore her favorite purple dress—the one with the sparkles that she insisted on wearing to every important occasion—and her dark hair was pulled back in two careful braids that Yuna must have done that morning. She looked so small standing next to the hospital bed, so young, and Shane felt a sudden rush of love so intense it nearly knocked the breath out of him.

"Hi, baby," Shane said, holding out his hand. "Come here."

Elena hesitated for just a moment, her gaze flicking between Shane and the bassinet, before she crossed to the bed and climbed up carefully beside him. Shane wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close, and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"I missed you," he said.

"I missed you too," Elena said. Her voice was small, uncertain. "Grandma said you were sick. She said the baby came early and you had to stay in the hospital."

"I'm okay now," Shane said. "I promise."

Elena's shoulders relaxed slightly at his words, but her gaze kept drifting to the bassinet. Before Shane could say anything else, Ilya appeared at the bedside, his expression soft as he looked down at her.

"*Devochka*," Ilya said warmly, reaching out to gently touch Elena's hair. "You came to meet your brother."

Elena's head snapped up, her face brightening immediately. "Papa!" She practically launched herself at Ilya, wrapping her arms around his neck. Ilya caught her easily, lifting her slightly and pressing a kiss to her temple.

"I missed you so much," Elena said, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

"I missed you too, *moya lyubov*," Ilya murmured. He held her for a long moment before setting her back down on the bed between himself and Shane, his hand settling protectively on her back. "Your dad is okay now. Everything is okay."

Elena looked between them both, seeming to need that reassurance from both her fathers. She reached out and took Shane's hand with one of hers while leaning against Ilya's side.

Ilya lifted Leonid from the bassinet, bringing him over with that same careful reverence he'd shown since the moment Shane woke. He settled the baby gently in Shane's arms, positioning himself so Elena could see clearly from where she sat between them.

"He's so small," Elena whispered, reaching out tentatively. Her fingers brushed over Leonid's hand, and her entire face lit up when his tiny fingers curled reflexively around hers.

"Look at his nose," Ilya said, his voice warm with unmistakable pride. He leaned closer, pointing gently. "That is my nose. And his mouth—see the shape? Exactly like mine."

Elena giggled, studying the baby's face intently. "He has Dad's eyes though," she said, glancing up at Shane. "Dark like yours."

Shane's chest tightened. "You're very observant."

"I'm going to be a good big sister," Elena announced seriously. She looked up at Ilya. "Papa, will you help me take care of him?"

Ilya's expression softened impossibly further. He reached over and gently squeezed Elena's shoulder. "Of course, *devochka*. We'll all take care of him together. You, me, and your dad."

Elena nodded, satisfied, then turned back to studying Leonid with intense concentration.

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Leonid," Shane said. "But we're going to call him Leo."

Elena tested the name out, her lips moving silently, then nodded. "Leo. I like it." She leaned closer to the baby. "Hi, Leo. I'm your big sister, Elena. I'm going to take care of you forever."

Shane's chest felt too full. He looked up at Ilya, who was watching them with an expression so tender it made Shane's throat ache, then at his mother, who was dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

Yuna stayed for most of the morning, fussing over Shane and making sure Ilya ate something other than vending machine snacks. Elena settled between her two fathers, her hand resting protectively on Leonid's blanket, chattering about everything she'd been doing—how Grandma had let her stay up late to watch a movie, how she'd drawn a picture for the baby, how she'd told all her friends at daycare that she was going to be a big sister.

When she got tired, she leaned against Ilya's side, and he wrapped his arm around her without hesitation, keeping her close while Shane held the baby.

When Yuna finally announced that she needed to take Elena home for lunch and a nap, Elena protested loudly. "I want to stay with Dad and Papa and Leo."

"You'll come back tomorrow," Yuna said firmly. "Your dads need to rest, and so does the baby."

Elena looked like she wanted to argue, but she glanced between Shane and Ilya, gauging their expressions. Ilya leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"Your grandma is right," he said gently. "We need to rest. But you'll come back tomorrow, and we'll have more time together. Yes?"

Elena's pout softened. She leaned over and pressed a careful kiss to Leonid's forehead, then hugged Shane tightly. "I love you, Dad."

"I love you too, baby," Shane said. His voice came out rougher than he intended, thick with emotion. "So much."

Elena turned and threw her arms around Ilya's neck. "I love you too, Papa."

"I love you, *devochka*," Ilya said, holding her close. "So very much."

The next afternoon brought Dana and Robby. Dana swept in like a storm, pulling Shane into a hug that was just shy of painful before stepping back to study him with red-rimmed eyes.

"Don't you ever do that to me again," she said fiercely. "Do you hear me? *Ever*."

Shane's throat tightened. "I'm okay. I'm okay, Dana."

She wiped at her eyes, smearing mascara across her cheeks, then turned to the bassinet. "Oh, Shane. He's perfect."

Robby hung back near the door, smaller than Shane remembered in an oversized hoodie, his face pale beneath the fluorescent lights. He stared at the bassinet with an expression Shane couldn't quite read—wonder and fear and something that looked almost like longing.

"Hey, kiddo," Shane said, his voice gentling. "Come here."

Robby hesitated, then finally crossed to the bed, moving carefully, like he was afraid of breaking something. But before he reached Shane, Ilya stepped forward, his expression warm and open.

"Robby," Ilya said, his voice carrying that particular gentleness he reserved for the people he loved. "Come. Meet your brother."

Something in Robby's shoulders relaxed at Ilya's words—at the casual certainty of *your brother*, as if there had never been any question.

Robby moved closer, and Ilya placed a hand on his shoulder, anchoring him at the bedside. It was a small gesture, but it meant everything.

"Dana said the baby came early," Robby said quietly, his eyes fixed on the bassinet. "She said you almost—" He stopped, his jaw working. "She said you're okay now."

"I am," Shane said, holding out his hand. After a moment, Robby took it, his fingers cold and tentative. Shane squeezed gently. "I'm okay. And so is the baby."

Ilya lifted Leonid from the bassinet and settled him in Shane's arms, positioning himself so Robby could see. He kept his hand on Robby's shoulder, steady and reassuring.

Robby's breath caught. "He's so small. He's—" His voice broke. "He's really here."

"He is," Shane said. "And he's your brother, Robby. Your baby brother."

"He has Shane's eyes," Ilya said, his voice carrying that same proud warmth. "Dark like his. But everything else—" He gestured to Leonid's face. "That is all Rozanov. Which means it is all *yours* now too."

Robby's eyes went bright. He reached out tentatively, his fingers brushing over Leonid's tiny hand. When Leonid's fingers curled reflexively around his, Robby made a sound that was half-laugh, half-sob. "My brother," he repeated, wonder thick in his voice.

"Yeah," Shane said. "Your brother."

Robby stayed like that for a long moment, his hand resting gently on Leonid's, his scent shifting from fear to something warmer—something that smelled like hope. When he finally looked up, his gaze moved between both Shane and Ilya, acknowledging them both.

"Thank you," Robby said, his voice thick with emotion. "For letting me be here. For letting me be part of this."

Ilya's hand tightened on Robby's shoulder. "You are not *part* of this, Robby," he said firmly, his accent thickening with emotion. "You *are* this. You are family. You are Rozanov. Do you understand?"

Robby's eyes filled with tears. He nodded, unable to speak.

Shane reached out with his free hand and pulled Robby into a careful hug, mindful of Leonid between them. Ilya wrapped his arms around both of them, creating a circle—Shane, Robby, Leonid, and Ilya at the center of it all, holding them together.

"You're ours," Shane said quietly. "Both of you. You understand?"

Robby nodded against Shane's shoulder, his thin frame trembling. "I understand."

Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Robby's head, his expression fierce and protective. "Good," he said. "Because you're never going anywhere. You're home."

Later that day, after Dana and Robby had left, Yuna returned with Elena and a basket of homemade muffins. She set up breakfast on the rolling table, shooing Ilya away from his post

by the bassinet.

"You look like death," Yuna said bluntly, eyeing Ilya's rumpled clothes and the dark circles under his eyes. "When was the last time you slept?"

Ilya shrugged. "I sleep when Shane sleeps."

"That's not sleeping," Yuna said. "That's hovering. There's a difference."

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. "She's right. You need to actually rest, Ilya. Not just sit in that chair and stare at me all night."

"I am fine," Ilya said, but his jaw was tight.

"You're not," Shane said, catching Ilya's hand and squeezing. "You're exhausted. And you're not going to be any good to me or Leonid if you collapse."

Before Ilya could argue, there was a knock at the door. Cliff Marleau stood in the doorway, looking uncomfortable and uncertain in a way Shane had never seen. He held a small gift bag, his shoulders hunched, and his scent carried something Shane couldn't quite identify—loneliness, maybe, or longing.

"Hey," Cliff said, his voice rough. "Is this—is this a bad time?"

"No," Shane said quickly. "Come in. Please."

Cliff entered slowly, nodding at Yuna and Elena before his gaze landed on the bassinet. His expression shifted—something vulnerable and raw crossing his face before he could hide it.

"Congratulations," Cliff said. He set the gift bag on the table and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I heard it was rough. But you're okay now?"

"Yeah," Shane said. "We're okay."

Cliff nodded. He was quiet for a moment, his gaze still fixed on the bassinet, and then he cleared his throat. "My sister just had a baby a few weeks ago. I haven't met him yet. I keep meaning to fly out, but there's always something—practice, games, whatever." He paused, his jaw working. "I don't want to be that guy. The one who misses everything."

Shane's chest tightened. He'd never heard Cliff talk like this—so open, so vulnerable.

But it was Ilya who moved first. He crossed to Cliff, his expression serious and intent in a way that made the room shift. "You are here now," Ilya said quietly. "That is what matters."

Cliff looked at him, something uncertain flickering in his eyes.

"I was twelve when my mother died," Ilya said. His voice was steady, but there was an undercurrent of something raw beneath it. "I was at hockey practice. I was not there. And I spent many years thinking about all the moments I missed—all the times I could have been present and was not." He paused, his gaze holding Cliff's. "But I learned something. The

moments that matter are not the ones you cannot change. They are the ones you choose to show up for now. Today. Tomorrow."

Cliff's throat worked. He looked away, blinking rapidly.

"Your sister's baby will know you," Ilya continued, his accent thickening slightly with emotion. "Not because you were there at the beginning, but because you choose to be there. Because you show up. Because you love him." He placed a hand on Cliff's shoulder. "That is what family is. Not perfection. Not being there for everything. It is choosing to be there for *something*. For the moments that matter."

Shane watched, his heart doing something complicated in his chest. This was Ilya at his core—fierce and protective and deeply, profoundly committed to the people he loved.

"Come," Ilya said, his tone shifting to something warmer. "Meet your nephew's cousin. Hold him."

He brought Leonid over and settled him carefully in Cliff's arms.

Cliff held the baby like he was made of glass, his large hands cradling Leonid's tiny body with a reverence that made Shane's throat ache. He stared down at Leonid's face, his expression cycling through a dozen emotions too fast to track.

"Look at his hair," Ilya said softly, moving to stand beside Cliff. "So dark. Shane had terrible heartburn—that is why. Old wives' tale, but true." He smiled, that proud gleam returning to his eyes. "And his face—you see? My nose, my mouth. But Shane's eyes. Perfect combination."

Cliff's lips twitched into something that might have been a smile. "He's beautiful," he said quietly. "Really beautiful."

"He is," Ilya agreed, keeping his hand on Cliff's shoulder.

They stayed like that for a while—Cliff holding Leonid, Ilya hovering nearby with that protective intensity he couldn't quite hide, Shane watching from the bed with his mother and daughter beside him. The room felt full in a way that had nothing to do with the number of people in it and everything to do with the weight of what they were building together.

When Cliff finally handed Leonid back to Ilya, his eyes were bright. "Thank you," he said. "For letting me—for this."

"You are pack," Ilya said firmly, his gaze steady on Cliff's. "You are always welcome here. Always."

Shane nodded, his voice warm. "He's right. You're family, Cliff. Family shows up for each other. That's what we do."

Cliff nodded, his throat working again, and then excused himself with a promise to visit again soon. The door closed behind him, and Shane sagged back against the pillows, suddenly aware of how much energy the day had taken.

"That was good," Ilya said quietly, settling Leonid back in the bassinet. "Seeing him with Leo. Seeing him let himself feel something."

"Yeah," Shane said, his voice rough and thick with emotion. "It was really good."

The fourth day in the hospital was chaos from start to finish. It began with Troy Barrett and Harris Drover arriving mid-morning, their arms loaded with gift bags and their energy filling the small room like a tidal wave. Troy was grinning ear to ear, his scent bright with excitement, while Harris looked slightly more composed but no less thrilled.

"Holy shit," Troy said, dropping the bags on the floor and crossing to the bassinet in three long strides. "Holy shit, Roz. He's here. He's actually here."

"Yeah," Ilya said, unable to keep the smile off his face. "He's here."

Harris elbowed Troy out of the way and peered into the bassinet, his expression softening. "He's beautiful. And so tiny. God, I forgot how tiny newborns are."

"Can I hold him?" Troy asked, already reaching for Leonid before Shane could answer.

"Careful," Ilya said sharply, moving to intercept. "Support his head. Like this." He demonstrated, guiding Troy's hands until Leonid was cradled safely in the beta's arms.

Troy's entire face lit up. He stared down at Leonid with the kind of wonder that made Shane's chest ache, and when Leonid's tiny hand curled around Troy's finger, Troy made a sound suspiciously close to a sob. "Oh my god. Oh my god, he's perfect."

"I know," Shane said. He was sitting up in bed, his body still sore but manageable, watching his teammates fawn over his son with a warmth that spread through his chest like honey.

Harris took his turn next, holding Leonid with the caution of someone who'd done this before, cooing softly in a way that made Troy laugh. "You're such a softie," Troy said.

"Shut up," Harris said, but he was smiling. He looked up at Shane, his expression warm. "Congratulations, Shane. Really. He's amazing."

"Thanks," Shane said. His throat felt tight, his scent spiking with gratitude and love and overwhelming emotion.

Zane and Cassie arrived an hour later, bringing more gifts and more energy. Cassie immediately took over, scooping up Leonid and making soft, delighted sounds while Zane hovered nearby with the kind of protective intensity that suggested he was ready to intervene at the first sign of trouble. They stayed for over an hour, filling the room with laughter and stories and the kind of easy camaraderie that made Shane feel like he was part of something bigger than himself.

By the time they left, Shane was exhausted but happy. He dozed off while Ilya reorganized the gifts and fielded texts from the rest of the team, and when he woke, it was to the sound of a familiar voice in the hallway.

Svetlana appeared in the doorway a moment later, looking exhausted. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, and her shoulders sagged with a weariness that went beyond simple fatigue. She was dressed in jeans and a simple sweater, her dark hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and she carried a small bouquet of flowers that she set down on the table before crossing to the bed.

"Hi," she said, her voice soft. "I hope it's okay that I came."

"Of course," Shane said. He pushed himself up carefully, wincing at the pull in his abdomen. "It's good to see you."

Svetlana's smile was tired but genuine. She glanced at the bassinet, her expression softening. "Can I see him?"

"Yeah," Shane said, nodding at Ilya, who lifted Leonid and brought him over. Svetlana's breath caught when she saw the baby, her eyes going bright.

"He's beautiful," she said quietly. "Congratulations, Shane. Ilya."

"Thank you," Shane said. "Thank you for coming."

Ilya settled Leonid back in the bassinet, and Svetlana pulled up a chair beside Shane's bed. They talked for a while about lighter things—how the delivery had gone, how Shane was feeling, the parade of visitors they'd had. Svetlana seemed genuinely interested, asking questions and laughing at Ilya's stories about the team's reactions.

But as the conversation wound down, Shane noticed the shift in Svetlana's expression, the way it grew more serious. Her hands twisted together in her lap, and she glanced between Shane and Ilya with something that looked like apprehension.

She sighed. "There's something I need to tell you."

Shane's stomach clenched. He glanced at Ilya, who was already moving to close the door, then nodded. "What is it?"

Svetlana drew a breath, her hands twisting together in her lap. "I wanted to tell you something. About Sasha."

