

The Distance Between Us

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The Distance Between Us

by [Bruja_oscura](#)

Summary

Ilya Rozanov has spent ten years circling Shane Hollander. Ten years of hotel rooms and secret phone calls. Ten years of pretending he doesn't feel it, doesn't need it, doesn't wake up reaching for someone who's already gone. Ten years convincing himself he's not good enough. That he's not worth it.

Then a plane needs to make an emergency landing near Montreal, and Yuna Hollander is on it.

So when Shane calls him from a bathroom floor, unable to breathe, Ilya stops pretending.

After five hundred miles of frozen highway, three and a half hours of driving like a man possessed, a hospital waiting room full of people who have every reason to hate him, and a boy who looks at him like he's something worth keeping, Ilya may have learned a thing or two about what it means to be loved—and to let himself love freely.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Hi my loves,

Look. I need to be honest with you. I am from LATAM. I have been to the United States exactly once in my entire life, and it was to New York. That's it. That's the extent of my firsthand North American geography knowledge. Do I know how long it actually takes to drive from Boston to Montreal in February? No. Do I know how border crossings work? Absolutely not. Do I know which highways exist or what the weather is like or if there's black ice on that route? Your guess is as good as mine. But here's the thing: I had an idea, and I needed it to work.

I think this is the first thing I've written in a long time without the threat of an exam looming over me lol. I wrote the entire thing in three days. It was the last thing I thought about before falling asleep and the first thing on my mind when I woke up, so I hope you'll enjoy this little piece of my heart.

I love talking to you all. Through these author's notes, through reading your comments, through responding to them—it's genuinely one of my favorite parts of sharing my writing. So please, please leave a comment if you feel like it. Tell me your favorite line. Tell me if you cried. Tell me if you want to fight me about something. I want to hear all of it. I will literally scream with joy and probably respond way too fast because I have absolutely no chill.

Thank you for reading, thank you for commenting, thank you for existing in this fandom with me. ❤️

Come say hi on [Twitter](#) if you want!

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

For the majority of Ilya Rozanov's life, he has been alone.

He came to America at seventeen, a boy with a suitcase, a dream and a grief so large it lived inside his ribs like a second skeleton. But even before that—before the planes and the billet families and the English words that never quite fit right in his mouth—he had already learned the shape of absence. Learned what it meant to live in rooms that had gone too quiet. Learned what it meant to be left behind by a mother who chose to die and a father who chose, afterward, to behave as though she had never existed at all. He knew what it meant to be alone in a way that follows you, the kind that becomes less a feeling and more a fact, like the color of your eyes or the shape of your hands.

Some loneliness arrives like weather, temporary and passing.

Ilya's did not.

His settled into the walls, into the silence between rooms, into the foundation of him. He learned early that loneliness was survivable—that if you were disciplined enough, you could build a whole life around it. That you could fill it with noise and money and sex and people who wanted pieces of you without ever allowing anyone close enough to touch the parts that still bled.

He learned, too, that alone was safer. Alone meant no one could leave.

So he built his cage carefully. Made it beautiful. Made it comfortable. Made it so no one would ever guess that the bars were there at all. He made a museum of expensive, sterile leather and cold glass, and called it a home, one entirely too quiet for a man whose mind was perpetually running at a hundred miles an hour and whose soul was slowly starving to death on a diet of his own hollow laughter. He made himself difficult to hold and easy to misunderstand, beautiful enough to want but too hostile to keep. He built walls out of arrogance and spectacle and gave them his own face.

By the time he got to Boston, the cage was already finished, America just gave it better lighting. The first bars had been built much earlier, four thousand seven hundred miles away, in Moscow, in the apartment that became a tomb the day his mother died.

He was twelve years old when he found her.

There were parts of that day his mind had swallowed whole. He did not remember screaming. He did not remember how long he stayed on the floor beside her. He did not remember the funeral, or the way his father's hand had gripped his shoulder too hard, or whether anyone said they were sorry at all.

What he remembered was the silence. The way it pressed against his eardrums, heavy and suffocating, as if the world itself had been wrapped in cotton. He remembered standing in the kitchen afterward, waiting for her voice to drift in from another room. Waiting for her to start singing again, to fill the rooms with something other than the echo of his own breathing ricocheting off the empty walls.

He remembered the day he stopped waiting.

He remembered his father's face, cold and distant, looking at Ilya like he was a reminder of something he wanted to forget. His father never said her name again. Not once. Not when Ilya asked, not when he begged, not even when he stood in the doorway of his study with tears drying stiff on his face and said, *please, just tell me something, I need to know she was real*. Grigori Rozanov looked at him the way men look at damage they do not intend to repair, coldly. Like grief was an administrative inconvenience. *She is dead*, he would say. *There is nothing to talk about. Stop being weak*.

His brother was worse. His brother was what happened when cruelty was given permission to grow in silence. His brother, who was older and stronger and meaner, and smart enough to understand exactly where to press. *His big brother*, who took their father's silence as permission and their mother's absence as an invitation, and sharpened it into a weapon. He

shoved Ilya into walls and called him a disappointment. Told him their mother had left because she could not stand to look at him. Told him, over and over, that he had been too much to stay for. And because children will believe almost anything if it explains the pain they are already in, Ilya believed him.

And that was the worst part, because Ilya could take the bruises, the shouting, he could even deal with the silence. It was not like all of those things hadn't been there before. But at least he had her love wrapped around him, like something he hadn't known was an armor until the moment he was left bare in a world that was too big, too dangerous, and actively trying to buried him next to her.

So the moment he was no longer protected by it, his brother's words shot through his brain like perfectly aimed bullets, sounding much more plausible than they had any right to. Like the missing piece Ilya needed to make sense of his mom abandoning them. Because once you are loved and then not loved, there are only so many conclusions a child can draw. Ilya drew the simplest one.

It had to be him.

If his mother left, if his father looked through him, if his brother hated him with that kind of practiced certainty, then there had to be something wrong with him at the root. Something spoiled. Something unlovable. Something in him that turned affection into rot the second it touched him, something that made love unsustainable.

And so he built his life around that idea.

He made anger his native language because it was easier to carry than grief. Anger was useful, it had a shape he could mold to his will, it could move and hit back and keep him warm when nothing else did. He fed it until it became the truest thing about him, the one companion that never abandoned him, the one thing he could rely on to drown out the quieter, more dangerous voice underneath it. Anger could fill the spaces where love used to live, could press against the inside of his ribs and push him forward when all he wanted was to stop.

He didn't notice, at first, when one became the other—when the heat in his chest stopped being the ache of missing her and started being the burn of wanting to break something. By the time he did, it had already become his shield, one that would not fail him like love did. It was the only thing his father passed on to him willingly, the thing that connected all of them more than their last name ever did. And so Ilya let it replace every soft thing, until he couldn't remember what it felt like to be held without also being braced for the blow.

He was angry at his mother for choosing death over him, for making him feel like he wasn't enough to make her stay. He was angry at his father for his cold silence, for the way he looked through Ilya like he was a ghost already, for how he only wanted him when he was useful, when there was a medal to hang on the wall and a son to display like a trophy before locking him away again. He was angry at his brother for his envy, for his fists, for the words that carved themselves into Ilya's bones and stayed there. He was angry at God, for keeping him alive when he wasn't sure he wanted to be.

And yet, he couldn't help but still love them all. Dearly.

That was what made him angrier than everything else—how no amount of silence or cruelty or indifference could beat the love out of him. How his father's knuckles had been red more times than Ilya could count, and still he had never been able to stop wanting his approval. Had never been able to stop hoping that maybe this time would be different. That maybe this time Grigori would look at him and see a son instead of a disappointment. That maybe this time his mama would wake up.

It was pathetic, really. How desperate he was for them. How he kept coming back, kept reaching, kept loving, even when they gave him nothing in return. Even when they made it clear he would never be enough.

So he turned the anger inward. Because if no one else was going to carry the weight of it, then he would. He made himself the target, the reason and the blame. It was the only way any of it made sense—if he was the problem, then there was a solution. If he was the problem, then the punishments were not just random cruelties but something he had earned, something that kept him accountable. It meant his brother's hatred had a reason to exist. His father's coldness had a justification. It meant the abuse was not senseless.

He told himself he was a bad person; he repeated it so many times until it was the only truth he could accept. Because if he wasn't bad, then he was only broken, and broken was worse. Broken meant there had been no logic to any of it—no reason his mother had swallowed those pills, no reason his father had looked at him like a stain on the family name every time he lost a game, no reason his brother's fists had always found his ribs with such precision. But bad made sense.

The hours on the ice after everyone else had gone home, skating until his legs gave out and his lungs burned. The nights lying awake, waiting for his father's keys in the door and the lecture that would follow about what a disappointment he was to the Rozanov name. The scars on his hands and the ones much better hidden. The way every teammate looked at him with fear in their eyes, the whispers that followed him through the halls—It all had all been earned.

If he was a villain, then at least he had chosen the part. He would much rather be the architect of his own destruction than a victim of circumstance.

In America, he played it well. And since there was no other version of Ilya Rozanov for them to compare him to, he took the opportunity to build an identity that had nothing to do with grief, loss or pity. He sharpened his smile, perfected his game, and called it showtime.

He became the arrogant Russian with a filthy mouth who took cheap shots and gave worse interviews, like he was daring people to hate him and then seemed pleased when they did. He made himself into exactly the kind of man no one expected softness from, because softness had always been the first thing punished out of him. He became the one who pushed and provoked and dared anyone to get close. Because if they hated him, they couldn't disappoint him. If they kept their distance, he couldn't lose them. If he was the villain, then the loneliness was a choice, not a wound that had never healed.

He didn't believe he deserved love, didn't believe he deserved kindness, didn't really believe he deserved anything good, because good things didn't stay. Good things left. Good things looked at him with cold eyes and said nothing. Good things chose death over him.

Hockey was a good thing, though. The first one he never lost.

He loved hockey like an exit wound—like proof that something had made it through him and left him alive—and he loved the ice under his blades, smooth and endless, a world he could control when he couldn't control anything else. He loved winning, loved being the best, because on the ice his body finally made sense. The rage that poisoned everything else became useful there, beautiful even, when speed was not avoidance if there were cameras pointed at it, when violence was not instability if there were rules around it, when hunger was not pathetic if it made you elite.

The rink was the first place he ever felt powerful, and also the first place he ever felt wanted—people wanted goals from him, wins, hits, highlights. Boston wanted his talent, his edge, his danger, they wanted the spectacle of him, and that was close enough to love that, for a while, he let himself mistake one for the other.

But hockey was never only love. It was also a way out.

At fourteen, hiding under his bed and listening for his brother's footsteps in the hall, Ilya made himself a promise: he would get good enough to get out of Moscow, out of Russia, out of that apartment with its dead air and dead ghosts and the dead shape of his mother still caught in the corners of every room.

And so he did—he got good enough to leave. Good enough to be drafted. Good enough to turn survival into a career and distance into something that looked, from the outside, like success. He ran all the way to North America and still could not get far enough.

His father had wanted a champion, someone to carry the family legacy into the arenas of the world, and Ilya had given him one—but only because winning was the price of the door swinging open. Not for glory, not for Russia, not for the name stitched across his back. He got good because he needed the ticket to his freedom.

He knew it made him a coward, not only for running away but because he never really left at all. No matter how many cars he bought, how many women he slept with, how many cigarettes he smoked or parties he attended, he let his father keep the keys to his cage and returned every summer like a prisoner coming back to his cell. His father would call, and Ilya would go. His brother would sneer, and Ilya would stay. He would walk back into that apartment, and the walls would close in, and the silence would grow teeth, and he would let it.

He told himself each year was the last. Each year, he believed it. And each year, he went anyway.

Because beneath all the anger, the sadness, the cockiness, and the endless love, what Ilya Rozanov was at heart, was a coward. He could skate through a hit that would break another man's ribs but couldn't say no to his father's calls. He could drop his gloves in front of twenty

thousand people but couldn't drop the weight of a name he didn't even want. He could stand in front of a microphone and sneer and provoke and dare the world to hate him, but couldn't stand in front of his own reflection and admit that he was still, after all these years, waiting for his mama to come back. He could lift millions of trophies and medals but could not admit he was in love with a man.

So he told himself he was getting stronger. With each year in America, a little more free. He built a life so loud and so bright that maybe, if he tried hard enough, the noise would drown out the silence waiting for him back home.

But grief travels as well.

It crossed borders with him. Sat in the passenger seat. Lived in his throat. Followed him into every summer, every silence, every hotel room, every apartment too expensive and too empty to feel like home. He could outrun countries. He could outrun winters. He could outrun languages.

He could not outrun himself.

The ghost of Irina Rozanova was there when he scored, when he fought, when he laughed too loud and smiled too sharp. She was there in the quiet moments, the ones he couldn't fill with noise and chaos. A weight tied to his soul, dragging him down even as he tried to fly. And the voices never left either. *You're not enough. You don't deserve this. Everyone leaves. **Everyone leaves.***

But then there was Shane Hollander.

Shane looked, at first glance, like the kind of person the world opened itself to—like belonging had been handed to him at birth and never once revoked, like he had never once had to earn his place in a room. A good son, a good teammate, a good man. Everything Ilya had spent his whole life failing to be.

He moved through the world with a kind of precision that made Ilya ache to watch it. On the ice, he was all clean lines and impossible control, every movement deliberate, every choice exact. Nothing in him seemed wasted. He did not fight for command the way Ilya did; he simply had it, the game bending around him as if it understood, instinctively, that he belonged at the center of it.

He watched him from across the rink for years—watched him grow, get better, become the captain of his team, become the golden boy of the NHL, watched the way his teammates looked at him like they would follow him anywhere, watched the way he carried himself like the weight of the world was something he had agreed to carry and would never complain about.

And Ilya hated him for it, at first. For being so good. For making it look so easy. For never breaking, never showing the cracks that he was sure had to be there somewhere, underneath all that polish. The steadiness of him, the way people loved him without fear, without needing to be convinced—it made something ugly twist in his chest every time he watched Shane lift a trophy or give an interview or skate off the ice with that calm, measured grace.

But envy and fascination lived next door to each other, and Ilya couldn't stop watching. He watched him enough that it bordered on obsession, enough that the cracks started to show—not to anyone else, maybe, but to him.

Ilya knew what performance looked like; he had made an art form of it. He recognized the effort in the stillness, the calculation under the composure, the loneliness hidden beneath the structure of Shane's life. He recognized, with the cold shock of something almost intimate, that Shane was not effortless. He was just hiding in the opposite direction—where Ilya had made himself loud and sharp, Shane had made himself quiet and steady. Both of them untouchable, both of them alone.

But with him, somehow, Shane stopped hiding. Not all at once, of course. Nothing between them had ever been simple enough for that. But time did what time does; years passed, edges shifted, they grew older if not softer then at least more legible to each other. Ilya had spent his whole childhood learning how to read danger before it spoke, and that had made him observant in ugly, useful ways—so of course he saw it, the strain beneath Shane's composure, the fatigue, the hunger, the way Shane wanted things so quietly it almost looked like he didn't want them at all.

He saw the way Shane went still when he needed direction, the way he relaxed most when someone else was willing to hold the shape of the moment for him—someone to cut through the noise and tell him, plainly, where to stand and what to do and how to breathe. And Ilya, who had never been good at anything except breaking things, found that he could give him that. He could be the one Shane didn't have to perform for, he could be his anchor, and the voice that cut through the static.

It was terrifying, how much he wanted to be that for him. How much he started to need it.

He started noticing things he had no business noticing—the way Shane's nose scrunched when he was thinking too hard, the way he bit his lip during close games, the way his ears went pink when Ilya said something that landed too close to something real. He started looking for Shane in crowded rooms without meaning to, started tracking him the way he tracked the puck, automatic and hungry.

Shane made him want to be better. Shane, who had appeared out of nowhere when Ilya was seventeen and drowning, a boy with brown eyes and a constellation of freckles and a smile that made him forget, for just a second, that he was supposed to be running. Shane, who made him feel like the boy he thought was buried six feet under next to his mother, forever frozen in the cold landscape of his homeland. That boy wanted to be softer for Shane, wanted to protect him instead of beat him, wanted to be the person he looked for in a crowd.

Ilya didn't know what to do with that—he still doesn't, most days—because he wasn't good at protecting things, at being delicate and careful, his hands were trained to be rough and cold, to grab a stick, to push a puck, to break things. He didn't know how to hold someone's hand, how to gentle his sharp edges.

And that terrified him. Because Shane was everything Ilya wasn't—controlled where Ilya was chaos, quiet where he was loud, careful where he was reckless. Shane built his life around routines and rules, and Ilya broke rules for fun. He was supposed to hate him, supposed to

want to wipe that perfect composure off his face on the ice, to prove that chaos always won in the end.

But he couldn't hate him, couldn't even try.

Because he was the first person who ever looked at Ilya and didn't flinch—didn't step back, didn't cross to the other side of the street. Shane looked at him and saw something Ilya couldn't see in himself.

So, naturally, he ran.

He was an idiot and a coward, and running was the only thing he had ever been good at, the thing that had saved him most of his life. He was a fast runner, quick on the ice too—even faster than Shane—and he carried that speed into everything else. He ran from his family, from his country, from every soft thing that threatened to undo him. He ran from the boy whose smile made his chest ache in a way he didn't understand, ran from Shane Hollander before anything could even start.

For ten years, he pushed him away with sharp words and hotel rooms and messages that meant nothing and everything all at once. He pretended he didn't care. He pretended he didn't need. He pretended he was fine.

He was not *fine*.

Because no matter how fast he ran, Shane was the only thing that made the voices quiet. The only thing that made the ghost of his mother recede, just a little, just enough to breathe. The only thing that made the summers in Russia bearable—the thought of him, the memory of him, the promise of seeing him again in the fall.

Ilya would lie in his childhood bed, the one with the too-thin mattress and the walls that still held echoes of past ghosts, and he would think about Shane. About the way he skated, smooth and effortless. About the way he looked when he was focused, his brow furrowed, his tongue between his teeth. About the way he said Ilya's last name, soft and careful, like it was something precious and not a chain around his neck.

Thinking about Shane was the only thing that got him through those summers. The only thing that reminded him that the world was still larger than that apartment, larger than Moscow, larger than the version of himself that only seemed to exist there—the boy who had learned too young how to make himself smaller in the face of cruelty, who still slept beneath the weight of old ghosts and older humiliations, who could walk into that house at twenty-seven and somehow still feel twelve.

But still, he told himself, over and over, that he did not deserve him. That whatever existed between them could only ever be temporary, because things like Shane did not stay with men like him. He was too steady, too decent, too untouched by the kind of rot Ilya was certain lived somewhere at his center. He had spent too many years believing that anything good brought too close to him would eventually curdle in his hands.

But Shane kept coming back anyway.

Kept looking at him like he was worth the trouble of understanding. Kept trusting him with softness Ilya had done nothing to earn and would not have known how to ask for if it had not been offered freely. Kept reaching for him, again and again, every season and every game, as if he was something safe to return to.

Kept placing his trust and his body in Ilya's hands as though they had been made for holding rather than breaking. And with every hand at the small of his back, every quiet glance, every impossible act of staying, he became harder and harder to explain within the logic he had built his whole life around.

Shane Hollander kept coming back, every single time, and it proved every voice in Ilya's head wrong.

Ilya was sprawled across his sectional, one leg thrown over the armrest, a half-empty bowl of leftover takeout balanced dangerously on his stomach. He'd been flipping channels for the better part of an hour now, the remote a restless extension of his hand. Sports highlights. A movie he'd already seen. Some reality show about people renovating houses in places that clearly didn't have winter. His phone was face-down on the cushion somewhere near his hip, already proven to be a useless distraction too. Nothing stuck.

It was a Tuesday in mid-February, when the season had settled into that long, grinding stretch between the All-Star break and the trade deadline. The Bears had played in Ottawa two nights ago—a 4–2 win in which Ilya had put up a goal and an assist—and then flown back to Boston for a few precious days of home ice. Next game was Friday, against Montreal actually. The thought had been sitting at the back of his mind all day, a low hum of something complicated that he wasn't ready to examine.

The All-Star break was three weeks behind him, now. Three weeks since he'd stood in a painfully generic hotel room in Tampa and watched Shane Hollander look at him like he was seeing him for the very first time. Three weeks since Shane had smiled at him across that ugly patterned carpet, an expression so soft and impossibly wondering, like they weren't supposed to be rivals anymore. Like that night in Florida had *actually* meant something. Like they'd crossed a line neither of them knew how to uncross.

They hadn't talked about it, of course they hadn't, that wasn't what they did. What they did was text at 2 AM and pretend the messages meant nothing. What they did was watch each other's games on nights off and lie to themselves about the sudden, tight anxiety in their chests when the other took a heavy hit. What they did was exist in the agonizing, suffocating space between a blood-feud rivalry and an obsession so absolute it felt like an illness, something Ilya was too much of a coward to name properly in any language.

But the texts had changed, and with them the careful, mocking distance Ilya had spent years perfecting started collapsing into something unguarded and terribly dangerous for his fragile

mind. Shane had begun offering up little pieces of himself—a complaint about the freezing rain in Quebec, a photo of his mother's garden in the spring, a good night message that arrived at exactly the same time every evening and somehow always lead to hours of conversation, long past any reasonable bedtime, and long past any pretense of casual. And every time his phone buzzed, Ilya felt his treacherous heart lurch toward the sound like a compass desperately finding north.

He clicked the remote again.

But the next channel made his thumb freeze over the button.

On the screen of his ridiculously expensive TV, an airplane sat in a field. Surrounded by crushed snow, emergency vehicles and the harsh, violent glare of red and blue rescue lights. The fuselage was dark, broken, tilted at an angle that looked wrong in every conceivable way physics allowed. Rescue workers swarmed around the metal carcass like frantic ants, carrying stretchers, moving with the urgent precision of people who did this for a living.

Ilya's hand dropped to his lap. The remote slipped from his fingers, landing somewhere on the cushion. He was too busy trying to steady his heart to notice.

"-emergency landing near Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, approximately forty kilometers south of Montreal," the reporter was saying, her voice carrying the practiced, measured cadence of professional grief. "The regional flight from New York to Montreal experienced a bird strike during final descent, causing a catastrophic failure in both engines. The pilot was able to execute an emergency landing in a frozen field; a maneuver aviation experts are already calling a miracle."

The camera angle shifted, revealing a wider shot of the scene—the plane, dark and broken against the white expanse of the field, rescue vehicles clustered around it like metal flowers blooming in snow.

"Eighty-seven passengers were on board. Early reports indicate dozens of injuries, ranging from minor to critical. Rescue operations have been underway for a couple of hours, with patients being transported to hospitals across the greater Montreal area, including the Hôpital du Sacré-Coeur, the region's Level 1 trauma center."

Montreal.

The word bypassed his brain entirely and landed in Ilya's chest like a puck to the ribs, shattering any hope of calming his racing heart.

He knew, logically, that this was an irrational spike of adrenaline. That metropolitan cities had plane accidents and emergency landings and terrible, senseless tragedies happening all the time. That Montreal was a massive, sprawling area with millions of people, and the mathematical chances of anyone he knew being on that specific flight were-

He did the math anyway. He ran the schedules in his head the way he always did, the way he was pathologically incapable of stopping when it came to Shane.

He hadn't been in New York—Ilya knew because he knew the Voyageurs' schedule better than his own, because he always knew where Shane was playing, because he was pathetic like that and hopelessly tethered to the man's orbit. Montreal had played at home on Saturday, and since Tuesday was an off-day, Shane was probably safely locked inside his pristine apartment, doing whatever infuriatingly structured things he did on off-days. Cooking those weird, tasteless healthy meals, or reading one of his boring books.

Not on a plane. Not falling out of the sky. *Not in danger.*

Letting his heavy head fall back against the couch, Ilya exhaled a jagged breath. He told himself to stop being a ridiculous, paranoid idiot, but his eyes remained glued to the screen as he rubbed the back of his neck absently, feeling the fine hairs standing at attention. The primal, animalistic part of his brain completely ignoring logic and schedules and the objective fact that Shane was safely on the ground.

Somewhere deep in his chest, a small, icy thread of unease had begun to wind itself tightly around his ribs.

Ilya'd never really been a big fan of flying. He had it under enough control that it wasn't exactly a phobia per se, but how quickly everything could go wrong, how fast gravity could reclaim you, and the way you willingly surrendered your life to metal and engineering and a pilot you'd never looked in the eye—it all inspired in him a profound, uncomfortable respect. He'd done it hundreds of times, would probably do it thousands more, but he always felt that tiny click of pure relief when the rubber wheels finally screamed against the tarmac. Always.

Not that he'd ever confess that to a living soul. He had a reputation to uphold, after all.

But right now, watching the grainy news footage of ambulances converging on some frozen, blood-stained field outside Montreal, that unease magnified tenfold. Eighty-seven people. Eighty-seven families. Eighty-seven versions of a phone call no human being ever wanted to receive.

Stop it. He told himself, closing his eyes against the glare of the television. *You're being ridiculous. Shane is fine.*

The shiver returned anyway, deeper this time.

Ilya pulled his phone off the cushion, swiped it open, and stared at the blinding screen. No messages. No missed calls. He opened their chat and typed out a text anyway. Deleted it. Typed it again.

You awake?

His thumb hovered over the send button, trembling almost imperceptibly. What was he even asking? *Hey, I know you're fine, but I just watched a plane crash near your city and now my lungs aren't doing what they are designed for, is that weird?* Pathetic. Embarrassing. Too transparent.

He deleted the letters, one by one. Then he tossed the phone back onto the cushion beside him as if it had burned him—as if he didn't trust himself not to grab it again and send the message anyway. He rubbed both hands over his face, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes so hard he saw stars, trying violently to scrub the tension out of his muscles. The news anchor was still talking, her voice a relentless drone of tragedy. Ilya changed the channel to something, anything else.

Twenty-three minutes later, his phone started vibrating against the couch cushion.

The sound was small—harmless, even. Barely more than a tiny hum beneath the low murmur of the television. It still carved his whole evening in two.

Ilya's head turned before his mind could catch up—the kind of instinct you only develop for the things you love most and spend your life terrified of losing. He reached for the phone almost blindly, already upright before he had properly registered the name glowing on the screen

Jane

The icy thread in his chest immediately pulled taut, snapping around his lungs the second he read that stupid nickname. He answered on the first ring, bringing the phone to his ear with a hand that was suddenly not quite steady.

"Hollander?"

Nothing.

Just breathing. Shallow, broken little gasps that didn't sound like breathing at all, more like Shane's own body had turned against him. *He is panicking*, his brain supplied, *he is in pain*. Something in Shane had gone violently, terrifyingly wrong and Ilya wasn't fucking there to see what.

"Shane." Ilya tried again, his tone shifting instantly, the gentle mockery vanishing, replaced by something firm and unyielding. He was on his feet now, the TV forgotten, the massive, empty room shrinking around him until the only thing that existed in the entire universe was the small speaker pressed to his ear and the sound of the person he cared the most falling apart on the other end. "Tell me what is happening, *zlotse*. Talk to me."

A gasp. A wet, shuddering inhale that caught on something incredibly sharp in Shane's throat. Then a voice—Shane's voice, but entirely *wrong*, scraped raw and thin and gutted by terror—trying to force a thought through his paralyzed vocal cords and failing.

"I-I can't-I can't-"

"Yes you can." Ilya kept his voice pitched low, kept it as steady as bedrock, even as his own heart was hammering a frantic, sickening rhythm against his ribs. "You can breathe. You have done it before. You will do it now. Just-try. Just one word. One breath. Whatever you can give me."

A sound leaked through the speaker. Half sob, half devastated surrender. "*Ilya*."

"I am here. *I am right here*. Just concentrate on breathing."

Another gasp. Another desperate, uncoordinated struggle for air. Ilya closed his eyes, pressing his free hand flat against the cold drywall of his living room, grounding himself in the unmoving walls of the house so he could be the immovable object Shane desperately needed him to be.

"I didn't-I didn't know who else to call." Shane's voice was fractured, splintering at the edges, a fragile glass pane cracking under immense pressure. "I just-I saw your name and I-I needed-"

"You call me." Ilya's voice came out harder than he intended—not at Shane, never at Shane—but the fear had lodged itself between his ribs, sharp and immediate. "You call me *always*. Tell me what is happening. Where are you? Are you hurt?" He didn't want to overwhelm him with too many questions at once, but he needed to know.

Another wet, fractured exhale crackled through the speaker, and despite the distance, Ilya could see him with horrifying clarity. Shane, somewhere, alone, falling apart, his face doing that thing it did when the world got too big, too loud, too much. Shane with his careful, competent little mask split clean down the middle, stripped down to just the terrifyingly vulnerable boy who needed everything to be in order.

His Shane, some treacherous part of him thought instantly, like a reflex he'd never managed to kill.

Except Shane wasn't his. Not really.

And he could never truly be, not the way Ilya wanted. Because Shane was *good*. Golden boy, captain material, the kind of person who actually called his mother after every game and meant it. And Ilya? Ilya was the arrogant Russian who thrived on chaos, the one whose own father couldn't look at him without disgust curdling his mouth. Shane deserved someone clean. Someone whole. Someone whose hands weren't so rough, whose heart wasn't so careful with itself—someone who hadn't spent half his life learning to want things without ever believing he deserved to have them.

And even if that weren't true—even if, somehow, Shane wanted him anyway—there was still the rest of the world to contend with. The cameras, the headlines, the inevitable fallout when two rival captains from hockey's most bitter national rivalry turned out to be something other than enemies. Shane's career, Shane's reputation, Shane's perfect, pristine image—all of it shattered because he'd been stupid enough to love Ilya Rozanov.

He deserved to love someone without having to choose, without having to measure every touch against what it might cost him. And that person would never be Ilya.

So no. Shane wasn't his. Could never be his.

Not in any way that counted. Not in daylight, not in language, not in the kind of life Ilya had taught himself, over and over, never to ask for. And yet, when Shane made that shattered sound into the phone, something inside him answered like it had been waiting years for someone to finally give it permission.

"My mom."

The two words redirected Ilya's chain of thought so fast they landed like a physical blow. His hand tightened on the phone.

"She was-she was on the plane. The one that-it had to do an emergency landing. She was on it, Ilya. She was coming from New York, she was supposed to-she was coming to *see me*, and now she's-she's-"

The words dissolved into a thin, keening sound, it rose from the back of Shane's throat like an animal cornered and too tired to fight anymore, and Ilya felt his chest crack open because of it. The plane. Montreal. The emergency landing.

Yuna. Yuna was on the plane. Fuck.

"Shane." His voice was rough, the carefully maintained calm slipping just a fraction, because the floor had just dropped out from beneath them both and he was blindly scrambling for purchase. He was already moving, his legs carrying him away from the wall, his eyes tracking across the immaculate surfaces of his home. "Where is she? Do you know? Is she—"

"Sacr  -Coeur." The name of the hospital came out wet, smeared heavily with tears. "They took her to Sacr  -Coeur. She's in-she's in surgery, Ilya. My dad called-he called from the car, and he told me-he told me she has a-her leg, it's *broken*, really bad, and her *spleen*-they had to-they're operating, and I'm just-I'm just sitting here-"

"Where?" Ilya's brain shifted into an icy, terrifyingly clear state of tactical hyper-focus. He strode into the foyer, his hand snatching the heavy ring of keys off the console table. The metallic clatter was loud, but on the other end of the line, Shane was too deeply into in his own panic to register the sound. "Where are you right now, Shane?"