Shane's chest went cold. He sat up straighter, ignoring the pain flaring through his abdomen. "What about him?"

"My father called me," Svetlana said. Her voice was steady, but Shane caught the tension in her shoulders. "He still has connections in Moscow—intelligence contacts, people who track certain things. He heard that Sasha's father is trying to get him extradited."

Shane's breath caught. "Extradited? From where?"

"From jail here. In America." Svetlana's gaze held his. "After what he did—his father wants him back in Russia. He's trying to pull strings, use his diplomatic connections to get Sasha transferred to serve his sentence there instead."

Shane's hands clenched into fists. The memory of Sasha's attack was still too fresh, too raw. "Can he do that?"

"My father doesn't think so," Svetlana said. "The extradition process is complicated, and Sasha committed crimes here. But his father is powerful, and he's trying." She paused, her gaze flicking between them. "I wanted you to know. I wanted you to be prepared in case they manage to get him a shorter sentence in Russia."

Shane's throat tightened. He looked at Ilya, who stood beside the bed with his arms crossed, his expression unreadable. "What do you think?"

Ilya was quiet for a moment, his gaze distant. "I think," he said finally, "that as long as our family is safe, I don't care what Sasha's father tries. Let him try. Sasha is in jail here. He can't hurt us."

Shane nodded slowly. The fear still lurked at the edges of his mind, but Ilya's certainty grounded him. "Okay. Okay."

Svetlana's expression softened. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to bring this up now, but I thought you should know."

"No," Shane said. "I'm glad you told us. Thank you."

Svetlana nodded. She hesitated, her exhaustion seeming to deepen, and Ilya's brow furrowed as he studied her.

"Sveta," Ilya said gently. "You look tired. Are you okay?"

Svetlana's smile was strained. "I'm fine," she said. "Just—working a lot. I have two jobs right now, and it's been hard to keep up."

"Two jobs?" Shane asked, his chest tightening.

"*Da*," Svetlana said. She rubbed her face, her shoulders sagging. "With the three kids. My eldest is thirteen—she's been watching the younger ones while I work, but it's not ideal. I'm trying to find something better, something that pays enough that I don't have to work so much, but it's hard."

Ilya's expression darkened. "I didn't know," he said. "I should have asked at one of our Sunday dinners. I should have—"

"You didn't know because I didn't tell you," Svetlana said firmly. "It's not your fault."

Ilya shook his head. He was quiet for a moment, his gaze thoughtful, and then he looked at Shane. "What do you think," he said slowly, "about hiring Svetlana to help with the foundation?"

Shane blinked. "The Irina Foundation?"

"*Da*," Ilya said. He turned back to Svetlana. "We've been planning to start a foundation—for people who are struggling with suicidal ideation, for mental health support. It's named after my mother." His voice caught slightly, but he pushed through. "We need someone to help coordinate the groundwork. Someone smart, someone dedicated. Someone who understands what it means to help people."

Svetlana's eyes went wide. "You're offering me a job?"

"Yes," Ilya said. "If you're interested. It would be full-time. Good pay. Better hours than what you're doing now."

Svetlana's breath hitched. Her scent spiked—hope and gratitude and something that smelled like relief. "I—" She stopped, her voice breaking. "I don't know what to say."

"Say yes," Shane said gently. He reached out and took her hand, squeezing it. "We'd be lucky to have you, Sveta."

Svetlana's eyes filled with tears. She nodded, her grip tightening on Shane's hand. "Yes," she said. "Yes. Thank you. Both of you. I—thank you."

Ilya's expression softened. "We will talk more when you are ready," he said. "After Shane is home. After things settle. But the job is yours if you want it."

Svetlana nodded again, wiping at her eyes. She stayed for a little while longer, talking quietly with Shane and Ilya about her kids and her current work situation, before finally excusing herself with promises to stay in touch. When she left, Shane sagged back against the pillows, suddenly aware of how exhausting that conversation had been.

"That was good," Shane said quietly.

"*Da*," Ilya agreed. He moved to the bed and sat down beside Shane, his hand finding Shane's and squeezing gently. "She will be good for the foundation. And we will be good for her."

Shane nodded. The idea of the foundation—of turning Ilya's grief into something meaningful, something that could actually help people—felt right. It felt like the next step. "After we're home," he said. "We'll figure it all out."

Ilya leaned down and pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead. "After we are home," he agreed.

Later that evening, after Svetlana had left and the room had settled into a quiet lull, a nurse arrived with a clipboard and a sympathetic expression that immediately put Shane on edge.

"Mr. Hollander," she said gently. "I wanted to talk to you about feeding options for Leonid."

Shane's stomach tightened. "Okay," he said slowly.

The nurse—a different one from earlier, younger with sharp eyes and a no-nonsense demeanor—pulled up a chair beside the bed. "We've been monitoring your recovery closely," she said. "And we've noticed that you're not producing milk."

Shane's breath caught. "What?"

"It's rare," the nurse said quickly. "But it does happen, especially in male omegas. Your body went through significant trauma during the birth, and sometimes that can affect lactation. We've been supplementing with formula, and Leonid is doing well on it, but I wanted to make sure you understood your options."

Shane's chest felt tight. He'd known, logically, that breastfeeding might not work—that his body was different, that the complications from the hemorrhaging might have affected things. But hearing it confirmed, hearing that he *couldn't* do this one thing that felt so fundamental to being an omega parent, made something in him crack.

"So I can't breastfeed," Shane said. His voice came out flat, emotionless.

"Not right now," the nurse said. "And possibly not at all. But that doesn't mean Leonid won't thrive. Formula is a perfectly healthy option, and many parents use it exclusively."

Shane nodded, but he didn't trust himself to speak. The nurse continued talking—explaining different formula brands, discussing feeding schedules, offering reassurances—but Shane barely heard her. All he could think about was that he'd failed at this, that his body had failed at this, that he couldn't even do the one thing that was supposed to come naturally.

When the nurse finally left, Shane stared at the ceiling, his jaw tight and his scent spiking with something that smelled like shame.

Ilya was beside him immediately, his hand finding Shane's and squeezing gently. "It's okay," Ilya said. "It's okay, *solnyshko*."

"It's not," Shane said. His voice came out rough, thick with emotion. "I can't even feed my own son."

"You *are* feeding him," Ilya said firmly. "With formula. It's just as good. It's keeping him healthy and strong."

"It's not the same," Shane said.

"It is the same," Ilya insisted. He cupped Shane's face, forcing Shane to look at him. "You are a good father. You're doing everything right. This—" He gestured vaguely at Shane's chest. "This doesn't change that."

Shane's throat tightened. He wanted to believe Ilya, wanted to let the words settle over him like a balm, but the shame was still there, sharp and insistent.

"I'm going to Costco," Ilya said suddenly.

Shane blinked. "What?"

"I'm going to Costco," Ilya repeated. He was already moving, grabbing his jacket and his keys. "I'm going to buy every formula they have. We're going to test them all. We'll find the one Leonid likes best. And then I'm going to buy enough to fill the entire house."

Shane's lips twitched despite himself. "Ilya—"

"No," Ilya said. He leaned down and pressed a fierce kiss to Shane's mouth. "You are not doing this alone. We are doing this together. And I am going to make sure we have everything we need."

Shane's chest ached. He nodded, watching as Ilya left the room with the kind of determined energy that suggested he was on a mission.

Ilya returned two hours later, arms loaded with bags and his scent bright with triumph. He'd bought twelve different brands of formula, along with bottles, nipples, sterilizing equipment, and what looked like half the baby aisle at Costco.

"This is insane," Shane said, staring at the pile of supplies.

"This is every option," Ilya corrected. He started unpacking the bags, lining up the formula cans on the table like he was organizing a military operation. "We're going to test them all. Tonight."

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. "Ilya, he's not going to drink twelve different formulas in one night. We'll make him sick."

"Then we will test them over several nights," Ilya said. "But we are going to find the best one. The one he likes. The one that makes him happy."

Shane's throat tightened. He watched as Ilya prepared the first bottle with meticulous care, testing the temperature on his wrist and adjusting the nipple until it was perfect. Something in his chest unclenched. This was Ilya—practical and devoted and utterly determined to take care of their family, no matter what it took.

They tested three formulas that night. Leonid fussed at the first one, tolerated the second, and took to the third with the kind of enthusiasm that made both Shane and Ilya laugh. By the time the sun came up, they'd settled on a brand, and Ilya had already made plans to go back to Costco and buy enough to last them through the next month.

"You're ridiculous," Shane said, but he was smiling.

"I am taking care of my family," Ilya corrected. He leaned down and kissed Shane softly.

Shane's chest ached. He pulled Ilya closer, breathing in his scent, and let himself believe it.

The rest of the fourth day passed in a blur of visitors. Luca Haas arrived late in the afternoon, looking nervous and clutching a small stuffed bear that he set on the table with the kind of awkwardness that suggested he had no idea what he was doing. He stayed for twenty minutes, making stilted conversation and staring at Leonid with wide eyes, before excusing himself with a promise to visit again soon.

Jackie and Hayden Pike arrived just as the sun was setting, their presence filling the room with a warmth that made Shane's chest ache. Jackie was bright and cheerful, her scent light

and welcoming, while Hayden was quieter, more reserved, but no less kind.

"We brought food," Jackie announced, holding up a bag from a local deli. "Real food. Not hospital food."

Shane's stomach growled. "You're a lifesaver."

They ate together—sandwiches and chips and cookies that tasted like heaven after days of bland hospital meals—and talked about everything and nothing. Jackie told them about her new job, about how much she loved Boston, about how excited she was to have friends nearby. Hayden was quieter, but he smiled when Shane thanked him for saving Ilya's life, and his scent shifted to something warm and pleased.

"I'm glad I could help," Hayden said. "And I'm glad you're both okay."

Shane's throat tightened. He glanced at Ilya, who was watching Hayden with an expression that looked almost like gratitude, and felt a rush of warmth. "We're glad you're here. Both of you. We'd love to have you over once we're settled at home."

Jackie's face lit up. "We'd love that. Really."

They stayed for another hour, filling the room with laughter and easy conversation, before finally excusing themselves with promises to visit soon. When they left, Shane felt lighter, warmer, like the pack was expanding in ways he hadn't expected.

The fifth day in the hospital dawned bright and clear, the kind of morning that felt like a promise. Dr. Martinesi arrived early to check on Shane and Leonid, her expression warm and approving as she reviewed the charts and examined Shane's incision.

"You're healing well," she said. "Better than I expected, honestly. I think we can discharge you today."

Shane's chest lifted. "Really?"

"Really," Dr. Martinesi said, smiling. "You'll need to take it easy for the next few weeks—no heavy lifting, no strenuous activity. But you're doing great, Shane. Both of you are."

Shane's throat tightened. He glanced at Ilya, who stood beside the bed with an expression that looked almost like relief, and felt a rush of warmth. "Thank you," Shane said. "For everything."

Dr. Martinesi nodded. "You're welcome. Now let's get you home."

The next few hours passed in a flurry of activity—nurses coming and going, paperwork being signed, instructions being given. Ilya packed up the flowers, gifts, and absurd amount of formula he'd bought, loading everything into bags with the kind of meticulous care that suggested he was preparing for a military operation. Shane dressed slowly, his body still sore but manageable, and watched as Ilya settled Leonid into the car seat with the kind of reverence usually reserved for something holy.

By the time they were ready to leave, Shane felt like he'd run a marathon. But when Ilya took his hand and led him out of the hospital, Leonid's car seat cradled carefully in his other arm, something in Shane's chest unclenched.

They were going home. As a family.

The drive was quiet, the city passing by in a blur of familiar streets and landmarks. Shane sat in the back beside Leonid's car seat, his hand resting protectively on the handle, watching as his son slept peacefully through the journey. Ilya drove carefully, his gaze flicking to the rearview mirror every few seconds to check on them, and Shane felt a rush of love so intense it made his chest ache.

When they pulled into the driveway, Yuna was already waiting on the porch with Elena bouncing excitedly beside her. The moment the car stopped, Elena ran toward them, her face lit up with joy.

"Dad! Papa! You're home!"

Shane climbed out carefully, his body protesting the movement, and caught Elena as she launched herself at him. He hugged her tightly, breathing in her familiar scent, and felt tears prick at his eyes.

"We're home, baby," he said. "We're home."

Ilya carried Leonid inside while Yuna fussed over both of them, ushering them into the living room where the nest waited—freshly made, filled with soft blankets and pillows and the patchwork quilt Ilya's mother had sewn. Shane sank into it gratefully, his body aching but his heart full, and watched as Ilya settled Leonid carefully beside him.

Elena climbed in next, curling up on Shane's other side, and Yuna hovered nearby with the kind of maternal intensity that made it clear she wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

"Welcome home," Yuna said softly.

Shane's throat tightened. He looked around the room—at his mother, at his daughter, at his alpha, at his newborn son—and felt something in his chest settle into place.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "We're home."

The first week at home was harder than Shane had expected. His body was healing, but slowly, and the exhaustion was overwhelming. Leonid woke every two hours to eat, his cries cutting through the quiet of the house and dragging Shane from the shallow sleep he managed between feedings. Ilya was there for every single one, preparing bottles and changing diapers and rocking Leonid back to sleep with a patience that made Shane's chest ache.

But it wasn't enough. Shane felt like he was drowning, like he couldn't do anything right. The formula took too long to warm. Leonid fussed and wouldn't settle. Shane's incision throbbed,

a constant reminder of everything his body had been through. And underneath it all was a creeping sense of inadequacy he couldn't shake—the feeling that he was failing, that he wasn't good enough, that he couldn't even take care of his own son.

"I can't do this," Shane said one night, his voice breaking as he stared down at Leonid, who was crying inconsolably in his arms. "I can't—I don't know what I'm doing."

Ilya was there immediately, his hands gentle as he took Leonid and settled him against his chest. "You are doing fine," he said firmly. "You are doing everything right."

"I'm not," Shane said. His voice came out harsh, angry. "I can't even get him to stop crying. I can't—" He stopped, his throat closing around the words.

Ilya's expression softened. He rocked Leonid gently, his scent flooding the room with something warm and soothing. After a few moments, Leonid's cries quieted to soft whimpers. "He is tired," Ilya said. "And so are you. This is normal, *solnyshko*. This is what it's like with a newborn."

Shane's hands clenched into fists. "I should be better at this. I'm a nurse. I've taken care of babies before. I should—"

"You are not just a nurse right now," Ilya interrupted. "You are a father. And you are recovering from major surgery. You are doing the best you can. That is enough."

Shane's throat tightened. He wanted to believe Ilya, wanted to let the words settle over him like a balm, but the inadequacy was still there—sharp and insistent.

"I'm going to call Dr. Sharma," Ilya said quietly. "I think you should talk to her. Alone."

Shane's chest tightened. "I don't need—"

"You do," Ilya said gently. "And that's okay. There is no shame in asking for help."

Shane stared at him for a long moment, his jaw tight, before finally nodding. "Okay," he said quietly. "Okay."

Dr. Sharma's office was warm and familiar, the scent of lavender and chamomile filling the air as Shane settled into the chair across from her. She didn't push, didn't ask pointed questions—just let Shane talk, let him spill out all the fear and frustration and overwhelming inadequacy that had been building inside him for the past week.

"I feel like I'm failing," Shane said finally. His voice was rough, thick with emotion. "I feel like I can't do anything right. Like I'm not good enough."

Dr. Sharma's expression was kind, understanding. "What you're experiencing is very common," she said. "Postpartum emotions can be intense, especially after a traumatic birth. Your body went through something incredibly difficult, and it's still healing. It's okay to feel overwhelmed. It's okay to struggle."

Shane's throat tightened. "But I shouldn't be struggling. I've done this before. I should be—"

"You should be exactly where you are," Dr. Sharma interrupted gently. "You're a new parent. You're recovering from surgery. You're adjusting to a completely new reality. There's no 'should' here, Shane. There's just what is."

Shane nodded slowly. The words settled over him like a weight, grounding him in a way he hadn't expected.

"I want you to focus on small things," Dr. Sharma continued. "Not the big picture. Not whether you're a good father or whether you're doing everything right. Just the small things. Feeding Leonid. Holding him. Resting when you can. Can you do that?"

Shane's chest ached. "I can try."

"That's all I'm asking," Dr. Sharma said.

Shane left the session feeling lighter, steadier. The inadequacy was still there, lurking at the edges of his mind, but it was quieter now, more manageable. When he got home and found Ilya in the nest with Leonid, both of them sleeping peacefully, something in his chest unclenched.

He could do this. They could do this. Together.

Three weeks later, Shane found himself alone in the office at nearly eleven at night, the house quiet except for the occasional creak of settling wood and the soft hum of the baby monitor on his desk. Leonid had finally gone down after an hour of fussing, and Ilya had crashed hard in the nest, exhausted from a full day of managing Elena's school pickup, Robby's hospital appointment, and what felt like seventeen loads of laundry.

Shane should have been sleeping too. His body ached with the familiar exhaustion of new parenthood, and his eyes felt gritty from too many late nights. But the foundation launch meeting was in two days, and they still needed content for the website—something more than platitudes and good intentions. Something real.

He'd been clicking through academic databases for the better part of an hour, skimming abstracts and methodology sections, when he found it: *DeSimone, R. (2019). Early Intervention Models in Suicide Prevention: Meeting Individuals at the Point of Crisis.*

Shane opened the PDF and started reading.

Within the first two pages, something in his chest loosened.

DeSimone's research wasn't about grand institutional solutions or clinical detachment. It was about *presence*. About creating low-barrier access points where people in crisis could reach out without fear of judgment, hospitalization, or losing their autonomy. It was about training peer supporters who understood lived experience, building trust before trying to fix anything,

and recognizing that suicidal ideation wasn't a character flaw—it was a response to unbearable circumstances.

Shane highlighted a passage: *"The most effective interventions occur when individuals feel seen and heard without the immediate imposition of clinical frameworks that pathologize their distress. Safety is built through relationship, not protocol."*

He sat back in his chair, staring at the screen.

That was it. That was exactly what they were trying to build with the Irina Foundation—a space where people like Irina, people who were drowning and couldn't see a way out, could reach for help without shame. Where someone would answer. Where they wouldn't be alone.

Shane kept reading, his focus sharpening as DeSimone outlined the components of successful early intervention programs: peer-led support groups, 24-hour crisis lines staffed by trained volunteers with lived experience, partnerships with community organizations to reach marginalized populations, and follow-up care that didn't end when the immediate crisis passed.

He opened a new document and started taking notes, his fingers moving quickly across the keyboard. Svetlana had already done incredible groundwork—three support groups, outreach to LGBTQ+ youth and veterans, partnerships with local mental health organizations. But this research gave them a framework, a way to articulate *why* their approach mattered.

By the time Shane heard footsteps in the hallway, he'd filled four pages with notes and had six more tabs open.

"You're still awake," Ilya said from the doorway, his voice rough with sleep. He was wearing only pajama pants, his hair sticking up at odd angles, and he looked rumpled and warm and perfect.

"I found something," Shane said, turning the laptop toward Ilya. "Research on early intervention models for suicide prevention. It's—Ilya, it's exactly what we're trying to do. Meeting people where they are. Building trust. Creating spaces without judgment."

Ilya moved closer, leaning over Shane's shoulder to read the screen. His scent wrapped around Shane—cedar and warmth and home—and Shane felt himself relax into it.

"This is good," Ilya said after a moment. "This is very good, *solnyshko*."

"It validates everything Svetlana's been building," Shane said. "The support groups, the outreach, the counseling referrals. We're not just guessing anymore. There's evidence this actually works."

Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Shane's head. "You should sleep. You can show Sveta and your mother at the meeting."

Shane nodded, but he didn't close the laptop yet. He scrolled back up to the passage he'd highlighted earlier and read it again.

Safety is built through relationship, not protocol.

That was what Irina had needed. What so many people needed. And maybe—maybe they could actually provide it.

"Okay," Shane said finally. He saved the document and closed the laptop. "Okay. Let's go to bed."

Ilya took his hand and pulled him up gently, careful of Shane's still-healing incision. They walked down the hallway together, past Robby's room where the door was cracked open, past Elena's room where her nightlight cast soft shadows on the wall, and into their bedroom where Leonid slept peacefully in his bassinet.

Shane climbed into bed beside Ilya, letting himself be pulled close, and felt the weight of purpose settle over him like a blanket.

They were building something that mattered. Something real.

And it was going to help people.

Late November brought a crispness to the air that made Shane's office feel like a sanctuary. The room smelled of coffee and the faint vanilla scent of the candle Yuna had lit on the bookshelf. Outside the window, the last of the autumn leaves clung stubbornly to the branches. Shane sat at his desk with Leonid sleeping in a bassinet beside him, one hand resting protectively on the edge while he reviewed the foundation's preliminary budget on his laptop.

Ilya paced near the window, his restless energy filling the space even as he tried to stay quiet. Yuna sat in the armchair in the corner.

When the doorbell rang, Ilya was at the door before Shane could even push back from his desk.

"Sveta," Ilya said warmly, and Shane heard the sound of the door opening, followed by Svetlana's familiar voice.

"I hope I'm not late," she said. "Traffic was terrible."

"You're right on time," Shane called from the office. He stood carefully, mindful of the lingering soreness in his abdomen, and moved to the doorway just as Svetlana appeared with Ilya at her side.

She looked different than she had in the hospital—more rested, more put together. Her dark hair was pulled back in a neat bun, and she wore a professional blazer over a simple blouse. But what really caught Shane's attention was the energy radiating from her. She looked *alive*, her scent bright with purpose and determination.

"Shane," she said, smiling. "Thank you for having me."

"Of course." He gestured to the chairs around his desk. "Come in. Sit."

Svetlana entered the office and set a leather portfolio on the desk, her movements precise and confident. Yuna looked up from her knitting and offered a warm smile.

"Svetlana," Yuna said. "It's good to see you again."

"And you, Yuna." Svetlana glanced at the bassinet, her expression softening. "How is Leonid?"

"Perfect," Shane said. "Sleeping through most of the day now, which is a miracle."

Svetlana's smile widened. "Good. You need the rest."

Ilya closed the office door and moved to stand beside Shane's desk, arms crossed but posture relaxed. "So," he said. "You have been working."

"I have." Svetlana opened the portfolio and pulled out a thick stack of papers, organized with colored tabs and neat annotations. "I wanted to present everything I've done over the past few months so we can formalize my role and discuss next steps."

Shane's chest tightened with anticipation. He sat down and gestured for her to continue.

"First," Svetlana said, flipping to the first tabbed section, "I've created a structure for our support groups. We currently have three groups running in the Boston area—one on Monday evenings, one on Wednesday afternoons, and one on Saturday mornings. Each group meets weekly and is facilitated by a trained volunteer. I've developed a training program for facilitators that covers active listening, crisis intervention, and how to create a safe, non-judgmental space."

She slid a packet across the desk to Shane. He picked it up and began flipping through it. The materials were thorough—detailed guidelines, sample scripts, resource lists. Professional, thoughtful, and exactly what they needed.

"This is incredible," Shane said quietly.

Svetlana's scent warmed with pride, but she didn't pause. "Second," she continued, "I've established partnerships with three local mental health organizations and two hospitals. They're referring people to our support groups and helping us reach individuals who might not otherwise know we exist. I've also been working with a few community centers to offer outreach programs targeting vulnerable populations—LGBTQ+ youth, veterans, people experiencing homelessness."

Yuna set down her knitting, her full attention on Svetlana now. "How many people have you reached so far?"

"Forty-three," Svetlana said. "Across all three groups. And twelve more have reached out through our website for one-on-one counseling referrals."

Shane's throat tightened. Forty-three people. Forty-three lives they were touching, helping, supporting. It felt enormous and humbling all at once.

Ilya leaned forward, his gaze intent. "And the testimonials? The ones Shane has been reading?"

"Those are from participants in the Monday and Wednesday groups." Svetlana pulled out another packet and handed it to Ilya. "I've been collecting feedback to help us improve and to document the impact we're having. The responses have been overwhelmingly positive."

Ilya took the packet and began reading, his jaw tightening as his eyes moved over the words. Shane watched him, saw the way his scent shifted—grief and pride and something fierce and protective all tangled together.

"This is good work, Sveta," Ilya said quietly. "This is—" He stopped, his voice catching. "This is what my mother needed. What she never had."

Shane's chest ached. He reached out and took Ilya's hand, squeezing gently, and Ilya squeezed back.

Yuna spoke then, her voice thoughtful. "What about early intervention? Are you reaching people before they hit a crisis point?"

Svetlana nodded. "That's one of our primary goals. The outreach programs are designed to connect with people who might be struggling but haven't yet reached out for help. We're also working on a campaign to raise awareness about the warning signs of suicidal ideation and how to support someone who's struggling. I have a draft of the materials here."

She pulled out a folder and handed it to Yuna, who opened it and began reading. Shane watched his mother's face, saw her expression shift from curiosity to approval.

"This is excellent," Yuna said. "You've thought of everything."

Svetlana's scent brightened, but there was a vulnerability beneath it—a need for validation, for recognition. "I've been working in intelligence for years," she said quietly. "I know how to gather information, build networks, coordinate complex operations. But this—" She gestured to the materials spread across the desk. "This feels different. This feels like it *matters*."

Shane's throat tightened. He looked at Svetlana, really looked at her, and saw the exhaustion she'd been carrying for so long—the weight of a job that had demanded everything and given so little back. And now here she was, pouring that same intensity and dedication into something that could actually save lives.

"It does matter," Shane said firmly. "You're doing incredible work, Sveta. We're lucky to have you."

Svetlana's eyes went bright, and she blinked rapidly, her scent spiking with emotion. "Thank you," she said. "That means a lot."

Ilya cleared his throat, his voice rough. "We wanted to wait until you'd had time to settle in, to show us what you could do," he said. "You've exceeded every expectation. This role is yours, Sveta. Groundwork coordinator for the Irina Foundation. Full-time. Good salary. Benefits. Everything we discussed."

Svetlana's breath hitched. "I—" She stopped, her hands trembling slightly as she pressed them flat against the desk. Her eyes filled with tears.

"You've already done so much," Shane said gently. "This is just us making it official—publicly recognizing what you mean to this foundation. You're essential to our work."

Svetlana nodded, her eyes shining. "Thank you," she said, her voice thick. "All of you. Thank you."

Shane felt something settle in his chest—a sense of rightness, of pieces falling into place. He glanced at Ilya, who was watching Svetlana with fierce approval, and then at Yuna, who was smiling softly.

"Okay," Shane said. "Let's talk about next steps. We need to set an official launch date for the foundation. Something public, something that raises awareness and brings in more support."

Svetlana pulled out a calendar and flipped to January. "I was thinking mid-January," she said. "After the holidays, when people are looking for ways to give back and get involved. We could host an event—maybe a fundraiser or a community gathering. Invite local media, mental health professionals, community leaders."

"I like that," Shane said, making a note on his laptop. "We'll need to coordinate with our partners, make sure everyone's on the same page."

"I can handle that," Svetlana said. "I've already been in touch with most of them. They're excited about the launch."

Ilya leaned back in his chair, arms crossed but expression thoughtful. "We should also think about how to tell my mother's story," he said quietly. "Not in a way that is—" He paused, searching for the word. "Not exploitative. But in a way that helps people understand why this foundation exists."

Svetlana nodded. "I agree. We can include a brief statement on the website and in our promotional materials. Something that honors her memory without dwelling on the details."

"Yes," Ilya said. "Exactly."

Yuna set down the folder she'd been reading and looked at each of them in turn. "You're building something beautiful," she said. "Something that will help so many people. I'm proud of all of you."

Shane's throat tightened. He looked at his mother, at Ilya, at Svetlana, and felt the weight of what they were creating together. This wasn't just a foundation. It was a legacy—a way to transform grief into hope, pain into purpose.

They spent the next hour going over logistics: budgets, timelines, outreach strategies. Svetlana took notes, asked questions, offered suggestions. Yuna provided insight from her years of community work, and Ilya brought his characteristic intensity and determination to every discussion.

By the time they finished, the sun was setting outside the window, casting the office in warm golden light. Leonid stirred in his bassinet, letting out a soft whimper, and Shane stood to pick him up.

"Thank you," Svetlana said as she gathered her materials. "For believing in me. For giving me this opportunity."

"Thank *you*," Shane said. He shifted Leonid to one arm and reached out to squeeze Svetlana's hand.

December arrived with a cold snap that turned the world white and brittle. Shane had returned to work part-time, managing the foundation from home and coordinating with Svetlana on new programs and outreach efforts. Leonid was growing, his tiny body filling out and his dark eyes becoming more focused, more aware. Elena was thriving, her protective instincts toward her baby brother strengthening every day. And Robby—Robby was about to become theirs. Permanently.

The adoption hearing was scheduled for early December. Shane and Ilya arrived at the courthouse dressed in their best clothes, their scents carefully neutral despite the anxiety thrumming through both of them. Robby was already there, sitting with his caseworker and looking small and nervous in a button-down shirt that hung slightly too big on his frame.

The judge was an older woman with kind eyes and a no-nonsense demeanor. She reviewed the paperwork, asked a few questions about Shane and Ilya's home and their ability to care for Robby, and then looked directly at him.

"Do you want to be adopted by Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov?" she asked.

Robby's voice was quiet but steady. "Yes," he said. "I do."

The judge smiled. "Then it's my pleasure to finalize this adoption. Robby, you are now legally and permanently part of the Hollander-Rozanov family. Congratulations."

Robby's face crumpled. He stood, his hands shaking, and crossed to where Shane and Ilya sat. Shane pulled him into a hug immediately, his arms wrapping around Robby's thin frame, and felt the boy's shoulders shake with silent sobs.

"You're ours," Shane said quietly. "You're ours, Robby. Forever."

Robby nodded against Shane's shoulder, his scent flooding with something that smelled like relief and joy and overwhelming gratitude. "Forever," he whispered.

They left the courthouse together, Robby walking between Shane and Ilya with his hands clasped tightly in theirs. They went for ice cream to celebrate, sitting in a booth at a local shop and laughing as Robby tried to decide between chocolate and vanilla before finally settling on both.

"This is the best day of my life," Robby said, his voice thick with emotion.

Shane's throat tightened. He reached across the table and squeezed Robby's hand.

Christmas came a few weeks later, and the house transformed. Yuna helped Shane and Ilya decorate, stringing lights across the porch and setting up a tree in the living room that Elena insisted on covering with every ornament they owned. Robby was home for the holiday—his first Christmas as a permanent member of the family—and the house filled with the scent of pine and cinnamon and something that smelled like home.

Christmas morning dawned bright and cold. Elena was up before the sun, bouncing on Shane and Ilya's bed and demanding they come downstairs immediately to open presents. Shane groaned, his body still protesting the early hour, but Ilya was already moving, scooping Elena up and carrying her downstairs with the kind of energy that suggested he'd been awake for hours.

Robby was already in the living room, sitting on the couch and staring at the tree with wide eyes. He looked overwhelmed, his scent spiking with disbelief and wonder and fear all tangled together. His hands were clasped tightly in his lap, and he kept glancing between the presents under the tree and the doorway, like he was waiting for someone to tell him this was all a mistake.

"Merry Christmas, kiddo," Shane said, settling onto the couch beside him.

Robby glanced at him, his expression uncertain. "There are so many presents," he said quietly. "I've never—I mean, I didn't think—"

His voice broke, and Shane's chest ached. He reached out and squeezed Robby's shoulder gently. "A lot of them are for you."

Robby's eyes went bright. He looked down at his hands, his jaw working. "I don't know if I deserve—"

"You do," Shane said firmly. "You're part of this family, Robby."

Robby nodded, his throat working, but Shane could see the doubt still lingering in his eyes. The fear that this was temporary. That it could all be taken away.

Elena bounded over, her hair still messy from sleep, and shoved a present into Robby's hands. "Open this one first! It's from me!"

The morning blurred past in a flurry of wrapping paper and laughter and the kind of chaotic joy that made Shane's chest feel too full. Leonid slept through most of it, waking only to eat

before drifting off again in Ilya's arms. Robby opened each present slowly, carefully, like he was afraid of breaking something. A new hoodie from Yuna. A stack of books from Dana. A gaming headset. Art supplies. Each gift seemed to overwhelm him more, his scent cycling through disbelief and gratitude and something that still smelled like fear.