"I'm at-" A pause. A shaky breath. "I'm at Hayden's." Okay, he was not alone, that was good, Ilya could work with that. "We were having dinner. Jackie made pasta, but there was-there was *so much noise*, Ilya. And my dad called, and I just-I went to the guest bathroom, and I've been in here for-I don't know how long, and I just-I can't *breathe*, the tiles are so cold but my skin is burning, and I can't *think*, I just-"

"Shane." Ilya's voice was an iron rod cutting straight through the spiral. He kicked off his slides, shoving his bare feet violently into the first pair of sneakers he found by the door. He didn't bother with the laces, just crushed the heels down in his haste to move. "You are doing good. You are telling me the facts. That is good. Now-your dad. He is driving from Ottawa?"

A wet sniffle. "Yeah. He was-he was at home when she didn't-when she didn't call after the flight was supposed to land. He saw the news. He called the airline, the hospital, *fucking everyone*-and then they told him she was-that she was *alive* but-" Another sob, sharp and

devastating. "He's coming. He said it'll take—he said an hour and a half, maybe more with the roads, and he told me to go, to get to the hospital, that he'd meet me there, but I can't, Ilya, *I can't move, I can't*—"

"Yes you can." Ilya yanked open the hall closet, his free hand blindly snatching the first heavy winter jacket his fingers brushed against. He awkwardly shoved his arms through the sleeves, pinning the phone tightly between his shoulder and his ear so he wouldn't lose Shane's voice for even a microsecond. "You can move. You *are* moving. You are going to stand up, you are going to unlock that bathroom door, and you are going to let Hayden know what happened. And then you are going to let him drive you to the hospital, and you are going to sit in that waiting room and breathe until your father gets there. Do you hear me?" He yanked open the small drawer beneath the mirror. His fingers bypassed the watches and the spare cash, closing around the smooth, crimson red cover of his Russian passport. He shoved it deep into the inner pocket of the coat without a second thought.

"But I *can't*—"

"You *can*." Ilya shoved the heavy front door open, stepping out into the biting, unforgiving cold of the Boston night. He moved toward the detached garage, his unlaced sneakers silent on the frost-heaved concrete. "You are the strongest person I know, Shane Hollander. You have carried an entire franchise on your back since you were twenty-two years old. You can carry yourself to a hospital waiting room. One step at a time."

"My legs," Shane choked out, the words a fractured, breathless scramble over the line. "Ilya, my legs won't—they're numb. Everything is buzzing."

A violent wave of frustration slammed into Ilya's chest, hot and bitter. He knew exactly what Shane needed right now, his hands literally ached with the urge to reach through the cellular network, to grab him by the shoulders, to pull him down to the floor and crush him against his chest until the frantic bird trapped in Shane's ribs finally calmed down. But he couldn't. There were five hundred miles of frozen, dark highway between them. Five hundred miles Ilya was about to try and break with his bare hands.

For now, his voice was the only lifeline he could offer.

"Then you sit on the tiles until the buzzing stops," Ilya commanded gently, absolutely refusing to let Shane spiral back down into the dark. He kept his pace steady across the driveway, the freezing wind cutting through his open jacket, a sharp physical contrast to the white-hot adrenaline burning in his veins. "But you breathe. With me. Right now. Inhale."

For a moment there was nothing but the ragged, uneven static of Shane's breathing—then a small, shuddering sound, like he was trying and failing and trying again anyway.

"Again," Ilya pushed, his voice an unyielding anchor. "You are safe, *zlotse*. Listen to me. Inhale. One. Two. Three. Four. Hold there. Keep it in your lungs."

A strained, trembling pause carried over the line.

"Now exhale. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Push it all out. Good."

A shuddering breath came through the speaker, then another—slightly deeper, fighting past the tight knot in his throat—and Ilya walked the impossible tightrope of giving Shane absolute, unyielding structure while his own heart hammered so hard it felt like it might tear straight through his ribs.

"Tell me what you feel," Ilya demanded softly, forcing Shane's brain to engage with the physical world instead of the panic in his head. "Ground yourself. The tiles are cold. What else?"

"The—" Shane's voice hitched, but he was trying. "The grout. It's rough. My hands are flat on the floor."

"Keep them there," Ilya instructed. He had absolutely no idea what *grout* meant, but if it was something Shane could hold onto, then it worked for him. The low, rumbling certainty in his voice worked like a splint for Shane's fractured mind—holding him together, giving him something solid to lean on. Ilya listened as the jagged edges of Shane's breathing slowly began to smooth out, the panic dulling into something like exhaustion. "Exhale again," he murmured, reaching the side of the garage. He pressed the button on the wall with numb fingers. "Good. You are doing so good, *Solnyshko*."

The massive garage door began to rise with a heavy, mechanical groan, a sudden noise that threatened to swallow the silence of the night—Ilya cupped his large hand over the phone's microphone, terrified the noise would hit Shane's raw, overstimulated senses and shatter the progress they had just made. He slipped quickly into the dark space, yanked open the door of his Porsche—the GT2 RS, the lowest, fastest, most ridiculously overpowered car he owned—and dropped into the driver's seat.

The heavy thud of the door sealed him inside a vacuum of expensive leather and suffocating tension, and when he finally pulled his hand away from the mic, the silence in the cabin was almost deafening.

"Shane?" Ilya asked, his voice dropping instinctively to a softer, far more private register now that he was enclosed in the dark. "Are you with me?"

A long, wavering exhale brushed against the speaker.

"Ilya." His name was a small, devastated whisper. He was still not used to Shane calling him by his first name, and he had certainly never, ever heard him say it this hollowed out and miserable, clinging to the two syllables as if they were the only solid things left on earth. "I'm scared."

Ilya didn't think it was biologically possible for his heart to hurt any more than it currently did. He pushed the ignition button. The flat-six engine roared to life, a guttural, violent vibration that traveled straight up his spine.

"I know, *moya lyubov*. I know." He said it without thinking, the Russian endearment slipping past his defenses because it was the absolute truth, because it had always belonged there.

"But she is going to be okay. She is strong. Like her son."

That earned him a wet, broken sound—something that might have been a laugh if it hadn't been strangled by terror. "You don't know that. You don't know her."

"I know *you*." Ilya threw the car into reverse, the tires crunching loudly over the ice as he backed out of the garage. "And if she raised you, she must be made of the same stubborn stuff. So she will fight. And you will wait. And your father will arrive soon. And everything is going to be fine."

"Ilya—"

"You can do this, Shane. You do not have any other choice." Ilya took a deep breath himself, trying to calm his beating heart. "Listen, I want you to get out of that bathroom before Pike punches the door down, and I want you to tell them what happened. That is all you need to do right now. *Da?* They will take care of the rest. You just have to breathe and get out of the room. Can you do that for me?"

Ilya shifted the car into park. He sat in his driveway, the exhaust pluming in thick white clouds in the rearview mirror, the cold street sprawling out empty before him. He was Ilya Rozanov. He had a game in three days. He was sitting in an idling sports car at midnight, his passport burning a physical hole against his chest, preparing to violate half a dozen protocols in his contract and traffic laws, ready to drive six hours across an international border into a winter storm.

And for what? Because the man who still pretended to hate him on national television had called him from a bathroom floor and couldn't catch his breath, sounding like the world had just caved in around him and Ilya's first instinct had not been caution, or self-preservation, or even thought.

It had been to *move*.

Was he really about to do this? Was he truly this far gone, this hopelessly, humiliatingly, irrevocably lost to him?

The answer was a terrifying, undeniable yes. He would drive this car straight through a blizzard, through a war, through the freezing Atlantic itself if Shane had asked him to.

A pause over the line. Then, so quiet Ilya almost missed it.

"Yeah. Okay. I'm going."

"Good boy. Everything will be alright, Shane. I promise."

He had absolutely no right to make that promise. He held no power over the universe, no authority to guarantee survival, much less any control over the fragile mechanics of the human body. If he possessed that kind of power, he would be able to walk down the street holding Shane's hand without the suffocating fear of the cameras. He would be able to look the boy he loved in the eye and tell him the truth without the constant voices in his head whispering that he was too rough, too broken, too *much* for someone as purely good as

Shane. If he had that superpower, his own mother would be here, alive, breathing, instead of just a ghost haunting the corners of his mind.

But he could still try. He would push his will into the universe, demand it to bend, if only just this once, for Shane. Surely, the cold void of the world would be forced to listen to his frantic prayer just this one time, if it was only for Shane's sake.

And it didn't feel like a lie to say it. Not when Ilya knew it was the exact anchor Shane needed to hold onto. Not when he needed to be a fortress of absolute certainty so Shane could afford to fall apart in peace. Not when, out of all the people in the entire world, Shane had called *Ilya* during a panic attack.

"She is going to be fine," he promised again, his voice a low, gravelly vow, desperately praying that whatever god was listening would hear the absolute devotion in his voice and spare the boy he loved from the agony of grief.

Another pause. Then, so soft it was almost a ghost of a sound:

"Okay."

"Okay," Ilya repeated. He listened intently for a long, agonizing second, tracking the fragile cadence of the static over the line. Only when he was absolutely certain that the ragged, desperate edge had finally faded from Shane's breathing, settling into a heavy but steady rhythm, did he allow himself to issue the final push. "Now go. Go back out there. Your mom needs you."

He didn't hang up. He refused to break the connection until he had proof that Shane was actually moving. Through the tiny speaker of the phone, Ilya listened to the faint, telltale rustle of heavy fabric as Shane finally forced himself off the freezing bathroom tiles. He heard the unsteady, dragging scrape of a shoe against the floor, a long exhale that rattled heavily with leftover anxiety, and then, the sharp, distinct metallic click of the deadbolt unlocking.

"I'm opening it," Shane whispered, his voice sounding terribly small and completely hollowed out against the sudden echo of the hallway.

"I know. I am right here," Ilya murmured to the dark cabin of his car, his grip on the leather steering wheel tightening until his knuckles turned bone-white. "Go to them, *solnyshko*."

The faint squeal of a door swinging open filtered through the line, immediately followed by the muffled, frantic urgency of Hayden Pike's voice in the background, asking a rapid-fire string of questions. Shane didn't answer his teammate right away. Instead, Ilya heard the rustle of the phone shifting as he pulled it close to his mouth for one last, desperate second.

"Thank you," Shane breathed into the microphone, a fragile, exhausted little thing.

"Always," Ilya vowed to the empty air.

They murmured their reluctant goodbyes, neither man wanting to be the first to sever the invisible thread holding them together across countries. But inevitably, finally, the line went dead, leaving behind a sterile, synthetic dial tone that sounded entirely too loud in the suffocating silence of the Porsche.

Ilya sat perfectly still in his car. The engine was a low, vibrating hum beneath him, the phone still pressed uselessly against his ear even though there was nothing left on the other end but sterile buzz. For one long, stretched-out moment, he simply didn't move.

The house loomed in his peripheral vision—too massive, too empty, too painfully quiet. The kind of place he'd bought simply because his accountant told him it was a good investment, because it was what star athletes were expected to own, because he genuinely didn't know what else to do with the millions they paid him to chase a piece of rubber. It had never felt like a home. It was just a highly secure vault where he slept when he wasn't living out of a suitcase.

He lowered the phone. Stared at the black glass, the silent, undeniable evidence of a three-minute call that had just fundamentally rearranged the axis of his entire universe.

Yuna. Shane's mother. In a hospital. In surgery.

And Shane—*Shane*—alone, trembling, a raw nerve exposed to the air, calling Ilya because there was no one else who could understand the way his brain broke down, because he couldn't make his mouth form the words for anyone else, because—

Ilya's chest physically ached, a deep, bruising pain behind his sternum.

He turned his head. Looked through the windshield at the dark, sprawling expanse of Boston. The city was asleep, blissfully unaware that one of its most famous residents was about to do something incredibly, monumentally reckless.

Montreal to Boston. He'd made the drive before. Knew the rhythm of it intimately. The highway, the border checkpoint, the endless, hypnotic stretch of asphalt through upstate New York, bleeding into Vermont, and finally crossing into Quebec. A six hours drive normally, but in good weather, driving the speed limit, with no stops, it took roughly five.

Five hours of driving. Five hours of agonizing, helpless waiting.

He thought about Shane, sitting in that sterile, brightly lit hospital waiting room. Shane, who couldn't sit still for two minutes on a good day without tapping his foot or analyzing a play. Shane, whose brain ran like a supercomputer, constantly processing, calculating, catastrophizing every possible outcome. Shane, alone, staring at a set of double doors, waiting for a surgeon to come out and deliver the news that would dictate the rest of his life.

He thought about his own mother.

The memory came entirely unbidden, as it always did, a dark tide rising to choke him. Finding her. The apartment. The absolute, suffocating silence. The way the rotation of the earth had simply stopped in that exact moment, freezing his life forever into a permanent

Before and After. For a few terrible, innocent minutes, the young boy he had been thought she was just deeply asleep on the rug, or that she had stumbled and hit her head. But when he had dropped to his knees and touched her shoulder, and she was cold—cold in a terrifying, unnatural way that had absolutely nothing to do with the harsh weather of his motherland—every single pillar holding his world up had violently collapsed at the same time.

He thought about how incredibly, devastatingly lonely he had felt in that exact second. How he had curled his small body down next to hers, hidden his face against her unmoving chest, and just wept until his throat bled, clinging to the only anchor he had, looking for the heartbeat that usually calmed him to sleep, but there was nothing now, only hollow silence. He stayed like that for hours—for what felt like days—until his father finally found them. He thought about how, in the hollow days after, he had desperately searched the cabinets for the pills she'd taken, wanting nothing more than to follow her into the dark. But his father had already sterilized the house, clearing out anything sharp or poisonous, leaving Ilya trapped in a world he no longer wanted to exist in. He thought about how deeply lonely he had been after that day. How lonely he still was, most days, walking through a world that felt hollowed out, like all the color had drained out of it along with her.

How incredibly lonely he had been, right up until the exact moment he met Shane Hollander.

Shane, with his stupid, perfectly symmetrical face and his infuriatingly boring habits and his eyes that sparked with absolute fire when he fought for the things he loved. Shane, who looked at Ilya like he was actually a person worth knowing. Shane, who made the unbearable weight of the world feel a little less crushing just by existing on the same ice as him.

He absolutely refused to let that happen to him.

He didn't want Shane to ever know what it felt like to walk this earth with only half a heart beating in his chest. To have a massive, gaping crater in his life where a person who loved him unconditionally was supposed to be standing. And if, God forbid, the absolute worst happened tonight and Yuna didn't make it—then Ilya was not going to let him receive that news alone. He would not let Shane inherit that specific, hollowed-out loneliness. Not like Ilya had been. Not like Ilya still was, underneath the smirks and the multi-million dollar contracts and the carefully constructed walls of arrogance.

He looked at the glowing digital clock on the dash. *11:58 PM.*

Five hours. Unless you drove a machine built for the *Autobahn* like you actually meant it.

Ilya shifted the car into drive.

The highway unfolded in front of him like a dark, endless ribbon, totally empty at this ungodly hour. Ilya pressed his foot down hard on the accelerator and felt the massive engine respond with a violent surge of power, felt the familiar, intoxicating hum of speed vibrating beneath him, watching the world blur past the windows when you stopped caring about trivial things like speed limits or physics.

Five hours was for normal people. Five hours was for people who didn't have Shane Hollander's terrified voice lodged in their chest like a piece of shrapnel. Ilya drove like a man

fleeing from a ghost. He drove like a man desperately chasing a lifeline. He drove like the difference between the two didn't even matter anymore.

The miles dissolved under his tires. The darkness pressed heavily against the tinted windows. His phone sat face-up in the passenger seat, completely silent, waiting. Every few minutes, his eyes darted to it, praying for a text, dreading what words might illuminate the screen.

Nothing came.

He gripped the leather steering wheel tighter and pushed the car faster into the dark.

The border came and went in a surreal, dreamlike blur of harsh fluorescent lights and sleepy, routine questions from a bored guard. *Purpose of your visit?* Personal. *How long do you plan to stay?* I don't know. *Any goods to declare?* Just myself. The agent looked at the dark blue passport, looked at the bruised, exhaustion-lined face of the man behind the wheel, and looked at the clock. He handed the passport back and waved him through into Canada.

Ilya was accelerating back onto the pitch-black highway before the ink on the stamp could even think about drying, his tires biting aggressively into the asphalt. The roads were mercifully clear, a bone-chillingly cold but pristine stretch of dry pavement, the specific kind of dead-of-winter February night that froze the entire world into something sharp and brittle and unnervingly still. He made terrifyingly good time, pushing the German engineering to its absolute, screaming limits as the car handled the sweeping curves beautifully, greedily devouring the miles in a blur of pure velocity, and Ilya simply let the machine consume the earth beneath them, because every single mile conquered was a physical mile closing the bleeding gap between him and Shane.

If he were a man who still harbored even a microscopic fraction of faith in God, he might have convinced himself that a divine hand was actively smoothing the roads ahead of him, ensuring that no animal would run across, no black ice would form under his spinning tires, that absolutely nothing in this frozen wasteland would be allowed to interrupt his desperate journey. He might have comforted himself with the poetic delusion that his mother's ghost was sitting quietly in the passenger seat, watching over him, fiercely refusing to let her son shatter his own life when he was finally rushing toward the man who held his heart. Not when Shane so fundamentally, desperately needed him.

But Ilya hadn't believed in a benevolent universe since he was twelve years old, since the precise, devastating second his small knees had hit the carpet next to a body that was already surrendering its light to the earth. He knew with absolute, freezing certainty that the universe possessed no morality, that it didn't care one way or another whether a hockey player wrapped his silver Porsche around a concrete overpass or made it safely to a hospital waiting room. And if he were being entirely honest with the ghosts in the car, he didn't really care whether he lived or died either. Not for a long time.

But he cared about Shane, cared with a violent, all-consuming intensity that terrified him down to his marrow.

Shane and his stupid, scattered constellation of freckles that Ilya had memorized under poor light from bedside lamps, Shane and his deeply infuriating, painfully boring routines that

somehow grounded the chaotic static of Ilya's mind, Shane and his fiercely intelligent eyes and that blindingly beautiful smile that he guarded so closely, Shane and his unbelievably soft, relentlessly tender heart that Ilya felt completely unworthy of holding. Shane, who had seamlessly rewritten Ilya's ruined internal wiring, who made him feel, for the very first time in a decade of walking through a grayscale world, like maybe there was actually something solid on this earth worth sticking around for.

His mind was entirely devoid of anything resembling rational thought, wiped clean of everything except the rhythmic, desperate cadence of a name that had become the only religion he practiced, the only frantic prayer he was willing to offer to the dark roads as he drove.

Shane, Shane, Shane, Shane, Shane, Shane, Shane

Two hours and twenty-three minutes after leaving Boston, he crossed the invisible, freezing threshold into Quebec.

Two hours and forty-seven minutes after leaving Boston, the first glowing green highway signs for Montreal materialized out of the gloom, reflecting off the hood of the speeding car.

Three hours and twelve minutes after leaving Boston, he was ripping the wheel to pull off the desolate highway and plunge into the sleeping grid of the city, his burning eyes frantically tracking the blue hospital signs pointing the way toward *Hôpital du Sacré-Coeur*.

Three hours and twenty-eight minutes after leaving Boston—two hours and thirty-two minutes faster than Google Maps would have told you was possible—Ilya Rozanov violently slammed the transmission into park in the starkly lit hospital lot, killed the screaming engine, and found himself completely submerged in a sudden, ringing, suffocating silence.

His heavy hands were painfully locked into rigid, cramped claws from strangling the steering wheel, his lower back radiating a dull, throbbing ache that he completely ignored, his dry eyes burning with a cocktail of pure exhaustion, leftover adrenaline, and a profound, terrifying vulnerability he was nowhere near ready to name.

He had fucking made it. He was physically here.

And as he stared through the windshield at the imposing, clinical brick facade of the emergency room entrance, he realized he was about to do the second most monumentally stupid thing he had ever attempted in his entire life. Second only to driving a sports car like a suicidal lunatic through the pitch-black night on potentially icy roads, wild animals and speeding cameras. But as he forced his cramped fingers to release the wheel and reached for the door handle, every ounce of his self-preservation simply evaporated. The press, his team, the consequences—it all faded into meaningless white noise. The only thing in the entire universe that mattered was waiting behind those glass doors.

He only cared about Shane.

The sliding doors of the Hospital parted with a mechanical hiss, and the blast of sterile, artificially heated air hit Ilya like a physical wall. The emergency room at three-thirty in the

morning was a bizarre, purgatorial space. The harsh fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, a relentless, clinical glare that stripped the shadows from the corners and made Ilya's burning eyes water. The air smelled aggressively of industrial bleach, stale coffee, and the quiet, metallic tang of human desperation.

His body was operating entirely on the fumes of an adrenaline high that was rapidly, violently crashing. His hands, shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket, were trembling with a uncontrollable tremor, his fingers locked into a permanent, cramped curve from strangling the steering wheel for three and a half hours. Every muscle in his back screamed, but he pushed the physical agony aside, forcing his heavy, uncoordinated legs to carry him toward the main reception desk.

Behind the plexiglass, a tired-looking clerk barely glanced up from her monitor.

"Bonjour," she said, her voice flat.

"I need—" Ilya started, and stopped. His brain, fried from the drive and the panic, stubbornly refused to supply the correct English words, let alone French. His tongue felt thick, his thoughts muddled, the language barrier suddenly towering over him like a brick wall. He swallowed hard, forcing his jaw to unlock. "I am looking for Yuna Hollander. She was in the plane. The crash."

The clerk's fingers paused on her keyboard. She looked up, her professional detachment hardening into a protective shield. "Are you immediate family, monsieur?"

"No. I am..." Ilya's voice fractured. What was he? A rival? A ghost Shane kept locked in the dark? "I am a friend. I need to know where she is."

"I am sorry, monsieur," the clerk said, not sounding sorry at all. "Hospital policy. For the passengers of the flight, we are only releasing information to immediate family members. If you are not family, I cannot tell you anything."

"You don't understand," Ilya growled, the frustration spiking hot and fast in his chest. He leaned closer to the glass, his massive frame casting a shadow over the desk. "I need to know—"

"Rozanov?"

The voice came from his left. Ilya whipped his head around. Standing near a bank of vending machines, holding a flimsy cardboard tray carrying what appeared to be three steaming cups of coffee, was Jackie Pike.

She was wearing a pair of faded leggings and a massive, oversized Montreal Voyageurs hoodie that undoubtedly belonged to Hayden, her hair thrown up in a messy, chaotic bun. She looked utterly exhausted, the pale skin under her eyes bruised with heavy purple shadows, but her gaze was sharp, locking onto Ilya with a mixture of profound confusion and absolute disbelief.

She blinked, her eyes dropping from his bruised, exhausted face to his completely unlaced sneakers, taking in the sheer, impossible reality of the Boston Bears' captain standing in a Montreal trauma center at three in the morning. "What are you doing here?"

For a fraction of a second, the instinct to lie flared in Ilya's chest. It was a survival reflex honed over years of secrets, years of carefully constructed animosity, of hiding the softest part of himself behind a smirking, arrogant mask. He could say he heard the news and came to pay his respects to a colleague. He could preserve the lie. But then he remembered the sound of Shane's voice on the phone.

I'm scared.

The memory of that broken, terrified whisper shattered the last remaining pillar of Ilya's pride. He let the survival reflex die right there in the fluorescent-lit hallway. Hayden's inevitable questions and the risk of the entire world finding out meant absolutely nothing compared to the desperate, blinding need to put his hands on Shane and hold him until the world stopped being so terrifyingly vast and scary.

He closed the distance between them, his posture entirely stripped of its usual bravado. He didn't look like an arrogant superstar; he looked exactly like a man desperately begging for a lifeline.

"Jackie," Ilya said, his voice thick, the Russian accent bleeding heavily into his fractured English. "Please. Where is Shane?"

Jackie froze. She looked at him—really looked at him—and Ilya watched the incredibly fast, terrifyingly sharp gears of her mind turn. She processed the desperation in his eyes, the absolute, unshielded panic radiating from his massive frame, and the logistical impossibility of him being in this city unless he had driven like a madman the second the news broke. Ilya saw the exact moment the math clicked perfectly into place. Her eyes widened, just a fraction, a micro-expression of absolute, world-altering realization.

And then, because Jackie Pike was fundamentally one of the best, most relentlessly practical human beings on the planet—and currently skyrocketing into Ilya's top three favorite people on earth—the shock completely vanished. She didn't gasp. She didn't drop the coffees. She didn't ask a single damn question about what kind of relationship he and Shane actually had that resulted in Ilya driving all the way to this hospital in the middle of the night, just so he could be here for him. The fierce, maternal caregiving instinct that made her such an incredible mother, and the profound love she carried so deep in her heart that practically made her Shane Hollander's unofficial older sister, simply overrode everything else.

Her expression softened into something impossibly warm and profoundly understanding. She smiled at him, a tiny, brilliant spark of wonder lighting up her exhausted eyes.

"Okay," Jackie said quietly, her voice a steady, grounding anchor. She tilted her head toward the elevators. "Come on. Follow me."

Ilya exhaled a breath that felt like it had been trapped painfully in his lungs since Boston, his broad shoulders slumping just a fraction as he fell into step beside her. As they navigated the

blindingly white, labyrinthine corridors, Jackie effortlessly filled the heavy silence, her voice a low, soothing hum that demanded no effort from Ilya's fried brain.

"I just came down to grab these," she murmured, shifting the cardboard tray of coffees slightly as they finally reached the elevator bank. She pressed the glowing call button with her knuckle, offering him a small, grounded smile. "The coffee in the surgical waiting room tastes like literal battery acid." He was grateful for how she let the sentence hang there for a moment—he didn't know if it was intentional or not, but it gave his exhausted brain a few quiet seconds to process the mundane information. The low hum of the hospital ventilation filled the space between them.

"Shane's dad is upstairs," she added softly, her voice dropping to an even gentler register now that she had his focus. "He got here about an hour ago."

Ilya let out a microscopic breath, his rigid shoulders dropping perhaps a millimeter more. *David*. Okay. Shane had his father. He was safe.

"He drove like a maniac all the way from Ottawa," Jackie continued. Ilya let out a short, rough puff of air, a dark, exhausted amusement flickering briefly in his chest. He could certainly understand the sentiment.

The elevator arrived with a soft, artificially cheerful chime. Jackie stepped inside and waited patiently until he followed her in. She let the heavy doors slide completely shut before she spoke again.

"And, of course," she said with a sigh, a deeply fond, almost sad smile pulling at her mouth, "the second David walked in, Shane immediately tried to kick Hayden and me out. He told us to go home. Said they were totally fine and we needed to sleep." She shook her head slowly. "He completely put his walls up."

She shot Ilya a wry, knowing look as she pressed the floor button. "Hayden basically told him to shut up and sit down. We weren't leaving him alone."

"Thank you," Ilya rasped, his thick accent bleeding heavily into the quiet space. The two words felt utterly inadequate, but they were pulled from the very bottom of his chest. "For staying."

He didn't know if it was his place to thank them or not, considering they were Shane's chosen family and he was just a ghost hiding in a closet, but it felt like the absolute right thing to do. It made Ilya's chest ache with a profound, staggering realization: Shane was so deeply, fiercely loved. He had a family that dropped everything to drive through the night, and friends who refused to let him suffer in silence. He let the thought comfort him.

Jackie didn't take offense at the gratitude; if anything, her smile only grew softer, looking at him with a warm, reassuring light in her tired eyes. "Of course we stayed," she said simply, leaning back against the metal rail. "He's our family." She watched him attentively for a long couple of seconds, her sharp gaze calculating, as if trying to figure something out, maybe if he was actually worth Shane's heart or not. Whatever raw, unshielded truth she found in Ilya's

open eyes seemed to satisfy her, because the heavy scrutiny melted away, and she continued with a spark of genuine mirth in her tone “But I have a feeling it’s not us he needs right now.”

It took Ilya an embarrassing long moment to understand that she meant *him*. She was talking about *him*. Jackie Pike, who had just met him five minutes ago in a hospital lobby, was looking at him like *he* was the person Shane needed most in the world.

He didn't know what to do with that. Didn't know how to hold it. So he just nodded, a small, jerky movement, and hoped she couldn't see how much her words had gotten under his skin.

Ilya really fucking hoped she was right.

After watching the illuminated floor numbers tick upward for what felt like an eternity, she turned her gaze back to him, a sudden, playful lilt entering her voice. "I'm guessing you're the one Shane locked himself in the bathroom to call. Hayden is currently sitting up there entirely convinced that Shane was having a meltdown to his secret Boston girlfriend."

Ilya blinked, the sheer, staggering absurdity of the comment piercing straight through the heavy static in his brain. He let his heavy head fall back against the cool metal wall of the elevator, his voice dropping into a deadpan, exhausted gravel. He was already deep enough in this mess at this point—might as well be completely sincere about this one thing. He just desperately hoped Shane would eventually forgive him for burning their secret to the ground. "We are the same person."

Jackie let out a soft, breathy laugh, the corners of her eyes crinkling with a deeply fond, knowing twinkle. "Yeah, I kind of figured that out about sixty seconds ago," she smiled, the expression wide and genuine. "Honestly? It's a really good thing we are already standing inside a trauma center. Because when my husband sees you walk into that waiting room, he is absolutely going to have an aneurysm."

Completely against his own will, a laugh actually punched its way out of Ilya's chest.

It was a rough, gravelly sound, scraped raw by hours of suffocating panic and pure adrenaline, but it was undeniably real. His broad shoulders shaking slightly as the humor of the situation finally caught up with him. He was Ilya Rozanov, captain of the Boston Raiders, the ultimate villain of Montreal, currently standing in a Canadian hospital at almost four in the morning just to hold their golden boy's hand. He could already visualize the exact, horrifying shade of purple Hayden Pike's face was going to turn, the sheer psychic damage the winger was about to endure the second the elevator doors opened.

"I will gladly pay for his medical bills," Ilya rasped, his thick accent wrapping around the words as a familiar, arrogant smirk finally managed to break through the exhaustion on his face. He was still terrified for Yuna, and his hands were still shaking deep in his jacket pockets, but the crushing weight on his chest felt just a fraction lighter.

Jackie chuckled softly, shaking her head. Then her smile faded into something much gentler, much more serious as she seamlessly guided the conversation to the only thing that truly mattered. "But seriously—Shane is okay. And Yuna is going to be okay. I need you to know

that before we walk out there. Nobody has said a single word about her being in mortal danger, alright?"

Ilya felt a massive, suffocating band of iron physically snap around his ribs, a full lungful of air rushing in for the first time in hours. "It's just... it's a very long, very complicated surgery," Jackie explained, keeping her voice slow and remarkably steady. "She's been in the OR for about four and a half hours now. They said the seatbelt absolutely saved her life, but it did a lot of mechanical damage to her body when the plane hit the ground."

Ilya listened as if his ears were packed tightly with cotton, but he forced his sluggish mind to latch onto her calm, patient tone.

"It's a comminuted fracture in her right femur," she explained gently, her brow furrowing slightly. The complex English medical term slipped right off Ilya's exhausted brain, but Jackie didn't miss a beat, unknowingly offering the exact translation his mind desperately needed. "The bone broke into multiple pieces, so the surgeons are having to put it all back together with titanium plates and screws. That takes hours on its own. But the impact from the belt also ruptured her spleen."

Spleen. Another word he didn't quite know. An organ. Something inside. Ilya didn't need a medical dictionary to grasp the gravity of it.

"They had a general surgeon go in first to stop the internal bleeding and take the spleen out," she reassured him quickly, seeing the sudden, rigid tension locking Ilya's jaw. "They said you can live perfectly fine without one, so there shouldn't be any permanent damage once she heals. But a nurse came out about twenty minutes ago. She had a minor complication—her blood pressure dropped. They stabilized her immediately, but they had to slow down the orthopedic work. It's just going to be a while longer before they finish closing her up."

Ilya closed his eyes and pressed his head harder against the cold metal, hoping the sharp chill would cut through the ache that was starting to bloom behind his temple. He hadn't caught every single word, but the gist of it was completely clear. Four and a half hours. Hours of Shane sitting in a hard plastic chair, trapped entirely inside his own head, waiting for a surgeon to come out and give him his life back.

"She is strong," Ilya whispered to the metal doors, the words sounding terrifyingly fragile, less like a statement of fact and more like a desperate, exhausted prayer. "She will be okay. It is just bones. Bones heal."

"Exactly," Jackie agreed instantly, her voice a fierce, unwavering beacon of optimism in the suffocating space. "She's going to be completely fine, Ilya. And once she's out of recovery, she's going to need intensive physical therapy, but the doctors expect a full recovery."

Ilya was too fried to even begin to analyze what it did to his chest to hear one of Shane's best friends—people who were supposed to hate him on principle—suddenly addressing him by his given name. It felt entirely too intimate, too unguarded, a permanent shifting of the ground beneath their lives. But his drowsy brain simply lacked the capacity to panic right now.

Jackie shifted the coffees again as the elevator began to slow. "Shane just..." She paused, her tone softening. "He needs someone to help him carry the waiting part. Hayden and I are trying, we really are, but he's totally shut down. We can't reach him."

Before he could ask exactly what she meant by "shut down", the elevator dinged—a bright, artificially cheerful sound that grated against Ilya's raw nerves—and the heavy metal doors slid open to reveal the sterile, blindingly lit expanse of the fourth-floor surgical wing.

"He's at the end of the hall," Jackie said softly. She stepped out into the quiet corridor and looked back at Ilya. Her expression held such unwavering support that the ache in his throat sharpened. "Go to him."

The corridor seemed to stretch on forever, a sterile, blindingly white tunnel that ended in a small, agonizingly quiet surgical waiting area. Ilya stopped at the threshold for a second.

He saw him immediately. Shane was sitting rigidly in one of the plastic chairs, his posture stiff and completely unnatural. Beside him, David Hollander was leaning close, his hand gripping Shane's pale fingers in a silent, desperate attempt at comfort. Crouched directly in front of Shane's knees, taking up a massive amount of space, was Hayden Pike. The big right winger was speaking in a low, continuous murmur—too quiet for Ilya to catch the actual words, but the desperate, reassuring cadence was obvious—his heavy hand gripping Shane's tense shoulder with unwavering firmness.

But Shane wasn't registering any of it. His gaze was completely blank, his unblinking eyes fixed with terrifying intensity on the sterile white wall opposite him, utterly lost to the room. It was a hollowed-out stare that made Ilya's stomach drop. Because this was Shane stripped of every polished, disciplined, tightly held thing he usually offered the world. No captain. No composure. No practiced neutrality. No carefully managed distance.

There was nothing left of the version of himself he gave to the world now, nothing but the raw, unbearable center of him laid completely bare—his grief, his terror, and Shane himself in the purest, most breakable form Ilya had ever been allowed to witness.

And Ilya loved him so violently in that moment he almost could not breathe around it.

It was Pike who saw him first. The man's head snapped up as Ilya and Jackie approached, and as he slowly stood up, his features immediately twisted into a mask of profound bewilderment. His eyes darted frantically from the exhaustion on the face of his fiercest rival to his wife, silently demanding an explanation for the impossible absurdity of Ilya Rozanov standing in front of him right now.

He didn't care. The only thing that existed in his narrowed universe was the echo of Shane's desperate voice on the phone. The only thing that mattered was the crushing, suffocating terror currently drowning the man he loved—a specific, agonizing fear that Ilya knew intimately, a darkness he had navigated blindly since he was a child. He looked at that empty, lost expression on Shane's face, and his own exhaustion burned away.

"Shane," Ilya breathed.

The word tore out of his throat, completely unrecognizable. It was stripped of all its usual arrogant smoothness, jagged with raw urgency, the heavy cadence of his Russian accent bleeding thickly through the desperation. Slowly, agonizingly, Shane blinked. He dragged his gaze away from the blank wall, his head turning as if fighting a massive physical weight, until his eyes finally found the doorway.

The exact second their eyes connected, a massive shift occurred in Ilya's chest. It was as if his consciousness, which had been floating untethered since he backed out of his driveway in Boston, suddenly slammed back into his physical form. He was finally back in his own body. He finally had control of his limbs.

Shane just stared at him, and for what felt to Ilya like several excruciating millennia, the world stood perfectly still. Then, the fragile mask on Shane's face finally cracked, his bottom lip began to tremble, a minute quiver, and the glassy emptiness in his eyes was instantly drowned by a sudden, hot rush of unshed tears. He looked utterly shocked for a split second, his brain failing to process the logistics of Ilya standing there, before the shock melted completely into something much more vulnerable.

"Ilya," Shane sighed.

If Ilya had been operating on anything more than pure survival instinct, if his brain hadn't been completely hijacked by the primal need to protect, he might have recognized the relief that saturated every single syllable of his name in Shane's mouth. He might have realized that his presence was exactly the anchor Shane had been praying for.

But every single electrical impulse in his brain was entirely focused on moving.

Shane didn't register his father's confusion or Pike's stunned silence. Didn't see any of it. His eyes were locked on Ilya as he pushed himself up from the chair, his legs unsteady beneath him, and moved—shoving past Hayden without even realizing it, without meaning to, just following the only gravitational pull that made sense anymore.

Ilya didn't wait. He crossed the remaining distance in two massive strides, meeting Shane halfway in the middle of the waiting room, and wrapped his arms around him with every ounce of strength he possessed. The impact of their collision knocked the breath out of both of them, but neither loosened their grip.

Shane didn't hesitate. Didn't brace himself. He just... surrendered. Let his knees give out, let his entire exhausted weight collapse against Ilya's chest, let his fingers fist desperately into the fabric of his jacket like he was afraid Ilya might disappear. The dam finally broke with a quiet, ragged gasp—a silent and devastating release of every hour of terror and panic he'd been forcefully holding inside. Shane let himself shatter entirely into the one person who knew exactly how to put him back together.

His face was buried so deeply in the crook of Ilya's neck that hot tears soaked through the collar of his jacket. The only thing Ilya could truly register was the frantic, stuttering rhythm of Shane's heart beating against his own ribs.

"I have you," Ilya rumbled, the words vibrating thick and heavy deep in his chest.

Shane's fingers only twisted tighter into the fabric at his shoulders—a desperate, white-knuckled grip trying to anchor itself to something solid. Another ragged, silent gasp escaped, quiet crying muffled against the dark sanctuary of his coat.

"You came," Shane choked out, his voice scraped raw and muffled.

Ilya pressed his cheek fiercely against damp hair, his massive arms locking around him in an ironclad vow. "Of course," he whispered, the truth of it simple and absolute. "You called me."

His English felt entirely inadequate after that, too clumsy for the fragile thing trembling in his arms, so he abandoned it completely. The soft, rounded vowels of his native tongue spilled into the narrow space between them. "Ya zdes', solnyshko. Ya derzhu tebya. Ya nikuda ne udy."

He pressed his lips hard against the sweaty curve of Shane's temple, ignoring the salt of the tears, his hand rubbing slow, heavy, deliberate circles between his shoulder blades—manually forcing the frantic panic out with the sheer, immovable force of his presence.

Behind them, the stunned silence in the waiting room had taken on a thick, suffocating quality.

"Shane?"

The voice was older, scraped rough with exhaustion, fear, and profound confusion. Shane's father had slowly stood up from his plastic chair, his tired eyes darting frantically from his sobbing son to the massive, bruised Russian forward who was currently holding him together as if his life depended on it.

And Hayden. Hayden looked like he had just taken a blindside hit to the jaw at full speed. His mouth was slightly parted, his eyes wide, staring at the two of them as if gravity had just suddenly reversed itself. He looked helplessly toward Jackie, silently begging his wife for a translation of a reality that mathematically and historically did not compute. Jackie simply walked past her paralyzed husband, placing the cardboard tray of coffees quietly on a small table and putting a gentle, restraining hand flat against Hayden's chest, a silent command to let it be.

Shane flinched at the sudden sound of his father's voice—a violent, involuntary jerk of his spine—but he didn't pull away from the embrace. Instead, his fists tightened their desperate death grip on the fabric of the jacket, burying his face impossibly deeper into the warm, sandalwood-scented sanctuary of Ilya's shoulder, desperately trying to hide from the sudden influx of questions and eyes.

Ilya felt the flinch travel through Shane's bones and his protective instincts flared into a fierce, almost territorial heat—he shifted his weight, subtly angling his broad shoulders to physically block Shane from the rest of the room, creating a dark, enclosed pocket of safety built entirely out of his own body.

"It is okay," he said, not knowing if he was speaking to the boy in his arms, to David, or to the bewildered idiot staring at them, but he kept his eyes entirely focused on the side of

Shane's head, his jaw tight. "We sit down now, da? Your legs are done working for today."

He didn't wait for permission or for Shane's sluggish brain to process the command. Keeping one arm locked like a solid iron band around his waist, Ilya practically carried the Captain of the Voyageurs back to the bank of plastic chairs. He sat down first, pulling Shane down firmly with him, maneuvering them with a practiced, effortless strength until he was tucked securely against his side. Shane went completely boneless, surrendering every ounce of his exhausted weight, his head falling heavily onto Ilya's shoulder. His breathing was still a ragged mess of hitched gasps, but the violent shaking had finally begun to subside under the heavy, unapologetic weight of Ilya's arm.

David took a hesitant step back, his brow furrowed so deeply it looked painful. "Rozanov? What... how are you..." He trailed off, the sheer impossibility of the intimacy completely short-circuiting a brain that was already battered by the terror of his wife's ongoing surgery.

Ilya finally looked up.

He met David Hollander's exhausted, baffled eyes, offering no excuses, no carefully crafted PR deflections, no apologies for the way his hand was still possessively rubbing circles into his son's back. He was entirely too tired to lie, and Shane was entirely too broken to hide. If the universe wanted to rip the secret from their hands tonight, then Ilya would gladly hand it over, so long as he didn't have to let go of the boy leaning against him.

"I drove," Ilya stated simply, his voice a low, immovable absolute in the quiet room. "Shane called me. So I drove."

He offered nothing else—no explanations, no justifications. Not without Shane's permission, not while Shane was in no condition to decide what parts of their story they wanted to share.

Ilya braced himself for the inevitable fallout. He had just detonated a bomb in the middle of a sterile, brightly lit hospital waiting room, shattering the meticulously crafted illusion of their bitter rivalry right in front of the people who knew Shane best. He expected immediate, righteous anger. He expected David to pull his son away, to demand answers, to rail against the hated Boston captain for daring to touch his boy in his most vulnerable moment.

He expected the absolute worst, because Ilya's only blueprint for a father was his own, a man who swept the broken pieces of his heart away into the dark rather than sitting on the floor to help hold them together. In Ilya's mind, a father was someone who demanded strength and decorum, someone who would view this desperate, public display of shattered composure and forbidden love as an unforgivable failure.

Not to mention the fact that they were both men.

Logically, somewhere beneath the deafening roar of his own panic, Ilya knew David Hollander was nothing like his father. He knew Shane's family didn't operate that way. The man trembling against his chest had grown up enveloped in a warmth and support Ilya could scarcely comprehend. But logic had completely abandoned him on an icy highway somewhere outside of Boston. Right now, operating purely on instinct, Ilya tightened his grip

around Shane's shaking shoulders, jaw locked, ready to ruthlessly defend his right to stand exactly where he was.

But the explosion never came.

Over the top of Shane's trembling head, Ilya's defensive, burning gaze collided directly with David's.

Shane's father was a man fundamentally, almost confusingly different from his intensely driven, constantly calculating son or his high-strung wife; David had always been the quiet, grounding earth to their chaotic electrical storms. There was no shock in his eyes. No disgust. *Certainly* no anger.

He just *looked*.

David had spent almost forty years loving a woman whose brain ran at a hundred miles an hour, twenty-seven years raising a son who felt everything so deeply it sometimes broke him. He had learned long ago that the world didn't always make sense, that the people you loved didn't always fit into the neat little boxes other people built for them. He had learned that the only questions that ever really mattered were simple ones: *Is my child happy? Is he safe? Is he loved?*

Now he looked at the massive Russian hockey player wrapped around his son like a second skin. Those hands—the same ones that had scrapped with Shane on ice for a decade, that had thrown punches and delivered checks—were now rubbing slow, grounding circles into his son's back with a tenderness that couldn't be faked. He saw the way his jaw was set, not in arrogance, but in *defense*, like he was ready to fight the entire room if anyone tried to take Shane away from him. And beneath all of it, David saw the exhaustion carved into every line of the young man's face—the dark circles, the rumpled clothes from hours of frantic driving.

Then his gaze found Shane. His son. His beautiful, brilliant, sweet, overachieving son—who had been a hollowed-out shell when David walked into this waiting room an hour ago, unreachable, lost somewhere inside his own head with no way back.

But Shane was breathing now. *Present* now. Curled against this man's chest like it was the only safe harbor in a storm. And for the first time since David had gotten the call about the plane, he was certain his son would survive the night.

David's eyes softened. The tension that had been living in his shoulders since he'd called Yuna's phone over and over and gotten nothing, drained out of him in a long, slow exhale. He didn't ask how. Didn't ask why. Didn't ask for how long. Didn't ask about the decade of rivalry or the public animosity or the carefully constructed lies.

He just settled back into his plastic chair on Shane's other side and, without a word, reached out and took his hand—the one not currently fisted in Ilya's jacket. Forming a quiet triangle of support around the boy they both loved.

Ilya's brain short-circuited.

He stared at David, utterly frozen, waiting for the other shoe to drop—waiting for the anger, the accusations, the *something* that had to be coming. Because this—this quiet acceptance, this uncomplicated love—didn't exist in Ilya's understanding of the world. But nothing came. David just sat there, thumb tracing slow circles into his son's knuckles. No suspicion in his gaze. No judgment. No demands for explanations or promises. He simply *was* there—a steady, quiet presence asking for nothing except the chance to support his child.

Shane, still tucked against Ilya's shoulder, let out a shaky breath. His fingers tightened briefly around his father's hand—a small, unconscious acknowledgment of the connection—and his weight sagged further into Ilya's side. His breathing was finally, *finally* beginning to even out into something that resembled rest rather than survival. Ilya looked down at the top of Shane's head, then up at David—who was watching his son with an expression of such profound love it made Ilya's chest ache with something he couldn't name.

Of course, exactly like every other good, fragile thing in Ilya's entire life, the profound, quiet tenderness of the moment was violently shattered, in this case by the obnoxiously loud voice of Hayden Pike.

"What the—*ough!*"

Ilya didn't even bother to lift his heavy head or tear his gaze away from the top of Shane's messy hair to visually confirm that Jackie had just physically elbowed her idiotic husband in the ribs. He simply tightened his arms protectively, completely ignoring the baffled, sputtering man who was currently having his entire understanding of the universe forcefully rewritten.

"We are just going to go for a quick walk downstairs to stretch our legs," Jackie announced, her voice suddenly rang out with a saccharine, terrifyingly sweet cheerfulness that brooked absolutely no argument. "We'll be right back!"

"But Jackie—"

"Hayden."

"Yes, baby, I'm sorry"

Without waiting for a single word of acknowledgment from the three men huddled in the center of the room, she clamped her hand onto her husband's wrist with the vice-like grip of a seasoned hockey wife and ruthlessly dragged him backward toward the open elevator doors. Ilya listened to the sound of them stepping inside, to the muffled thump of Hayden's body hitting the elevator wall, to the doors sliding closed with a definitive shush.

And then, silence.

With the chaotic energy of the Pikes gone, the only sounds left were the low, sterile hum of the hospital ventilation, the distant, rhythmic beep of cardiac monitors down the hall, and the soft, steady cadence of Shane's breathing against his chest.

Ilya let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and let his heavy head fall back against the cold plaster wall. His eyes burned, desperately wanting to close. Now that he finally had Shane in his arms, the adrenaline was crashing—leaving him hollow, aching, utterly wrung out. But Shane was still breathing just a fraction too fast, still trembling in small, involuntary waves that traveled right through Ilya's chest. So he kept his eyes open. Kept his arm locked securely around those shaking shoulders. Kept his thumb moving in slow, grounding circles against Shane's bicep.

Across from them, David shifted slightly in his plastic chair. Not moving away, just... settling. Getting comfortable in the gravity of the situation. His thumb never once stopped its slow, rhythmic circles over Shane's pale knuckles and Ilya watched the way the rigid fingers relaxed incrementally with every single pass. Watched the way David's gaze never left his son's exhausted face. Such a small thing. A father quietly holding his son's hand in a freezing hospital waiting room, demanding absolutely nothing, just offering a steady presence.

Ilya had never experienced anything remotely like it in his entire life.

He looked down at the top of Shane's head, his throat tight. The messy, sweat-dampened hair curled slightly at the nape of his neck, and Ilya wanted to press his face there, to breathe him in like he'd done a hundred times before when Shane was asleep and couldn't see how desperate Ilya was for the scent of him. But he couldn't—not from this angle, not with Shane curled against his chest like this. So instead he pressed his nose into Shane's hair, right at the crown of his head, and breathed deep.

Shane shifted against him, a small, hesitant movement, and Ilya felt more than heard the shaky exhale that escaped his lips.

"I feel so stupid." Shane whispered, his voice thick, wavering, and deeply embarrassed. "I'm sorry about this. All of it. You shouldn't have to—"

"Stop." Ilya's voice was quiet but firm, his hand coming up to cup the back of Shane's head. "You do not apologize for being vulnerable, Shane. Never to me."

Shane tilted his head back just enough to find Ilya's eyes—red-rimmed, puffy, his face blotchy in a way that would probably embarrass him later, when he had the energy to care. Right now he just looked exhausted and open and impossibly young despite everything.

"You're really here." Wonder bled through this words, like he was still trying to make the math work in his head. "I called you, and you just... got in your car and drove. In February. At midnight."

Ilya shrugged, the movement jostling Shane gently against his side. "Was not midnight when I left. Was *almost* midnight. Close enough."

"That's not the point."

"What is?"

That familiar crease appeared between Shane's brows, cutting through the exhaustion. "The point is, it's the middle of the season. You're supposed to be in Boston. And you drove six hours—"

"Three and a half."

Shane blinked. Something shifted behind his eyes—the exhaustion still there, the red-rimmed weariness, but now a flicker of something else. His jaw tightened. His spine straightened a fraction, and suddenly he looked less like someone who'd been crying and more like someone you did not want to argue with. Ilya thought he looked cute.

"Three and a half?" Disbelief sharpened his voice. He actually pushed back, putting enough space between them to glare properly. "Rozanov, the roads are shit this time of year, there's black ice everywhere. You could have wrapped your stupid car around a tree, and then where would we be? Huh? Then I'd be sitting here waiting for news about my mother and also waiting for news about my—" He stopped abruptly, the word catching in his throat, but his glare didn't waver. "News that I would have to learn over the internet because no one would have thought it was important to tell me, because *nobody fucking knows about us*. No, no you don't get to do that. You don't get to drive like a maniac just because I had a bad night."

Ilya blinked at him. The shift was so sudden, so completely Shane—the way his brain could flip from devastated to angry in seconds—that for a moment Ilya just stared. Then something warm bloomed in his chest.

It was ridiculous. He was being yelled at in a hospital waiting room at four in the morning by a man who looked like he'd been put through a washing machine. And all Ilya could think was: *So this is what it feels like—to have someone who would be angry if you died.*

"You are scolding me," Ilya said slowly, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth despite his best efforts to suppress it.

"Yes, I'm scolding you! Somebody has to! You clearly don't have a single functioning brain cell when it comes to your own safety!"

"I have many brain cells. They were all focused on getting here."

"Then they're the wrong brain cells!" Shane's voice cracked, but he pushed through, his fingers still twisted in Ilya's jacket like it was the only thing keeping him upright. "You don't—you can't just—do you have any idea what could have—"

"I didn't." Ilya's voice was soft now, amused and tender in equal measure. "I am here. In one piece. Your mother is the one in surgery, not me. Focus on the correct crisis, Hollander."

Shane's jaw worked. Ilya watched the war play out across his face—the need to keep yelling warring with the bone-deep relief that he'd come at all. The gratitude won. It always won with Shane, Ilya was learning. No matter how much he wanted to be practical, to be careful, to be the responsible one—Ilya made him want to throw caution into oncoming traffic. Which was ironic, given the current conversation.

"You're such an idiot." The words came out soft now, all fight drained. Shane slumped heavier against Ilya's chest, his grip loosening into something more comfortable. "A complete, reckless, stupid idiot."

"A very safe idiot." Ilya pressed his smile into Shane's hair where he couldn't see it. "Who made excellent time."

"Don't brag about speeding."

"Is not bragging. Is just facts. There is difference."

A sound escaped Shane—something almost a laugh, small and tired and cracked at the edges. It vibrated through Ilya's chest, and he felt something finally, *finally* start to unclench. The knot that had been wound tight since the moment he'd answered the phone in Boston and heard nothing but ragged breathing on the other end.

"You're impossible," Shane whispered against his collar.

"You called me, so really, you did this to yourself."

Shane huffed—no real irritation in it, just exhaustion and relief and that warm, wondering thing that had been growing between them for years. The thing they'd both been too scared to name. Until tonight.

Across from them, David was watching. And there was something in his eyes—a glint of recognition, maybe. The look of a man who'd also broken a few speed limits tonight, for a reason that wasn't so different from Ilya's. The look of a man who also loved someone whose brain ran at a different speed than everyone else and whose body was currently broken on a surgical table.

David Hollander had spent forty years loving Yuna—her intensity, her brightness, her glorious, overwhelming way of filling every room she entered. Forty years of watching her burn bright and trying to keep up. Forty years of knowing, with absolute certainty, that there was no version of his life that made sense without her in it.

And Ilya? Ilya had spent ten years circling Shane. Ten years pretending he didn't feel it, didn't need it, didn't wake up in hotel rooms reaching for someone who was already gone. And tonight, when he'd finally stopped pretending—when he'd admitted to himself, in the dark of his car at two hundred and fifty kilometers an hour, that he loved Shane Hollander more than he loved his own life—he looked up from the pretty boy in his arms and saw the same love reflected back at him in David's tired eyes.

The same fear. The same fierce, bone-deep devotion. The same absolute refusal to let the people they loved face the dark alone.

David watched him—watched the way his hands cradled Shane's shoulders like he was something precious, watched the way he pressed his face into Shane's hair like he was breathing him in, watched the way his thumb never stopped its grounding path against Shane's arm—and he understood.

This wasn't just attraction. This wasn't just convenience or secrecy or whatever story these kids had been telling themselves. This was the real thing. The kind of love that made you drive through the night without thinking. The kind of love that made you sit in hard plastic chairs and refuse to sleep because the person in your arms needed you to be awake. The kind of love that David had spent his entire adult life feeling for Yuna. He saw it, clear as day.

Ilya Rozanov loved his son the way David loved his wife. Completely. Desperately. Without question or hesitation.

And from the way Shane was curled into Rozanov's side, from the way his fingers were twisted into his jacket like he'd never let go, from the way his breathing had finally evened out and he'd laughed despite his panic—

Shane loved him back just the same.

David's eyes burned. He blinked rapidly, looking away for a moment, giving himself a second to process the weight of it. When he looked back, Rozanov was watching him.

There was something in his expression—a flicker of uncertainty, maybe, or the barest hint of defensiveness, like he was bracing for David to say something, to pull Shane away, to tell him he didn't belong here. But David didn't do any of those things. He just looked at Rozanov, really looked at him, and let everything he was feeling show on his face. The recognition. The acceptance. The quiet, overwhelming gratitude that someone loved his son this much.

Ilya's ears went hot. He felt the flush creeping up his neck, but he didn't look away. Didn't hide. Just tightened his arm around Shane's shoulders and let himself be seen.

The silence that followed was heavy, but not uncomfortable—the kind of quiet that comes after something important has been said without words. David cleared his throat softly, swiping at his eyes with his free hand. Then, slowly, he pushed himself up from his chair. The plastic creaked under him, the sound loud in the stillness.

"I'm going to find some water," he murmured, already moving. He squeezed Shane's hand once before letting go, a small, deliberate pressure. "Give you two a minute."

Shane's head lifted slightly, a flicker of concern crossing his exhausted face. "Dad, you don't have to—"

"I know." David's voice was gentle, firm. He straightened slowly, his body protesting the hours of sitting. "But I'm going to anyway. Been sitting too long. I need to move."

He looked at Ilya then—a long, steady look that made Ilya's spine straighten instinctively. But there was no judgment in it. No warning. Just that same quiet acknowledgment from before, the look that said; *I see you. I see what this is. And you don't have to be scared of me.*

David nodded once, just a small movement, and then he was gone, his footsteps fading down the corridor.

The quiet that followed was different—softer, more private, like the room itself was giving them permission to breathe. Shane exhaled slowly, his shoulders dropping as some of the tension finally released its grip. He shifted against Ilya, tilting his head back just enough to meet his eyes. They were still swollen from crying, shadowed with exhaustion, but underneath all of that there was something lighter. Something that looked almost like peace.

Then his forehead creased again. "What were you doing?" He asked, his voice still thick but steadier now. "When I called. What were you doing?"

Ilya blinked down at him. "What?"

"When you answered. You picked up so fast. What were you doing?"

Ilya hesitated. It felt stupid to admit now, in the harsh fluorescent light of a hospital waiting room, that he'd been spiraling over a news report. That he'd watched a plane crash on television and immediately thought about Shane—where he was, when his last game was, whether he could have been on that flight, if he was safe. That he'd typed out a text and deleted it three times because he couldn't figure out how to say that he couldn't properly breathe with just the thought of something bad happening to him, without sounding insane.

But Shane was looking up at him with those eyes—still exhausted, but focused now, present in a way they hadn't been all night—and Ilya found he didn't want to lie. Not about this.

"I was watching the news," he said quietly. "They showed the plane. The emergency landing. And I thought—" He stopped, his jaw tightening.

Shane's fingers curled tighter into his jacket. "You thought what?"

"I thought about you." The words came out rougher than he intended, stripped of all his usual careful control. "I did the schedule in my head. Montreal played at home Saturday, so you should be safe, but I could not—" He exhaled sharply. "I could not make my brain stop. So I sat there trying not to think about you. And then you called."

Shane was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was barely above a whisper. "You were scared."

"I was... concerned."

"Same thing."

"Is different. Concerned is rational. Scared is—" Ilya cut himself off, frustrated with his own inability to find the right words. "I do not get scared, Hollander. I am Russian. We do not have that word."

"Liar."

"Rude."

Shane's mouth twitched. It was small, barely a movement at all, but Ilya saw it. Felt it, more like, in the way the tension in Shane's shoulders eased just a fraction.

"You're a terrible liar," Shane murmured. "You were scared for me. And then I called, and I was having a full meltdown on your phone, and that definitely helped."

"Immensely," Ilya deadpanned. "Was exactly what I needed. Ten out of ten experience."

Shane let out a real laugh this time—short, surprised, punched out of him before he could stop it. It was watery and exhausted and absolutely the most beautiful sound Ilya had heard in hours.

"I'm sorry," Shane said, but he was smiling now, just a little. "That's terrible."

"It is not terrible." Ilya's voice softened. "You called me. That is the opposite of terrible. I am always happy when you call me." The words came out before he could stop them, more honest than he'd intended. But Shane was looking at him with those impossibly bright eyes that seemed to see right through him, and he did not want to take it back.

The hour was late, the adrenaline had long since burned away, and something in Ilya Rozanov's chest was cracking open whether he liked it or not.

"I fell apart on your phone."

"You trusted me with falling apart." Ilya's voice was quiet, rough at the edges. "That means everything, Shane. That you wanted me. That you *chose* me."

Shane's breath caught. His eyes went bright again, but the tears didn't fall this time. They just sat there on his lower lashes, catching the harsh light.

"I would never have called anyone else," he admitted quietly. "I just—I needed to hear your voice. I needed you to tell me it was going to be okay, even if you didn't know. Even if you couldn't promise. I just needed you to say it. I never thought—I didn't even have to ask you to come."

Ilya's throat tightened. He thought about the phone in his hand, the way his thumb had hovered over the send button on a text he never sent. The way his heart had lurched when Shane's name appeared on the screen. The way he'd answered without thinking, without strategy, without any of the careful walls he'd spent a decade building.

"You called," Ilya said simply. "I came. That is how it works. You do not have to ask."

Shane shook his head slowly, a tiny movement against Ilya's chest. "That's not how it works for most people."

"I am not most people."

"No." Shane's voice was impossibly soft. "You're really not."

For a moment, they just looked at each other. Ilya was acutely aware of everything—the weight of Shane against his side, the warmth of him, the way his fingers were still twisted into his jacket like he was something worth holding onto.

And Ilya wanted to tell him. Wanted to tell him every single secret he had ever kept, every single thought that had filled his head during all those miles he'd driven. How scared he'd been. How worried. Wanted Shane to know him. All of him. The good parts and the broken ones and all the messy, complicated space in between. Ilya wanted to tell him *everything*.

"When you told me what happened," Ilya said quietly, his hand stilling where it rested against Shane's shoulder, "I thought about my mama."

Shane went still.

"I remembered how it felt," Ilya continued, the words coming slowly, painfully. "When I found her. How lonely I was, like the floor was gone. And I was not going to let you sit here alone and feel that. I could not."

Shane's eyes went bright again, but he blinked rapidly, forcing the tears back. "I didn't know that," he whispered. "About your mom. I mean, I knew she—but I didn't know you were there. That *you* found her."

Ilya nodded, not trusting his voice.

"That's—" Shane swallowed hard. "Thank you. For telling me. And for coming. For not letting me be alone."

"You are never alone." The words came out fierce, absolute. "Not anymore. Not while I am breathing. You understand me, Hollander?"

Shane stared at him for a long moment. Then, slowly, he nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I do." And then he reached up, his fingers brushing against the dark circles under Ilya's eyes with a gentleness that made Ilya's chest ache. "You look terrible," he murmured. "When did you last sleep?"

Ilya caught his wrist, turning his head to press a kiss to Shane's palm without thinking. The gesture was so natural, so automatic, that he did not realize what he'd done until he felt Shane's fingers curl against his cheek.

"I do not remember," Ilya admitted against his skin. "Sleep is for people who are not worried about their—" He stopped. Swallowed. Started again. "Sleep is for people who are not worried about the people they love."

The words hung in the air between them. Shane's eyes went wide, his breath catching audibly.

Ilya felt the admission settle between them like a stone dropped into still water—and immediately wanted to take it back. What kind of idiot said something like that *now*? Shane was already carrying too much. Ilya had already messed things up enough just by coming here without a thought for who would find out, without a care for the consequences. And now he was dumping his damaged heart into the pile too?

The worst part was that he was a fucking coward who couldn't even confess properly. Hiding behind words aimed at no one, deflecting them against skin instead of saying them face-to-

face. Always hiding. Always protecting himself. Always leaving just enough room to pretend he hadn't really said anything at all.

Just in case Shane didn't want him.

"The people you— Ilya " Shane's voice cracked and his face crumpled in a completely different way. Not the panic from before—this was softer, more vulnerable, his bottom lip trembling as fresh tears welled up. He tried again.

That's it, Ilya thought, something cold and inevitable settling in his gut. This is it. He's going to let me down easy. He's going to break this thing before it even begins. All because Ilya couldn't keep his stupid mouth shut and his stupid ass on his stupid couch in Boston where it belonged.

Shane tried again.