Then Ilya handed him a large, flat box wrapped in silver paper.

"This one is from all of us," Ilya said, his voice warm.

Robby took the box carefully, his hands shaking slightly. He peeled back the wrapping paper and opened the lid, and his breath caught.

Inside were matching Christmas pajamas—soft flannel in a deep red plaid, with white trim at the cuffs and collar. Five sets, each one labeled with a name tag: *Shane, Ilya, Elena, Leonid, and Robby*.

Robby stared at them for a long moment, his fingers brushing over the fabric. His throat worked, and when he looked up, his eyes were wet.

"Matching pajamas," he said quietly. "For all of us."

"*Da*," Ilya said. "We thought—family tradition. Every Christmas, we wear them together."

Robby's hands were shaking now. He pulled out the set with his name on it, holding it up like it was something precious. "Mine has my name on it," he whispered.

"Of course it does," Shane said gently.

Robby's face crumpled. He clutched the pajamas to his chest, his thin frame shaking with silent sobs, and Shane's throat closed.

"Hey," Shane said softly. He moved closer, wrapping his arm around Robby's shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Robby said, his voice breaking. "It's just—I've never had matching pajamas before. I've never had—" He stopped, his breath hitching. "There's still another present here. The big one."

Elena bounced excitedly. "Open it, Robby!"

Robby set the pajamas down carefully and reached for the large box. He unwrapped it slowly, revealing the brand-new PlayStation 5 inside. His eyes went wide.

"Holy shit," he breathed, then immediately clapped his hand over his mouth. "Sorry. I mean—this is—"

"It's yours," Ilya said, grinning. "We thought you could use something fun to do, but only after you finish your schoolwork!"

Robby stared at the PlayStation, his expression cycling through shock, disbelief, and overwhelming gratitude. But then his gaze drifted back to the matching pajamas still sitting on the couch beside him, and something in his face shifted.

"Can I—" His voice broke. "Can I keep the pajamas? Forever?"

Shane's chest tightened. "Of course you can. They're yours."

"No, I mean—" Robby's hands twisted together in his lap. "Can I keep them even if—even if something happens? Even if I have to go back to—"

"Robby," Shane said firmly. He turned to face him fully, settling his hands on Robby's shoulders. "You're not going anywhere. You're ours. Do you understand?"

Robby's breath hitched. "But what if—what if you change your mind? What if I mess up, or —"

"We're not going to change our minds," Ilya said, his voice fierce and protective. "You're our son. That can't be undone."

Robby's face crumpled again. He looked down at the pajamas, his fingers brushing over the name tag with his name embroidered in careful stitching. "I've never had a real Christmas before," he said quietly. "I've never had—people don't usually want me. Not for long."

Shane's throat ached. He pulled Robby into a hug, wrapping his arms around the boy's thin frame and holding on tight. "We want you," Shane said. "We want you, Robby. For long. For forever."

Robby nodded against Shane's shoulder, his scent flooding with hope and relief and overwhelming love. They stayed like that for a long moment, and when Robby finally pulled back, his eyes were red but his expression was lighter.

"Can we wear them now?" Robby asked, his voice small. "The pajamas?"

"Absolutely," Shane said.

They all changed into the matching pajamas right there in the living room—Shane and Ilya helping Leonid into his tiny set, Elena spinning around to show off hers, and Robby pulling his on carefully, like he was afraid of tearing them. When they were all dressed, Yuna insisted on taking a photo, and they gathered together in front of the tree—Shane and Ilya on the couch with Leonid between them, Elena sitting on the floor, and Robby standing beside Ilya with his hand resting tentatively on Ilya's shoulder.

"Perfect," Yuna said, snapping the photo. "Absolutely perfect."

The rest of the day passed in a warm blur—dinner around the table, Robby setting up his PlayStation with Ilya's help, Elena playing with her new toys, Leonid sleeping peacefully in his bassinet. By the time evening came and Yuna had gone home and Elena had been tucked into bed, the house was quiet and warm and filled with the kind of contentment that made Shane's chest ache.

Robby was still in his matching pajamas, sitting on the floor near the tree and staring at the lights with an expression that looked almost like wonder.

"Papa," Robby said quietly.

Ilya's head snapped up from where he was sitting on the couch. His scent spiked with something like honey. "Yes?"

Robby turned to look at him, his eyes bright. "Thank you," he said. "For everything. For—for the pajamas and the PlayStation."

Ilya's throat worked. He stood and crossed to where Robby was sitting, kneeling down beside him. "You do not need to thank me," Ilya said, his voice rough. "You are our son. Shane and I love you."

Robby stood. He took a few steps toward Ilya and threw his arms around his neck, his thin frame shaking with silent sobs. Ilya held him tightly, his scent flooding the room with something calming.

"I love you, Papa," Robby said, his voice muffled against Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya's breath caught. "I love you too, Robka," he said. "So much."

When Robby finally pulled back, he looked at Shane, his expression tentative but hopeful. "Dad," he said quietly.

Shane's breath caught. He nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and held out his arms. Robby crossed to him immediately after releasing Ilya, curling against Shane's side. Shane wrapped his arms around him and held on tight.

"We love you," Shane said quietly. "So much, Robby. You're ours. Forever."

Robby nodded against Shane's shoulder, his hands clutching the fabric of Shane's matching pajamas like he was afraid to let go. "I love you so much."

They stayed like that for a long time, the three of them tangled together on the couch. Shane felt something in his chest unclench. This was home. This was family. This was everything.

New Year's Eve arrived with a flurry of snow and the kind of excitement that made Shane feel like a teenager again. Yuna had insisted on taking all three kids to her house for the night—a gift, she'd said, so Shane and Ilya could have their first real night out together since Leonid's birth. Shane had protested at first, worried about leaving Leonid overnight, but Yuna had been firm.

"You need this," she'd said. "Both of you. I'll take care of them. Go dance. Be young. Come home when you're ready."

Now Shane stood in front of the mirror, adjusting his shirt and trying to ignore the way his hands were shaking. He'd lost most of the pregnancy weight, but his body still felt different—

softer, rounder, marked by stretch marks that covered his abdomen and hips. He'd never been particularly vain, but tonight he felt self-conscious in a way he hadn't expected.

Ilya appeared behind him, his hands settling on Shane's hips, his scent flooding the room with something warm and possessive. "You look beautiful," Ilya said.

Shane huffed. "I look tired."

"You look beautiful," Ilya repeated, pressing a kiss to Shane's neck. His hands tightened on Shane's hips. "And I'm going to spend the entire night showing you off."

Warmth spread through Shane's chest. He turned in Ilya's arms, his hands settling on Ilya's chest, and looked up at his alpha. "I can't believe we're doing this," he said. "Going out. Dancing. Like—like normal people."

Ilya's expression softened. "We are normal people," he said. "We're just normal people who happen to have three children and a very full life."

Shane's lips twitched. "When you put it like that."

They gathered the kids a few minutes later—Elena clutching her sticker-covered overnight bag, Robby carrying his backpack and practically vibrating with excitement about a sleepover at Grandma's, and Leonid already asleep in his car seat. The drive to Yuna's house was short, the streets quiet under the falling snow. When they pulled into her driveway, she was already waiting on the porch.

"There are my babies," Yuna said, opening her arms as Elena bounded up the steps.

"Grandma!" Elena threw herself into Yuna's embrace, her scent bright with excitement. "We're having a sleepover!"

"We are," Yuna agreed. She kissed the top of Elena's head, then looked at Robby, who was hovering uncertainly on the bottom step. "Come here, Robby. You too."

Robby climbed the steps and let Yuna pull him into a hug, his thin frame relaxing against her. "Thanks for letting us stay over," he said quietly.

"Of course," Yuna said. She squeezed his shoulder, then turned to Shane and Ilya, who were standing at the base of the steps with Leonid's car seat. "Bring him up. Let me see my grandson."

Shane carried the car seat up the steps. Yuna peered down at Leonid's sleeping face, her expression softening. "He's perfect," she said. "Don't worry about a thing. I've got everything under control."

"Call if you need anything," Shane said. "Anything at all. His bottles are in the bag, and he usually wakes up around—"

"Shane," Yuna said gently. She reached out and squeezed his hand. "I raised you. I know how to take care of a baby. Go. Have fun. Be with your alpha."

Shane's throat tightened. He nodded, leaning down to press a kiss to Leonid's forehead before stepping back. Ilya did the same, his hand lingering on the car seat handle for a moment before he straightened.

"Be good for Grandma," Ilya said, looking at Elena and Robby.

"We will!" Elena said, already tugging Robby toward the door.

Robby glanced back at Shane and Ilya, his expression uncertain but hopeful. "Have fun," he said.

"We will," Shane said. His chest ached with something warm and overwhelming. "We love you."

"Love you too," Robby said, and then he was following Elena inside, and Yuna was waving them off with a knowing smile.

Shane and Ilya walked back to the car in silence, the snow falling softly around them. When they climbed inside, Shane let out a long breath.

"The house is going to be empty when we get back," he said.

Ilya's hand found his, their fingers tangling together. "Yes," Ilya said. His scent was warm, possessive, full of promise. "It is."

Shane's breath hitched. He squeezed Ilya's hand and nodded toward the road. "Let's go."

They drove to the club where they were meeting Troy and Harris, the city lights reflecting off the snow-covered streets. Shane felt something in his chest settle. This was what he'd never thought he'd have—the freedom to be himself, to be with his alpha, to have a night that was just theirs.

And it was everything.

Troy and Harris were waiting near the bar, both dressed up and grinning. "Finally!" Troy said, pulling Shane into a hug. "I thought you two were never going to leave the house again."

"We've been busy," Shane said dryly.

"Yeah, yeah," Harris said. He handed Shane a drink—something fruity and sweet that tasted like summer—and grinned. "Now let's dance."

The music was loud, the bass thrumming through Shane's chest, and the dance floor was packed with bodies moving in sync. Shane felt self-conscious at first, aware of the way people were looking at him, aware that he was an omega out in public with his alpha. But then Ilya's hands were on his hips, pulling him close, and the rest of the world faded away.

They danced together, their bodies moving in sync, and Shane felt free. He'd never thought he'd have this—the freedom to be himself, to be with his alpha, to dance in public without

fear or shame.

And it was everything.

Ilya's hands tightened on Shane's hips, pulling him closer, and Shane could feel the heat of his alpha's body against his back. "You are so beautiful," Ilya murmured in his ear. "So perfect."

Shane's breath hitched. He turned in Ilya's arms, hands settling on his alpha's shoulders, and looked up at him. "I love you," he said.

Ilya's expression softened. "I love you too, *solnyshko*."

They danced for hours, losing themselves in the music and the heat and the press of bodies around them. Troy and Harris were nearby, laughing and dancing and occasionally pulling Shane and Ilya into their orbit, but mostly the two of them stayed in their own little world.

By 10:30, Shane was exhausted. His feet ached, his body protested every movement, and all he wanted was to go home and curl up in the nest with Ilya and their children.

"Ready to go?" Ilya asked, his voice low.

Shane nodded. "Yeah. Let's go home."

They said their goodbyes to Troy and Harris—quick hugs, promises to do this again soon—and made their way out into the cold Boston night. Snow had started falling while they were inside, soft and steady, blanketing the streets in white. The city felt quieter than usual, muffled by the snow and the late hour, and Shane pulled his coat tighter around himself as they walked to the car.

Ilya opened the passenger door for him, waiting until Shane was settled before closing it gently and rounding to the driver's side. The engine purred to life, and Ilya cranked the heat up immediately, his hand finding Shane's knee as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"You had fun?" Ilya asked after a while, his voice low.

"Yeah," Shane said. He turned his head to look at his alpha, taking in the strong line of Ilya's jaw, the way his eyes stayed focused on the road ahead. "I did. Thank you for tonight."

Ilya's hand tightened on his knee. "You don't need to thank me, *solnyshko*. I wanted this for you. For us."

Shane's throat tightened. He reached over and covered Ilya's hand with his own, threading their fingers together. "I know," he said quietly. "But I'm still grateful."

They pulled into the driveway a few minutes later, and Shane could see the warm glow of the porch light through the falling snow. Ilya closed the front door behind them, locking it with a quiet click, and the house settled into stillness around them. Shane could hear the faint hum of the heater, the soft creak of the floorboards, and nothing else. It was just the two of them now, alone in the quiet warmth of their home.

Shane stood in the entryway, shrugging out of his coat, and felt the weight of the silence settle over him. It had been *months* since they'd been alone like this. Months since they'd had time to just be Shane and Ilya, without the baby needing to be fed or changed, without Elena asking for help with homework, without shuttling Robby to doctor's appointments. Months since the pregnancy had made Shane too uncomfortable, too exhausted, too swollen. Months since the hemorrhaging had nearly killed him and left them both terrified of what intimacy might mean for his healing body.

He'd been cleared by Dr. Martinesi weeks ago—physically capable of sex again, the incision healed, the internal damage repaired as much as it would be. But knowing he *could* and actually *wanting to* had felt like two different things. His body didn't feel like his own anymore. It felt foreign and soft and marked in ways that made him uncertain.

Ilya turned to him, his eyes dark and intent, and Shane's breath caught. There was something in the way Ilya looked at him—something hungry and reverent and deeply, achingly tender.

"Come here," Ilya said, his voice low.

Shane crossed to him, and Ilya's hands settled on his hips, pulling him close. They stood there for a moment, just breathing each other in. Shane could feel the heat of Ilya's body through their clothes, the steady thrum of his alpha's heartbeat against his chest.

"I want you," Ilya murmured, his lips brushing Shane's temple. "If you're ready. If you want —"

"I want," Shane said, cutting him off. His voice came out rough, uncertain despite the words. "I want you, Ilya."

Ilya's hands settled on Shane's hips, and then he was guiding him toward the stairs, slow and careful, his scent wrapping around Shane like a blanket. They made their way to the bedroom, and Ilya closed the door behind them.

The room was dim, and Shane could just make out the outline of their bed—the nest they'd rebuilt together months ago. Ilya's hands were gentle as he helped Shane out of his coat, his sweater. Shane let himself be undressed, his body responding to the careful reverence in Ilya's touch even as his mind whispered doubts.

When Ilya's fingers moved to the button of Shane's jeans, Shane's hands came up to still them. "Wait," he said quietly.

Ilya froze immediately, his gaze searching Shane's face. "What's wrong?"

Shane's throat worked. He didn't know how to say it—didn't know how to articulate the fear that had been building in his chest for months. That his body had changed too much. That Ilya wouldn't want him anymore, not like this. That the stretch marks and the softness and the scar were too much, too visible, too *permanent*.

"I just—" Shane started, then stopped. He looked away, his jaw tight. "I don't look the same. I know you said—I know you've said it doesn't matter, but—"

Ilya's hands came up to cup Shane's face, turning him gently until their eyes met. "Shane," he said, his voice firm. "Look at me."

Shane did, reluctantly, and found nothing but warmth and desire in Ilya's gaze.

"I want you," Ilya said. "I have wanted you every single day since Leonid was born. Every single day you were in that hospital bed. Every single day you were recovering. I want you *now*. Do you understand?"

Shane's breath hitched. "But I'm—"

"Beautiful," Ilya said, cutting him off. "You are beautiful, Shane. Let me show you."

Ilya's hands returned to Shane's jeans, and this time Shane didn't stop him. Ilya undid the button, slid the zipper down, and eased the denim over Shane's hips. When Shane was down to his boxers, Ilya paused, his hands settling on Shane's hips. His gaze traveled over Shane's body—the stretch marks covering his stomach and thighs in silvery lines, the softness that hadn't quite disappeared after Leonid's birth, the faint scar from the C-section bisecting his lower abdomen.

Shane's instinct was to cover himself, to hide, but Ilya's hands held him steady.

"You're so beautiful," Ilya said, his voice thick. "So fucking beautiful, Shane."

Shane's throat tightened. He wanted to believe it, but doubt still whispered that Ilya was just being kind.