"I love you," he whispered, the words tumbling out like he couldn't hold them back anymore. "I know this is—I know we don't—but I love you. I have loved you for so long, I don't even remember what it felt like before. And I'm sorry if that is too much, I'm sorry if you aren't ready, I'm sorry—"

Ilya's brain short-circuited. Completely. Entirely. Every self-deprecating thought that had been screaming at him seconds ago evacuated his head all at once, leaving nothing but static and the sound of Shane Hollander saying those three words into the space between them.

Shane must have seen something in his expression—horror, maybe, or shock, or just the blank look of a system that had completely crashed—because he stopped mid-sentence. His eyes went impossibly wider. His face went pale beneath the tear tracks.

And then he tried to pull away.

It was a small movement, barely a shift, but Ilya felt it like a physical blow. Felt Shane's muscles tense, felt him start to retreat, felt the fragile thing they had built tonight start to crack.

Ilya's arm locked around him. Tight. Immovable.

"*Stop*," Ilya said, his voice rough. "Do not—Shane. Stop moving."

Shane froze, his eyes searching Ilya's face with something that looked terrifyingly like resignation. Like he was bracing for impact. Like he already knew what was coming.

Ilya stared at him. This beautiful, broken, impossible man who had just handed him his entire heart like it was nothing. Like it was something Ilya deserved.

"You love me," Ilya said slowly, testing the words. They felt huge in his mouth. Terrifying. Right.

Shane flinched. "I shouldn't have—I know it's too soon, I know we haven't talked about it, I just—with everything that happened tonight, I couldn't—"

"Shane."

"—keep pretending that I don't feel this, and I understand if you don't feel the same, I don't expect—"

"Shane."

Shane's mouth snapped shut. His eyes were bright and wet and absolutely terrified.

Ilya cupped his face with both hands, ignoring the way his own fingers were trembling. Ignoring everything except the man in front of him who had just shattered every wall Ilya had ever built.

"I love you too," Ilya said. The words came out rough, scraped raw, absolutely certain. "I have loved you for years. I did not know how to say it. I did not think I was allowed to want it. But I love you, Shane. *I love you.*"

Shane stared at him. His mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. Nothing came out.

Then, slowly, incredibly, his face broke into something Ilya had never seen before. It was wrecked and glowing all at once, tear tracks still fresh on his cheeks but his eyes bright with something Ilya couldn't quite name. It was the kind of smile that started somewhere deep and spread outward, warming everything it touched. It was the smile of someone who had just been given permission to stop running.

"Yeah?" Shane whispered.

Ilya let out a sound that was half laugh, half something else entirely. "Yeah."

Shane surged forward, pressing his face into Ilya's neck, his whole body shaking with something that might have been laughter or crying or both. Ilya held him through it, one hand cradling the back of his head, the other pressed flat against his spine, grounding them both.

"You're such an idiot," Shane mumbled against his skin, his voice muffled and wet. "I cannot believe you made me say it first."

"You did not even let me finish my sentence."

"Your sentence was going nowhere."

"It was going somewhere. I was building up to it."

"You were not."

"I absolutely was. I am very romantic person."

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him, one eyebrow raised. His face was a mess and he was absolutely beautiful. "You're literally the least romantic person I have ever met."

"Rude. I drove three and a half hours for you."

"While speeding."

"Romantically speeding."

Shane laughed. It was wet and wobbly and perfect. "That isn't a thing."

"Is a thing in Russia."

"You are not in Russia."

"Thank God for that." Ilya pressed his forehead against Shane's, breathing him in. "I love you," he said again, softer this time, like he was still learning the shape of the words. "I love you, and I am not going anywhere. Okay?"

Shane nodded, a tiny movement that brushed their noses together. "Okay." His hand came up to curl around the back of Ilya's neck, holding him there. "I love you too. Just so we're clear."

"Crystal clear."

"Good."

They stayed like that for a moment, foreheads pressed together, breathing each other's air, and Ilya could feel Shane's pulse through the point where their skin touched, could feel the way his breath kept catching like he was waiting for something—like he, too, couldn't quite believe in this, couldn't quite believe that Ilya would stay, like he was waiting for him to disappear the way he always had.

Ten years. Ten years of hotel room doors closing behind him, of leaving before the sun came up, of pretending that what they had was just convenience, just release, just something to burn through until the next game. Ten years of walking away because it was easier than staying.

But Ilya was so tired of walking away. *So* desperate for a place to stay.

So he tilted his head, just slightly, and kissed him.

It was soft at first—barely a press of lips, a question more than a statement—but Shane made a sound against his mouth, small and desperate and relieved, and something in Ilya's chest exploded. So he pulled Shane closer and kissed him like he meant it, like he meant every single word they'd just said and a thousand more he didn't know how to say in English.

This was their first kiss that wasn't in the safety of some hotel room, wasn't in one of their apartments with the curtains drawn tight and the lights off. This was in a hospital waiting room, fluorescent lights buzzing overhead, where anyone could walk through that door at any moment—a doctor, a nurse, some stranger whose loved one had been on that plane. The thought flickered through Ilya's mind, instinctive and cold: *Shane's image. Shane's career. Shane's perfect reputation.* He remembered another kiss, years ago on a balcony after the rookie awards, the way the boy in his arms had practically launched himself away at the sound of footsteps, the terror in his eyes at the thought of being *seen*. The memory had lived

in Ilya's chest like a splinter ever since—a reminder of what Shane needed, what he couldn't give, what Ilya would never ask for.

So he started to pull back. Always protecting him. Always putting his comfort above Ilya's own desperate need to be loved in the light.

But that was then. This was now. And Shane wasn't letting him retreat. His fingers curled tighter, refusing to let Ilya disappear the way he always had.

Ilya let out a shaky breath against his mouth and kissed him deeper, letting himself believe what that grip was telling him: that it didn't matter anymore. The cameras, the headlines, the judgment of the world—none of it mattered. He wanted this. Wanted *him*. Right here, in front of anyone who might walk through that door.

Shane kissed him back like he was drowning and Ilya was air, like he'd been holding his breath for years and had finally been given permission to breathe, his fingers curling into the hair at the nape of Ilya's neck, holding him there, keeping him close, like he still couldn't quite believe Ilya would stay.

But Ilya wasn't going anywhere. Not now. Not ever. He knew that with a certainty that settled deep in his bones, heavier and more real than anything he'd ever felt.

He could not believe he had gone ten years without this. Without the right to hold him like this, to kiss him like this, to let himself feel the full weight of what the other meant to him. Every hotel room, every stolen night, every goodbye that left him hollow—it all led here. To this moment. To Shane warm and alive and *his* in a way he had never allowed himself to want.

And Shane had said *I love you*. Had said it first, had said it like a confession and a gift all at once, had said it while looking at Ilya like he was enough, like he was everything.

Ilya let that thought settle into him, let it seep through all the cracks he'd spent a lifetime building. And Shane didn't lie—Shane *couldn't* lie, not about something like this, not with his whole heart cracked open and bleeding into the space between them. So if he said he loved Ilya, if he said he'd loved him for years, if he said *I'm sorry if you aren't ready* like Ilya was the one who needed protecting—then it meant it was true. It meant he wanted Ilya here. Shane wasn't angry that Ilya had come, wasn't wishing he'd stayed in Boston, wasn't already calculating the damage to his precious public image.

For the first time in his life, following his heart hadn't led Ilya to disaster. For the first time in his life, wanting something—wanting *someone*—hadn't ended in ashes.

He let himself believe it. Let the truth of it seep into all the cold, empty places he'd been carrying for so long. Shane wanted him here. Shane *loved* him. The thought unraveled something in Ilya's chest—something tight and terrified that had been holding on for years. He let it go. Let himself relax into Shane's grip, into the kiss, into the impossible, terrifying, beautiful truth of it.

The kiss deepened, turned desperate, turned into something Ilya couldn't control and didn't want to. He poured every mile he'd driven into it, every second of terror, every prayer he'd whispered to a God he didn't believe in—kissing him like he was trying to memorize the shape of him, the taste of him, the way he fit so perfectly against Ilya's mouth. It wasn't just a kiss. It was a homecoming. It was every goodbye reversed, every closed door forced back open.

And then he tasted salt.

Not just Shane's tears—though those were there, mixing between their lips, warm and wet and overwhelming—but there was more, too much salt for it to be only Shane, and Ilya pulled back just enough to breathe, just enough to see, and realized with a jolt that his own face was wet. When had that happened? When had the tears started? He couldn't remember, couldn't remember the last time he had cried, couldn't remember the last time he had let himself feel anything this much.

Shane was looking at him with those impossibly bright eyes, his own face a mess of tear tracks and wonder, and he raised one hand slowly, gently, brushing his thumb across Ilya's cheekbone, catching a tear before it could fall.

"Hey," Shane whispered, his voice wrecked and beautiful. "You're crying."

Ilya shook his head, a tiny, automatic denial. "I do not cry."

"Uh-huh." Shane's thumb traced the same path again, following the trail of another tear. "Tell that to your face."

"Is the hospital. Bad air. Makes eyes water."

Shane laughed—soft and wet and the most stunning man Ilya had ever seen. "You're ridiculous."

"Okay," he admitted, his voice rough. "Maybe a little crying. But only because you are very emotional tonight. Is contagious."

Shane's laugh was brighter this time, louder, filling the small space between them. He pressed his forehead back against Ilya's, breathing him in.

"I love you," Shane said again, like he could not say it enough. Like he needed Ilya to hear it, to believe it, to carry it with him. "I love you so much. I'm so fucking grateful you are here."

Ilya kissed him again—shorter this time, softer, just a brush of lips to remind himself that this was real. Then Shane's hand slid down from his neck, pressing flat against the center of Ilya's chest. Right over his heart, which was currently trying with all its might to violently beat its way out of his ribcage.

"Your heart is going crazy," Shane murmured against his lips.

"You are very annoying."

Shane smiled, close enough that Ilya could feel the curve of it. "You love it."

"Da," Ilya said quietly, the word slipping out before he could stop it, warm and certain and absolutely true. "I do."

For a moment they just breathed each other's air, foreheads pressed together, Shane's hand still flat against the frantic rhythm of Ilya's heart. Ilya could feel each beat like a countdown to something he couldn't name.

Then the elevator dinged.

The sound was soft, polite, entirely out of place in the quiet of the surgical wing. But Ilya felt Shane tense against him, felt the way his breathing began to quicken again. Footsteps echoed down the corridor. Three sets of them. Low voices, hushed but not urgent. Ilya kept his arm locked around Shane's shoulders, kept his thumb moving in that slow, grounding path against his bicep—the one that seemed to calm him earlier. He wasn't going to let go just because company was coming. Not now. Not after everything.

Shane shifted, pulling back just enough to break the press of their foreheads, to be able to see. But he didn't let go—his hand stayed curled in Ilya's jacket, his body still pressed warm against Ilya's side. Just enough space to face whatever was coming, but not enough to lose the connection.

David appeared first, a paper cup of water in his hand. His eyes found them immediately—found the way they were still tangled together, found the tear tracks still fresh on both their faces—and something in his expression softened, like he'd already known what he'd find and was glad to be right.

Behind him, Jackie emerged from the stairwell, moving with the quiet efficiency of someone who'd spent too many hours in hospitals. And behind her, looking significantly less shell-shocked than when he'd left, was Pike.

The man's eyes landed on them and, for a split second, his step faltered. Ilya watched him take it in—the way Shane was curled into Ilya's side, the way Ilya's arm was wrapped around him like a protective shield, the way neither of them had moved apart despite the audience. Hayden's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

Then Jackie's elbow found his ribs, and he made a sound that was half grunt, half surrender.

"Hayden," Jackie said sweetly, "sit down and be quiet."

Hayden sat, dropping into the chair closest to the vending machines. Jackie sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched. She didn't say anything. Just watched them with that warm, knowing look that made Ilya feel like she could see straight through to his bones.

David settled back into his plastic chair, the one he'd occupied for hours, and reached for Shane's hand like he'd done a thousand times before—like it was the most natural thing in the world. Shane didn't even look. He just moved his hand, the one that had been pressed flat against Ilya's heart, sliding it off Ilya's chest and onto his own thigh, close enough for his

father to reach. David's fingers found his instantly, wrapping around them with that same quiet, unthinking ease. Like muscle memory. Like love so ingrained it didn't need words.

The gesture was so natural that Ilya felt his heart breaking a little.

For a long moment, no one spoke. The silence wasn't uncomfortable per se, but it was heavy with everything none of them knew how to say. Then Shane shifted against Ilya's side, his fingers tightening briefly on his dad's hold before he spoke.

"I should—" Shane started, his voice still rough but steadier now. He cleared his throat, tried again. "I should explain. About us. About... everything."

Surprisingly to Ilya, it was Hayden's idiotic head that snapped up at Shane's comment. "Shane, man, you don't have to—"

"I know." Shane cut him off, but there was no sharpness in it. Just exhaustion and something like surrender flickering through his eyes. "I know I don't *have* to. But I want to. I'm so tired of lying. To the people I love. I can't—not anymore. Not after tonight."

Ilya felt the words land in his chest like stones. He looked down at Shane, at the way his jaw was set with that stubborn determination that Ilya had spent ten years pretending to hate, and something warm and aching bloomed behind his ribs.

"Shane," Ilya murmured, low enough that only he could hear. "You do not have to do this tonight. You are tired. You have been through enough."

Shane tilted his head back to look at him, and his eyes were puffy but absolutely certain. "I know I'm tired. I'm so tired I can barely think straight." A small, tired smile tugged at his lips. "Which means I'm too exhausted to panic about this. And I don't want to keep pretending. Not with them. Not after tonight. Not when the last thing I said to my mom was a lie."

David leaned forward slowly, his brow furrowing with gentle concern. "What do you mean, kid?"

Shane's cheeks flushed—just a little, a faint pink that crept up from his collar. He glanced at Ilya, then back at his father, then at Hayden and Jackie, who were watching with matching expressions of careful attention.

"I asked her for vodka," Shane said quietly.

Ilya blinked. "What?"

Shane's flush deepened. "The vodka you like. The Russian one—the fancy one I can never remember the name of." He wouldn't look at Ilya, his gaze fixed somewhere on the opposite wall. "You mentioned it once. Months ago. I don't even remember when. But I remembered. And I asked my mom to bring some from New York. They don't sell it here, and I wanted—" He stopped, swallowed. "I wanted to have it for you. For when I went to Boston on Friday."

Ilya's brain stopped working. Completely. Entirely. He stared at Shane, utterly frozen, trying to process what he'd just heard.

Shane kept going, his voice getting smaller but somehow more determined. "The game on Friday. I thought maybe I could come over after. Stay the night. We could—I don't know." He finally glanced at Ilya, just for a second, blushing even more, before looking away again. "But when my mom asked why I needed it, I lied. I told her it was for someone on the team. One of the guys who liked it. Which was stupid, because none of them drink that stuff, and also I'm a terrible liar, and she definitely knew I was hiding something, but I just—I couldn't tell her the truth. Not then." His voice cracked, wobbled, broke. "And now she's in surgery, and the last thing I said to her was a lie."

Ilya couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't do anything except stare at the man pressed against his side—this impossible, ridiculous, *devastating* man who had remembered a throwaway comment from months ago, who had asked his mother to smuggle alcohol across the border, who had been *planning* for Friday, planning for *them*, while Ilya had been sitting in his empty house trying not to think about how much he missed him.

David was the first to move. He leaned forward, his free hand coming up to rest on Shane's knee. "Shane. Look at me."

Shane did, his eyes holding that familiar shine he hadn't been able to shake all night.

"First," David said quietly, "mom is going to be fine. She's going to wake up, and you're going to have plenty of time to tell her everything you want to tell her. About the vodka. About Ilya. About whatever else you've been keeping from us. You'll get that chance."

Shane's breath hitched.

"Second," David continued, his voice gentle but firm, "you don't owe us any explanations. Not tonight. Not ever, if you don't want to give them. You're allowed to have a private life. You're allowed to love who you love without having to justify it to anyone. That's not lying, son. That's just... living. On your own terms."

Ilya's throat closed.

He stared at David—at the way he looked at Shane, at the way his voice wrapped around every word like it was something precious. There was no judgment there. No disappointment. No edge waiting to cut. Just patience and so much love. Just the quiet, absolute certainty of a man who had spent years looking at his son and seeing someone worth looking at.

Ilya had known, logically, that Shane grew up way differently than him. He'd seen the way Shane's face softened when he talked about his parents, filed away the small details that painted a picture of a childhood nothing like his own. But knowing something and *seeing* it were two different things.

Seeing it was this: David looking at his twenty-seven-year-old son—captain of an NHL team, grown man, professional athlete—with the same expression Ilya imagined he'd worn when Shane was a little boy and scraped his knee. Like nothing had changed. Like Shane would always be *his* little boy, and that was a privilege, not a problem.

Seeing it was this: the way David's voice never wavered, never hardened, never lost that undercurrent of warmth even when he was saying something serious. The way his eyes never left Shane's face, tracking every flicker of emotion, like he was cataloguing his son's heartbeat in real time.

Seeing it was this: Shane nodding, quick and eager, not because he was scared of his father's disapproval, but because he *wasn't*. Like he needed David to know he understood, he agreed, he was listening but he just needed to make his point heard. Like eaving this wasn't something strange or remarkable. Because he knew, with absolute certainty, that David was on his side. Because he'd always known. Because that was just how it worked in the Hollander house.

Ilya's eyes burned.

He blinked rapidly, looking away for a moment, pressing his face into Shane's hair to hide. It didn't help. The tears were there anyway, hot and unwanted, spilling over before he could stop them.

This was what it looked like to be loved by a father who stayed. Who held your hand in hospital waiting rooms. Who looked at you at twenty-seven the same way he looked at you at seven—like you were the most important thing in the world

Ilya had never had that. Would never have that. His father's love came with conditions, with performance, with the constant grinding pressure to be *enough*—and even then, it wasn't love. Not really. Not like this. But Shane had it. Shane had always had it. And as Ilya held him in that freezing hospital room, feeling the steady rhythm of his breathing, the warmth of his body pressed close, he waited for the envy to come.

He knew envy. Knew it the way he knew the back of his own hand, the way he knew the sharp bite of a Moscow winter, the way he knew the hollow echo of an apartment where no one waited for him. Envy was an old friend. An unwelcome one, but familiar. He'd felt it watching other kids with their parents at the rink when he was young. Felt it watching teammates pull out their phones to call their mothers after games. Felt it a thousand times, a million times, in a thousand different ways.

So he waited for it now. Waited for the familiar twist in his gut, the bitter taste on his tongue, the small, ugly voice that whispered *why not me, why not mine, why not ever*.

But it didn't come.

He searched for it—really searched, dug deep into the dark corners of his chest where all the old wounds lived—and found nothing but space. Nothing but warmth. Nothing but the steady, impossible realization that what filled him wasn't envy at all.

It was gratitude.

Huge, overwhelming, bone-deep gratitude. So big it made his ribs ache, made his breath catch, made fresh tears spill silently into Shane's hair.

Because Shane knew. Shane *knew* what love was supposed to look like. He'd grown up with it, breathed it in like air, had it woven into the very fabric of who he was. He knew what it felt like to be held without conditions, to be loved without performance. And with all that knowledge, with all that history, with every example of what love should be burned into his bones—

Shane had chosen Ilya.

Shane had looked at Ilya Rozanov—broken, sharp-edged, terrified of his own heart—and seen something worth keeping. Something worth calling at midnight. Something worth coming back to, over and over again. Something worth being brave for. Something worth holding onto in a freezing hospital waiting room while his mother was in surgery. Shane had seen something in Ilya that Ilya himself couldn't find. Had found something worth loving in all the broken, messy, complicated space between Ilya's ribs.

He pressed his face deeper into Shane's hair, hiding the tears, hiding the wrecked expression he could feel pulling at his features. His arm tightened around Shane's shoulders, pulling him closer, and he let the gratitude wash over him like a wave.

Thank you, he thought, though he didn't know if he was thanking Shane or David or whatever cold, indifferent universe had somehow, impossibly, led him here. *Thank you for loving him the way he deserves. Thank you for making him someone who could love me back.*

Yeah. No envy. Just this. Just gratitude. Just the overwhelming, terrifying, beautiful certainty that somehow, against all odds, he'd been chosen by someone who knew exactly what love was supposed to look like.

Shane moved a little, not pulling away—never pulling away, not anymore—just adjusting, settling deeper into Ilya's side like he belonged there. Like this was normal. Like they'd been doing this for years instead of hours. His free arm—the one not currently being held by his father—slid around Ilya's back, palm pressing flat against the space between his shoulder blades. Warm. Solid. Grounding. And then he just... kept talking.

"—But I *want* to tell you. I don't want to hide anymore. Not from you. Not from them." He glanced at Hayden and Jackie, then back at his father. "I've been hiding for ten years. I'm so tired of it. And after tonight—after thinking I could lose her without her ever knowing who I really am—I just..." His voice broke again. "I can't. I can't keep—"

Ilya stopped listening.

Not because he didn't care—he cared, god, he cared so fucking much—but because Shane's hand was moving in slow, absent circles against his back. The same motion Ilya had been using on Shane's shoulder all night, mirrored back at him without thought, without intention, like Shane's body had simply decided that this was how they held each other now. Like it was instinct. Like it was habit. Like it was something they'd done a thousand times before.

And maybe, in a way, they had. In the dark. In those stolen hours when the world didn't exist and Shane's skin was the only map Ilya needed. But those moments had always been borrowed, always temporary, always tinged with the knowledge that morning would come

and they'd go back to being strangers. This wasn't borrowed. This wasn't temporary. This was Shane, in front of his father, in front of his best friends, holding Ilya like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like he'd been doing it his whole life. Like he never planned to stop.

Ilya stayed there for a moment longer, still hidden in the soft, dark warmth of Shane's hair, breathing him in. Letting the familiar, comforting smell of him—cedar and salt, like standing on a weathered deck near the coast, where land and sea don't quite blend and everything feels quietly held in place—calm the last of the static in his chest, grounding him in a way nothing else could do. When he finally lifted his head, David's eyes had softened, and he was squeezing his son's hand gently.

"Then tell us whatever you want to tell us," David said quietly. "We're here. We're listening. And we're not going anywhere."

Shane nodded, a small, grateful movement. He took a breath, clearly gearing up for another round of explanations, when Hayden's voice cut through the quiet.

"You just said ten years." Hayden's voice was quiet now, all the earlier chaos drained out of it. He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees, looking at Shane like he was trying to reconcile every version of him he'd ever known with this new information. "You're telling me that for a decade—while we were rooming together on road trips, while I was sitting next to you in locker rooms, while I was *complaining to you about Ilya Rozanov*—you were just..." He trailed off, shook his head. "I don't even know what I'm asking."

Shane's jaw tightened. Just a fraction. His hand, still pressed warm against Ilya's back, didn't stop its slow circles.

"It wasn't like that," Shane said quietly. "It was never like that."

"Then what was it like?"

Shane was quiet for a long moment. Ilya watched him—watched the way his gaze drifted to the blank wall opposite, the way his thumb kept moving against Ilya's spine like it was the only thing keeping him tethered to the moment.

"Complicated," Shane finally said. "Messy. Confusing." A small exhale. "We were eighteen when this started. Both of us. Terrified. In way over our heads. And at the beginning we were just fooling around."

Ilya's fingers pressed a little harder against his shoulder—a silent reminder that he was here, that he was not facing this alone. Not anymore.

"We didn't know what we were doing," Shane continued, his voice softer now. "Didn't know what it meant, what it would become. We just knew that when we were together, it felt—" He stopped, searching.

"Like coming up for air," Ilya offered quietly.

Shane glanced at him. Held his gaze for a moment. Then nodded. "Yeah. Like that. Like I was—like *we* were, finally just ourselves. Not Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, just Shane and Ilya."

Across from them, David was very still. His hand hadn't moved from Shane's. His eyes hadn't left his son's face. Hayden was quiet too, processing. When he spoke again, his voice was different—softer, stripped of its usual bravado.

"God," he said. "You two were just kids."

Shane nodded, his eyes bright.

"Eighteen," Hayden continued, like he was working through it out loud. "You were eighteen. Fresh out of juniors." He shook his head slowly. "I've known you for nine years, Shane, and I thought I knew you pretty good, but—but I have literally never met a version of you that wasn't somehow tangled up with him and I didn't even suspect it."

Shane's mouth opened, then closed. There wasn't really anything to say to that. It was true. Every version of himself he could remember, from that terrified rookie to the captain sitting here now, had Ilya somewhere in the margins. Even when they weren't together, even when they were pretending, Ilya was there. A constant. A thread running through everything.

"*Ten years.*"

"Yes Hays, I heard you the first time."

"I don't think you understand how long ten years is, Buddie. That's—that's a decade. That's—" Hayden did some rapid mental math. "That's like, a third of our lives, you need to be a little patience with me here. That's—"

Hayden's mouth opened and closed several times. Jackie patted his knee sympathetically.

"I think what he's trying to say," Jackie offered, "is that the mental image of you two together is going to take some time to process."

"Together," Hayden repeated weakly. "Together *together*. For ten years. While he was breaking my nose in playoffs."

"That was one time," Ilya said.

"One time? You cross-checked me into the boards so hard I saw stars!"

"You were in front of my net."

"I'm always in front of your net. That's my job!"

"And I always cross-check you. Also my job."

Ilya felt the familiar itch of mischief crawling up his spine. It was strange, after hours of terror and tears, to feel something so normal—but Shane was warm against his side, and

Yuna was going to be okay, and Hayden Pike was *so easy* to rile up. He couldn't help himself.

"That's not—" Hayden sputtered, and for a moment he was fully distracted, caught up in the familiar rhythm of arguing with Ilya Rozanov. It was almost comfortable, this back-and-forth—a dance they'd done a hundred times on ice, just with less blood and more fluorescent lights. Then Hayden caught himself. He blinked, looked back at Shane, and something in his expression shifted. Softened. Like he'd remembered what they were actually here for.

He shook his head, a small, rueful smile tugging at his mouth.

"You," he said to Ilya, "are very annoying."

"I know."

"But you're also—" Hayden paused, glanced at Shane, then back at Ilya. "You're also apparently... this. So I'm going to figure out how to be okay with it."

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "Is that your way of saying you accept me?"

"It's my way of saying I'm gonna try."

"Trying is first step. Is very good. I am proud of you."

Hayden made a sound that might have been a laugh, buried somewhere under all the exhaustion. "You're impossible."

"Da, because you are *so easy*."

Across from them, David's quiet voice cut through. "He's got you there, Hayden."

Hayden's head snapped toward Shane's father, betrayal written all over his face. "Not you too."

David shrugged, unrepentant. "I'm just making an observation."

"Observe less."

"I don't think that's how observing works."

Shane laughed—soft and surprised, the sound vibrating against Ilya's side. It was small, barely there, but it was real. And Ilya felt something warm spread through his chest at the sound of it. For a moment, the silence was comfortable. Full of breath and warmth and the slow, settling weight of everything that had been said.

Then Hayden's brow furrowed.

"Wait," he said slowly. "So what was all that with Rose, then? You two seemed serious. For a while there, I thought—"

Ilya felt Shane stiffen beside him and forced his face into careful neutrality, but something cold flickered in his chest anyway—Rose Landry, the actress, the beautiful, famous woman who had been all over the tabloids with Shane. The one from the club, with her perfect smile and her hands all over Shane's back. The one he could go out in public with. Didn't need to hide.

Ilya had tried very hard to stop thinking about Rose after Shane told him they weren't *compatible*.

Shane made a sound low in his throat. "Hayden—"

"I'm not trying to—" Hayden stopped, ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not trying to be difficult. I just... you seemed serious. You brought her to team events. Jackie and I had dinner with you guys. You held her hand. You introduced her to your mom."

He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice came out slower. Wrecked.

"I thought you were happy."

The words stayed there between them, heavier than they should have been for something said so quietly.

Ilya watched something shift in Hayden's expression then—something small, but unmistakable. A fracture in the usual bravado. A glimpse of something raw and unguarded beneath all the easy sarcasm and noise he so often used to keep the world from getting too close.

He had been so relieved when Shane started seeing Rose. After years of watching his best friend throw himself into hockey and almost nothing else, years of watching him sidestep every question about his personal life with that careful, polished blankness of his, years of wondering—quietly, privately—whether Shane was lonelier than he ever let anyone see, Rose had felt, at first, like an answer.

Like proof that Shane might finally have something good. Something steady. Something real. Something that might soften the sharpest edges of his solitude and give him the kind of quiet, ordinary happiness Hayden himself had stumbled into almost obscenely young with Jackie and, by some miracle, never lost.

He had wanted that for Shane more than he had ever said out loud.

Not because Shane needed saving, and not because Hayden thought a relationship was some magical cure for whatever private, carefully hidden things lived inside a person, but because everyone deserved to have someone. Everyone deserved at least one person in the world who made the unbearable parts of life feel lighter to carry. And Shane had always seemed like someone carrying far more than he ever let anyone touch.

And now?

Now Hayden did not know what to do with any of it. Had Shane been lonely anyway? Had he been hurting right in front of him all this time, while Hayden had been stupidly, sincerely relieved, patting himself on the back for believing his best friend had finally found someone who made him happy? What kind of friend felt grateful for a lie simply because it had looked enough like happiness from a distance?

Had he missed it all because Shane was that good at hiding, or because Hayden himself had wanted so badly to believe in the surface of things that he had never once forced himself to look underneath?

His gaze flicked, just briefly, to Ilya.

And for one strange, disorienting second, something else seemed to move through him too—something quieter than shock, and far more unsettling. A thought, half-formed and almost absurd in its lateness.

What if Shane had found someone after all? What if he had not been alone in the way Hayden had always feared? What if the answer had been here, somehow, all along, hidden in plain sight beneath years of bickering and sharp edges and whatever strange, impossible thing had always existed between them?

Ilya felt Shane's breathing change at the words—just slightly, just enough for him to notice.

"I was," Shane said quietly. "Not the way you think, and not the way I wanted to. But *I was*."

Hayden did not interrupt. Did not rush to fill the silence the way he so often seemed biologically incapable of not doing. He only stood there with his mouth slightly parted, his usual easy expression gone strangely blank, as though he had not yet caught up to the shape of what was being handed to him.

Shane took a breath. Let it out. Took another.

"I didn't always know," he began slowly. "What I wanted. Who I was. I mean, I knew I felt things for Ilya, but I also thought—" He stopped, swallowed. "I thought maybe I could be normal. Maybe I could want what everyone else wanted. And with her I tried, *I really, really tried*. But I just *couldn't*."

David's hand tightened around Shane's almost imperceptibly, not enough to interrupt him, only enough to anchor him there—to say, without words, *I'm still here. Keep going. I'm still here*.

But it was Hayden's face Ilya found himself watching.

Something complicated moved across it then, too quick and too deep to be called simple surprise. It darkened his expression for only a second, but it was enough. Enough for Ilya to see the way the word *normal* had landed wrong. Not with confusion, but with pain. With the sudden, ugly understanding of just how long Shane must have been carrying around the belief that he had somehow failed at becoming the version of himself the world would have found easiest to love.

Ilya thought, suddenly and with a strange sharpness, about all the times Hayden had protected Shane on the ice.

The dropped gloves. The immediate, unquestioning way he always seemed to step between Shane and whatever came at him too hard, too cruel, too fast. The fights he picked without hesitation, the bruises he collected on Shane's behalf as if his body had long ago decided that was one of the things it was for.

Ilya had always dismissed it as hockey. As instinct. As teammates being teammates.

But maybe it had never been only that.

Maybe Hayden had spent years sensing, in some wordless, animal way, that there was something in Shane softer than he ever let the world see, something he guarded so viciously that even Hayden himself had never been trusted close enough to name it. Maybe, without even knowing what he was protecting him from, Hayden had been standing guard for years.