Ilya seemed to sense his hesitation. He dropped to his knees in front of Shane, his hands sliding up Shane's thighs, and Shane's breath caught at the sight of his alpha kneeling before him.

"Ilya—"

"Let me," Ilya said quietly. His fingers traced one of the stretch marks on Shane's hip, following the silvery line with reverence. "These are beautiful. Do you know why?"

Shane shook his head, unable to speak.

"Because you carried our son," Ilya said. His lips followed the path his fingers had made, pressing soft kisses to the stretch marks. "You carried Leonid. You gave me this family. You gave me *everything*." His hands moved to Shane's stomach, tracing more of the marks there. "Every single one of these is a gift, Shane. Every single one is proof of what you did for us."

Shane's eyes burned. He threaded his fingers through Ilya's hair, holding him close, and let himself feel it—the love, the gratitude, the overwhelming tenderness filling the space between them.

Ilya's lips moved lower, kissing the scar with the same reverence. "This too," he murmured. "This saved you. This brought Leonid into the world safely. How could I see this as anything but beautiful?"

Something in Shane's chest cracked open. The doubt that had weighed heavy in his gut for months began to dissolve, replaced by something warmer—something that felt like hope. Ilya wasn't just tolerating his body. He *loved* it. He loved what it had done, what it represented.

And suddenly, Shane didn't feel fragile anymore. The uncertainty, the self-consciousness—it all fell away. He felt *powerful*. He felt like himself again: capable, strong, in control.

"Ilya," Shane said, his voice steadier now. "Stand up."

Ilya looked up at him, something questioning in his gaze, but he obeyed immediately, rising to his feet. Shane's hands went to Ilya's shirt, undoing the buttons with deliberate slowness. Ilya stood still, letting Shane undress him.

When Ilya was bare-chested, Shane pushed him gently toward the bed. "Sit."

Ilya sat on the edge of the mattress, his eyes dark and intent. Shane could see the way his alpha's scent was shifting—tinged with something that smelled like submission. Like trust.

Shane stepped between Ilya's thighs, his hands settling on Ilya's shoulders, and leaned down to kiss him. It was slow and deep, Shane's tongue sliding against Ilya's. When he pulled back, Ilya's breathing was ragged.

"I want you," Shane said, his voice low and commanding. "But I'm in charge tonight. Understand?"

Ilya's pupils dilated, his scent spiking with arousal. "Yes," he breathed. "Whatever you want, *solnyshko*."

Shane's lips curved into a small smile. He pushed Ilya back onto the bed, climbing over him. Ilya went willingly, his hands coming up to rest on Shane's hips—not pulling, not directing. Just holding.

Shane took his time. He kissed Ilya's mouth, his jaw, his throat, feeling the way Ilya's pulse jumped beneath his lips. He moved lower, tracing the lines of Ilya's chest with his tongue. Ilya's hands tightened on his hips, his breathing growing more uneven.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice rough. "Please—"

"Shh," Shane said, his tone firm. "I'll give you what you need. But you're going to be patient."

Ilya groaned, his head falling back against the pillows, and Shane felt a surge of satisfaction. This was what he'd been missing—this sense of control, of power, of being the one who decided what happened next.

He moved lower, working Ilya's jeans open. Ilya lifted his hips to help Shane pull them off. When Ilya was finally bare beneath him, Shane sat back on his heels, taking in the sight of his alpha—flushed and aroused and completely at Shane's mercy.

"You're so good for me," Shane murmured, his hands sliding up Ilya's thighs. "So perfect."

Ilya's breath hitched, his scent flooding the room with cedar and need. Shane leaned down to press a kiss to Ilya's hip. He took his time, kissing and touching and tasting, until Ilya was trembling beneath him, his hands fisted in the sheets.

"Shane," Ilya said again, his voice breaking. "Please, I need—"

"I know what you need." Shane reached for the bedside table, pulling out the bottle of slick they kept there. Ilya's eyes went dark with want.

Shane slicked his fingers, his gaze locked on Ilya's face, then pressed inside himself, slow and careful, his body adjusting to the stretch. It had been so long—months since he'd felt this, months since he'd wanted it—and the sensation was overwhelming in the best way.

Ilya watched him with rapt attention, his hands gripping Shane's thighs now, his scent thick and heady in the air. "You're so beautiful," Ilya said, his voice rough. "So fucking beautiful, Shane."

Shane's breath caught. He added another finger, working himself open, and Ilya's hands tightened on his thighs, his hips shifting restlessly.

"Stay still," Shane said, his tone commanding. Ilya froze immediately, his entire body going taut with the effort of obeying.

When Shane was ready, he positioned himself over Ilya, his hands braced on Ilya's chest, and slowly sank down. The stretch was intense, his body adjusting to the fullness. Ilya's hands came up to grip Shane's hips, steadying him.

"Okay?" Ilya asked, his voice strained.

"Yeah," Shane breathed. "Yeah, I'm okay."

He started to move, slow and deliberate, setting the pace. Ilya's head fell back against the pillows, his eyes squeezing shut. Shane could feel the way Ilya was holding back, the way his alpha wanted to thrust up and take control, but was letting Shane lead.

"Look at me," Shane said, and Ilya's eyes snapped open, locking on Shane's face.

Shane moved faster, his hands braced on Ilya's chest. Ilya's scent flooded the room—cedar and snow and something that smelled like devotion. Shane could feel the heat building in his core, the pleasure coiling tighter and tighter. He let himself get lost in it—in the power, in the control, in the way Ilya was looking at him like he was everything.

"Touch me," Shane said, and Ilya's hand immediately moved to wrap around Shane's cock, stroking in time with Shane's movements.

"Like this?" Ilya asked, his voice rough.

"Yes," Shane breathed. "Just like that."

They moved together, Shane setting the rhythm, Ilya following his lead. Shane felt something in his chest expand—something that felt like reclamation, like coming home to himself. He wasn't fragile. He wasn't broken. He was strong and capable and *powerful*, and Ilya loved him for it.

When Shane finally came, it was with Ilya's name on his lips, his body trembling with the force of it. Ilya followed moments later, his hands gripping Shane's hips, his scent flooding the room with warmth and safety and love.

They stayed like that for a long moment, Shane collapsed against Ilya's chest, their bodies slick with sweat, their breathing slowly evening out. Ilya's hand traced lazy patterns on Shane's back. Shane let his eyes drift closed, content and sated and deeply, profoundly happy.

"You okay?" Ilya asked after a while, his voice soft.

"Yeah," Shane said. He turned his head to press a kiss to Ilya's chest. "I'm perfect."

Ilya's arms tightened around him. "You are," he murmured. "You really are."

As the minutes ticked by, Shane's omega instincts began to creep in—a low-level anxiety that whispered about the kids being away, about whether Leonid had eaten enough, about whether Robby was comfortable sleeping at Yuna's house. He tried to push it down, tried to stay in this perfect moment with Ilya, but the worry gnawed at him.

"I should call Mom," Shane said finally, his voice small.

"Just to check. Just to make sure everyone's okay." He could hear the anxiety threading through his own words.

Ilya didn't say anything, but Shane felt him smile against his shoulder. "Go ahead. I'll be here."

Shane reached for his phone on the nightstand and dialed Yuna's number. She picked up on the second ring, her voice warm and unsurprised.

"Hi, honey. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just—" Shane took a breath. "I wanted to check on the kids."

"They're all asleep," Yuna said, and Shane could hear the gentle amusement in her voice. "Elena and Robby are in the guest room, both out like lights. Leonid finished his bottle about an hour ago and is sleeping peacefully in the bassinet. Everyone's fine, Shane."

Shane's shoulders relaxed. "Okay. Good. That's—thank you."

"You're welcome. Now go enjoy your night with your alpha. Stop worrying. I've got this."

"I know you do," Shane said. "I just—"

"I know." Yuna's voice softened. "But they're safe. You're safe. Go be happy."

After they hung up, Shane set the phone back on the nightstand and turned to find Ilya watching him with soft eyes.

"Better?" Ilya asked.

"Yeah." Shane settled back into Ilya's arms, his anxiety melting away now that he'd heard Yuna's reassurance. "Yeah, much better."

Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of his head, and Shane let himself relax completely, knowing his pack was safe and his alpha was right here beside him.

Eventually, Ilya shifted, pressing a kiss to Shane's shoulder. "Come on. Let's go watch the fireworks."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"It's almost midnight," Ilya said, glancing at the clock on the nightstand. "We should watch the fireworks from the porch."

Shane huffed a laugh. "You want to go outside? It's freezing."

"I'll keep you warm," Ilya said, his tone teasing. He climbed out of bed and grabbed a pair of sweatpants, pulling them on before tossing Shane's to him. "Come on, *solnyshko*. It'll be worth it."

Shane grumbled but pulled on the sweatpants and one of Ilya's hoodies, the fabric soft and warm and smelling like his alpha. Ilya grabbed a thick blanket from the closet, and they made their way downstairs, bundled against the cold night waiting for them.

The porch was freezing, the air sharp and biting, but Ilya wrapped the blanket around both of them and pulled Shane against his chest, his arms circling Shane's waist. They stood there, wrapped in each other and the blanket, watching as the first fireworks began to light up the sky in the distance.

The neighborhood was quiet, the snow still falling softly. Shane could hear the faint pop and crackle of fireworks from somewhere nearby. The sky lit up in bursts of color—red and gold and blue—and Shane leaned back against Ilya's chest, letting himself relax into the warmth of his alpha's body.

"This is nice," Shane said quietly.

"*Da*," Ilya agreed, his chin resting on top of Shane's head. "It is."

They stood in comfortable silence for a while, watching the fireworks. Shane felt something settle in his chest—something warm and content and deeply, profoundly grateful.

"Ilya," Shane said after a while, his voice soft.

"*Mm?*"

Shane hesitated, his fingers tightening on the blanket. "I've been thinking about everything you gave up for me."

Ilya's arms tightened around him. "What do you mean?"

"All those people." Shane's voice was quiet, almost hesitant. "Before me. All the people you were with, all the people you could have been with. You gave all of that up for me."

Ilya was silent for a moment. Then he turned Shane around in his arms, his hands settling on Shane's hips. His expression was fierce, his eyes dark and intent.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice low. "You're a dumbass."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"You're a *dumbass*," Ilya repeated, but his tone was soft, affectionate, and his hands were gentle on Shane's hips. "If you think I gave anything up for you."

Shane's throat tightened. "But—"

"No," Ilya said, cutting him off. "Listen to me, *solnyshko*. You've always been the only person for me. Always. From the moment I saw you, from the moment I scented you—there was no one else. There's never been anyone else."

"But all those people before—"

"Meant nothing," Ilya said firmly. "They were nothing, Shane. They were just—bodies. Distractions. I didn't even remember their names half the time." His hands tightened on Shane's hips, his gaze locked on Shane's face. "But you? You're everything. You're my omega, my mate, my *family*. You're the only person I've ever wanted, the only person I'll ever want. There was no sacrifice, Shane. There was only ever you."

Shane's eyes burned. "Ilya—"

"I mean it," Ilya said, his voice rough, thick with emotion. "You think I gave something up? I didn't. I *chose* you. I choose you every single day. And I'll keep choosing you for the rest of my life."

Shane's breath hitched, and he reached up to cup Ilya's face, his thumbs brushing over his alpha's cheekbones. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too," Ilya said. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead, soft and reverent. "So much, *solnyshko*. So fucking much."

They stood there for a moment, wrapped in each other, and then Shane pulled back slightly, his hands still on Ilya's face.

"We should have the wedding this year," Shane said.

Ilya's expression softened. "We should," he agreed.

"Next summer," Shane said. "In the backyard. Just us and the people who matter."

Ilya's eyes lit up. "Yes," he said. "*Da*. That's perfect."

Shane's mind was already racing, picturing it—the backyard strung with lights, the pack gathered around them, Elena as the flower girl and Robby standing beside them as they said their vows. Yuna would be there, smiling and crying. The team would be there, celebrating with them.

"We could do it in the evening," Shane said. "When it's cooler. String up lights in the trees. Keep it simple."

"Simple is good," Ilya said. His hands slid up Shane's sides, settling on his ribs. "What about vows?"

Shane hesitated. "I want them real good," he said. "Not just the traditional stuff. I want to talk about what we've built together. About therapy, about the foundation, about our family. About choosing each other even when it's hard."

Ilya's expression softened. "I'd like that."

Shane's throat tightened. "Yeah, me too."

"Elena can be the flower girl," Ilya said, his tone warming. "She'll love that."

"And Robby," Shane said. "He can be the ring bearer. Or—maybe he can stand with us."

"*Da*," Ilya agreed. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to Shane's lips, slow and tender. "Our family."

They stood there, wrapped in each other and the blanket, watching as the fireworks continued to light up the sky. The clock struck midnight somewhere in the distance, and Shane could hear the faint sound of cheering from the neighbors, but he didn't move. He just stayed there, in Ilya's arms, and let himself feel it—the love, the gratitude, the overwhelming sense of *rightness* that filled the space between them.

"This summer," Shane said quietly.

"This summer," Ilya agreed. His arms tightened around Shane, and his scent wrapped around them both. "I can't wait, *solnyshko*."

Shane smiled, his eyes drifting closed. "Me neither."

They stayed on the porch until the fireworks ended, until the neighborhood settled back into quiet. Then they went inside, wrapped in each other and the promise of forever. And as Shane climbed back into bed, Ilya's arms around him and the scent of their nest surrounding them, he let himself believe it.

Chapter 25: These beautiful years.

Chapter Notes

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

Introductory Chapter Note:

I know you all have been waiting nearly two months for this final update, and I am so sorry. I wanted the ending to be perfect. I actually wrote an original version of the wedding in much more detail, then deleted it because I hated it. Eventually, I realized that what I loved most was not necessarily the big “moments,” but the characters themselves.

More than anything, I wanted to see Shane and Ilya as full-time parents to multiple children, and I really think this chapter brings that together through Shane’s POV. I hope you love it. I do.

I also apologize for any timeline errors you may notice. I have been going back and forth on this ending for months, and I really just wanted to give these characters the closing they deserved.

Thank you all so much for loving this story, supporting it, commenting, leaving kudos, and sticking with me until the end. It has meant so much.

Please also check out my other WIPs if you are interested:

She Would Have Loved You (And Does), Like I Love You

A fic where Irina survives and makes a huge impact on Ilya’s life after he loses hockey, but finds his way to Shane Hollander instead.

E Pluribus Unum

A fic where Shane Hollander is a successful attorney, and Ilya is a law school dropout who ends up becoming Shane’s paralegal.

Daddy Issues: The Shane Hollander Edition

A fic where Shane is a slut after Vegas, but slowly realizes that sex is not always about pleasure. Sometimes, it is about who you feel safe with — and, well, that person is Ilya. Also, there is heavy Ilya jealousy here, if you like that.

Introducing Brad

A fic about what happens when you have positive queer influence in your life early on. Introducing Shane’s best friend, Brad.

Show those some love, too! I appreciate all of your support, comments, and kudos more than I can say.

Happy reading!

July 2028

Shane woke to sunlight streaming through the bedroom window, the kind of warm, golden light that only came on perfect summer mornings. The bed beside him was empty, the sheets cool where Ilya should have been, but Shane could hear the distant sounds of movement downstairs. Voices, laughter, the clatter of dishes. His family was awake, and the house was alive with them.

He lay there for a moment, letting himself surface slowly from sleep. The room smelled like home. Like the nest they'd built together over the years, layered with memories and comfort. The faint sweetness of maple syrup that was his own scent, the lingering trace of icy mints that had long ago transformed into something warmer. Honey. That was what Ilya smelled like now, most of the time. Warm and golden and sweet, the scent of an alpha who had found his home and settled into it completely.

Shane stretched, feeling the pleasant ache of a body that had been well-used and well-loved for forty-two years. He wasn't twenty-five anymore. Neither of them were. But they were here, and they were happy, and that was more than he'd ever thought he'd have.

He got up slowly, pulling on a pair of sweatpants and one of Ilya's old Raiders shirts that had been washed so many times it was soft as silk. The fabric hung loose on his frame, comfortable and familiar. He stepped barefoot out of the bedroom and into the hallway, and that was when he stopped.