And maybe that was why guilt was now opening so visibly across his face. Because he couldn't protect Shane from this—from himself, from the years of hiding, from the loneliness of it all—because maybe, despite his best efforts, Shane had still spent years trying to survive himself in silence while the people who loved him most stood just outside the walls, believing he was fine because he had made "*fine*" look so convincing.

Ilya wondered, not without a flicker of reluctant sympathy, how badly Pike felt in this exact moment. Whether he was replaying every awkward deflection, every too-careful answer, every time Shane had smiled just a little too quickly and changed the subject before anyone could look too closely. Probably as bad as Ilya himself. Probably worse, in some ways, because Hayden had been right there the whole time and never known.

And wasn't that a thought to have. To feel genuine, aching empathy for *Hayden Pike* of all people.

"Rose was the first person I ever told. About me. Or more like, she realized and confronted me about it." Shane continued, his voice softer now, his eyes flickering to his father.

David was watching him with the kind of stillness that did not read as detachment but devotion—as if every part of him had gone completely quiet just to make more room for whatever Shane needed to say next. There was something almost unbearable in the steadiness of it, in the absolute absence of recoil. He looked at Shane the way some people held fragile things in both hands: carefully, yes, but never fearfully. Like there was no version of his son that could make love require reconsideration.

"She was really good about it, really kind. She helped me see that it wasn't—that I wasn't broken. That I could want both, or neither, or whatever, and it didn't make me less of a person." He swallowed hard. "She helped me understand that I'm—that I like men. That it was okay to be gay. That it is okay that I'm gay."

The words settled into the room with a strange, almost sacred weight to them, as if even the fluorescent hospital air had paused long enough to make space. Heavy, because Ilya could

hear what they had cost Shane to drag into the light. Light, because once spoken, they no longer seemed to belong entirely to shame.

David nodded. Just once. But there was nothing absentminded in the movement. It was small, yes, and quiet, but it carried the solemnity of something chosen deliberately—like he was not simply reacting, but placing his acceptance down with care where Shane would be able to find it and trust that it would stay.

“Okay,” he said. Not a question. Not a challenge. Not a request for clarification. Just okay. And the simplicity of it was so staggering it nearly felt unreal.

No hesitation. No visible recalculation. No subtle shift in his face that would suggest he was rearranging his son into something newly unfamiliar. Just okay, offered with the same calm certainty he might have used if Shane had told him the weather had changed or that he was hungry or that he needed a ride home.

Something in Shane’s expression gave then—not dramatically, not all at once, but in one small, involuntary fracture through the middle of the composure he had been clinging to with such visible effort. His eyes widened just slightly, and for one fleeting second he looked almost young again. Not childish. Just startled in the oldest, deepest way there was: by the possibility that the thing he had feared might not happen after all.

He did not speak. He didn’t need to.

Not with his father looking at him like that.

David squeezed his hand. “I mean it, son. *Okay.*”

That was all.

No dramatic embrace. No grand declaration. No one crying openly, though David’s eyes had gone wet, and Shane’s were bright, and something hot and tight had lodged itself in the back of Ilya’s throat with such force he refused to examine it too closely for fear it might become unbearable if named. Just a father holding his son’s hand as though it had never occurred to him to let go. Accepting him not loudly, not performatively, not as some heroic act of tolerance, but with the kind of quiet certainty that made it feel, somehow, even bigger. Quietly. Without condition.

Ilya had to look away for a moment. Just a second. Just long enough to lower his face into Shane’s hair and breathe, because there was suddenly too much inside his chest and nowhere for any of it to go.

When he looked back, Jackie was watching him.

Not in the prying, curious way most people did when they thought they had stumbled onto something intimate, but with a softness that made it feel, somehow, worse. Like she had seen far more than he would ever have willingly shown. Like she understood, in some quiet and unnervingly complete way, exactly what that moment had cost him to witness. She didn’t say anything about it. Didn’t embarrass him by naming whatever had passed across his face. She

only gave him a small, warm smile, one that held no mockery and no pity, and turned back to Shane as if granting him the dignity of pretending she hadn't just looked straight through him.

"Rose sounds like a good friend," she said quietly.

Shane nodded, and his face did that awful, delicate thing it always did when he was trying not to cry—his mouth tightening at the corners, his eyes going too bright too fast, as though emotion always reached him first in the places he tried hardest to control.

"The best," he said. A pause. "She still is." His fingers shifted slightly against Ilya's where their hands rested together, not enough to draw attention to it, just enough for Ilya to feel the warmth of it. Grounding. "She's the one who told me to stop being a coward and actually talk to Ilya."

Ilya blinked. "She told you to talk to me?"

"She told me a lot of things." Shane's mouth curved, just slightly, and there was something so fond and quietly exasperated in it that Ilya could almost picture the entire conversation without having been there. "Mostly that I was being an idiot and that if I didn't do something about it, I'd regret it for the rest of my life."

Ilya did not know what to do with that.

For too long, Rose Landry had existed in his mind more like a wound than a person. A polished, smiling doll in paparazzi photos and thirty-second clips from some games that Ilya would die before telling another soul that he had watched and analyzed every frame till his eyes started to burn. She was always at Shane's side in public in some way that felt effortless and unbearably easy, safe in a way Ilya could never be. A woman Shane could stand beside in daylight without anyone looking twice. A woman he could walk holding hands if he wanted, and the world would smile at them for it instead of making them into something ugly and *wrong*.

Ilya had not known how to look at that and not feel replaced by the life it represented. He had thought, stupidly, selfishly, and with the full force of his own private misery, that Rose was proof Shane had chosen a version of happiness that had no space for him in it. And maybe that was why it had hurt so much. Not the fact that the only person Ilya had ever loved was actively choosing to be with someone else—though that was another scar he would have to show under his skin permanently—but the fact that with her, Shane had seemed to have access to a life Ilya had long ago stopped believing belonged to people like them. a life without hiding, without all that careful distance. A life without shame clinging to every soft touch.

A couple of weeks ago, when Shane had first come out to him, Ilya had not understood what he had actually been trying to say. He'd heard *I'm gay* and translated it only through the narrow, bruised logic of his own fear. Now Ilya thought that maybe Shane was trying to tell him that, for him, Rose had never been proof of any kind of freedom—quite the opposite, actually. She had been proof that he had tried and failed; she was the last straw that made Shane finally run out of ways to lie to himself.

What Ilya had been too brute to understand, and Shane too unsure to actually explain, was this: *There is no other path left for me, not like there is for you.*

But what Shane had not known, back then, what Ilya himself had not been brave enough to say either, is that being capable of wanting women had never actually saved him from anything. That his bisexuality, so useful in theory, had been functionally worthless the moment the only person he had ever wanted to build a life around had turned out to be a man with shining eyes and a soft heart.

That there had never really been another life for Ilya either.

Rose Landry. A woman Ilya had never met, whose name had once made something ugly and possessive twist low in his chest. But now—now he understood. She wasn't the reason Shane had stayed away from him. She was the reason Shane had come back.

She had seen Shane when Shane could not yet bear to see himself clearly. Had sat beside him through all the confusion and fear and futile, painful attempts to become someone easier to be. She had not recoiled when he told her the truth. Had not made him feel fractured for wanting things that refused to fit neatly into the shape of a life the world approved of. And when it mattered most, she had not let him keep hiding behind indecision and fear and timing and all the other flimsy excuses people used when they were terrified of the one thing they wanted most. She had pushed him—gently, but firmly—toward the person who had always been waiting for him.

And tonight—tonight, when everything could have fallen apart, when Shane could have retreated back into silence and safety—he hadn't. He'd sat in front of his father, his best friends, and laid himself bare. He'd let Ilya hold him in a hospital waiting room where anyone could see. He'd kissed him back like the world outside those doors didn't exist.

That was Rose too, wasn't it? Not directly—but the courage, the willingness to stop running, in the slow, painful work of becoming someone who no longer wanted fear to be the organizing principle of his life. That was what she'd helped him find. That was the gift she'd given him. Given *them*.

Maybe, when everything was alright—when Yuna was home and healing, when he and Shane had slept for about twelve hours straight, when they'd had time to talk about what this meant for them, about what came next—maybe Ilya could ask. Ask if Shane would want to organize a dinner. Something small. Somewhere quiet. Nothing overwhelming. Just enough for Ilya to finally meet the woman who had, in some indirect but undeniable way, saved them both long before either of them knew they needed saving.

And maybe—if Shane wanted, if he was ready—Ilya could give him something too. Something he'd never given anyone. Not just his heart, not just his future, but his past. The only piece of home he had managed to carry intact across an ocean and through fifteen years of loneliness.

Svetlana.

The only real friend he'd ever had before Shane walked into his life. The woman who had never asked him to be anyone other than who he was. Who had never demanded more than he was willing to give.

Ilya hadn't really told her—that he also liked men—because he'd never needed to. She had simply known, the way she always knew things about him that he never said aloud, and he was not naïve enough to imagine she had failed to form certain conclusions about Shane over the years. So she probably knew. Or at least suspected—The way she always said *Jane* with that infuriating, knowing little edge of amusement whenever she caught him on the phone at odd hours, or the way one eyebrow would tilt whenever he came back from a game against Montreal quieter than usual, had never exactly suggested a woman that found him especially convincing.

But she never pressed. Never asked. Never made him say anything he wasn't ready to say. She had only ever looked at him with that same patient steadiness, as though she did not need every detail in order to remain loyal. As though she trusted that one day, if and when he could bear to speak plainly, he would. She had always respected his limits, and for that, Ilya would always love her.

She had protected him as best she could. From his family, from himself, from the situations he stumbled into and didn't know how to escape. Svetlana had been the only person in his life who looked at him and saw someone worth staying, without asking him to be different first.

For years, he hadn't let himself talk about Shane with her. Not because he was afraid she would think less of him—Svetlana had never made him feel less, not once—but because saying it out loud would have made it real in a way he had not known how to survive. It would have given it weight. It would have meant admitting that what he felt for Shane was not some private indulgence that only existed in the dark or in hotel rooms or in the space between games, but something with consequence. Something with tenderness. Something that mattered enough to ruin him if he lost it.

Now, though—Now he wanted to tell her everything. Wanted to show up at her door and tell her that *Jane* had a name and a face and a laugh and a smile that made something painful and joyful crack open in his chest all at once. Wanted, selfishly and absurdly, to put the two people who had loved him most cleanly in the same room and watch what happened.

He just hoped neither of them killed him when he did.

Shane, because over the years Ilya had watched him shrink into himself every time Svetlana's name came up—his voice going quiet, his hands stilling—and Ilya, the asshole he was, had done it on purpose. Had made them both suffer. He had used her name like a shield, a convenient excuse, a reminder that he had a life outside of whatever this was, a way to build walls when things got too real. He had talked about her when he needed to put distance between them, when Shane was getting too close, when the wanting started to feel like something he couldn't control. He had let Shane imagine that what he and Svetlana had was more than the casual comfort of two people who knew each other's edges and never asked for more.

But now Ilya would have to explain that she was the one person who had kept him standing when he didn't know how to stand on his own. That what they had was real, yes, but not like that. That they loved each other in the way people who had survived things together loved each other. That she was his *friend*.

Svetlana, meanwhile, would almost certainly kill him for an entirely different reason. Because for all her quiet, knowing smiles and her pointed "*Jane*"s, Ilya had never told her the truth. Had never given her the satisfaction of being right. Had let her wonder, let her guess, let her wait for the day he'd finally be ready to say the words out loud. And now he was going to show up one day and tell her that *Jane* was not only a man, but *the* man. Ilya Rozanov, captain of the Boston Raiders, hopelessly in love with Shane Hollander, captain of the Montreal Voyageurs. Their rivalry. Their history. Their years of secrets and sharp edges and all the things they had been to each other before they had ever allowed themselves to become this.

She was going to kill him. And then, almost certainly, ask why he had not had the basic decency to get her a signed jersey years ago.

If Rose was the person who taught Shane it was okay to love who he loved, then Svetlana was the person who had taught Ilya that he was allowed to be loved at all.

Maybe he could give Shane that part of himself too.

He did not know how to thank all the people who had, knowingly or not, carried them to this exact moment. So he only tightened his hold on Shane by a fraction, let the warmth of him seep quietly into every cold, starved place, and hoped that, for now, that could be enough.

Jackie leaned forward slightly then, one hand curling more securely around Hayden's forearm as if she were easing herself into the shape of a question she already suspected she would regret asking.

"So when did it—" She gestured vaguely. "When did it become... this?"

"All Stars' Game," Ilya said. "That was where something changed."

Jackie's brow furrowed, but not with judgment. More with the strained concentration of someone trying to reverse-engineer a decade's worth of emotional nonsense in real time and finding the math actively offensive.

"But that was just a few weeks ago."

Shane nodded.

"So you're telling me," she said slowly, looking between them now as if the answer might somehow improve if she could physically inspect both of their faces at once, "that you two have been dancing around each other for almost ten years. And you only actually talked about it a few weeks ago?"

Ilya shrugged. "We are not very smart."

Shane huffed a laugh, the sound quiet and frayed at the edges from exhaustion but real enough to make something inside Ilya unclench. “Speak for yourself.”

“I am speaking for both of us. We are equally stupid. Is part of our charm.”

Jackie shook her head, though there was affection all over her face now, disbelief softened by something far warmer. “That’s insane.”

“Is love,” Ilya corrected. “Insane love. There is difference.”

Jackie’s smile widened, and her head came to rest lightly against Hayden’s shoulder in a gesture so easy and long-practiced it almost made the room feel warmer. Then she looked at Ilya—really looked at him, without irony, without teasing, without the amused detachment she had worn through most of this conversation—and something in her expression gentled.

“I like him,” she said simply, nodding toward Shane. “He’s good for you, Shane. You made an excellent choice, just so you know.”

The words landed in Ilya’s chest with the delicate, destabilizing force of something he had no instinct yet for catching. Approval, perhaps. *Acceptance*

He wasn't sure himself. Wasn't sure Shane had made a good choice at all. There were a thousand reasons why this could fall apart, a thousand ways Ilya could mess it up, there were still too many voices inside him, too many old reflexes sharpened into certainty over years of being exactly the kind of person people warned others about. *too rough, too broken, too much.*

But Shane had chosen him anyway. This beautiful boy had looked at him in the middle of all this chaos and said *I love you* like it was the simplest thing in the world. And if Shane let him—if Shane kept choosing him, day after day, year after year—Ilya would spend the rest of his life trying to prove Jackie right. Trying to be the keeper Shane deserved. Trying to build something steady enough, gentle enough, worthy enough, that Shane would never have cause to look back on this night and wonder what on earth he had been thinking.

Shane’s flush deepened, but he did not look away from Jackie. If anything, he seemed to settle more fully into himself beneath the weight of her certainty, like some small part of him had finally unclenched at being told out loud that the thing he wanted most did not look ridiculous or doomed from the outside.

"I know," he said quietly.

Not *I think so*. Not *I hope so*. Just *I know*. Like there wasn't a single doubt in his mind. Like Ilya being made for him was as obvious as gravity, as undeniable as the beating of his own heart. Like Ilya was perfect for him the same way Shane was perfect for Ilya.

He didn't turn to look at Ilya. Didn't need to. He just said it—simple and sure—like he'd known it for years. Like it was just a fact, no different from the ice being cold or the sky being blue. And maybe he had known. Maybe through all the years of hotel rooms and late-

night calls and unfinished conversations and pretending and wanting and not wanting to want, Shane had known something Ilya was only now beginning to let himself believe.

I know.

Shane knew. Shane had always known. And Ilya was going to spend the rest of his life making sure that certainty was never misplaced.

"Please stop making bedroom eyes at my best friend in front of me and his father," Hayden complained.

David held up both hands immediately. "No, please don't get me into this."

But there was no real resistance in it. His voice had gone lighter than it had been in hours, and the laugh that escaped him seemed to surprise even himself, as though his body had momentarily forgotten it was still supposed to be bracing for bad news.

Ilya felt a grin tugging at his mouth.

This—this was what he had never let himself want. Not just Shane, but this too. The teasing. The warmth. The careless intimacy of people who already belonged to one another enough to be ridiculous in front of each other without shame. The kind of family banter he had spent most of his life watching from the edges of rooms, close enough to recognize its shape and far enough away to know it had never been meant for him.

"Bedroom eyes?" he repeated, genuinely delighted now. "You think I make bedroom eyes at Shane? This is not bedroom eyes; this is *I love you* eyes."

"I don't know what you make! I'm not an expert on whatever this is!"

"I make many eyes at Shane. Some are bedroom. Some are 'I want to kill you on ice.' Some are both. He is very good at reading them."

Shane groaned against Ilya's shoulder, but the sound lacked all real suffering. It came out soft and embarrassed and suspiciously close to fond, like his body had already given up any serious attempt at resisting being folded into whatever this had become.

"Please stop."

"He knows all my looks," Ilya continued, warming to the topic.

He was being himself. Completely, unapologetically himself. And they were laughing with him, not at him. What unsettled Ilya most was not Pike's outrage, or Jackie's knowing little smiles, or even David looking at him with the exhausted, kind eyes of a man too worried about his wife to spare much energy for whatever complicated thing his son and Ilya clearly were.

It was the fact that no one had asked him to leave yet. No one looked at him and saw an intrusion. No one treated him like something shameful Shane had dragged in by accident and would need to explain away later. They made room.

Quietly. Almost absentmindedly. As if the space beside Shane had always been his in some unfinished, unspoken way and they were only just now catching up to something Shane himself had known for years.

It should not have mattered as much as it did. It mattered enough to make his throat ache.

Here *he* was. And they were still laughing.

“Is very impressive,” Ilya continued. “Ten years of practice. From across the ice, I can tell him—” He made a series of exaggerated faces. “This one means ‘meet me after.’ This one means ‘you are in my spot.’ This one means ‘your hair looks stupid today but I still want to kiss you.’”

“That last one is not a real look,” Shane muttered against his shoulder.

“Is absolutely real. You just miss it because you are too busy staring at my ass.”

Shane’s head snapped up so quickly it was almost violent, all soft post-confession daze instantly replaced by sheer offended panic. The flush that had never fully left his face deepened with impressive efficiency, climbing all the way up into his ears.

“I do *not* stare at your ass.”

“You do. Is okay. I stare at yours too. Is fair.”

“*Ilya Rozanov!*”

“What? We are being honest now. This is honesty time.”

Jackie had long since abandoned any attempt at restraint. She was laughing openly now, one hand pressed to her mouth too late to do anything useful, her entire body tipped slightly toward Hayden like she physically needed someone to absorb the force of how delighted she was by all of this. Even David had covered part of his face with one hand, though the effort was useless. The smile was there anyway, visible in the softened lines around his eyes and the helpless, intermittent shake of his shoulders.

They’re not just tolerating me, Ilya realized, something warm and strange and almost frightening unfurling low in his chest. *They’re actually enjoying this. They’re enjoying me.*

And from somewhere behind his hands—currently clamped over most of his face like a man trying to preserve the last surviving fragments of his dignity—Hayden made a muffled groaning sound. At some point during the conversation, he had folded in on himself almost completely, elbows braced on his knees, shoulders rounded forward, as if the only available strategy now was to physically make himself smaller until the situation either improved or killed him.

“Okay. So. Ten years. Rookie showcase. Rose was—” He waved one hand vaguely through the air without uncovering his face. “—a whole thing. And Tampa was—” Another helpless motion. “—recent.”

He paused, then peeked at them through his fingers with the shell-shocked expression of a man who had been forced to realize that an enormous, absurd drama had apparently been unfolding directly in front of him for a decade without his knowledge.

“I have approximately seven hundred more questions, but I’m going to try really hard to be chill about this.”

“Try harder,” Jackie murmured.

“I *am* trying!” Hayden pointed at Ilya. “My mortal enemy is apparently in love with my best friend, and has been for the better part of a decade. Give me a break.”

“I am not your mortal enemy,” Ilya corrected. “I am your captain’s lover.”

“Same thing,” Hayden complained, at the exact same moment Shane muttered under his breath, “Oh my God, why wasn’t I on the plane with Mom.”

Ilya ignored him completely, too busy soaking in the warmth spreading through his chest—the impossible, terrifying warmth of watching Hayden Pike, of all people, complain and gripe and protest his way steadily toward acceptance without even realizing that was what he was doing.

And for the first time in his life, Ilya thought maybe, just maybe, he could stop waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Is not the same thing,” he continued. “Mortal enemy implies we are still fighting. We are not. I am part of the family now. You have to accept me.”

“*Have to?*”

“Is in the rules.”

“There are no rules!”

“Family rules. Very important. Jackie already likes me. David likes me. Shane loves me. You are outnumbered.”

Hayden lifted his head just enough to glare at Ilya through the gaps between his fingers, the expression itself far more performative than sincere by now.

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t.”

Ilya pressed a little closer to Shane, letting the warmth of him settle against all the places in himself that had spent too many years braced for rejection.

“I really, really do.”

“You bought me a birthday shot last year. At that bar in Boston. After the game.”

Hayden froze.

The stillness that followed was so immediate and complete it bordered on theatrical. Jackie turned to look at him slowly, with the sharp, delighted interest of someone who had just been handed a brand-new weapon and already intended to use it.

Ilya's smile widened.

He could feel Shane starting to shake beside him with the effort of not laughing again, his forehead now half-hidden against Ilya's shoulder as though that might somehow preserve a shred of neutrality he had very clearly already lost.

This—this ridiculous, stupid little argument—was exactly what Ilya had never known enough to want until it was happening to him. To be teased and tease back like he was just another person in the room instead of Ilya Rozanov the villain, the Russian, the outsider, the man people formed opinions about before they had ever heard him laugh.

"I know you remember," he continued, clearly enjoying himself. "We were both there. You bought a round for your linemates. And then you saw me, and you—"

"I was being polite!"

"You bought me a shot. And we clinked glasses. And you said—"

"Don't."

"—'good game, Rozanov.' And I said—"

"Ilya."

"—'good game, Pike. See you next time.' And then we drank." Ilya smiled, slow and infuriating. "That was bonding. You cannot take it back now."

Hayden dropped his face back into his hands with a defeated thump, the gesture so dramatic it finally tipped over from resistance into full surrender.

"I hate everything."

Jackie patted his back with the absent, soothing rhythm one might use on a deeply distressed but ultimately harmless house pet.

"There, there, honey. You'll survive."

"Will I?"

"Probably."

A sound escaped Hayden then that might have been a laugh if it had not been so thoroughly buried under mock suffering. His shoulders gave him away anyway, loosening and shaking with it despite his best efforts.

“I need a minute,” he mumbled.

Shane’s voice, when it came, was quieter than the room deserved.

Steadier too.

“Take a minute. We’re not going anywhere.”

Hayden looked at him then. And just like that, something in his face shifted. The joke drained out of him first. Then the defensiveness. Then that frantic need to turn everything into something manageable and stupid and unserious before it could get too close to whatever it was actually making him feel.

What remained after that was something much simpler.

Just Shane’s best friend. The same one who had, despite it all, always tried to protect him. Always tried, in whatever imperfect ways he knew how, to be there. Just Hayden, sitting in a hospital waiting room, trying to find the right words

“I’m glad you’re okay,” he said finally. “I mean it. After tonight, after everything—” He stopped, swallowed. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Shane nodded, and Ilya felt rather than saw the slight shift in him—that tiny internal collapse people sometimes had when relief landed somewhere too tender to be held upright for long.

“And I’m sorry,” Hayden continued, his voice rougher now. “That I wasn’t—that you couldn’t tell me. That you had to go through all of that alone. *I’m sorry* I wasn’t there for you the way you needed.”

Shane’s breath caught, just a little. But Ilya felt it immediately, the small hitch of it where they were still pressed together.

“But I’m glad,” Hayden said, “that you came out the other side of it. That you’re still here, a better man. That you’re—” He gestured vaguely at Shane, at Ilya, at the two of them folded into each other in a way that no longer looked accidental. “That you have this. Even if I don’t understand it. Even if it’s weird.” A small, awkward shrug. “*I’m glad.*”

Shane nodded again, smaller this time. Softer.

“Thanks, Hayd.”

Hayden waved it off immediately, but the gesture lacked its usual dismissiveness. It looked less like rejection and more like someone trying, unsuccessfully, to cover up the fact that he had just said something honest enough to make his own skin itch.

“Yeah, well. Don’t get used to it. I’m still going to need therapy.”

Jackie patted his knee. “We’ll get you a good one.”

That finally got a real laugh out of him—brief, reluctant, but unmistakable.

Shane leaned his head back against Ilya's shoulder then, watching his best friend slowly unravel and restitch himself in real time with a soft, exhausted smile still lingering at the corners of his mouth. He was still pink. Still visibly flustered. But there was something else in him now too. Something looser. Something that looked a little too much like relief for Ilya not to notice it instantly.

"You're enjoying this way too much." Shane whispered to him.

"Am enjoying this exactly the right amount. Is perfect amount."

"You're evil."

"I'm a man in love," Ilya said proudly. And then, lower, pitched just for Shane, "You good?"

Shane glanced up at him. Held his gaze for a long moment. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"Yeah," he whispered back. "I think I am."

Ilya believed him.

The waiting room settled into something almost peaceful—the quiet hum of the lights, the distant beep of monitors, the soft sound of Shane breathing against his chest, solid and real and *his*. Hayden was still muttering into his palms. Jackie was still wiping her eyes. David was still smiling that small, quiet smile. All of it—the grief and the relief and the ridiculous, wonderful chaos of this new thing they were building together—hung in the air like a held breath.

And then a door opened.

Not the elevator. Not the stairwell. One of the heavy double doors down the hall, the ones that led to the restricted areas where families weren't allowed. A figure in surgical scrubs emerged, clipboard in hand, eyes scanning the waiting area.

Ilya's heart stopped.

He felt Shane tense beside him, felt the way his hand froze mid-circle against Ilya's back. Felt the collective intake of breath from everyone in the room as the surgeon walked toward them.

The doors swung open before anyone was ready for them.

Every head in the waiting room snapped up at once, the fragile, half-formed quiet collapsing instantly under the weight of collective panic. A woman in blue scrubs stepped through the double doors, surgical cap still on, mask pulled down around her neck, clipboard in hand and exhaustion written plainly across every line of her face.

Her eyes moved across the room.

"Hollander family?"

David was on his feet before the words had fully left her mouth, as if his body had made the decision before his mind had even caught up. Shane tried to stand too, but his legs gave under him almost immediately, trembling with the kind of weakness that came only after too many hours spent held together by fear alone.

Ilya caught him before he could stumble.

He tightened one arm around Shane's shoulders and steadied him against his side, feeling the full, shaking weight of him lean in without resistance this time, as if whatever force had been keeping him upright all night had finally burned itself out.

"Here," David said, his voice raw enough to sound scraped from somewhere deep. "We're here."

The surgeon smiled then—small and tired and unmistakably genuine—and something in Ilya's chest cracked open so suddenly it almost hurt.

"Mrs. Hollander is out of surgery," she said. "The procedure went well. She's stable, and we're very optimistic about her recovery."

For one suspended, disbelieving second, no one moved.

Then Shane made this tiny, wrecked sound beside him, barely more than a breath breaking apart on its way out, and Ilya felt the sting rise sharp and immediate behind his own eyes.

"The orthopedic team was able to repair the fracture in her femur with plates and screws," the surgeon continued gently, glancing down at the clipboard in her hand before looking back up at them. "The splenectomy was successful, and she tolerated the procedure very well. There were no complications beyond what had already been discussed with the family earlier."

David exhaled like someone had just cut a rope from around his throat.

"Can we see her?" he asked, and there was so much inside those four words that it nearly undid Ilya all over again—the waiting, the helplessness, the terror, the desperate, almost childlike need to see with his own eyes that the woman he loved was still here.

"Very soon." The surgeon's smile widened, warmer now. "She's in recovery at the moment. We need to give the anesthesia a little more time to wear off, and then we'll be moving her to a private room on the fifth floor. Give us about twenty minutes, and you'll be able to go up. Two at a time for now—she'll be tired, and we want to keep things calm."

Shane nodded immediately, too quickly, tears already spilling freely down his face as though his body had finally received permission to stop pretending it could endure one more second of uncertainty.

"Okay," he said, breathless. "Okay. Twenty minutes. We can—we can do twenty minutes."

The surgeon nodded once, made another note on her clipboard, and disappeared back through the doors she had just delivered their entire world through.

And then it was over.

The words moved through Ilya slowly at first, like they were struggling to reach the parts of him that had spent hours braced for devastation. Yuna was alive. She was alive. She had made it through. The room itself seemed to change around them, the air no longer sharp with dread but suddenly thinner somehow, lighter, as if all at once it had remembered it was meant to be breathed.

Beside him, Shane turned without a word and folded himself straight into Ilya's chest.

It was not graceful. It was not measured. It was not the restrained, carefully managed version of affection Shane usually allowed himself in public. It was instinctive and immediate and total, like his body had finally chosen the one place it trusted to collapse. His breathing came in short, uneven bursts, each inhale catching somewhere painful on the way down, each exhale stuttering out like it had to fight its way free. His fingers twisted tightly into the fabric of Ilya's jacket, clutching with quiet desperation, shoulders trembling hard enough that Ilya could feel it all the way through to his own bones.

And still, he didn't make a sound.

No sob. No gasp. No dramatic unraveling. Just that awful, silent shaking. That devastating effort to hold himself together even now, even after all this, as though some old, deeply rooted part of him still believed he had to suffer neatly in order to be allowed to do it at all.

Something inside Ilya ached so sharply it felt almost holy.

He held him tighter.

One hand slid up to cradle the back of Shane's head, fingers threading gently into the hair at his nape, while the other spread flat between his shoulder blades and stayed there, steady and warm and immovable. He did not tell him to calm down. He did not ask if he was okay, because the answer was obvious and because this, too, was a kind of okay. Not peace. Not composure. But release. Relief. The unbearable aftermath of fear finally loosening its grip.

So he said nothing.

He just stood there and let Shane fall apart against him in complete, devastating silence.

"I told you," Ilya whispered at last into his hair, his own voice rough around the edges. "I told you she was strong. I told you."

Shane nodded against him, small and jerky and almost frantic in the way grief and relief often looked identical when they first came out. His breath hitched again. Then again. But he still didn't cry. Not fully. Not in the way most people would have expected. He only stayed there, breathing in those fractured little pulls of air, letting Ilya's arms keep him upright until, little by little, they began to even out.

Next to them, David had finally started crying too, though quietly, as if even now he did not quite know what to do with the scale of what he was feeling. One hand was still wrapped

around Shane's arm, unwilling to let go even with Ilya holding the rest of him. Jackie had her face buried in Hayden's shoulder, her whole body shaking with what looked suspiciously like silent tears, and Hayden—*the fool*—was patting her back with one hand while very obviously, and very badly, trying to wipe his own eyes with the other without anyone noticing.

For a long moment, no one moved. No one spoke.

They just stayed there in the wreckage of relief, breathing the same newly merciful air, letting it wash through them in waves too large to name.

Eventually, Shane pulled back just enough to look up at him. His face was damp and flushed and exhausted, his eyes still glassy with the remains of panic, but there was something almost luminous in them now—something soft and open and joyfully wrecked that made Ilya's heart feel suddenly too large for his chest.

"Thank you," Shane whispered. "For being here. For—for everything."

Ilya's expression tightened immediately, something almost pained moving through it, and he shook his head once.

"You do not thank me for this," he said quietly, firmly, like the idea itself offended something fundamental in him. "This is not—" He stopped, swallowed hard, and when he spoke again, his voice came out lower. More honest than anything else he had said his entire life. "There is nowhere else I would be, Shane," he said. "There is nowhere else I *want* to be."

Something in Shane's face gave way completely at that.

His smile, when it came, was trembling and radiant and so nakedly full of feeling that it nearly made Ilya look away just to survive it. Instead, Shane leaned up and pressed a kiss to his mouth—soft and brief and warm with all the things neither of them had the words for yet.

Behind them, Hayden made an aggressively disgusted noise.

"Get a room," he muttered. "There is an entire hospital full of them and somehow you still picked the hallway."

Without taking his eyes off Shane, Ilya lifted one hand and flipped him off.

Jackie laughed. A small thing, wet at the edges. Even David shook his head, though he was smiling now in that dazed, exhausted way people sometimes did when joy arrived too soon after terror for the body to fully trust it.

Then Shane reached for him again.

His hand slid into Ilya's almost absentmindedly, like it belonged there, like the gesture required no thought at all. Their fingers laced together with practiced ease, and Ilya looked down at the sight of it—his own scarred, battered hand wrapped around Shane's careful, familiar one—and felt something deep in his throat pull painfully tight.

“Twenty minutes,” Shane murmured, still smiling in that stunned, disbelieving way, like happiness itself was something he was trying not to startle. “Then you’re meeting my mom.”

Ilya’s heart stumbled hard enough that, for one disorienting second, he thought it might simply stop. Not out of fear—not the old kind, not the kind he had spent most of his life swallowing whole until it calcified inside him—but because the weight of what Shane was offering him was almost too large to hold all at once. Shane wanted him there. Not hidden in the margins, not tucked carefully behind closed doors and half-truths and plausible deniability, not as something private enough to protect and fragile enough to deny, but there, in the bright and terrible intimacy of family, in the center of the room, in front of his mother and his father and the people who had made Shane into the man Ilya loved with a kind of devotion that still frightened him in its scale. He wanted him there as *his*.

“She will be—she will be on drugs,” he said, and even to his own ears his voice sounded thinner than he wanted it to, unsteady in a way that made him feel absurdly young. “Very strong drugs. She might not—”

“She’ll love you anyway,” Shane said, with the kind of certainty Ilya still did not know how to survive. His fingers tightened around his hand, warm and grounding. “Trust me.”

Ilya swallowed, and the movement felt difficult somehow, as though his body was struggling to process too many impossible things at once. “I am very nervous.”

Shane grinned, because of course he did. “Good. You should be. She’s terrifying.” Ilya let out something that was almost a laugh, and Shane’s grin softened immediately, the teasing falling away into something gentler, something unbearably sincere. “I’m kidding,” he said, quieter now. “Well. Mostly.” His thumb moved once over Ilya’s knuckles. “She’s going to love you. Honestly, she already does. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

Ilya couldn’t find the words. Couldn’t find anything except frozen in the impossibility of this moment—this boy, this family, this life that somehow, impossibly, was becoming his.

And that—more than anything—was what undid him.

Because Ilya did not have language for this. Not really. Not for the particular, impossible tenderness of being anticipated by a life he had not let himself believe he could have. Not for the quiet violence of being included. Not for the way Shane said things like that so easily, as if love were not a scarce and conditional resource, as if it were not something that could be withdrawn without warning, as if it were not always one mistake away from vanishing.

And yet here he was, sitting in a freezing hospital waiting room with fluorescent lights that made everyone look tired and half-haunted, surrounded by people who had seen enough of him by now to leave if they wanted to and had, inexplicably, chosen not to.

He looked around the room as if he could not quite trust what he was seeing unless he catalogued it piece by piece.

David was wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand, already halfway lost inside the practical mechanics of care, mentally rearranging furniture and logistics and medication

schedules, trying to solve what could be solved because love, in some people, naturally translated itself into labor. Jackie was leaning into Hayden's space to whisper something that made him snort despite himself, and Hayden—who looked deeply offended by the fact that he had apparently become emotionally attached to any of this—was failing spectacularly to hide the small, stubborn smile pulling at his mouth. There was life here. Messy, ridiculous, exhausted life. Not performative. Not conditional. Just people staying in the room because someone they loved was hurting, and because leaving had never once occurred to them as an option.

And beside him, Shane sat with his hand wrapped around Ilya's like it belonged there, like it had always belonged there, like this was not some extraordinary act of faith but the simplest truth in the world.

He had come to America at seventeen, full of a grief so large it constantly overflowed of his small body—he had spent his whole life since building cages. Beautiful cages, comfortable cages, cages so well-constructed that no one ever guessed the bars were there. For years afterward he had gone on living the only way he knew how: defensively, beautifully, half-starved and half-feral, surrounding himself with noise and bodies and spectacle so that no one—not even himself—would have to look too closely at the ruins underneath. He had made a life out of surviving it. Out of enduring. Out of moving fast enough, talking loud enough, wanting little enough that the ache at the center of him could almost be mistaken for momentum.

But this—this over-air-conditioned waiting room with its bad coffee and stale air and people speaking too softly because fear had made everyone reverent, this hand in his, this family gathering around pain instead of retreating from it, this impossible, ordinary intimacy of being wanted in the room—this was something else entirely. Something he had never learned how to build because it had never been built for him. Something he had wanted for so long, and so wordlessly, that by the time he was old enough to name it he had already taught himself to live without it.

A home, he thought, and the word moved through him with such force it was almost unbearable.

Not a place. Not walls. Not a country. Not an apartment full of expensive things and no softness anywhere in it. Not the echoing, airless mausoleum in Moscow where he had first learned that silence could become a living thing if you fed it enough years. Not any of the sterile spaces he had filled since, all those beautifully curated cages where he had slept alone and called it freedom because the alternative was admitting it was grief.

No.

This.

This hand. This room. This *boy*. These people who were, somehow, beginning to fold him into the fabric of their lives as though there had always been space for him there. As though his presence did not have to be justified by performance. As though he did not have to earn every scrap of tenderness by bleeding for it first.

He lifted Shane's hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to his knuckles, slow and reverent and helplessly full of feeling, and when he looked back up Shane was watching him with that same open, impossible expression—soft and wondering and so full of love that it made something deep inside Ilya go painfully still.

And for the first time in his life, Ilya understood with complete and devastating clarity that what Shane had given him was not simply love, though it was that too, and more of it than Ilya had ever thought one human being could safely hold. It was not only desire, or comfort, or even forgiveness.

It was a reason.

Shane had taken all the hollow, uninhabitable spaces inside Ilya and, with nothing but patience and stubbornness and the terrifying gentleness of being seen clearly and loved anyway, made them feel less like a grave and more like something a person might actually survive living inside.

For most of his life, Ilya had believed that being alone was safer, that loneliness was simply the cost of being who he was, that some people were made to be loved from a distance and left before dawn and never, ever chosen in daylight.

But five hundred miles away from the cage he'd once called a house, five thousand miles away from the country where he had first learned how to disappear inside himself, and fifteen years away from the boy who had once stood in a silent kitchen waiting for a dead woman to start singing again, Ilya found himself sitting in the cold fluorescent middle of a life he had not dared to ask for and realizing, with the force of revelation, that maybe he wasn't just passing through in a world that didn't have a place for him. That he wasn't a ghost haunting his own existence. That maybe he had not been put on this earth only to endure it.

Maybe he had been meant to stay.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this was honestly kind of therapeutic. I gave Ilya the healing I'm still working on for myself lol.

Also I want everyone to know that while writing Ilya and Hayden's relationship, I'm actually picturing Flynn Rider and Maximus from Tangled lmao.

If you'd like to support me, my socials are linked in my [profile](#)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Hi my loves.

So I have heard the people, and what the people wanted was a second chapter. What the people *also* wanted was Yuna's reaction, and that was supposed to be in this one, believe me, it was my full intention. It was actually the whole reason I started writing a second chapter in the first place—I wanted to explore Yuna and Shane's relationship. Buuuut then I also wanted to do a character study on Shane, and that's where I began. And then this got too long.

If I had kept going, this chapter would have been way longer than the first one, or I wouldn't have been able to give everything the love it deserves. So Yuna's reaction will have to wait for chapter three. The good news is that we will have a third chapter!!! (said the author with tears in her beautiful eyes because she gives herself invisible deadlines and gets frustrated when she can't make them, plus she also has tons of papers to do).

Writing this drove me absolutely *nuts*. I honestly believe I lost the point I was trying to make like five times along the way. But I wanted Shane to sound like Shane and not just my voice or Ilya's voice. And where Ilya thinks in images and metaphors, I made Shane think in concrete details and structures. Ilya moves, Shane observes. Ilya acts, Shane waits until he can't wait anymore, because he doesn't feel the way Ilya does. So I tried to make the poetry in this chapter come not from emotional excess, but from the obsessive precision with which i made Shane perceives the world. Which was hard, because I like to write dramatically and with all the emotions I have.

And it was also fucking difficult to make Shane's POV without making it sound—and I say this with all the love I have for him—*boring*. So I really, really hope this is somehow good.

AND, I didn't get to watch the Bruins-Minnesota game tonight because I was finishing this. And what a game it was, apparently. So you're welcome. (And by "you're welcome" I mean "I'm going to need you to appreciate this because my priorities are clearly in order.")

Also, can somebody from the native English speaking world tell me if the short for Hayden is Hayd, Hayds, or Hays? Because I actually don't understand how you all shorten things.

As always, thank you for reading. Thank you for commenting. I may have lied when I said I respond to every comment—I have over a thousand in my inbox, and while I absolutely love it and it drives me crazy to have them and not respond (if by now you haven't realized how much I love to talk by my long-ass notes, I don't know what to tell you), I actually get overwhelmed and I don't have the physical time to do it (that's why I

invite all of you to write me on X if you really want to tell me something or have an idea you want me to write about or anything at all or if you want to just talk, I'll 100/100 answer there). But I do read every single one, and I cherish them all. What I love the most is when you tell me your favorite parts (yes, I'm a little narcissistic, what can we do). You have no idea how happy I get every time I get an email saying someone left a new comment. Hope you enjoy this! ❤️

Come say hi on [Twitter](#) if you want!

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

For the majority of Shane Hollander's life, he has been different.

He learned this early. Not from cruelty but from the way people looked at him. The pause before they spoke. The glance they exchanged when they thought he wasn't watching. The questions they asked that weren't quite questions, the ones that circled around what they really wanted to know: *What's wrong with him?*

Nothing was wrong with him. He knew this, somewhere, in the part of his brain that was logical and unshakeable. But knowing it and feeling it were two different things, and what he felt was the weight of every pause, every glance, every question he couldn't quite answer the way people expected him to.

He learned to compensate. Learned to watch. Learned to catalog the faces and sounds that people made and the way their bodies moved when they were happy or sad or confused or angry. He learned to mimic them, carefully, in the mirror of his childhood bathroom, standing on the cool tile and making his face into shapes that didn't come naturally.

He was seven years old the first time his mother caught him.

What are you doing? she asked, and he told her the truth: *Practicing.*

She didn't ask what. She just watched him for a long moment, her head tilted, and then she said: *You don't have to practice being yourself, Shane.*

But he wasn't practicing being himself. He was practicing being someone else. Someone who laughed at the right time, even when he didn't understand the joke. Someone who knew what to say when a teammate was crying, even when he couldn't feel what they were feeling. Someone who could look people in the eye without counting the seconds, without calculating whether he'd held it too long or not long enough, without his skin prickling with the effort of it.

He was seven years old and he already understood that the face he was born with wasn't the one people wanted to see.

So he built a new one. Carefully. Methodically. A face for every occasion. A smile for the cameras, a frown for when someone got hurt, a neutral expression for when he didn't know

what to feel. He catalogued them, filed them away, pulled them out when he needed them. It became automatic after a while. He stopped thinking about it. He stopped remembering that the face he wore wasn't really his.

And then he tried to be enough.

He learned this in the way his mother's face lit up when he scored his first goal, like his success was her oxygen. Learned it in the way his father's hand would find his shoulder after a loss, steady and sure, never disappointed, just there — and how that was almost worse, somehow, because how do you live up to a love that asks for nothing?

His father loved him steadily, loved him for who he was. His mother loved him for that too, but there was something aspirational in the way she looked at him, as if there were no limit to what he might become, as if some brighter version of him was always still unfolding just ahead.

So he learned that being enough meant being *everything*.

He was not just their son. He was the future tense of their lives. The proof that everything they had crossed, left behind, worked for, and endured would continue into something stable and good and recognizably theirs. There was no one else to carry it forward. No one else to become what all of this had been for.

There was no room for failure. Not because his parents would punish him—they never did, not once, not ever—but because they had given him so much. The early morning drives to practice. The equipment that cost too much. The way his father sat through every game, every shift, every season, never missing a single one even when his job wanted him to travel, even when it would have been easier to stay home.

His parents gave him everything.

So Shane learned to give everything back.

He learned to be perfect. To be the golden boy, the one who never cracked under pressure. He learned to smile for cameras even when his ears were ringing from the hit he'd taken. Learned to answer questions even when his brain was so full of noise he couldn't hear his own voice. Learned to be the son they deserved — the one who didn't cause trouble, didn't ask for too much, didn't need anything they couldn't give.

He learned control before he learned anything else.

Before he learned to skate, before he learned to shoot, before he learned to read the ice like a language only he could speak — he learned to control himself. Every part of himself. The parts that were too loud and the parts that were too quiet. The parts that didn't understand why people laughed at certain jokes, why they expected certain responses, why his face never seemed to make the right shape at the right time.

He controlled his body too. Every calorie, every meal, every bite. He ate the same breakfast every day for fifteen years. The same rotation, the same portions, the same timing. He knew

how many grams of protein he needed, how many carbs, how much fat. He knew what his body weighed at the start of the season, at the All-Star break, at the playoffs. He knew what it felt like when he was off by even a pound, even a fraction of a pound.

But it was never just about hockey. Or at least, not *only* about hockey.

It was about the relief of subtraction. The quiet satisfaction of denying himself something and surviving it. The way hunger, when chosen, could almost feel clean. Like discipline. Like proof. And there was a kind of victory in it, too, one he would never have admitted out loud. In the hollow feeling of his stomach at the end of the day, in the sharp, empty lightness of having eaten less than he wanted and needing nothing more. In looking at a plate and deciding, with perfect certainty, that this was enough, even when some deeper, more instinctive part of him still reached for more.

Every smaller portion, every skipped indulgence, every moment in which he overruled the softer, hungrier part of himself felt like a win. A private one. As if each act of restraint proved that he was still stronger than his own body, stronger than appetite, stronger than want. And maybe that was the part he liked best: the feeling that he could take something as basic and human as hunger and bend it until it obeyed him.

If he was tired, he could outwork it. If he was hungry, he could ignore it. If something in him wanted too much—too much comfort, too much softness, too much wanting in general—then he could starve that too.

Pain did not scare him nearly as much as disorder did.

And if being good meant being disciplined, and being disciplined meant learning how to live with a little discomfort, a little emptiness, a little ache under the skin, a little pain, then fine. He would live with it. He would live with all of it.

He wanted control. He wanted a body that never betrayed him, never asked for too much, never reached for things it should not want. He wanted to be clean all the way through, polished down to the bone, until there was nothing messy or excessive or shameful left in him at all.

His teammates called him obsessive. They said it like a joke, like a compliment, like a criticism he wasn't supposed to hear. He didn't care. Control was the point. Control was what kept the noise manageable, what kept the edges of him where they were supposed to be, what kept him from becoming someone too unruly to contain. If he controlled what went into his body, what his body did, what his face looked like when people looked at him, then maybe nothing could surprise him. Nothing could catch him off guard.

And maybe, if he stayed disciplined enough, careful enough, empty enough, even wanting itself would not be able to ambush him.

He controlled his schedule down to the minute. Wake at six, stretch, breakfast at six-thirty, gym at seven, skate at nine, video review at eleven, lunch at twelve, nap at one, pre-game meal at four, game at seven, post-game recovery at ten, bed at eleven. Every day the same. Every day predictable. Every day safe.

He built his life like a house of cards. Every card in its place. Every edge aligned. One wrong move and it would all come down.

He knew this about himself. Knew that he needed the structure the way other people needed air. Knew that without it, his brain would fill with noise—too much noise, noise that didn't stop, noise that made it impossible to think, impossible to breathe, impossible to be the person everyone expected him to be. The routines were walls. The rituals were doors. He built them carefully, maintained them obsessively, and inside the fortress he built, he was safe.

And then there was hockey.

Because if structure was the thing that kept the rest of his life from splintering apart, then hockey was the place where that structure became something more than survival. It was the one place where the way his mind worked—its precision, its rigidity, its relentless need for order—did not make him difficult or strange or too much. It made him brilliant.

Hockey did not ask him to be softer, easier, more legible. It asked him to notice everything. To anticipate. To calculate. To trust the same instincts that made the rest of the world feel so loud and impossible. And for the first time in his life, the things that made him feel out of step everywhere else fit perfectly somewhere.

On the ice, there were rules. Predictable rules. The puck moved in straight lines unless someone changed its path. Players moved in patterns, systems, structures he could read before they even happened. He knew where the puck was going to be before it got there. Knew where his teammates were going to be. Knew where the defense was going to be. The ice was a grid, and the grid was knowable, and Shane could spend hours inside that knowing without once having to think about what his face was doing, what his body was doing, whether he was saying the right thing or making the right expression or taking up the right amount of space.

On the ice, he was king.

Not because he was loud or aggressive or the kind of player who demanded attention. Because he was right. He was always right. The puck went where he wanted it to go. The game moved at his speed. Players ten years older, twenty pounds heavier, couldn't touch him because he was already three moves ahead, already gone, already somewhere they hadn't thought to look.

On the ice, the thing that made him different—the way his brain worked, the way he saw patterns where other people saw chaos, the way he could process information faster than anyone else—that thing wasn't a liability. It was a weapon. It was why he was the best. It was why he was captain. It was why his mother's face lit up when she watched him play, why his father never missed a game, why the commentators said his name with something that sounded like awe.

On the ice, he wasn't different. He was *exceptional*.

He poured himself into it. All of himself. The parts that didn't fit anywhere else, the parts that were too much or not enough, the parts that confused people and made them look at him sideways—he poured them all into the ice. The ice took them. The ice held them.

The ice gave him back something that looked enough like what everyone expected him to be.

And for a long time, that felt like a kind of answer.

If he could be extraordinary there, maybe it would make up for all the places where he felt strange, or difficult, or slightly misaligned with the rest of the world. If he could be useful enough, brilliant enough, disciplined enough, then maybe he would not need the things other people seemed to need so naturally. Maybe he would not need softness, or ease, or intimacy, or the terrifying vulnerability of being fully known by another person. Maybe excellence could replace all of that. Maybe success could fill in whatever hollow place the rest of his life kept circling without ever quite reaching.

He was good. He was *so good*. He was the best. And for a long time—for most of his life—he let himself believe that was supposed to be enough. That hockey could be the whole shape of a life. That if he won enough games, scored enough goals, lifted enough trophies, then the rest of it would quiet down. The loneliness. The confusion. The wanting. The hunger. The way he sometimes felt like he was watching his own life from the outside, like he was moving through it beautifully and efficiently and without ever fully arriving inside it.

He thought that if he gave enough of himself to hockey, hockey would spare him from having to want anything else.

Then Ilya Rozanov happened.

Ilya was the opposite of control.

He was chaos in human form. He played like the rules did not apply to him—like the ice was his and he was only letting everyone else borrow it for a while. He did not follow systems. Did not stick to structure. He moved the way water moved, finding gaps where there should not have been any, slipping through impossible spaces, doing things that should not have worked and somehow always did.

He was unpredictable in ways that made Shane's brain short-circuit.

Shane had spent his whole life learning to read the ice. Learning to see the invisible architecture of a game before it revealed itself to anyone else. He could tell you where the puck was going to be three moves before it got there, what the defense was about to do before they had fully committed to it, where a lane would open half a second before it existed. He saw hockey the way a chess player saw a board—every piece in relation to every other, every motion part of a larger, legible design.

But Ilya did not play chess. He played something else entirely.

He would fake left and go right, then fake right and go left, then stay exactly where no one expected him to stay, as if he operated according to a logic Shane could feel was there but

could not quite translate. Watching him made something in Shane's brain stutter. Not because Ilya was careless, but because he was not. There was intention in everything he did. Shane just could not map it fast enough to get there before him.

It was infuriating. It was unsettling. It was the first time in his life that Shane looked at something on the ice and did not immediately understand what was going to happen next.

He hated it. He loved it. He couldn't stop thinking about it.

Ilya was the first thing that ever made a crack in the fortress Shane had built around himself. The first thing that made him curious about what might exist outside of control, outside of caution, outside of the narrow, overmanaged shape he had spent his whole life forcing himself into. The first thing that made him suspect that control and safety were not, in fact, the same thing. That maybe letting go would not always feel like dying. That maybe sometimes it could feel like relief.

He was eighteen years old when he first kissed Ilya Rozanov.

He did not plan it. He never planned anything with Ilya. That was the whole point. Ilya existed outside of planning, outside of structure, outside of every rule Shane had built his life around. He was the one variable Shane could never quite account for, the one equation that refused to solve cleanly, the one thing in his carefully ordered world that made no sense and yet kept pulling him back with a force Shane could not seem to resist.

And then, somehow, impossibly, Ilya became the easiest person Shane had ever known.

It was the way he spoke. Direct. Blunt. Unembellished. No hidden meanings, no social trapdoors, no endless second-guessing over what he had really meant or whether Shane had answered correctly. When Ilya said something, he meant it. When he was angry, he said he was angry. When he wanted something, he said he wanted it. When he looked at Shane and said *come here* or *stay* or *again*, there was no ambiguity, no second-guessing, no hours of lying awake afterward trying to figure out what he'd missed.

Shane did not have to perform for him.

He did not have to calculate the right expression, or monitor his tone, or think too hard about whether he had held eye contact too long or not long enough. Ilya did not seem to care about any of the things other people always seemed to notice. He said what he meant and expected Shane to do the same, and in that expectation there was something almost unbearably kind.

Ilya gave him instructions. Explicit ones. *Come here. Lie down. Turn around. Look at me.* And the relief of it—the sheer, humiliating, overwhelming relief—was like nothing Shane had ever felt before. He did not have to guess. Did not have to read between the lines or search someone else's face for cues he might misread. He did not have to perform competence in a language that had never come naturally to him. Ilya just told him. Clear and simple.

And in return, Shane could be direct too. Could say *I want this* or *I don't want that* or *harder* or *slower* or *yes* without having to soften it into something more acceptable,

more palatable, more easily received. With Ilya, he did not have to manage anyone else's comfort before he was allowed to have a need of his own.

He could just exist there for a little while without editing himself first.

That was what terrified him most. Not only how good it felt, but how natural it was. How, for the first time in his life, he did not have to think about what his face was doing, because Ilya was not looking at him the way other people looked at him. Not like he was something to be interpreted correctly, or handled carefully, or quietly adjusted into a more legible shape. Ilya looked at him like he was something to be understood, not decoded. Like Shane was not a problem to solve. Not someone slightly off in a way that needed managing. Just Shane.

So he kept coming back. For ten years, he kept coming back.

Because whatever this was with Ilya—whatever impossible, badly timed, badly hidden thing that had always existed between them—it was the only place in Shane's life where being himself did not feel quite so exhausting. The only place where he did not feel, all the time, like he was being subtly steered toward a version of himself that was easier for everyone else to hold. The only place where wanting something did not immediately feel like a flaw that needed to be corrected.

But then he would think about his parents. About their sacrifice. About the life they had built around him with such careful, loving hands. About everything they had given him, and everything he still felt he owed in return. And so he learned to be small in all the ways that mattered. To take up less space. To want less. To fold the parts of himself that did not fit into a box labeled *normal* so tightly inward that, on his better days, he could almost convince himself they were not there at all.

Almost.

Because the wanting never actually went away. It only changed shape. Became quieter. More private. Learned to live in the spaces between heartbeats, in the seconds before sleep, in the strange suspended moments where his eyes would catch on something—someone—across the ice and hold there for just a fraction too long before he forced himself to look away.

He looked away for years.

He looked away because he was already different. Already the Asian kid in a league that did not have many of them—the one who got the questions about *where are you really from*, the one whose face was too soft for hockey but whose body was too hard for anything else. Already the one who could not always tolerate the noise of the locker room, who sometimes had to sit in his stall with his hands pressed hard against his ears under the pretense of fixing his gear, pretending the sound of thirty men shouting was not splintering something inside him. Already the one who ate the same food every day because trying something new felt less like spontaneity and more like standing at the edge of a cliff, because predictability was not preference so much as survival, even if his teammates thought it was strange. Already the one who was too Asian for North America and too North American for Asia, too pretty to be a real hockey player and too masculine to be anything but, who never quite fit anywhere, who

was always performing some version of himself he hoped the world would find easier to understand.

He could not be gay too.

That would be one thing too many. One more way to be wrong. One more way to disappoint.

Because wanting Ilya did not feel, to Shane, like something beautiful at first. It did not feel brave or romantic or inevitable. It felt like failure. Like proof that there was still some part of him he had not disciplined into submission, some part of himself still reaching in the wrong direction no matter how carefully he tried to train it out of existence.

And Ilya—God, Ilya—made it worse in the most unfair way possible, because there was nothing about him that looked shameful. Nothing hidden. Nothing diminished. He wanted things with his whole chest. He moved through the world like wanting was not a sin, like taking up space was not something a person had to apologize for, like desire itself was not something that had to be starved down into something quieter and easier to contain.

He smoked when he felt like it. Ate what he wanted. Drank what he wanted. Never seemed to measure or portion or deny himself with the same grim precision Shane had built his whole life around. He did not seem ruled by discipline in the same punishing, joyless way. And still—still—he had that body. That effortless, infuriating body. Still he moved the way he moved on the ice, all instinct and grace and impossible control that somehow never looked like control at all.

And maybe the cruelest part was that Ilya could want men and still, if he wanted to, could choose otherwise. Could still reach for the easier life. Could still, in some version of the future, step sideways into something simpler, something safer, something the world would recognize without flinching. Shane could not. *He had tried*. Tried to bury it, starve it, out-discipline it into something survivable.

He had spent years trying to carve himself into something clean and acceptable, and Ilya, apparently, just existed. Wanted what he wanted. Took up space. Broke rules. And somehow remained beautiful anyway.

Shane had never known how to do that.

Ilya was excess in every form Shane had spent his whole life trying to avoid. Too loud. Too impulsive. Too hungry. Too alive in ways that made him feel both fascinated and vaguely threatened, like standing too close to a fire and realizing, with some detached part of himself, that he might let it burn him anyway.

That was what Ilya showed the world, at least. The swagger. The recklessness. The smirk that said he did not care what anyone thought of him. The cigarettes and the late nights and the careless, infuriating ease with which he seemed to move through his own body, through the world, through desire itself. The version of himself that made it seem like nothing touched him for very long.

But over the years, Shane started noticing the things that did.

Not because Ilya told him, and never in ways anyone else would have noticed. But because, around Shane, Ilya was always a little less guarded than he meant to be. And once Shane noticed that, he could not stop noticing.

He noticed the things Ilya remembered after pretending not to care. The small adjustments he made before Shane even had to ask. The way he seemed to sense, almost instinctively, when something in Shane was beginning to fray, and shifted without ever making a show of it. The way he could be so infuriatingly loud with everyone else and then, somehow, impossibly gentle in private.

He noticed, too, that Ilya was funny in a way no one ever gave him credit for. Not performatively funny, not loud about it, but sharp and strange and dry in ways that made something helpless in Shane loosen every time. He could make Shane laugh in the middle of things that should not have been funny at all, could pull him out of himself with one muttered comment, one look, one perfectly timed deadpan observation.

And he was thoughtful. Embarrassingly, quietly thoughtful. In ways that seemed almost incompatible with the version of himself he insisted on showing everyone else. There was a softness to him Shane only ever caught in fragments—in the way he adjusted his grip so carefully when he touched him, in the way he never pushed when Shane went quiet, in the way he asked for things directly but never cruelly, always leaving room for no.

There was something almost unbearably gentle underneath all that wildness. Something warm. Something careful. Something that felt less like chaos and more like concealment. And threaded through all of it, always, there was something else Shane could never quite name.

A sadness, maybe. Not a dramatic sadness. Not something visible enough to point at. Just a kind of quiet gravity that seemed to follow Ilya everywhere, even in his best moments, even when he was smiling, even when he was beautiful. Even when he was playing like the whole world belonged to him. Shane never knew exactly what to do with that feeling, only that it made something inside him ache in a way he did not entirely understand.

It made him want to be gentler with Ilya than he knew how to be with anyone.

To him, Ilya had always seemed like the kind of person the rules bent around. Untouchable. The sort of beautiful that did not need permission to exist. Shane, on the other hand, had spent most of his life trying to become less. Because his parents had given him everything, and the least he could do in return was give them the life they were supposed to get from a son like him. The wife. The kids. The house with the yard and the dog and the Christmas cards with everyone smiling, everyone normal.

That was the deal. That was what he owed them.

So he looked away. Every time. For ten years. Even when it ate him alive. Even when he was so fucking lonely he could barely stand it, even when some part of him kept reaching anyway, he looked away

Until he couldn't anymore.

For the majority of Shane Hollander's life, he has been hungry.

Hungry for food he wouldn't let himself eat. Hungry for rest he wouldn't let himself take. Hungry for the man he wouldn't let himself want. Hungry for a life where he didn't have to perform, didn't have to translate himself into a language other people could understand, didn't have to fold himself smaller and smaller until he fit into spaces that were never built for him.

He had spent his whole life hungry. For control. For perfection. For the love he thought he had to earn. He had starved himself of everything that wasn't necessary, everything that wasn't safe, everything that might make him one thing too many, one difference too far, one disappointment too much to bear.

He had been hungry for so long he had forgotten what it felt like to be full. Forgotten, maybe, that wanting something did not automatically make him selfish. Or weak. Or wrong.

But after twenty years of denying himself everything that felt dangerous, he finally chose one thing he wanted and did not look away.

The spaghetti had been the first thing gone wrong in his night. The first rupture of his routine.

But Jackie had been so kind. So genuinely happy when he finally said yes after months of saying no. *Hayden's making his famous sauce*, she'd texted, and Shane had stared at the message for ten minutes, his thumb hovering over the keyboard, running through every possible outcome. The noise of their house. The smell of garlic that would cling to his clothes. The texture of noodles cooked someone else's way. The questions he wouldn't know how to answer.

But he went anyway. Because Hayden and Jackie were the only people in Montreal who didn't treat him like a brand. Didn't treat him like something to be managed or marketed or handled with care. They treated him like Shane. Like the person who showed up at their house on game nights and let their kids climb all over him. Like the person who helped Jackie in the kitchen even though he was terrible at it, who let her teach him recipes he'd never make on his own, who stood there and nodded and tried to remember the steps even though his brain was already full, even though the measuring and the timing and the textures were already too much. He tried. For her. Because she never made him feel strange for eating the same thing every day, for needing things a certain way, for being the way he was.

Because Hayden was the only one who noticed when Shane hadn't eaten. Who slid a protein bar into his bag before a game without saying anything. Who started bringing two of everything on road trips—two water bottles, two energy gels, two bananas—and leaving the second one in Shane's stall like it was an accident, like he'd just grabbed too much, like it wasn't carefully, quietly intentional.

Hayden was the one who sat next to him on the plane, every single flight, no matter who else wanted the seat. Who learned to read the small shifts in Shane's expression—the tightening

around his eyes, the way his jaw went rigid—and knew, before Shane knew himself, when the noise was getting too loud. Who pulled out his headphones and handed them over without a word, didn't make Shane ask, didn't make him explain.

He was the one who stood between Shane and the cameras after a bad loss, his broad shoulders blocking the flashes, his voice cutting in with some joke or deflection before the reporters could ask the questions Shane couldn't answer. The one who found him in the tunnel after games when the noise of the arena was still ringing in his ears, when his hands were shaking too much to untie his skates, and crouched down and did it for him. The one who sat with him in the equipment room afterward, in the dark, saying nothing, just being there, until Shane's breathing evened out and the world stopped spinning.