The walls were covered in photographs. They always had been, but over the years the collection had grown, spreading from the upstairs hallway down the stairs and into the living room below. A visual timeline of their life together, captured in frames of every size and style. Shane had arranged them himself, adding new ones as the years passed, creating a gallery of memories that told the story of who they'd become.

He stopped in front of the first frame, a small one near the bedroom door. It showed Elena at six years old, gap-toothed and grinning, holding up a flower girl basket that was nearly as big as she was. Her hair was pulled back in careful braids, and she wore a white dress with a blue sash that matched the sapphire accents from the wedding. She looked so small in that photo, so impossibly young. Shane could still remember the weight of her hand in his as they'd walked down the aisle together, the way she'd taken her job so seriously, scattering petals with careful precision.

Next to that was a photo of Robby at fourteen, gangly and self-conscious in his groomsman suit. He'd been so worried about belonging, about whether he had the right to stand up there with them. Shane had pulled him aside before the ceremony and told him that he was family, that he would always be family, and Robby had cried and tried to hide it. In the photo, he was smiling, one hand resting on Elena's shoulder, the other around Shane's back. He looked proud and nervous and so very young.

Shane moved down the hallway, his fingers trailing along the wall. There was a photo of Leonid at three years old, covered head to toe in chocolate cake from Robby's birthday party. His face was a mess of frosting and joy, his dark eyes bright with mischief. Even then, he'd been a handful. Even then, he'd looked so much like Ilya that it had made Shane's chest ache.

Further down was a larger frame, a professional family portrait taken when Leonid was three. All five of them dressed in coordinated blues and whites, sitting on the front steps of their house. Elena was ten, serious and beautiful, sitting between Shane and Ilya with her hands folded in her lap. Robby was sixteen, tall and healthy, his arm around Leonid's shoulders. And Leonid was a blur of motion even in the still image, his face turned toward the camera with a wild grin. The photographer had taken forty-seven shots to get one where everyone was looking in the same direction, and even then Leonid's hand had been reaching for Robby's hair.

Shane smiled at the memory. Leonid had always been chaos incarnate, a whirlwind of energy and emotion and stubborn determination. He was eleven now, and he hadn't changed much. He was still wild, still mischievous, still capable of driving them all to distraction with his antics. But he was also sweet and creative and fiercely loyal to his family. He had Ilya's face and Shane's dark hair, and he moved through the world like he owned it.

There were photos of holidays scattered throughout the collection. Christmas mornings with wrapping paper everywhere and children in matching pajamas. Thanksgivings with the table so full of people they'd had to add extensions. Birthdays and graduations and ordinary Tuesday afternoons that had somehow become extraordinary simply because they'd been together.

Shane stopped in front of a photo from Elena's thirteenth birthday. She was standing in front of a cake shaped like a hockey rink, her face lit up with joy. She'd just made the competitive travel team, and she'd been so proud she could barely contain it. Ilya had made the cake himself, spending hours in the kitchen getting the details right, and Elena had cried when she'd seen it. In the photo, she was hugging him, her face pressed against his chest, and Ilya's expression was soft and overwhelmed with love.

Next to that was a photo of Robby at his high school graduation, taken when he was eighteen. He was wearing his cap and gown, holding his diploma, standing between Shane and Ilya with his arms around both of them. His face was bright with pride and relief and joy. He'd made it. He'd survived cancer, survived the foster system, survived everything that had tried to break him, and he'd graduated with honors. Shane had cried so hard that day that Ilya had to drive them home.

There were photos of the team scattered throughout as well. Cliff and his family at a backyard barbecue, Harris holding Leonid upside down while the boy shrieked with laughter, Troy and Wyatt teaching Elena how to shoot properly on the driveway. The Raiders had become family over the years, woven into the fabric of their lives in ways that felt permanent and unshakeable.

Shane moved further down the hallway, his steps slow and deliberate. He was looking for something specific now, a photo he'd added to the wall just two weeks ago. And there it was, in a large frame near the end of the hall.

The photograph showed Ilya standing on the ice at the Raiders' arena, his jersey—number 81—being raised to the rafters. The crowd was on their feet, a sea of faces and raised hands, the noise so loud it seemed to vibrate through the still image. Ilya's face was turned upward, watching his jersey rise, and his expression was complicated. Pride, yes, but also something softer. Relief, maybe. Or peace.

That had been just a month ago. June 2028. The retirement ceremony that had marked the end of an era.

Shane had been standing in the stands that night with the kids. Elena had been sixteen, her face serious and proud, her hand gripping Shane's arm. Robby had been twenty-four, recently graduated from college, his scent sharp with pride—the knowledge that Ilya had made it possible for all of them to have this life. And Leonid had been eleven years old, gangly and growing into his father's features, bouncing in his seat and barely able to contain his excitement.

They'd watched together as the jersey went up, and Shane had felt Ilya's scent shift across the distance. Icy mints warming, softening, transforming into that honey warmth that had become Ilya's baseline over the years. The scent of happiness. Of home.

Ilya had retired at thirty-four, after fifteen years in the league. His body had been breaking down—too many hits, too many injuries, too many nights spent icing his knees and shoulders. But more than that, he'd been ready. Ready to step away from the game and step fully into the life they were building. Ready to be present for every hockey game, every school play, every ordinary Tuesday afternoon. Ready to stop traveling and start staying.

The retirement party had been enormous. The entire team, past and present. Coaches, staff, fans. Speeches and toasts and tears. Ilya had stood at center ice and thanked everyone in English and Russian both, his voice breaking on every other word, and when he'd finished, the arena had erupted. Shane had cried so hard he'd had to hand his phone to Robby so he could wipe his face.

That had been just weeks ago. The summer everything changed. The summer Ilya became fully theirs—not just in heart, but in time, in presence, in the everyday moments that made up a life.

Shane moved past the retirement photo and stopped in front of another frame, this one positioned prominently on the wall where he would see it every single day. It was a family photo, but not just their family. The Hollander-Rozanovs and the Pikes, all together, standing in front of a lake house somewhere in New Hampshire. The photo had been taken eight years ago, two summers after the wedding, and it represented something Shane had never thought possible.

Reconciliation.

In the photo, Shane stood next to Hayden Pike, both of them smiling, relaxed, their children scattered around them. Ilya had his arm around Shane's waist, and Jackie was laughing at something Robby had said. Arthur Pike, who would have been about sixteen in the photo,

was crouched down next to Leonid, showing him something in the grass. Elena was standing between the two families, her hand in Hayden's daughter's hand, bridging the gap.

It had taken time to get there. Years, actually. After everything that had happened with Sasha, after Hayden had helped save Ilya's life, there had been a tentative peace between them. Hayden had apologized for the way things had ended in Montreal, for the things he'd said and done. And Shane, exhausted and healing and trying to build something better, had accepted.

Hayden and Jackie had become a fixture in their lives over the years. They came to birthday parties and holiday gatherings. They had developed a cautious but genuine friendship, built on their shared love of hockey and their shared commitment to their families.

Shane smiled at the photo, remembering that weekend at the lake house. How nervous he'd been, how worried that it would be awkward or painful. But it hadn't been. It had been good. The kids had played together, the adults had talked and laughed, and by the end of the weekend Shane had felt something shift inside him. A letting go of old hurt. An acceptance of the fact that life was complicated and messy and full of second chances.

He moved on, his eyes scanning the rest of the photos. There were so many. Too many to take in all at once. But at the very end of the hallway, in the largest frame of all, was the photo that mattered most.

Their wedding photo.

It had been taken ten years ago, almost to the day. July 2018. A warm summer evening in their backyard, surrounded by everyone they loved. In the photo, Shane and Ilya were standing under the ceremony arch, their hands clasped together, their foreheads touching. Shane was wearing a simple white suit with a blue pocket square, and Ilya was in a dark blue suit that made his eyes look impossibly bright. They were both smiling, their faces soft with joy and relief and overwhelming love.

Shane could remember that moment so clearly it felt like yesterday. The way his hands had been shaking as he'd stood at the altar, waiting for Ilya to appear. The way his scent had been filled with anxiety, his omega instincts screaming that something was wrong, that he was exposed and vulnerable and everyone could see how terrified he was.

He'd spent the night before at Yuna's house with the kids, and he'd barely slept. He'd lain awake in the guest room, staring at the ceiling, his mind racing with doubts and fears. *What if Ilya changed his mind? What if this was too much, too fast? What if Shane wasn't enough, wasn't good enough, wasn't strong enough to be the partner Ilya deserved?*

And then the music had changed, and Ilya had appeared at the end of the aisle, and everything else had fallen away.

Ilya had been wearing that dark blue suit, his hair carefully styled, his face clean-shaven. But it was his eyes that had undone Shane completely. They'd been bright with tears, soft with emotion, and the moment their gazes had locked, Shane had felt his scent shift. The anxiety had melted away, replaced by the warm sweetness of their love.

Ilya had walked down the aisle slowly, his eyes never leaving Shane's face. And when he'd reached the altar, when he'd taken Shane's hands in his, he'd whispered in Russian, "*Ty moya sudba.*" *You are my fate.*

Shane had cried then, unable to hold it back any longer. And Ilya had smiled, soft and overwhelmed, and wiped the tears away with his thumbs.

The ceremony had been beautiful. Simple and intimate and exactly what they'd needed. Shane had given his vows in Russian, stumbling over some of the words but meaning every single one. He'd talked about how scared he'd been before they'd found each other again, how lost and alone he'd felt. He'd talked about how Ilya had saved him, had given him a family and a home and a reason to believe in forever. And he'd promised to love Ilya for the rest of his life, to be his partner and his omega and the father of their children.

Ilya's vows had been shorter, his voice breaking on almost every word. He'd talked about the cold, about how he'd lived in it for so long he'd forgotten what warmth felt like. He'd talked about his mother, about losing her and losing himself in the aftermath. And he'd talked about Shane, about how Shane had brought him back to life, had taught him how to be warm again, how to be a father and a partner and a man who deserved the love he'd been given.

By the time they'd exchanged rings, there hadn't been a dry eye in the backyard. And when the officiant had pronounced them married, when Ilya had pulled Shane into his arms and kissed him like they were the only two people in the world, the cheers had been deafening.

Shane stood in the hallway now, ten years later, and looked at that photo. He could still feel it, the overwhelming joy and relief and rightness of that moment. The way Ilya's scent had wrapped around him, honey-sweet and warm. The way their children had crashed into them after the kiss, all three of them piling on in a chaotic family hug. The way the backyard had erupted in celebration, their pack and their family and everyone they loved bearing witness to the promise they'd made.

It had been the best day of his life. And every day since had been a continuation of that promise, a building of the life they'd vowed to create together.

Shane took a breath, his chest tight with emotion, and turned away from the photos. He could hear voices more clearly now, drifting up from the kitchen. Leonid's laugh, bright and wild. Ilya's voice, low and patient, speaking in Russian. The clatter of dishes and the smell of pancakes cooking.

His family was waiting for him downstairs.

The kitchen was chaos when Shane walked in, but it was the good kind of chaos.

Ilya was standing at the stove, flipping pancakes with focus. He was wearing sweatpants and an old t-shirt, his hair still messy from sleep, and he looked so domestic and content that Shane's chest ached with love. The scent of honey was strong around him, warm and golden, mixing with the smell of butter and maple syrup and coffee.

Leonid was perched on the counter next to the stove, his legs swinging, talking a mile a minute in a mix of English and Russian. He looked so much like Ilya it was almost eerie—the same sharp cheekbones, the same intense eyes, the same way of holding himself like he was ready to take on the world. But his hair was dark like Shane's, and his smile was pure sunshine, bright and unguarded and full of mischief.

"*Papa*, how do you say 'I want extra chocolate chips' in Russian?" Leonid asked, his voice bright with curiosity.

Ilya sighed, but there was no heat in it. "*Ya khochu dopolnitelnyye shokoladnyye chipsy*," he said, enunciating each word carefully. "But you are not getting extra chocolate chips. You already have enough sugar in your system to power a small city."

"But *Papa*—"

"*Net*," Ilya said firmly, but Shane could see the smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "You will eat regular pancakes like a normal human being, and you will be grateful for them."

Leonid groaned dramatically, throwing his head back like he'd been mortally wounded. "*Ty samyy khudshiy*," he declared. *You're the worst.*

"*Ya znayu*," Ilya replied without missing a beat. I know. He flipped another pancake onto the growing stack on the plate beside him, then glanced over his shoulder and caught sight of Shane standing in the doorway. His entire face softened, his scent blooming warmer. "*Dobroye utro, solnyshko*." *Good morning, sunshine.*

Shane felt his own scent shift in response, the maple syrup sweetness intensifying. "Good morning," he said, moving into the kitchen. He went straight to Ilya, wrapping his arms around his waist from behind and pressing his face against Ilya's shoulder. "You let me sleep in."

"You needed it," Ilya said simply. He set the spatula down and turned in Shane's arms, his hands coming up to cup Shane's face. "You have been working too much. I wanted you to rest."

Shane leaned into the touch, his eyes drifting closed. "I'm fine."

"You are exhausted," Ilya corrected gently. He pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead, then his nose, then his lips. "But you are also beautiful, so I will forgive you for lying to me."

"Gross," Leonid announced from his perch on the counter. "Can you two not be disgusting before I've had breakfast? I'm a growing child. I need nutrition, not trauma."

Shane laughed and pulled away from Ilya, turning to look at his youngest son. "You're eleven. You're not that grown."

"I'm very mature for my age," Leonid said seriously. "Everyone says so."

"Everyone is lying to you," came a new voice from the doorway. Elena walked in, her dark hair pulled back in a messy bun, wearing an oversized Raiders hoodie and leggings. She

looked tired, her face still soft with sleep, but there was tension in her shoulders that Shane recognized immediately. Game day nerves.

She went straight to the coffee maker, pouring herself a cup. They weren't too happy about Elena picking up drinking coffee at fourteen years old. Ilya had tried to stop her at first, arguing that she was too young, but Elena had inherited his stubbornness along with his intensity, and she'd worn him down eventually.

"Morning, *medvezhonok*," Shane said. *Little bear*.

Elena grunted in response, taking a long sip of her coffee. She was sixteen now, tall and lean and beautiful in a way that made Shane's heart ache. She had his eyes and his bone structure, but everything else was pure Ilya. The intensity, the focus, the way she moved through the world like she was always three steps ahead of everyone else.

"Nervous?" Shane asked gently.

Elena shrugged, but Shane could see the truth in the set of her jaw. "It's just a game."

"It's the championship game," Leonid pointed out helpfully. "If you lose, your entire season is ruined and you'll have to live with the shame forever."

"Leo," Ilya said warningly.

"What? I'm just being honest."

Elena shot her brother a look that could have melted steel. "If you don't shut up, I'm going to tell Dad about what you did to his laptop last week."

Leonid's eyes went wide. "You wouldn't."

"Try me."

"*Chto ty sdelał s moyim noutbukom?*" Shane asked, switching to Russian without thinking. *What did you do to my laptop?*

Leonid suddenly became very interested in the pancakes. "Nothing. I didn't do anything. Elena is a liar and a traitor."

"He downloaded a virus trying to get free Minecraft mods," Elena said, her voice flat. "Dad's laptop was broken for three days."

Shane closed his eyes and counted to ten. "Leonid Davidovich Hollander-Rozanov."

The use of his full name made Leonid wince. "It was an accident," he said quickly. "I didn't mean to. And Robby fixed it, so it's fine."

"We will talk about this later," Shane said, his voice firm. "After Elena's game."

"But—"

"Later."

Leonid slumped on the counter, his face the picture of dejection. Ilya reached over and ruffled his hair, his expression somewhere between exasperated and fond. "You are lucky your *papa* loves you," he said in Russian. "Otherwise I would let him kill you."

"Dad wouldn't kill me," Leonid said confidently. "He loves me too much."

"Don't test that theory," Shane muttered, but he was smiling. Leonid was a handful, but he was their handful. Wild and creative and full of life, exactly the way a child should be.

The back door opened, and Robby walked in with Anya, their golden retriever, trotting at his heels. Robby was twenty-four now, tall and healthy and so handsome it sometimes took Shane's breath away. He'd graduated from Boston College last month with a degree in social work, and he was working at a community center in Dorchester, helping kids who reminded Shane painfully of who Robby had been when they'd first met him.

"Morning," Robby said, unclipping Anya's leash. The dog immediately made a beeline for Ilya, who slipped her a piece of pancake when he thought no one was looking. "Smells good in here."

"*Papa* made pancakes," Leonid announced. "But he won't let me have chocolate chips because he's a tyrant."

"You had chocolate chips yesterday," Ilya pointed out. "And the day before. And the day before that. At some point, you need to eat actual food."

"Chocolate is actual food."

"It is not."

"Is too."

"Nyet."

Robby laughed and went to the coffee maker, pouring himself a cup. Shane watched him, noting the way he kept glancing at his phone, the small smile that played at the corner of his mouth. Something was going on. Something good, judging by the warmth in Robby's scent.

"You seem happy this morning," Shane observed.

Robby looked up, his cheeks flushing slightly. "I'm always happy."

"You're smiling at your phone like a teenager with a crush," Elena said, her voice dry. "It's kind of gross."

"I'm not—" Robby started, then stopped, his flush deepening. "I'm just texting a friend."

"A friend," Leonid repeated, his voice full of skepticism. "Is this friend cute?"

"Leo," Shane said warningly.

"What? I'm just asking."

Robby shook his head, but he was still smiling. "You're all terrible. I don't know why I live here."

"Because we're your family and you love us," Elena said matter-of-factly. She took another sip of her coffee, then set the mug down and looked at Ilya. "*Papa*, can I have pancakes? I need to eat before the game."

"Of course, *medvezhonok*," Ilya said, his voice softening. He plated up several pancakes and handed them to her, then did the same for Leonid and Robby. "Everyone sit. We eat together."

It was a rule in their house, one that Ilya had insisted on from the beginning. No matter how busy they were, no matter what was happening, they ate breakfast together on Sundays. It was their time, their ritual, the thing that kept them grounded and connected.

They settled around the kitchen table, the five of them plus Anya sprawled under Elena's chair. Shane sat between Ilya and Leonid, his hand finding Ilya's knee under the table. Ilya's fingers laced with his automatically, a gesture so familiar and comfortable that Shane barely registered it anymore.

"So," Shane said, looking around the table at his family. "Big day today. Elena's championship game. Everyone ready?"

"I'm ready to watch Elena destroy the other team," Leonid said cheerfully. "It's going to be epic."

Elena rolled her eyes, but Shane could see the pleased flush on her cheeks. "It's not about destroying anyone. It's about playing well as a team."

"You can do both," Ilya pointed out. "Playing well and destroying the other team are not mutually exclusive."

"That's not the point of hockey," Shane said, shooting Ilya a look.

"That is exactly the point of hockey," Ilya replied, his voice serious. "You play to win. You play to be better than everyone else. That is how the game works."

"The game is about teamwork and sportsmanship," Shane argued.

"The game is about winning."

"It's about having fun."

"It is about winning while having fun."

Elena groaned and dropped her head into her hands. "Can you two not do this right now? I'm already nervous enough without you arguing about the philosophy of hockey."

Shane and Ilya both stopped, looking at their daughter. She was staring down at her plate, her shoulders tense, and Shane felt a pang of guilt. He reached across the table and covered her hand with his.

"You're going to be amazing," he said gently. "You've worked so hard for this. You're ready."

"What if I'm not?" Elena asked, her voice small. "What if I mess up? What if I let everyone down?"

"You won't," Ilya said, his voice firm and certain. "You are the best player on that team, *medvezhonok*. You are fast and smart and strong. You will not let anyone down."

"But what if—"

"*Nyet*," Ilya interrupted. "No what ifs. You trust yourself. You trust your team. And you play the game the way you know how to play it. That is all you can do."

Elena looked up at him, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "What if I'm not as good as you were?"

The question was heavy. Ilya was quiet for a long moment, his expression complicated. Then he reached across the table and took Elena's other hand, holding it gently.

"You are not me," he said quietly. "You are you. And you are better than I ever was at your age. You have something I did not have when I was sixteen. You have a family who loves you. You have people who believe in you. You have a home. That makes you stronger than I ever was."

Elena's face crumpled, and she pulled her hands back to wipe at her eyes. "I hate when you make me cry before games," she muttered.

"I know," Ilya said, his voice soft. "But it is important that you know. You are not playing to live up to anyone's expectations. You are playing because you love the game. That is enough."

Shane felt his own eyes burning. He squeezed Ilya's hand under the table, and Ilya squeezed back, his scent blooming warmer.

"Okay," Elena said, taking a shaky breath. "Okay. I can do this."

"You can do this," Shane agreed. "And we'll all be there cheering for you."

"Even if you lose, we'll still love you," Leonid added helpfully. "Although it would be better if you won."

"*Leo*," Robby said, reaching over to flick his ear. "Read the room."

"Ow! I'm just being supportive!"

The tension broke, and Elena laughed at Leonid's lack of filter.

They were clearing the dishes when the sound of a car pulling into the driveway made everyone look up. Robby's head snapped toward the window, and Shane saw the way his entire face transformed. The careful neutrality melted away, replaced by something bright and joyful and unmistakably smitten.

"I, uh," Robby said, setting his plate down quickly. "I have to go. I have a shift at the center this afternoon."

"Your shift doesn't start until three," Shane said, his voice mild. "It's barely noon."

"I know, but I wanted to get there early. To, um. Prep. For things."

"To prep for things," Elena repeated, her voice flat. "That's the worst lie I've ever heard, and I live with Leo."

"Hey!" Leonid protested.

Robby's flush deepened. "I'm not lying. I just—there's someone—I mean—"

The doorbell rang, cutting off whatever excuse Robby had been about to make. He practically bolted for the front door, leaving the rest of them staring after him in various states of amusement and curiosity.

Shane exchanged a look with Ilya, who raised an eyebrow. They followed Robby to the front door, arriving just as he pulled it open.

Standing on their front porch was a young man about Robby's age, tall and lean with dark hair and warm brown eyes. He was wearing jeans and a Boston College t-shirt, and he was smiling at Robby with the kind of open affection that made Shane's heart squeeze.

"Hey," the young man said, his voice warm. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah," Robby said, and his voice was soft in a way Shane had never heard before. "Just let me grab my bag."

The young man's gaze shifted past Robby, landing on Shane and Ilya standing in the hallway. His smile widened, and he stepped forward with his hand extended.

"Mr. Hollander, Mr. Rozanov," he said. "Good to see you again."

Shane took his hand automatically, his mind racing. There was something familiar about this young man, something in the shape of his face and the warmth of his smile that tugged at Shane's memory. And then it clicked.

"Arthur," Shane said, his voice slightly breathless. "Arthur Pike."

"Yes, sir," Arthur said, his handshake firm and confident. "Sorry to show up unannounced. Robby mentioned you were all going to Elena's game this afternoon, and I wanted to wish her luck before my shift."

Shane stared at him, his mind struggling to process what was happening. Arthur Pike. Hayden Pike's son. The boy from the photo on the wall upstairs, the one who'd been sixteen and gangly and sweet. He was a man now, confident and comfortable, standing on their porch like he belonged there.

And Robby was looking at him like... well like Shane looked at Ilya around that age.

"Arthur," Ilya said, and his voice was carefully neutral. "It is good to see you. How is your father?"

"He's good," Arthur said easily. "Busy with own retirement, but good. He said to tell you congratulations on the retirement, by the way. He wanted to make it to the ceremony, but he was out of town."

"That is kind of him," Ilya said. His hand found Shane's lower back, a grounding touch. "You are welcome here anytime, Arthur. You know that."

"I appreciate that, sir," Arthur said. His gaze shifted back to Robby, who had reappeared with his bag slung over his shoulder. "You ready?"

"Yeah," Robby said. He looked at Shane and Ilya, his expression somewhere between nervous and hopeful. "I'll see you guys at the game, okay? I'll meet you there."

"Okay," Shane managed. His voice sounded strange to his own ears, tight with emotion he couldn't quite name. "We'll see you there."

Robby hesitated, then stepped forward and hugged Shane quickly. "Love you, Dad," he murmured against Shane's shoulder.

"Love you too," Shane whispered back. He pulled away and watched as Robby hugged Ilya next, then headed down the porch steps with Arthur at his side.

They walked to Arthur's car together, their shoulders brushing, and Shane saw the way Arthur's hand found Robby's, their fingers lacing together naturally. They were comfortable with each other. Easy. Like they'd been doing this for a while.

Shane and Ilya stood in the doorway and watched them drive away, neither of them speaking. Behind them, Shane could hear Elena and Leonid arguing about something, their voices bright and unconcerned. But Shane couldn't move. He was rooted to the spot, his mind spinning.

"Did you know?" he finally asked, his voice quiet.

"That Robby was seeing someone?" Ilya asked. "Yes. He told me a few weeks ago."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"He asked me not to," Ilya said simply. "He wanted to tell you himself when he was ready. I think he was nervous about how you would react."

Shane turned to look at him. "Why would he be nervous? We've always told him he could date whoever he wanted."

"Because it is Arthur Pike," Ilya said gently. "Because he was worried you would see Arthur and think of Hayden, and all the pain that came with that."

Shane's throat tightened. He looked back at the empty driveway, at the space where Arthur's car had been. "I don't think of Hayden when I look at Arthur," he said quietly. "I think of the photo upstairs. The one of all of us together at the lake house. I think of how happy we've been over the years."

Ilya's arm came around his waist, pulling him close. "Then you should tell Robby that," he said. "When you see him at the game. Talk to him."

Shane nodded, leaning into Ilya's warmth. The scent of honey wrapped around him, familiar and comforting. "When did our son grow up?" he asked, his voice thick.

"I do not know," Ilya admitted. "But he is happy, *solnyshko*. That is what matters."

"Yeah," Shane said softly. "Yeah, it is."

After a few hours of Sunday relaxing. Elena's voice called from the kitchen right around six-o'clock. The game was at seven-thirty and they needed to leave soon.

"Are we going to this game or not? Because I need to be there in an hour, and Leo still needs to find his shoes!"

"They're in the living room!" Leonid yelled back. "Where you left them!"

"Those are *my* shoes, you idiot!"

Shane and Ilya exchanged a look, and despite everything, Shane felt himself smile. This was his life. Chaotic and messy and full of love. And he wouldn't change a single thing.

"Come on," Ilya said, pressing a kiss to Shane's temple. "Let us go watch our daughter play hockey."

The drive to the rink was a familiar one. They'd made this trip hundreds of times over the years, first for Ilya's games, then for Elena's. The route was burned into Shane's memory, every turn and stoplight as familiar as his own heartbeat.

Ilya drove with one hand on the wheel and the other resting on Shane's knee, his thumb tracing absent patterns against the fabric of Shane's jeans. It was a habit he'd developed years ago, this need for constant contact, and Shane had long since stopped questioning it. It was just part of who they were. Part of how they moved through the world together.

In the backseat, Elena sat with her headphones on, her eyes closed, her face a mask of concentration. She always did this before games, retreating into herself, into whatever mental

space she needed to be in to play her best. Shane had learned not to interrupt her during these moments. She would come back to them when she was ready.

Leonid, on the other hand, was... well, he had discovered Sabrina Carpenter and decided he needed to blast her every time we got in the car. And while he didn't know all the words, he blessed everyone in said car with his beautiful vocals. Well, they sounded more like screeches. But Shane swore that he and Ilya shared the same vocal cords and tone when singing. He also had his sketchbook open on his lap, his pencil moving rapidly across the page. He'd been drawing since he was old enough to hold a crayon, and he was good. Really good. His sketches were detailed and expressive, capturing moments and emotions with a precision that sometimes took Shane's breath away.

"What are you drawing?" Shane asked, glancing back at him.

"Elena," Leonid said without looking up. "I want to sketch her before the game. She always looks so serious. Like a warrior preparing for battle."

"She is a warrior," Ilya said, his voice warm with pride. "She is fierce and strong and unstoppable."

"She's also terrified," Leonid added matter-of-factly. "But that's okay. All the best warriors are scared before battle. It means they're smart enough to know what they're up against."

Shane felt his chest tighten. Leonid was eleven, but sometimes he said things that made him sound much older. Much wiser. It was a gift, Shane thought. The ability to see people clearly, to understand them in ways that most people never could.

"Where did you learn that?" Shane asked.

Leonid shrugged. "Robby told me. He said being scared doesn't make you weak. It makes you human."

Shane's throat closed up. He reached back and squeezed Leonid's knee, and Leonid looked up from his sketchbook and smiled. It was Ilya's smile, bright and unguarded, and it made Shane's heart ache with love.

They pulled into the parking lot of the rink, and the familiar sight of it settled something in Shane's chest. This place had been part of their lives for so long. It was where Ilya had played, where Elena had learned to skate, where their family had spent countless hours watching and cheering and celebrating.

They climbed out of the car, and Elena pulled off her headphones, her face still serious but more present now. She grabbed her hockey bag from the trunk, slinging it over her shoulder with practiced ease.

"You good?" Shane asked, touching her arm gently.

Elena looked at him, and for a moment she was six years old again, small and uncertain and looking to him for reassurance. Then she straightened her shoulders and nodded.

"I'm good," she said. "Let's do this."

The rink was already crowded when they walked in. Parents and siblings and friends filled the stands, their voices echoing off the high ceiling.

Shane led the way to their usual spot, halfway up the stands with a clear view of the ice. Ilya followed close behind, his hand on Shane's lower back, and Leonid bounded ahead, his sketchbook tucked under his arm.

They settled into their seats just as the teams began warming up on the ice. Shane's eyes immediately found Elena, her number 24 jersey bright against the white ice. She was skating laps, her movements fluid and confident, and Shane felt a surge of pride so strong it almost hurt.

"She looks good," Ilya murmured beside him. His scent had shifted, the honey warmth taking on an edge of intensity. He was in game mode now, his focus narrowed to the ice and his daughter.

"She looks great," Shane agreed. He pulled out his phone and took a photo, capturing Elena mid-stride, her face set with determination.

Leonid had his sketchbook open again, his pencil moving rapidly. Shane glanced over and saw that he was drawing the rink, the players, the moment. Preserving it in his own way.

The stands continued to fill, and Shane found himself scanning the crowd, looking for familiar faces. He spotted some of Elena's teammates' parents, waving when they caught his eye. He saw a few of Ilya's former teammates scattered throughout the stands, their presence a reminder of the community they'd built over the years.

And then he saw Robby, making his way up the stands with Arthur at his side.

Shane's breath caught. Robby looked nervous, his eyes scanning the crowd until they landed on Shane and Ilya. He said something to Arthur, and they started climbing toward them.

"Hey," Robby said when they reached their row. His voice was carefully casual, but Shane could see the tension in his shoulders. "Mind if we sit with you?"

"Of course not," Shane said immediately. He shifted over, making room. "Come on."

Robby and Arthur settled in beside them, and Shane felt Ilya's hand squeeze his knee under the guise of adjusting his position. A silent communication. *Be gentle. Be kind.*

"Arthur," Shane said, turning to look at the young man beside his son. "I'm glad you could make it."

Arthur smiled, and it was warm and genuine. "I wouldn't miss it. Robby's been talking about this game for weeks."

"Has he," Shane said, and he couldn't help the small smile that tugged at his mouth. He looked at Robby, who was determinedly not meeting his eyes. "Robby, can you come with me to get snacks real quick?"

Robby's head snapped up, his expression wary. "Now?"

"It'll just take a second," Shane said gently. "Come on."

He stood and made his way down the stands, trusting Robby to follow. When they reached a quieter corner near the concession stand, Shane turned to face his son and immediately noticed the way Robby's hands were shoved deep into his pockets, the way his shoulders were hunched forward like he was bracing for impact. His scent had shifted too, the warm cedar undertone that usually marked Robby's presence now edged with something sharp and anxious. Shane had spent years as a nurse reading body language and vital signs, but he didn't need clinical training to recognize fear in his own child.

"So," Shane said carefully, keeping his voice light. "We should probably actually buy something or your Papa is going to know this was a setup. You know how he gets when he thinks he's missing out on popcorn."

Robby let out a breath that might have been a laugh, but it came out shaky. "Yeah. He's weird about snacks."