He was the one who told the rookies, quietly, firmly, that they didn't ask the captain personal questions. That they didn't touch his stuff. That they didn't make jokes about what he ate or didn't eat. He made it sound like a rule, like a code, like something any good teammate would know. But Shane knew. Knew that Hayden had made himself a wall between Shane and the parts of the world that pressed too hard.

He didn't know how Hayden knew. Didn't know how Hayden always seemed to be there, always seemed to know what Shane needed before Shane knew it himself. Maybe it was years of watching. Years of paying attention. Years of being the one person in that locker room who looked at Shane and saw someone who needed protecting, not someone who needed fixing.

They were the ones who invited him over on off-days, when the kids were at Jackie's parents and the house was quiet, when Hayden would cook too much food and Jackie would pour wine Shane wouldn't drink and they'd sit on the couch watching games they'd already seen, Hayden providing commentary, Jackie falling asleep against his shoulder, and Shane—Shane would sit there and watch them and feel something he didn't have a name for. Something that wasn't quite loneliness and wasn't quite belonging. Something that was both.

He didn't know why they kept inviting him. Why they kept texting, kept calling, kept showing up at his door with tupperware containers full of food they knew he wouldn't eat, just in case. Why they made him sit on their couch and watch their TV and let their kids call him *Uncle Shane* even though he wasn't their uncle—he did love those kids like crazy, though—wasn't anything, was just the strange captain who couldn't look people in the eye and sometimes disappeared into bathrooms when the noise got too loud.

But they did. They kept inviting. Kept calling. Kept showing up. And Shane kept saying yes, eventually, after saying no enough times to be polite, after calculating the cost and the risk and the possibility of failure. He kept saying yes because they were the closest thing he had to a family in this city. Because Hayden was the first person who ever sat next to him on the bench and didn't ask why he wasn't talking, just sat there, quiet, *enough*. Because Jackie was the first person who ever looked at his hands shaking and didn't say anything, just put a cup of warm tea in them and sat down beside him.

He went to their house more than anyone else's. More than any teammate's, more than any friend's, more than anywhere that wasn't his own. Because their house was the only place outside his own where the walls didn't close in. Where the noise was manageable. Where the

expectations were simple. He didn't have to perform so much. Didn't have to be the captain, the best player in the league. He could just be Shane, and that was enough for them.

He didn't understand it, but he was grateful nonetheless. Grateful in a way he didn't have words for, in a way he didn't know how to express. He'd tried, once. Said something, awkward and halting, about how Hayden didn't have to do all that, about how he was fine, about how Hayden should worry about his own game, his own life, his own—

Hayden had cut him off with a hand on his shoulder. A squeeze. A look.

You're my captain, he'd said. But you're also my friend.

A friend. Shane had never had one of those before. Not in the way Hayden was.

So he went. Even when the thought of eating someone else's food made his stomach turn. Even when the noise of their kitchen, the clatter of pans and the hum of the dishwasher and the sound of Hayden's laugh, was already starting to press against his skull. He went because they asked. Because they wanted him there. Because he loved them.

But the food was really a problem.

He sat at their kitchen island, watching Hayden stir a pot of sauce that smelled like garlic, tomatoes and some sharp spices that were making his throat close up. Jackie was telling a story about work—something about a deadline, a client who changed his mind three times—and Shane nodded in the right places, made the right sounds at the right intervals, smiled when she laughed. He was doing great.

His friend put a plate in front of him. The noodles were glossy, coated in sauce that was too red, too thick. The smell was stronger up close.

Shane picked up his fork. Took a bite. Chewed. Swallowed.

The texture was wrong. Too soft. Cooked a minute too long. The sauce was acidic in a way that made his stomach turn. He took another bite anyway. Kept chewing. Kept swallowing. Kept smiling.

It's great, really, thank you.

Hayden was watching him. Not in the way other people watched, waiting for him to be wrong, to be strange, to be different. Just watching. Like he was checking. Quietly. The way he always did.

"You don't have to finish it," Hayden said. "We've got leftovers. Or I can make you something else."

Shane shook his head. "No, it's—it's good. I'm fine."

Jackie reached over and put her hand on his arm. Just for a second. Just a squeeze. "You know we don't care if you don't eat it, right honey? We just wanted you here."

He knew. *He knew*. But knowing and feeling were two different things, and what he *felt* was the weight of every meal he'd ever refused, every invitation he'd ever declined, every time he'd said no to someone who was just trying to be kind. He was trying so hard to be different. To be easier. To be the kind of person who could eat spaghetti at his friends' kitchen table without his body treating it like a threat.

He took another bite.

The noodles slid down his throat, too soft, too warm, the wrong shape, the wrong texture. His stomach clenched. But he would finish this plate. He would smile and say thank you and help Jackie clear the dishes and sit on their couch and watch the game and be *normal*. He could do this. He had done harder things. He had played through a separated shoulder in the playoffs. He had stood at a podium and answered questions about a loss that made him want to disappear. He could eat a plate of spaghetti.

His phone buzzed.

He ignored it. Jackie was mid-sentence. He could check it later. He was being *normal*.

It buzzed again.

And again.

Something cold settled in his chest.

"Sorry," he heard himself say, already reaching for his phone, already pulling it out of his pocket, already knowing—somehow knowing—that something was wrong.

His father's name was on the screen. Three missed calls. A single text.

Call me

Shane didn't remember standing. Didn't remember excusing himself. Didn't remember Hayden's voice, Jackie's hand on his arm, the way the kitchen light caught on the edge of the counter as he turned. There was just the phone in his hand and his father's voice in his ear and words that didn't make sense, words that slid off his brain like water off ice.

Your mom. Plane. Emergency landing. Montreal. Hospital. Surgery.

The call ended. Or maybe he hung up. He didn't remember. The phone was in his pocket. His legs were moving. The hallway stretched in front of him, familiar and strange all at once. He knew this house. He had walked this hallway a hundred times. He knew where the bathroom was—the guest bathroom, the one Jackie had decorated in soft grays, the one with the towels that smelled like lavender.

He didn't remember opening the door. But suddenly he was inside. The door was closed behind him. The lock clicked. The tile was cold through his socks. He knew this bathroom. It was safe. It was supposed to be safe.

He sat down. Or maybe he fell. His knees folded, his back hit the wall, and the cold spread up his spine, into his fingers, into his lungs.

The bathroom was quiet. Too quiet. The kind of quiet that pressed against his eardrums, that made the blood rushing in his ears sound like a waterfall. The light was too bright, the fixtures too white.

He pressed his palms flat against the floor. The texture of the grout between the tiles was rough under his fingers, catching on the ridges of his fingerprints. He catalogued it. The way the cold seeped into his skin. The way the tiles were perfectly aligned, each one exactly the same distance from the next. The way the grout lines formed a grid, a pattern, something he could follow.

His mother was hurt.

His mother.

His mother was on a plane. A plane that fell out of the sky.

The thought didn't fit. It was the wrong shape, the wrong texture, the wrong everything. His mother was supposed to be in his apartment. She was supposed to be waiting for him on his couch, her feet tucked under her, her phone in her hand, scrolling through something she'd send him later with a string of emojis. She was supposed to be there when he walked through the door.

That was the plan. That was what was supposed to happen.

Because Yuna had insisted. *Go, go, enjoy your dinner with your friends. I'll let myself in. I want to see your place; I want to put my things away. Go, Shane. Have fun. Be young.*

She'd said *be young* like he was still a boy. Like she still saw the seven-year-old who needed his apples sliced thin, who couldn't bite into a whole one. Like she still saw the boy he used to be, underneath the man he'd built himself into.

Go, Shane. Have fun. Be young.

So he'd gone. He'd said yes to the dinner he always said no to. He'd sat at Hayden's kitchen island and watched sauce bubble in a pot. He'd taken a bite of spaghetti he didn't want to eat. And somewhere in the sky above Montreal, his mother was on a plane that was falling down.

Because she was coming to see him.

His breath caught. His lungs squeezed. The room tilted, or maybe it was him, maybe he was the one tilting, the floor tilting, the walls tilting, the whole world tilting.

His mother, who still texted him after every game. *Good game, baby. So proud of you.* Even when he lost. Even when he played badly. Even when he didn't deserve it. *So proud of you. Always.* Every time.

His mother, who learned to skate when she was thirty years old because she wanted to understand what made her quiet son so happy. Who fell more times than she could count, who bruised her knees and her palms and her pride, who got back up every single time because that was what Yuna Hollander did. She got up. She always got up. And when she finally made it around the rink without falling, she'd looked at him with her face bright and said *Did you see me, Shane? Did you see?* like she was the one who needed his approval, like she was the child and he was the parent, and he'd laughed and said yes, yes, he'd seen, and she was perfect, she was beautiful, she was so good, and she'd hugged him so tight he thought his ribs might crack.

His mom, who sat in the stands for every game. Every shift. Every season. From the tiny rinks in British Columbia where the ice was always too soft and the bleachers smelled like old popcorn, to the big arenas with the luxury boxes and the cameras and the thousands of faces he couldn't pick out of the crowd—but he always knew where she was. He always found her. Section 104, row 12, seat 4. The same seat for every home game, for years, because she'd figured out which one gave her the best view and she'd never let anyone else sit there. *That's my seat*, she'd tell ushers who didn't know her, who couldn't understand why this tiny Asian woman was so fierce about a piece of plastic in a stadium full of empty chairs. *That's my son out there.*

His mom, who packed his lunches when he was a kid. Who woke up before the sun to make sure everything was exactly the way he needed it. The sandwich cut diagonally because he said it tasted better that way. The apple sliced thin because he couldn't bite into a whole one, the texture was wrong, the sound was wrong, and she never once told him he was being difficult. She just sliced the apples. Every day. For years. Until he was too old for packed lunches and she had to learn to let go of that too.

His mom, who never once made him feel strange for needing things to be a certain way. For being too quiet, too still, too strange. She never said *what's wrong with you* the way other people did. She never looked at him like he was a puzzle to solve or a problem to fix. She just looked at him. Like he was hers. Like he was exactly who he was supposed to be.

His mom, who grabbed strangers by the arm and pointed at him on the ice, her face lit up like Christmas morning, *that's my boy, do you see him, that's my Shane*. Like every goal he scored was air in her lungs. Like she had given him everything, every early morning, every dollar, every hour of her life, and she would do it all again, a thousand times over, because he was hers and she was his and that was the only math that mattered.

He pressed his forehead into his knees. The tile was cold against his skin. The grout lines were rough under his palms. He counted them. One, two, three, four, five, across the width of his hand. Six, seven, eight, nine, ten, back to his wrist.

He wanted his mom.

But his mom was hurt. His mom was on a plane that fell out of the sky. A plane she took because she was coming to see him. She was coming to Montreal instead of Ottawa because she missed him, because she hadn't seen him in three weeks, because she was his mother and three weeks was too long to go without wrapping her arms around her son.

His mom was on a table somewhere, with doctors cutting into her body. Her leg, broken. Her spleen, gone. Her blood, spilling out of her until someone else had to pour it back in.

He wanted his mom. He was twenty-seven years old and he wanted his mother to come find him, to sit down on this cold floor next to him, to put her arms around him and hold him the way she used to, when he was small enough to fit against her chest, when her heartbeat was the only sound that could quiet the noise in his head.

But she wasn't coming. She was the one who needed finding now.

His phone was in his hand. He didn't remember picking it up. His thumb was moving, scrolling through contacts he couldn't see through the tears, looking for something, someone, anyone—

Hayden.

Hayden was in the kitchen. Hayden was right there. Hayden would come. Hayden would sit on this floor with him, would put his hand on Shane's back, would say something that might help.

But Hayden didn't understand. Hayden was good, Hayden was kind, Hayden was the best friend Shane had ever had. But Hayden didn't understand that the questions made it worse. That the kindness made it worse. That when Shane's brain broke like this, when the world collapsed and he couldn't find the ground, what he needed was someone who already knew. Someone who didn't need him to explain. Someone who had seen the broken parts, the strange parts, the parts that didn't fit, and had stayed anyway.

Ilya.

His thumb stopped.

Ilya's name was there. Under the nickname that was stupid and private and his. *Lily*. Because it was theirs. Because no one else would understand.

He'd never called him first. Not once in ten years. He waited. He always waited. He let Ilya call, let Ilya text, let Ilya be the one to reach out, because reaching out meant wanting, and wanting meant needing, and needing meant he was not enough on his own.

But he couldn't wait now. Couldn't be careful now. Couldn't be the captain, the one who never cracked. His mother was hurt. His mother was hurt and he was sitting on a bathroom floor and he couldn't move and couldn't breathe and he needed—

He needed Ilya.

He pressed the call button before he could think about what it meant.

What are you doing, a voice in his head screamed. You can't call him. You can't. What are you going to say? He's going to know. He's going to see right through you. He's going to—

The phone rang just once.

"Hollander?"

Ilya's voice. Already there. Already *here*. Like he'd been waiting. Like he'd known.

And Shane talked. Or maybe he didn't—maybe the words came out without him, spilled out of his mouth like water from a cracked glass, his mother, the plane, the hospital, his father driving, his legs numb, the tiles cold, the buzzing in his skin. He didn't know what he said. Didn't know if it made sense. But Ilya listened. Ilya always listened.

Ilya told him to breathe. Ilya counted. Inhale, one, two, three, four. Hold. Exhale, one, two, three, four, five, six.

Ilya told him everything would be okay.

She is going to be okay, Ilya said. She is strong. Like her son.

Shane wanted to believe him. Needed to believe him. So he held onto the words. Wrapped himself in them. Let them be the only thing that mattered.

You can move. You are moving. You are going to stand up. You are going to unlock that bathroom door. You are going to let Hayden know what happened. And then you are going to let him drive you to the hospital. One step at a time.

Ilya said everything would be okay. His mother would be okay. Everything would be okay. And the only thing Shane needed to do was move. One foot in front of the other. Tell Hayden what happened. Which hospital. And then—then he could shut down. Then he could go somewhere quiet, somewhere safe, somewhere he could manage his emotions better. Then no one would see him cry.

He said okay. He didn't know if he said it out loud or just in his head. But Ilya heard. Ilya always heard.

He was standing. He didn't remember standing. His legs were unsteady, his hands still shaking, but he was standing. He was moving. He unlocked the door. Pulled it open.

And then the call was over. Or Shane hung up. Or Ilya did. The phone was just—gone. In his pocket. On the floor. Somewhere. It didn't matter.

Hayden was there. Jackie was there. Their faces were blurred, their voices far away, but they were there. Shane opened his mouth. The words came out. He didn't know if they were the right words. His mother. The plane. The hospital. *Sacre-Coeur*. He needed to go. He needed to—

Jackie was putting a coat on him. His coat. When had she gotten his coat? Her hands were steady, gentle, pulling the fabric over his shoulders, zipping it up. Hayden was saying something, his voice low and urgent, but Shane couldn't—he couldn't—

One, two, three, four, five. Start again. One, two, three—

They were moving. Down the hallway. Through the kitchen. Past the plate of spaghetti still sitting on the island, the sauce congealing, the noodles cold. Out the door. The night air hit his face, cold and sharp, and he welcomed it. The cold was something he understood. The cold was predictable.

Hayden was opening the car door. Shane was sitting down. The seatbelt clicked. The engine started. And then they were moving, the lights of Montreal blurring past the window, and Shane watched them without seeing, his hands flat on his thighs, his breath shallow, his mind—his mind was somewhere else. Somewhere far away. Somewhere his mother was supposed to be waiting for him on his couch, her arms open, her voice bright.

Hello baby

The drive was a blur. Time lost its shape. There was parking, walking, sliding doors that opened automatically, a blast of warm air that smelled like antiseptic and coffee and fear. Fluorescent lights buzzing overhead, too bright, too white, casting shadows that didn't look like shadows.

He was sitting. In a chair. In a waiting room. He didn't remember sitting down.

Jackie was beside him. Hayden was beside her. Their voices were there, somewhere, shapes without meaning, sounds without words. They were saying something. Asking something. He knew he should answer. Knew he should say something, do something, be something. But his mouth wouldn't move. His voice was gone. There was only the white wall in front of him, blank and empty, and the counting in his head. Ilya's voice.

One, two, three, four, five. Start again. One, two, three—

His father arrived at some point—Shane heard his voice, felt his hand on his shoulder, and something in his chest loosened. Just a fraction. Just enough.

His father was here. His father was here, and his mother was in surgery, and Ilya had said everything would be okay, he had said it, so it must be true and Shane just had to wait. Just had to sit here and wait.

So he sat. And he waited, even though he hated waiting. And he didn't move a single muscle for what felt like hours.

He stared at the wall. The white wall. The blank wall. There was nothing on it. No clock, no window, no distraction. Just white paint and the shadows of people walking past.

He counted the seconds. *One, two, three, four, five. Start again. One, two, three—*

The elevator dinged.

He didn't look. He couldn't look. If he looked, if he saw another doctor come out with bad news, if he saw—

"Shane."

The word cut through everything.

It was the first thing that had pierced the walls of his mind in hours. The first thing that wasn't static, wasn't white noise, wasn't the endless loop of *my mom, my mom, my mom*, spinning in his skull. It was a voice. A voice he knew. A voice he had heard in his darkest moments, in his deepest dreams, in the hollow hours of the night when the world was too quiet and his brain was too loud and he thought he might disappear into the silence.

But this wasn't a memory. This was real.

The voice wrapped around him, filled him, settled into his bones. His skin prickled with goosebumps, his breath caught in his chest, and for one suspended moment, everything stopped. The static. The counting. The white wall.

Just his name. Just that voice.

He turned.

Ilya was standing in the doorway.

His coat was unzipped, his hair a mess, his shoes untied. His eyes were blue—that impossible blue that Shane had spent ten years trying not to look at, trying not to memorize, trying not to drown in. They were tired. Bruised with exhaustion. Rimmed with red. But they were looking at him. Only at him.

For a moment, Shane's brain couldn't make sense of it. Ilya was in Boston. Ilya was supposed to be in Boston. There was a game in three days, there was practice, there was—it didn't make sense. It couldn't be real. He was hallucinating. He had to be hallucinating. His brain was so broken, so exhausted, so full of terror that it was conjuring things. Conjuring him.

But Jackie was beside him. Jackie was real. Jackie was solid. And if Jackie could see him too —

It must be true.

The thought cracked something open in Shane's chest.

All the strength he'd been holding onto for hours—all the control, all the mask, all the careful, desperate effort of keeping himself together—evaporated. Instantly. Completely. Like it had never been there at all. He didn't have to be strong now that Ilya was here.

He didn't remember speaking. Didn't remember standing. Didn't remember moving. Didn't remember crossing the space between them. His body was not his own, or maybe it was more his own than it had been in hours, moving without thought, without permission, without anything except the gravitational pull of Ilya's presence. Moving to safety.

The next thing he knew; he was wrapped in some arms.

Ilya's arms were solid and warm. They wrapped unyieldingly around him like a shelter, like a shield, like something that could hold all the broken pieces of him together. The warmth of Ilya's body seeped into Shane's cold skin, his frozen bones, his hollow chest, and Shane melted. All the tension he'd been carrying, all the fear, all the desperate, frantic effort of holding himself together—it dissolved. It poured out of him. It left him empty and shaking. His face found the curve of Ilya's neck. His hands twisted into Ilya's jacket. His knees gave out, but Ilya held him up, held him together, held him like he was something precious, something worth holding.

Ilya smelled like the cold air of winter, late night coffee and his own personal scent, sweet and warm. Something that Shane had breathed in a hundred times in dark, fancy hotel rooms, in the spaces between one moment and the next. Something that his overwhelmed brain understood as *home*.

Ilya was here. *Ilya was here*. And now Shane could break peacefully, quietly. He could let go of all the strength he'd been pretending to have; of all the control he'd been pretending to feel.

Ilya would keep him safe. Ilya would hold his pieces. Ilya would be strong enough for the both of them.

Like he always did.

The hours that followed were a blur, but Shane remembered pieces.

Hayden's voice, somewhere behind him, saying something that might have been *what the fuck* or might have been *how did you* or might have been nothing at all. Jackie's hand on his back, steady, grounding, a small warmth against the shaking of his shoulders. His father's presence somewhere to his left, quiet, watching, not asking, just there.

And Ilya. Ilya's arms around him, Ilya's voice in his ear, Ilya's heartbeat under his cheek. Ilya murmuring things in Russian that Shane didn't understand but felt anyway—the rumble of them in his chest, the way they curled around Shane's name like something precious, something worth protecting.

Ya zdes', solnyshko. Ya derzhu tebya. Ya nikuda ne uyd.

Shane didn't know what the words meant. But he knew what they were. A promise. A vow. Something Ilya was giving him in a language that belonged only to them.

He heard his father's voice again, asking something, something Shane couldn't parse. Heard Ilya answer, his voice steady, unapologetic, like he had every right to be here. Like he would defend that right against anyone who questioned it.

Heard Jackie say something—to Hayden, maybe, or to his father—and then the sound of footsteps receding. Space being made. Room being given.

And then there was only Ilya. Ilya's arms, Ilya's warmth, Ilya's voice counting his breaths, guiding him back from the edge of something he hadn't even realized he was falling off of.

Inhale. One, two, three, four. Hold. Exhale. One, two, three, four, five, six. Good, zolotse. Good.

He remembered sitting down again—or maybe he never stood up, maybe Ilya had lowered them both to the chairs, he couldn't tell—and Ilya's arm stayed around him, a weight that kept him from floating away. He remembered the words that came out of his mouth, or maybe out of Ilya's, or maybe out of both of them. *I love you*. The words he'd been holding for ten years, the words he'd thought he would never say, the words that came out now like a confession and a gift and a promise all at once.

I love you. I have loved you for so long.

And Ilya had said it back. Had said it like it was the easiest thing in the world, like it wasn't terrifying, like it wasn't the thing that Shane had been running from his entire adult life. *I love you too*.

He remembered Hayden's face. The way it cycled through confusion and shock and something that looked like hurt before settling on something softer. The slow, dawning realization that the man he'd spent years fighting on the ice was the same man Shane had been hiding like a ghost under his bed. He remembered Hayden opening his mouth, closing it, opening it again—and Jackie elbowing him in the ribs before he could say anything stupid.

He remembered Hayden looking at him. Really looking. And then saying, quietly, *I'm happy for you, man. Even if it's weird. Even if I need therapy*.

He remembered laughing. Actually laughing. For the first time in hours.

He remembered his father's face when he'd looked at them—at Shane, curled into Ilya's side, at Ilya, his arm around Shane's shoulders like he was never going to let go. He'd braced himself for something. Disappointment. Disapproval. The thing he'd been dreading his whole life.

But David had just looked at Ilya. And then he'd looked at Shane. And then he'd reached out and taken Shane's hand, the one that wasn't twisted in Ilya's jacket, and held it. Like nothing had changed. Like everything had changed, and it was still okay.

You're my son, he'd said, quiet, so only Shane could hear. *That's the only thing that matters*.

Shane had wanted to believe him. Part of him did believe him. But there was another part—the part that had spent all his life folding himself into smaller shapes, the part that had learned to be enough by being everything, the part that still believed, somewhere deep and scared, that he was disappointing them—that part wasn't so sure.

But he wasn't ashamed of Ilya. He couldn't be. Not of the man who had driven five hundred miles through a February night to hold him, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Not of the man who had looked at his broken pieces and said *I want all of them*. Not of the man who had risked his life, just because Shane had called.

Ilya, who didn't want him to be alone. Ilya, who saw him—all of him, the strange parts and the broken parts and the parts that didn't fit—and stayed anyway. Ilya, who had been the only person in Shane's life who made him feel like he didn't have to perform. Like he could just be.

The surgeon came out at some point. Hours later, or maybe minutes, time was still slippery, still unreliable. She was smiling. *Mrs. Hollander is out of surgery. She's stable. She's going to be okay.*

Shane had felt something crack open in his chest. Relief so big it hurt. His father was crying. Jackie was crying. Hayden was patting his wife's back and wiping his own eyes. And Ilya—Ilya's arm tightened around him, and Shane heard him whisper something in Russian, something he didn't understand but felt anyway, something that sounded like a prayer.

She is going to be okay, Ilya had said earlier, and Shane had never doubted him.

Later—much later, after the surgeon left, after his father made calls, and after hours of staring at plastic chairs and fluorescent lights, Shane finally got to see his mother. She lay pale against the white pillows, her leg elevated, surrounded by tubes and beeping monitors. She looked so small. His mom, who had always been so fierce, so bright, so much—had looked fragile and so, so human.

He had wanted to wake her. Wanted to hold her hand, to tell her he was there, to tell her he loved her, to tell her everything. But the nurse had said she needed rest. Better to wait. Better to let her sleep.

When he finally walked back out to the waiting room, Ilya was exactly where he had left him. He was still sitting in the same plastic chair, grounded and unshakeable, like something that had taken root in the center of Shane's world and refused to be moved.

"She's sleeping," Shane murmured. He dropped heavily into the seat beside him, the exhaustion finally catching up and pulling at his bones. "The nurse said we shouldn't wake her."

"Good," Ilya replied smoothly. His hand immediately returned to the familiar curve of Shane's spine. "She needs to heal. I will meet her tomorrow, then. When she is awake and ready to appreciate my good looks. It would be a terrible waste of my charm to introduce myself right now."

Shane managed a weak, frayed smile. He recognized the joke for exactly what it was: a quiet, deliberate way to relieve the pressure. Ilya was giving him an out, allowing him to prioritize his mother's rest without spending a single second feeling guilty about making him wait, about keeping him a secret for a little longer.

A heavy, comfortable quiet settled over them. On Shane's other side, David let out a long, slow sigh.

Shane's father watched them for a moment. He looked at Shane, at Ilya, taking in the way Shane was tucked so naturally against Ilya's side, and the way Ilya's arm remained anchored around his shoulders as if it had always belonged there.

Then, slowly, David pushed himself up from his chair.

"I'm going to go," he said. His voice was rough, scraped raw from waiting. "There's—I need to get back to Ottawa. Get the house ready. She'll need—" He stopped. Swallowed. "She'll need things on the main floor. For when she comes home."

Shane nodded. He understood. His father needed to do something. Needed to build, to prepare, to make the world ready for his mother's return. That was how David loved—by making things safe, by making things ready, by being the steady ground his family stood on when the floor shifted beneath them.

"I'll come back tomorrow," Shane had said quietly. "I'll be here when she wakes up."

David looked exhausted. More than anything, he looked old.

Then his expression softened, just slightly. "Knowing you'll get a proper night of sleep is enough for my peace of mind, son. That's all I need of you for the next twenty hours."

Something in Shane's chest tightened. Part of him wanted to stay anyway or to go with him. Wanted to do something—anything—to make this easier for his dad, to help him carry it, to take some small piece of the weight off his shoulders. But he knew this was something his dad had to do alone. The thought sat heavy in his stomach, a familiar guilt he had carried his whole life.

His dad gaze shifted to Ilya then, tired but steady.

"Take care of him for me, alright?"

Ilya's hand tightened where it rested against Shane's back. "Of course," he said softly.

David nodded once, a small, tired movement. Like that was enough. Like he didn't need anything else explained. Then he was gone, his footsteps fading down the corridor, leaving Shane and Ilya alone in the waiting room.

Shane let out a long, slow breath. The room was emptier now, completely stripped of the chaotic energy from hours prior. He realized, with a sluggish, detached sort of confusion, that he couldn't actually pinpoint when Hayden and Jackie had gone. There was a blurry, fragmented memory filed somewhere in his exhausted brain—Jackie pressing a gentle kiss to

his temple, Hayden squeezing his shoulder and muttering a promise to drop off food later—but the timeline of their departure had completely dissolved into the static of the night. His brain had simply stopped recording the details.

And now, his father's absence left another space that felt strange, like a tooth that had been pulled—sore and hollow and waiting to heal.

"You should go home too," Shane said. His voice was hoarse, scraped raw from crying. "My mom will be out for a while. You need to sleep."

Ilya looked at him for a second. Then, quietly, he asked, "Where *is* home?"

Shane blinked. He had meant his apartment. Of course he had. He wasn't going to make Ilya drive all the way back to Boston like this, not after everything, not at this hour. He'd only meant: go sleep at my place.

But exhaustion had a way of loosening things. Of letting the wrong words slip out. Or maybe the right ones.

The question landed in his chest like something heavy and warm. He knew what Ilya was really asking. Not about geography. Not about the apartment in Boston, the city he'd made his own, the life he'd built on the other side of the border.

He meant: *Where do I belong?*

And Shane was so tired. Tired of measuring every word, tired of building walls, tired of pretending he wasn't hungry. And Ilya was looking at him with those eyes—steady and patient and waiting, like he already knew what Shane meant but wanted to hear him say it anyway—and Shane was too exhausted to be careful anymore.

"With me," he said. "Come home with me."

Ilya's mouth curved, a small, tired thing. "Okay."

The cab ride was quiet. Shane watched Montreal slide past the window, the streets empty at this hour, the buildings dark, the city asleep. Ilya's hand was in his, their fingers tangled together on the seat between them, and Shane traced the shape of Ilya's knuckles with his thumb, uncaring that the driver may recognize them. He only care about the warmth of the skin beside his. The solid weight of his palm. The way their hands fit together like they'd been made for it.

He should be thinking about his mother. He *was* thinking about his mother. Her face was still there, behind his eyes, the way she'd looked on the phone, before her flight took off. *Be young*, she'd said. But Ilya was here too, solid and real beside him, and somehow that didn't feel like a betrayal. For the first time in hours, the static in his head was quiet enough that he could hear himself think. He could be careless with Ilya. He *could* be young.

By the time the cab pulled up in front of his building, Shane barely registered the ride ending. One second they were still moving, city lights blurring past the windows, and the next he was

handing over his card and stepping out into the cold, onto the sidewalk in front of his building.

The wind bit through his coat immediately.

His building. His apartment. His space.

He stood there for a second longer than necessary, staring up at it.

He had never brought anyone here. Not like this. Certainly not Ilya. Their history was hotel rooms, the stupid apartment he'd only bought so they would have somewhere to meet, bathrooms at galas when they were feeling particularly adventurous, reckless enough to forget themselves for ten minutes. All neutral ground, spaces that belonged to neither of them.

Never this.

Never his kitchen, or his couch, or the bed he actually slept in. Never the books stacked too neatly on his shelves, or the sweaters folded in exact rows in his drawers, or the life he had built here piece by careful piece.

Inside, the apartment was dark and quiet, exactly as he'd left it that afternoon. His keys landed in the bowl by the door. His coat went onto the hook. His shoes came off and lined up neatly beside the others before he could stop himself.

All habit.

When he turned around, Ilya was still standing just inside the doorway, coat half open, laces untied, taking it all in with an expression Shane couldn't quite name. Something almost reverent.

Like this mattered.

Like he'd been waiting for it.

"Ilya—"

But, apparently having shaken himself from his thoughts, he was already crossing the room.

His hands came up to cup Shane's face, thumbs brushing slowly beneath his eyes, over skin that still felt tight and sore from crying. He didn't say anything at first. Just looked at him for a long moment, his expression soft in a way Shane didn't know what to do with. Then, quietly:

"*Nyet*" His voice was low and rough from the road, from too little rest, from everything they hadn't said yet. "We sleep now," he murmured. "Tomorrow, we talk."

Shane almost argued.

The words rose automatically—*I'm not tired. We should talk now. There are things I need to say*—but they never quite made it out. His whole body felt too heavy, his thoughts too slow around the edges. The apartment was warm. Ilya's hands were warm. Everything was quiet.