"He's a big child but we love him," Shane said, stepping up to the counter and ordering a large popcorn and two sodas. He paid, collected their items, and then gestured to a spot along the wall where they could stand without blocking foot traffic. Robby followed, his movements stiff and uncertain.

Shane handed him one of the sodas and watched as Robby took it with hands that trembled just slightly. The kid was twenty-four years old, a college graduate working on his master's degree, a cancer survivor who had faced down death and won. But right now, standing in a hockey rink holding a soda, he looked like he might shatter.

"Robby," Shane said gently. "Look at me."

Robby's eyes flicked up, then away, then back again. There was so much fear there, so much vulnerability, that Shane felt his chest tighten. This was the boy who had clung to him in a hospital bed and asked if anyone would ever want him. This was the son who had spent years wondering if he was truly part of the family or just a temporary guest. And now he was standing here, terrified that loving the wrong person might cost him everything.

"I've been seeing Arthur for a few months," Robby said suddenly, the words tumbling out in a rush. "We ran into each other on campus last fall and we started talking and then we started getting coffee and then it just kind of happened. I didn't plan it. I didn't mean for it to be him, specifically, I just—" He stopped, his breath hitching. "I know who his dad is. I know what happened. I know Hayden almost cost you everything in your hockey career and I know you and Papa had to fight so hard to get past all of that and I thought maybe if I just kept it quiet, if I didn't say anything, then it wouldn't matter. But then it got serious and I couldn't keep lying and I just—"

"Robby," Shane interrupted, his voice firm but kind. "Breathe."

Robby sucked in a breath, his chest rising and falling rapidly. His scent was souring now, the anxiety bleeding through whatever blockers he might have been using. Shane set the popcorn down on a nearby ledge and stepped closer, his hand coming up to rest on Robby's shoulder.

"You've been seeing him for months?" Shane asked quietly.

Robby nodded, his jaw tight. "I was scared. I didn't know how to tell you. Every time I tried to bring it up, I just kept thinking about what Hayden did and how he made everything so much harder for you those years with Elena. And I thought maybe you'd think I was choosing him over you, or that I didn't care about what you went through, or that I was being disloyal or—"

"Stop," Shane said, and his voice was gentle but unyielding. "Just stop for a second and listen to me, okay?"

Robby's mouth snapped shut. His eyes were bright with unshed tears, his whole body vibrating with tension.

"First of all," Shane said, "Arthur is not his father. You know that, right? He's his own person. He didn't do any of the things Hayden did. He was just a kid when all of that happened, same as you."

"I know," Robby whispered. "I know that. But I thought maybe it wouldn't matter. I thought maybe you'd still be angry or hurt or—"

"I'm not," Shane said firmly. He squeezed Robby's shoulder, his thumb rubbing small circles against the fabric of his jacket. "Robby, listen to me. Hayden and I made our peace years ago. You've seen the photos on the wall at home. You know we've had dinners together, that our families have spent time together. That history is in the past. It doesn't define who Arthur is, and it doesn't define what you and Arthur have together."

Robby's breath skipped again, and a tear slipped free, tracking down his cheek. "But what if you resent him? What if every time you see him, you think about what his dad did?"

Shane felt his own throat tighten. He pulled Robby into a hug, wrapping his arms around his son and holding him close. Robby was taller than him now, broader, but he still folded into Shane's embrace like he was a child again.

"I don't think about Hayden when I see Arthur," Shane said quietly, his voice muffled against Robby's shoulder. "I think about how happy you look when you're with him. I think about the way you smile when you check your phone and it's a text from him. I think about how you've been humming under your breath for the past three months and how you've been taking extra care with your appearance and how you've been lighter, happier, more yourself than I've seen you in a long time."

Robby let out a choked sound, somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "You noticed all that?"

"Of course I noticed," Shane said, pulling back just enough to look Robby in the eye. "I'm your dad. I notice everything. And what I've noticed is that Arthur makes you happy. That's all I care about. That's all I've ever cared about."

"I love him," Robby said, and his voice cracked on the words. "I really love him, Dad. And I was so scared that loving him meant I was hurting you."

Shane's vision blurred. He cupped Robby's face in his hands, his thumbs brushing away the tears that were falling freely now. "Loving someone could never hurt me, Robby. Not when it's real and good and healthy. And from what I can see, what you and Arthur have is all of those things."

"You really mean that?" Robby asked, his voice small and uncertain.

"I really mean that," Shane said. He pulled Robby back into a hug, holding him tight. "I'm proud of you. For finding someone who makes you smile like that. For being brave enough to let yourself be happy. For trusting me enough to tell me, even though you were scared."

They stood there for a long moment, just holding each other. Shane could feel Robby's heartbeat gradually slowing, could smell the way his scent was shifting back to something warmer and more settled. Around them, the noise of the rink continued, families and friends moving past them toward the stands, but Shane didn't care. This moment mattered more than anything else.

Finally, Robby pulled back, wiping at his eyes with the heel of his hand. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice rough. "I didn't mean to fall apart on you."

"Don't apologize," Shane said firmly. "That's what I'm here for. I'm your dad and if you can't fall apart on me then who can you fall apart on?"

Robby let out a shaky laugh. "You're really okay with this? With me and Arthur?"

"I'm more than okay with it," Shane said. He picked up the popcorn and handed it to Robby, then grabbed his own soda. "In fact, I want you to bring him over for dinner soon. This summer, before you go back to classes. I want to get to know him better. I want him to know that he's welcome in our home."

Robby's eyes went wide. "You'd do that?"

"Of course I would," Shane said. "And I'm going to invite Hayden and Jackie too. I haven't seen them in forever. I want Arthur to feel comfortable, and I want you to know that I support this. That I support you."

"I love you, Dad," Robby said, and his voice was thick with emotion. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," Shane said, his own voice breaking. "So much. And I'm so proud of the man you've become. You're kind and brave and so full of love, and I'm honored to be your father."

They stood there for another moment, just looking at each other, and then Robby pulled Shane into one more quick hug. When they separated, Robby was smiling, his eyes still red

but his expression lighter than it had been in months.

"We should get back," Robby said, glancing toward the stands. "The game's about to start."

"Yeah," Shane agreed. He slung his arm around Robby's shoulders as they walked back toward their seats. "Let's go watch your sister kick some ass. And hey, at least we actually got the popcorn. Your Papa would have been devastated if we came back empty-handed."

Robby laughed and Shane felt warmth bloom in his chest. When they reached their row, Ilya looked at Shane with a question in his eyes, his gaze flicking between Shane and Robby with the kind of careful attention that meant he knew something significant had happened. Shane just smiled and nodded, and Ilya's expression softened immediately. He reached over and squeezed Shane's hand, and Shane squeezed back, a silent communication passing between them.

Hockey was a fast game. Shane had known that intellectually for years, had watched Ilya play countless times and played most of his own life prior to getting pregnant with Elena, had seen Elena grow from a wobbly beginner to a confident player. But watching his daughter play in a championship game was different. Every moment felt heightened, every play more intense.

Elena was everywhere. She moved across the ice with a speed and grace that took Shane's breath away, her stick handling precise and controlled. She set up plays, blocked shots, drove toward the goal with a determination that was pure Ilya.

"She is incredible," Ilya breathed beside him, his voice tight with emotion. "Look at her. Look at how she moves."

"I'm looking," Shane said, his eyes never leaving Elena. "She's amazing."

The first period was scoreless, both teams playing tight defense. Elena had two shots on goal, both of them close, and Shane's heart had leapt into his throat each time. But the goalie had been good, and the puck had stayed out.

The second period was more intense. The other team scored first, and Shane felt his stomach drop. But Elena's team rallied, tying it up five minutes later on a goal from one of Elena's linemates. The assist had been Elena's, a perfect pass that had threaded through three defenders.

"That is my girl," Ilya said, his voice fierce with pride. "That is my daughter."

"Our daughter," Shane corrected, but he was smiling.

Beside them, Leonid was sketching frantically, trying to capture the movement and energy of the game. Robby and Arthur were leaning forward in their seats, completely absorbed. The entire crowd was on their feet, cheering and shouting.

The third period began, and the tension in the rink was thick. The score was still tied, and both teams were playing desperately. Elena was on the ice for almost the entire period, her shifts long and exhausting. Shane could see the fatigue in the set of her shoulders, but she didn't slow down. She kept pushing, kept fighting.

And then, with three minutes left in the game, it happened.

Elena got the puck at center ice. She was moving fast, her skates cutting across the ice with precision. Two defenders converged on her, but she deked around them, her stick work so smooth it looked effortless. She crossed into the offensive zone, and Shane's breath caught in his throat.

"Come on," Ilya whispered beside him. "Come on, *medvezhonok*."

Elena pulled back her stick and shot.

The puck flew toward the goal, a black blur against the white ice. The goalie dove, his glove reaching, but he was a fraction of a second too slow.

The puck hit the back of the net.

Goal.

The rink erupted. The crowd was on their feet, screaming and cheering. Elena's teammates mobbed her on the ice, piling on in a chaotic celebration. And Shane was crying, tears streaming down his face, his hands pressed to his mouth.

"She did it," he gasped. "Oh my God, she did it."

Beside him, Ilya was standing, his fists raised, his face bright with joy and pride. "That is my daughter!" he shouted. "That is my girl!"

Leonid was bouncing in his seat, his sketchbook forgotten. Robby and Arthur were hugging, both of them laughing. The entire section was celebrating, and Shane felt like his heart might burst.

On the ice, Elena had extracted herself from the pile of teammates. She was looking up into the stands, her face flushed and bright, and when her eyes found Shane and Ilya, her smile widened. She raised her stick in salute, and Shane felt a fresh wave of tears.

"I'm so proud of her," he whispered. "I'm so proud."

"She is perfect," Ilya said, his voice thick. "She is absolutely perfect."

The game resumed, and Elena's team held on for the final three minutes. When the buzzer sounded, signaling the end of the game and their victory, the celebration began all over again. The team poured onto the ice, hugging and crying and laughing. Parents rushed down from the stands, and Shane found himself being pulled along by Ilya, both of them making their way to the ice.

Elena saw them coming and skated over, her face bright with joy. She crashed into Shane first, nearly knocking him over, and Shane wrapped his arms around her and held on tight.

"You were amazing," he said into her hair. "You were so amazing, baby."

"I scored," Elena said, her voice muffled against his shoulder. "Dad, I scored."

"I know," Shane said, pulling back to look at her. "I saw. It was beautiful."

Elena turned to Ilya, and he pulled her into a hug that lifted her off her skates. "I am so proud of you," he said in Russian. "*Ty moya gordost. Moya radost.*" *You are my pride. My joy.*

Elena was crying now, her face pressed against Ilya's chest. "I was so scared," she admitted. "I thought I was going to mess up."

"But you did not," Ilya said firmly. "You trusted yourself. You played your game. And you won."

They stood there on the ice, the three of them wrapped in each other, while the celebration continued around them. Leonid appeared at some point, worming his way into the hug, and then Robby and Arthur were there too, and suddenly it was all of them, their whole family, holding each other and celebrating.

Shane looked around at them—at Elena's bright face, at Leonid's wild grin, at Robby's proud smile, at Ilya's soft expression—and felt something settle in his chest. This was it. This was everything he'd ever wanted. Everything he'd ever needed.

They eventually made their way off the ice and into the lobby, where other families were gathering. Shane was talking to one of the other parents when he heard Ilya's voice behind him, loud and insistent.

"She has my intensity," Ilya was saying. "Did you see how she moved? That focus, that determination. That is all me."

"She has my speed," Shane countered, turning around. "And my agility. Did you see how she deked around those defenders? That was pure Shane Hollander."

Ilya scoffed. "Your speed? Please. She is fast because she has my training. I have been working with her since she was seven years old."

"And who taught her to skate in the first place?" Shane shot back. "Who spent hours on the ice with her when she was learning? That was me."

"You taught her the basics," Ilya said dismissively. "I taught her how to be great."

"Oh, you taught her how to be great?" Shane's voice was rising now, but he was smiling. "She's great because she works hard. Because she's dedicated. Because she has my work ethic."

"Your work ethic?" Ilya laughed. "She has my discipline. My focus. My ability to see the ice and read the play."

"She has my creativity," Shane argued. "That goal? That was creative. That was thinking outside the box. That was me."

"That goal was pure instinct and skill," Ilya countered. "That was me."

They were standing face to face now, both of them gesturing wildly, their voices overlapping. Around them, people were starting to stare, but neither of them noticed. They were too caught up in the argument, in the joy of it.

"She has my hair," Shane said.

"She has my eyes," Ilya replied.

"My smile."

"My determination."

"My grace."

"My power."

"She's more like me."

"She is more like me."

"Boys," came a dry voice from behind them. They both turned to find Elena standing there, her arms crossed, her expression somewhere between amused and exasperated. "I'm right here. And for the record, I'm like both of you. Because I'm your daughter. Both of yours."

Shane and Ilya looked at each other, then back at Elena. And then they both started laughing, the argument dissolving into joy.

"You are right," Ilya said, pulling Elena into another hug. "You are perfect because you are ours. Both of ours."

"Exactly," Elena said, but she was smiling. "Now can we please go get food? I'm starving."

"Yes," Shane said immediately. "Food. Let's go."

They gathered up Leonid and Robby and Arthur and headed out to the parking lot. The sun was setting, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink, and the air was warm and perfect. Shane walked with Ilya's arm around his waist, their children surrounding them, and felt a contentment so deep it was almost overwhelming.

"She really was amazing," Shane said quietly.

"She was," Ilya agreed. "But you know what the best part was?"

"What?"

"Watching her with you," Ilya said, his voice soft. "Seeing how proud you were. How much you love her. That was the best part."

Shane's throat tightened. He stopped walking and turned to face Ilya, his hands coming up to cup his face. "I love you," he said. "I love our life. I love our family."

"I love you too, *solnyshko*," Ilya said. He leaned down and kissed Shane, soft and sweet, right there in the parking lot with their children groaning in the background.

"Gross," Leonid announced. "Can you two not be disgusting in public?"

"We can be disgusting wherever we want," Ilya said without pulling away from Shane. "We are married. It is allowed."

"It's been ten years," Elena pointed out. "You'd think the honeymoon phase would be over by now."

"Never," Shane said, finally pulling back from Ilya. "The honeymoon phase never ends."

Robby laughed, and Arthur smiled, and Leonid made exaggerated gagging noises. But they were all smiling, all happy, all together.

They piled into the car. And as Ilya drove, his hand finding Shane's knee again, Shane looked around at his family (with the newest addition of Arthur Pike) and felt that same overwhelming sense of rightness. This was his life. This messy, chaotic, beautiful life. And he wouldn't change a single thing. He couldn't wait for the next ten years of adventures and with Ilya Rozanov, his Alpha, by his side there was nothing that could take away his joy.

Chapter End Notes

I also need to say how much I love what Leonid became in this story. In my head, Leonid is exactly what I imagine Ilya might have been like as a pre-teen if he had been raised in a happy, safe, loving home. He has Shane's black hair, Shane's artistic little tics, and Shane's habit of taking things completely at face value — but with this incredibly high emotional IQ underneath it all.

And yet, he is also a pure demon when he is happy.

He is dramatic, he is terrifying, he is a pre-teen diva, and he is absolutely terrorizing Shane and Ilya in their own home while they laugh through every second of it. I love that for them. I love that for him.

I also love Elena following in both Shane and Ilya's footsteps. She is so strong, so supported, and so loved — but she is also genetically mixed with the skill of both Ilya

Rozanov and Shane Hollander, so honestly, fuck anyone who has to see her on the ice. Good luck to them.

And lastly: Robby and Arthur.

Oh my God. This relationship.

Imagining Robby feeling like he has to hide, the way Shane and Ilya once thought they had to hide, completely breaks my heart. But then Shane's response is just: absolutely not. Not in this house. Not with me. My home is an open door, and I am happy for you.

Full fucking heart.

That, more than anything, is what I wanted this ending to feel like. Not just Shane and Ilya getting their happy ending, but building a home where their children never have to question whether they are safe, loved, supported, or celebrated.

Thank you again for loving this story and these characters with me.

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