And he was so, so tired.

So he let himself be guided.

Let Ilya help him out of his sweater, then ease him gently toward the bedroom, where he let him take everything else and put him in a big t-shirt he found under the pillow. Let him pull back the covers on the bed Shane had made that morning, back when the day had still belonged to ordinary things. Before everything split open.

He sank into the mattress like his body had been waiting for permission.

A second later, the other side of the bed dipped.

Then arms wrapped around him from behind—firm, familiar. A chest against his back. Warm breath at the nape of his neck. A hand settling flat over his chest, right above his heart.

Holding him there.

Keeping him safe.

"Sleep," Ilya had whispered.

And how could Shane not listen when he spoke so softly?

The next thing he knew, it was late afternoon.

He could tell by the way the light came through the windows—pale and grey, the kind of winter light that never quite decided if it wanted to be day or night. Clouds pressed against the sky outside, thick and low, muffling the world in shades of silver and soft white. He couldn't tell how long he'd been asleep. The clock on his nightstand was facing away from him, and he didn't want to move to check.

He was warm. That was the first thing he registered. The second was the weight around him—the arm under his head, the arm draped over his waist, the hand splayed flat against his chest. Legs tangled with his. A chest pressed against his back, rising and falling with slow, steady breath.

Ilya.

The name settled into him like something he had always known. His body recognized Ilya before his mind did. The weight of him, the warmth of him, the rhythm of his breathing. This was a body Shane had mapped a hundred times over. But never like this. Never in his bed, in his apartment, in the place he had built for himself, in his safe corner of the world.

He let himself lie there for a long moment. Let himself feel it—the warmth, the weight, the way Ilya's arm tightened around his waist when Shane shifted, like even in sleep he was holding on. The way his breath was warm against the back of his neck. The way Ilya's heartbeat was slow and steady, the way Shane's own started matching its rhythm, the two of them falling into the same quiet cadence, like their bodies had been waiting for permission to beat together.

He had never woken up with anyone like this, had never let himself. He had built his life around routines, structures, walls that kept people out. But Ilya was here now, in his bed, in his space, and the walls were still standing. The world hadn't ended. The routines would still be there when he was ready to pick them up again.

Outside, the grey light pressed against the windows, soft and muted. But inside, wrapped in Ilya's arms, Shane felt something shift—a crack in the clouds, a sliver of something brighter waiting to break through.

Ilya stirred behind him. His arm tightened around Shane's waist, and he made a sound—something low and sleepy and content, a sound Shane had heard a couple of times in hotel rooms across North America, in the dark, in the spaces between waking and sleeping, when they had been too exhausted to pull away from each other's touch. A sound he had never let himself think about afterward because thinking about it meant wanting it, and wanting it meant needing it, and needing it meant he could never go back to waking up alone again.

"You are thinking too loud," Ilya mumbled against his skin.

Shane smiled. His face was pressed into the pillow, and he could feel the curve of his own mouth, the way his cheeks ached from it, the way he had been smiling without realizing. "Sorry."

"Is too early for thinking."

"It's way past noon."

Ilya made a sound that might have been a groan. "Is too early for past noon."

Shane turned in his arms, carefully, so they were facing each other. Ilya's eyes were still half-closed, his hair a mess, his face soft with sleep. He looked younger like this. Less like the cocky Russian superstar who taunted reporters and scored impossible goals and made the whole league hate him with a smile. More like the boy Shane had kissed in a hotel room almost ten years ago, scared and excited and not knowing what they were doing.

His Ilya.

He looked rested, though. The exhaustion that had been carved into his face at the hospital was gone, smoothed away by a full ten hours of sleep, resting in Shane's bed, wrapped around him like he belonged there. Shane traced the line of his jaw with his thumb. The faint scratch of stubble. The warmth of his skin. The slight, involuntary shiver that rippled through him at the touch.

"Hi," Shane said quietly.

Ilya's eyes opened properly, and Shane was suddenly bathed in the most beautiful blue he had ever seen. Ilya looked at him for a long moment, soft and wondering, like he was still trying to believe this was real, like he was still waiting for the dream to end.

"*Priviet-ik*," he said back, and the word was warm in Shane's mouth, the accent wrapping around it like something precious.

Shane felt his face warm. It was ridiculous. He had known Ilya for ten years. Had done things with him that he had never done with anyone else. This man was practically all of his firsts. They had even said *I love you* in a hospital waiting room with tears on their faces. And yet here he was, in his own bed, with Ilya's arms around him, feeling like a teenager again. Nervous. Giddy. Like he didn't know what to do with his hands.

Ilya's mouth curved. "You are blushing, Hollander."

"I'm not."

"You are. Is very cute."

"Shut up."

Ilya's smile widened. He leaned forward, pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead. Soft. Gentle. Like Shane was something precious. "How are you feeling?"

Shane considered the question. His mother was still in the hospital. Still healing. Still not out of the woods, even if she was out of immediate danger. The thought of her made a hard knot form in his throat, a sudden wave of apprehension washing over him. But Ilya was here. Solid and warm and real, looking at him like nothing else existed. And that—that made a quiet warmth spread through his veins, steady and bright.

"I'm still worried about my mom," he said slowly. "I don't think that's going to go away until she's home. Until she's okay."

Ilya nodded. His hand found Shane's, fingers lacing together.

"But I'm also—" Shane stopped. Swallowed. "I'm happy. I'm really happy. Is that—is that okay? To be happy, when she's—"

"Shane." Ilya squeezed his hand. "Your mother is alive. She is healing. She would not want you to be sad. She would want you to be happy."

Shane let out a breath. "Yeah. Yeah, I know."

"And you are happy because of me, yes?" Ilya's smile turned smug, the familiar arrogance creeping back into his voice. "Because I am very handsome and very charming and I make you feel—"

"You're impossible."

"Is not answer."

Shane laughed. The sound surprised him, bright and unexpected, and he felt something loosen in his chest, something that had been frozen for a very long time. Outside, the light shifted—a break in the clouds, a stream of gold cutting through the grey, falling across the bed in a long, warm stripe.

"Yes," he said. "I'm happy because of you, asshole."

Ilya's smug expression softened, and he lifted their joined hands and pressed a kiss to Shane's knuckles. "I am happy too," he said quietly. "Very happy."

Shane's pulse fluttered, an unsteady, beautiful rhythm against his own ribs. He leaned forward, pressed his forehead to Ilya's, and for a moment they just breathed together, the same air, the same space, the same impossible, terrifying, beautiful thing that had been growing between them for a decade.

"Ilya?" He would never get tired of saying his name.

"Mmm?"

"Thank you. For coming. For—for staying. For everything."

Ilya's eyes went soft. "You do not thank me for this. There is nowhere else I would be."

"I know. But I'm thanking you anyway."

Ilya didn't say anything directly. Instead, he pulled Shane closer, hands settling on his waist, and kissed him. This was better than any answer he could have given, better than any speech, because this, Shane understood. This was a language he knew better than French, better than Japanese, better than English. This was the way they had communicated with each other for years.

The kiss was nothing like the one they had shared in the hospital, nothing like the desperate, hungry kisses of the waiting room, the ones that tasted of salt and terror and the frantic relief of finding each other.

This one started slow. Ilya's lips barely brushing against his, a question more than a statement, like he was asking permission, like he had all the time in the world to wait for the answer. A sudden, weightless feeling dropped through Shane's stomach. He held perfectly still, letting the moment stretch. His hands came up of their own accord, fingers finding Ilya's jaw, feeling the faint scratch of stubble, the warmth of his skin, the way his pulse beat steady and sure beneath his palm.

The light had shifted while they talked. The grey was receding, the clouds parting, and the afternoon sun was beginning to spill through the windows in earnest. It caught in Ilya's hair, turning it to something almost amber, and painted the walls in shades of gold and soft orange. Dust motes floated in the air between them, slow and lazy, like they too had nowhere else to be. The apartment was quiet except for the sound of their breathing, the soft rasp of fabric as Ilya's hands slid from Shane's waist to his back, pulling him closer, and the distant hum of the city outside, muffled and far away, like it belonged to another world entirely.

Shane let his eyes fall closed.

Ilya kissed him again, and this time it was deeper, slower, the kind of kiss that seemed to unfold in layers, each one revealing something new. The warmth of his mouth, the taste of him—like tea gone lukewarm, and like the faint salt of skin after sleep. Shane breathed him in.

He smelled dark and warm, like he always did—chocolate and amber, it was like stepping inside from the biting cold and closing the door behind you, the heat from a chimney settling slow, close to the skin. It was the same scent Shane had searched for in his sheets too many times for it not to be embarrassing, long after Ilya was gone, when there was no one there to see it, back when even alone, he wasn't ready to face what that smell brought up in him.

He had spent so long cataloging Ilya, holding on to details instead of letting himself think about what they meant. The weight of his hands on the ice, heavy and unyielding. The sound of his voice, sharp with anger or lilting with teasing, softer in the dark when he said Shane's last name. The way his gaze found him across the rink, blue and steady, impossible to ignore. He had taken all of it and locked it in the part of his chest he never let anyone see, told himself it was rivalry, fixation, anything but what it actually was.

But he had never had *this*. This was new.

This didn't fit with the version of Ilya he had built in his head over years of watching, of wanting without ever saying it out loud. The way his mouth moved against Shane's, slow and certain, like he had nothing to prove and nothing else to be. The way his hands pressed into his back, fingers spread wide, holding him there without hesitation, finally sure of where his heart stood. The quiet warmth of his breath, the steadiness of it, how it sank into Shane's chest and stayed.

There was no place to put this, no way to fold it in with everything else he thought he knew. It didn't feel like something he could ignore anymore—*not that he wanted to*. He would have to face it, set it aside in a different box in his mind, a place that, without his conscious knowledge, had been waiting for a softer version of this man.

Ilya's thumb found the curve of Shane's jaw, traced it, gentle, almost reverent, and with it he tilted his head just slightly, just enough to change the angle, and the kiss deepened, and Shane felt the last of his carefully built walls quietly crumble into dust.

It was the slowness of it that undid him. The patience. The lack of urgency. For ten years, their kisses had been stolen things, snatched in hotel rooms and closed curtains, always with one ear listening for footsteps, always with the knowledge that they would have to stop,

would have to pull apart, would have to pretend it hadn't happened. They had learned to kiss like thieves, quick and quiet, taking what they could before the world came to take it back.

But this kiss had nowhere to be. No deadline. No escape route. Just the afternoon light and the quiet apartment and the warmth of Ilya's mouth against his, and Shane realized he had *never* been kissed like this. Had never let himself be kissed like this. Never wanted to be kissed like this by anyone else.

Ilya's hand slid into his hair, fingers threading through the strands, and Shane made a sound—something low and involuntary, something he hadn't meant to let out. He felt Ilya smile against his mouth, a small, private thing, and his fingers tightened in Shane's hair, just slightly, just enough to send a hot shiver tracing directly down Shane's spine.

When they finally broke apart, they were both breathing harder. Ilya's face was flushed, his lips red, his eyes dark and soft and full of something so incredibly tender it made Shane's throat feel dangerously tight. The light had deepened while they kissed, the gold ripening into something richer, more amber, the shadows stretching longer across the floor, the sky visible in patches of pale winter blue. In the back of his mind, he wondered where the clouds that had been outside his windows when he first woke up had gone.

Shane's hands were still tangled in Ilya's hair. He could feel the strands slipping through his fingers, fine and soft, and he didn't want to let go. Didn't want to move. Didn't want this moment to end.

But somewhere in the back of his mind, a voice was starting to surface. The voice that had kept him safe for years, the one that calculated risks and counted costs and reminded him, always, of what he was supposed to do. It was quieter now than it used to be, muffled by the warmth of Ilya's skin against his, the taste of him still on Shane's lips. But it was there.

He let his hands fall. Not pulling away, just... settling. Letting them rest flat against Ilya's bare chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath his fingers.

"Ilya," he said. His voice came out softer than he intended, almost reluctant.

Ilya hummed in response, his eyes still half-lidded, his mouth still curved in that small, private smile. His hands were still on Shane's waist, thumbs tracing slow circles through the fabric of his shirt.

"You can't stay, you have practice today," Shane said.

The words hung in the air between them, an intrusion from another world. Ilya's smile didn't fade, but something in his expression shifted—a flicker of awareness, of the world outside this room, of everything they were supposed to be.

"Will tell them I am sick," he said, and his voice was still deep, still rough, still doing things to Shane's ability to think clearly.

"You're not sick."

"I am very sick." He leaned in, pressed his lips to the corner of Shane's mouth, soft, distracting. "Very serious illness. I cannot leave this bed."

Shane's eyes fluttered closed despite himself. "Ilya—"

"And neither can you." Another kiss, this one to his jaw. "Is highly contagious. Very dangerous."

"You're impossible."

"Mm. Is part of my charm."

Shane laughed, a breathless sound that came out more unsteady than he intended. He was losing the thread of the argument, losing his grip on the responsible part of his brain that was supposed to be reminding him of deadlines and obligations and the fact that Ilya had a team waiting for him in Boston.

"I am dying, Shane," Ilya murmured against his skin. "Is tragic. I need my boyfriend to take care of me. Bring me food. Stay in bed with me. Very serious condition."

Boyfriend.

the word struck him right beneath the ribs, a sudden, bright warmth spreading through his lungs, his heart, filling spaces he hadn't known were empty. He had never been anyone's boyfriend before. Had never let himself want it. Had folded that wanting so small, hidden it so deep, that he had almost forgotten it existed.

Ilya must have felt the shift in him, because he pulled back. His teasing expression faded into something softer. Almost uncertain.

"What?" he asked.

Shane swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly feeling completely dry. "You said—" He stopped. Swallowed. "You said boyfriend."

Ilya's brow furrowed. "Yes. You are my boyfriend. We agreed. We had conversation."

Shane shook his head. "We said we love each other. Not that we were—" He stopped. His face was burning. "You never asked."

Ilya stared at him.

"*Oh*," he said slowly. Then a grin spread across his face, slow and delighted, he suddenly looked like man who had just discovered something wonderful. "Oh. So Shane Hollander wants to be asked. To be someone's boyfriend."

"Fuck you," Shane muttered, his skin on fire. "Don't be ridiculous."

But he kind of wanted that. He kind of really wanted that. Wanted Ilya to ask. Wanted to hear the words. Wanted to have this one thing be real and official and *his*. Not just implied. Not

just assumed. Chosen.

Ilya's grin softened again, into something impossibly endeared. His voice dropped lower, rougher, scraped raw from sleep. "What? You want me to get up? Bring you breakfast in bed? Ask properly?"

Shane's face was definitely red now. He could feel it spreading down his neck, across his chest, burning him from the inside out. "I said don't be ridiculous."

"You did not say that. You said 'fuck you.' Is different."

"I'm pretty sure I said both things."

"Yes, but 'fuck you' means you are angry. 'Ridiculous' means you are embarrassed." Ilya's eyes were bright, too bright, and Shane already knew that Ilya could always tell what he really wanted even when Shane didn't know how to say it. "Which is it, Hollander? Are you angry? Or are you embarrassed that you want me to ask?"

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

"You're impossible," he said finally.

"So you *are* embarrassed."

Shane groaned and buried his face in the pillow. The fabric was cool against his burning skin, and for a moment he let himself hide there, in the dark, in the smell of his own sheets and the lingering trace of Ilya's skin. His ears were burning. His pulse was hammering a frantic, deafening rhythm against his mattress. And Ilya was looking at him like he could see every part Shane had spent his whole life learning to fold small, to hide deep, to pretend didn't exist.

"Ilya—"

But the Russian was already moving. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, standing up, and Shane's brain short-circuited because Ilya was only in his boxers, showing off his body without an ounce of shame. His hair was a mess, sticking up in ten different directions, and his eyes were shining with something bright and soft and teasing.

"Stay," he ordered, pointing at him. "Do not move. You do not leave this bed."

Well. Shane could hardly disobey him on a good day.

"Rozanov—"

"I am being serious, Hollander. You stay right there."

And then he was gone, padding out of the bedroom on bare feet, and Shane was alone. Alone for the first time in hours.

He loved being with Ilya, he loved the way Ilya's arms felt around him, the way his voice sounded in the quiet of the evening, the way his presence filled the empty spaces of the apartment that Shane hadn't even known were empty. And he was immeasurably grateful for his father, for the steady warmth of his hand in the waiting room, for the way he had looked at Ilya and chosen acceptance without hesitation. He was grateful for Hayden and Jackie, for the way they had stayed, for the way they had refused to let him be alone even when he didn't know how to ask them for help.

But oh, how Shane loved his solitude. How much he needed it sometimes. Needed it to finally think.

And boy, did he have things to think about.

The apartment settled around him, the silence of the room different now without Ilya's breathing, without the warmth of his body pressed against Shane's back. The light was deepening outside, the gold ripening into something richer as the sun began its slow and earlier descent toward the horizon. The clouds that had pressed against the sky earlier were gone now, scattered by a wind Shane hadn't noticed, leaving the winter sky clear and pale and impossibly vast.

Shane let his head fall back against the pillow and stared at the ceiling.

Okay, so, his father knew. The thought surfaced with a lot less panic than he had expected, but it still felt like a bruise he kept pressing on, testing if it still hurt. David had sat in that plastic chair, had taken his hand, had said *you're my son, that's the only thing that matters*, and Shane had wanted to believe him. *Did* believe him. His dad had never given him a reason not to, after all.

But there was a part of him—the part that maybe hated himself a little for being the way he was, the part that made him feel like he was doing something wrong, that he needed punishment—that was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for the phone call where David said *we need to talk*. Waiting for the silence that meant disappointment. Waiting for the love that asked for nothing to finally ask for something, and for that something to be more than he could give.

And oh, *God*.

Hayden knew too. Hayden, who was the best fucking friend Shane had ever had, who let his kids call him uncle, Hayden who could be a fucking asshole sometimes, Hayden who only ever wanted the best for Shane. Hayden, who had looked at Ilya across the waiting room with his mouth open and his eyes wide and had said *I'm going to figure out how to be okay with it*.

Shane was so fucking scared that this would affect their relationship, but since Hayden had said he was happy for him, he made himself hope that it wouldn't. But he still hated that there was nothing he could do now to calm the anxiety churning in his stomach about where they stood. Hated that only time would tell how they'd relearn to navigate this side of himself he had kept under lock and key for their entire friendship.

He really fucking hated when there was nothing he could do—when he had already said everything he needed to say, and Hayden had said what he needed to say, and now all that was left was to wait. To let time pass and see what grew in the space between them, or what didn't. There was no action left to take, no problem he could solve with enough effort, no amount of control that would guarantee the outcome he wanted. He just had to sit with the uncertainty and let the days do their work. But at least Hayden knew now. There was no coming back from that.

The thought made a hollow ache bloom behind his ribs, but not in the way he expected. It was the ache of something loosening, something that had been held too tight for too long and was just beginning to stretch. He really owed him and Jackie dinner. He would figure out how to thank them for all that they did. He would find the words. Would sit at their kitchen table and eat their food and let Jackie put her hand on his arm and let Hayden make his stupid jokes, and maybe, now that they *knew*, it wouldn't feel like a performance anymore.

Then, there was his mother.

The thought of her brought a different kind of ache. Deeper. Older. The kind that lived in his bones and would never leave.

She was alive. The words still felt too big to hold, too bright to look at directly. She was alive and she was healing and she was going to be okay. The surgeon had said so. The nurse had said so. Ilya had said so, and Ilya had driven five hundred miles to make sure it was true.

But the fear was still there, coiled beneath his ribs, waiting for him to forget so it could remind him. He had almost lost her. He had almost lost his mother, the woman who had given up her career to manage his, who had learned the language of contracts and endorsements and media obligations so he wouldn't have to, who had sat in every meeting and negotiated every deal and made sure no one took advantage of her boy. The woman who had been there for every draft, every signing, every first day of training camp, her hand on his shoulder, her voice in his ear, *you belong here, Shane, you worked for this, you deserve this*.

She was the one who taught him to count by lining up his toy cars in perfect rows, who helped him arrange his stuffed animals by size and color and never once told him it was strange. She was the one who learned to read his silences, to know when he needed words and when he needed quiet.

He thought about all the moments she had been there for him. The first time he was cut from a team, the way she had held him while he cried and said *they made a mistake, they'll see, you'll show them*. The first time someone made a comment about his face, his eyes, the way he looked, and she had knelt down to his level and said *you are beautiful, Shane, you are exactly who you are supposed to be, don't let anyone tell you different*. The first time he came home from a game with his ears still ringing, his skin still buzzing, his brain too full to speak, and she had sat beside him on the couch and put on the same movie they had watched a hundred times, the one where he already knew every word, every scene, every sound, because she understood that sometimes the only thing that helped was something he already knew.

She was the one who had been there for every moment he was scared. Every nightmare when he was little, every panic attack before a big game, every time he thought he wasn't good enough, wasn't strong enough, *wasn't enough*. She had been there for all of it.

But she hadn't been there for this.

She hadn't been there when his father called. She hadn't been there when he collapsed on Hayden's bathroom floor, when his lungs forgot how to work, when the world tilted and spun and he couldn't find anything solid to hold onto. She hadn't been there when he called Ilya, when he said the words he had been holding for ten years, when he let himself need someone in a way he had never let himself need anyone. She hadn't been there when he came out.

She hadn't been there for the worst night of his life.

He needed to tell her. The need was a physical thing, pressing against his lungs, making it hard to breathe. He needed to sit beside her bed and take her hand and tell her everything. About Ilya. About the ten years of secrets and lies and the hunger that never quite went away, no matter how many cups he lifted over his shoulders. About the fear that had kept him silent—the fear that he would disappoint her, that he would be one thing too many, that the son she had given everything to would finally be too much.

But he was so tired of being afraid.

For ten years, his worst nightmares had been about his parents finding out. About the disappointment in his mother's eyes, the silence on the other end of the phone, the Christmas cards that would never be sent. He had built his life for them, around them. He wouldn't possibly know what to do if this was the thing that made him lose the two people he loved most in the entire fucking world. So he had learned to want less, to need less, to be less. He had learned to live with a hole in his chest, to ignore how starving he always was, how *empty, empty, empty*.

But now, sitting in his bed, in his apartment, with Ilya in his kitchen making him breakfast—though in a couple of hours it would be time for dinner—the fear was quieter than it had ever been. Not gone. It would never be gone. But quieter. And the hunger was receding.

The memory of Ilya's face in the waiting room drifted over him, the exhaustion carved into every line. He thought about the drive from Boston, five hundred miles of frozen highway, three and a half hours of driving like a man possessed, because Shane had called. Because Shane had needed him. Because Ilya would cross a border, break every rule, risk everything, for him.

He had never been loved like this.

It half terrified him. The weight of it. The size of it. The way it sat in his chest like something he hadn't asked for but couldn't imagine living without. But he would have done the same. If the situation were reversed, if it was Ilya's mom on that plane, Ilya in that hospital, Ilya calling him from a bathroom floor with his voice cracked and his lungs failing—Shane would have done the same fucking thing. He would have driven through the night. He would have

broken every self-imposed rule, crossed an ocean if necessary. He would have sat in those uncomfortable chairs for hours and waited with him.

The thought should have scared him more, maybe. The knowledge that he was that far gone, that he would burn his whole life down for this man. But after ten years of wanting and waiting and pretending, of looking away from Ilya's face across the ice—sitting here, in the quiet of his apartment, with the afternoon light fading and the sound of Ilya moving through his kitchen, it didn't feel like burning. It felt like coming home to a place he hadn't known he was looking for.

He had spent so long being enough for everyone else. He had given everything back, every early morning drive, every dollar, every hour of his parents' lives, and he had told himself that was the deal. That was what he owed them. That was what he owed the world for letting him exist in it.

But Ilya didn't want him to be enough. Ilya wanted him to be Shane. The strange one, the quiet one, the boring one.

The thought made his eyes sting. He blinked rapidly, stared at the ceiling, willed the tears away.

He didn't know how to be this. Didn't know how to be someone who let another person take care of him. Didn't know how to be someone who wanted things out loud, who asked for things, who let Ilya make him breakfast and didn't feel like he was stealing something he didn't deserve.

But he sure as hell would learn. For Ilya. For himself.

He heard footsteps in the hallway. The soft pad of bare feet on wood, the careful clink of glass against ceramic. He sat up a little straighter, scrubbed his palms over his face, pulled air into his lungs like it might steady the trembling somewhere beneath his ribs.

Ilya appeared in the doorway, and the light caught him—his shoulders, his hair, the curve of his mouth—and Shane thought: *I could have this. I could have this every day.*

He walked toward him slowly, deliberately, like he was carrying something fragile, something that might shatter if he moved too fast. And maybe he was. Maybe this *was* fragile—this moment, this afternoon, this ordinary, extraordinary thing. If he noticed the tear tracks Shane hadn't quite managed to erase, the redness around his eyes, the way his breathing still caught in uneven intervals, he didn't mention it. He just moved like he had all the time in the world, like there was nowhere else he would rather be.

He set the tray on Shane's lap. A glass of water catching the light. A cup of tea—chamomile, the way Shane liked it, the way he drank when the world felt too loud. A small bowl of plain Greek yogurt with a handful of blueberries on the side. Simple. Clean. Something Shane could eat without thinking. Something that fit into the careful architecture of his diet without him having to explain it.

"I made you your tiny disgusting food," Ilya said, settling onto the edge of the bed. His voice was light, teasing, but his eyes were soft—the same blue as the sky on a summer day.

Before Shane could protest, could explain why it wasn't tiny or disgusting, why the small portion made sense in the long run, Ilya took his hands. Held them. Looked at him. And then he just—stopped. His mouth opened, closed. His jaw worked. For a moment, nothing came out.

Shane had never seen Ilya struggle for words. Not once in ten years. Ilya always had something to say, always had a joke, a deflection, a wall built from clever words and sharper smiles. But now he just sat there, holding Shane's hands, his face open and raw and *young* in a way Shane had never seen before. The masks, the walls—they were all gone now. What was underneath was terrifying and beautiful and so, so vulnerable.

"I do not have words," Ilya said finally, his voice rough, scraped raw at the edges. "English is very hard now."

Shane's chest tightened. He knew this—knew how sometimes the distance between what Ilya felt and what he could say in a language that wasn't his own was a chasm that left him frustrated, grasping. It had never felt fair. Shane hated that Ilya was the only one who had to cross that distance, that he had to translate himself into a language Shane could understand, that Shane couldn't meet him halfway. He hated the thought that there was a version of Ilya he would never know—a version that was looser, funnier, more *him*, the one that existed in the language his mother sang lullabies in, the one that dreamed in Russian and woke up reaching for words that didn't exist in English. A version that would always be just out of reach, locked behind a door Shane didn't have the key to, simply because he had never learned to listen in the right language.

Here and now, he made a promise to himself: he would learn. He would cross every border, like Ilya had done for him. No matter how long it took, or how difficult it would be, Shane would learn to speak the language that had raised Ilya Rozanov.

"It's okay," he said softly. "You don't have to do this. I know what we are to each other."

But Ilya shook his head, his jaw tight, his hands firm around Shane's. "No. I want to do this. *You* deserve this. To be asked properly."

Shane bit his lip, thinking. He wanted to make this easier for both of them. "You can tell me in Russian, then."

Ilya's eyes flickered—surprise, maybe, or something softer, something that looked like a child being offered a gift he hadn't dared to ask for. "But you will not understand."

Shane squeezed his hands. "Doesn't matter. I will understand enough."

For a long moment, Ilya just looked at him. The silence in the bedroom wasn't empty; it was dense, heavy with the phantom weight of every hotel room door closing, every text left unanswered, every time they had forced themselves to look away from each other. Ilya's chest rose and fell with a deep, steadying breath. His thumbs pressed hard into the pulse points of

Shane's wrists, anchoring himself before stepping blindly off the edge. And then he began to speak.

His voice was different like this—lower, rougher, shaped by a language that seemed to fit him the way his own skin did. The words fell into a rhythm Shane had heard before but never understood, a cadence that belonged to late-night phone calls and whispered things in hotel rooms, to the spaces between sleep and waking when Ilya forgot to build his walls.

"Ya lyublyu tebya uzhe desyat' let," he said, and the words seemed to tear their way up from somewhere deep, somewhere Shane had always known existed but had never been allowed to touch. *"Tselykh desyat' let. I, pover' mne, ya pravda pytalsya s etim borot'sya. Pytalsya ne lyubit' tebya. Pytalsya zabyt' tebya. Pytalsya ubedit' sebya, chto eto proydyot, chto odnazhdy ya prosnus"—i tebya bol'she ne budet u menya pod kozhey."*

Shane didn't understand the words, but he understood the anatomy of the confession. He felt it in the slight tremor traveling from Ilya's hands directly into his own. He heard it in the way Ilya's voice cracked on the jagged syllables of *ne lyubit'*. He watched Ilya's throat work around *zabyt'*, swallowing hard as if the word itself had sharp edges. Ilya wasn't just talking; he was bleeding out a decade of carefully maintained distance right onto the mattress between them.

"No ty nikuda ne del'sya," Ilya continued, and his eyes were very, very blue, very wet, catching the gold light that was spilling through the windows, reflecting it like waterfalls of fire. *"Ya vsyo ravno dumal o tebe. Vsyo ravno iskal tebya vzglyadom. Vsyo ravno vozvrashchalsya k tebe snova i snova, dazhe kogda izo vsekh sil pytalsya derzhat'sya podal'she. Kazhduyu noch', kazhdyy match, kazhdyy chyortov den'—ty byl so mnoy. V myslyakh. V serdtse. V kazhdom vdokhe."*

Shane's throat was so tight he could barely breathe. He didn't need to know the exact words—he could see them in Ilya's face. In the furrow of his brow, the set of his jaw, the way his lips shaped each syllable like it cost him something to release it. Ten years of silence pouring out of him in a language Shane couldn't follow, and yet he understood everything. He understood because Ilya was looking at him like he was the only thing in the room, the only thing in the world, the only thing that had ever mattered.

"I ya bol'she ne khochu pryatat'sya," Ilya said, his voice dropping, fracturing on the last word like a physical break. *"Ne khochu delat' vid, chto mezhdru nami nichego net. Ne khochu etikh chuzhikh komnat, etikh sekretov, etoy zhizni vpolsily. Ya khochu tebya—po-nastoyashchemu. Ya ne khochu bol'she vozvrashchat'sya v Rossiyu i chuvstvovat', budto ya ostavil samuyu vazhnuyu chast' sebya zdes', s toboy. Ona vseгда budet moey rodinoy, no ty...."* He swallowed hard, his voice shaking. *"—ty moy dom, Sheyn. I kazhdyy raz, kogda ya uezhal, kazhdyy raz, kogda vozvrashchalsya ottuda, ya vozvrashchalsya razbitym. Budto mne snova i snova prikhodilos' uchit'sya dykhat' bez tebya. I ya bol'she tak ne khochu."*

A tear slipped down Ilya's cheek. He didn't wipe it away at first. He just kept looking at Shane, his face utterly unguarded. But then something shifted. His jaw tightened. His breath caught. He looked away—just for a second, just long enough to try to pull himself back together—and one of his hands slipped free from Shane's, coming up to cover his eyes.

"Blyad'," he muttered, his voice thick, frustrated. "Sorry. I am sorry. It's just—" He pressed the heel of his palm against his eyes, like he could push the tears back in, like he could shove all the emotion back where it belonged.

Shane caught his wrist. Gently. Firmly.

"Hey."

He pulled Ilya's hand away. Ilya's eyes were red-rimmed, wet, and clouded with a sudden, humiliating panic. Without hesitating, Shane slid his palm along Ilya's jaw, his thumb catching the dampness on his cheek. He guided Ilya's face back to center, forcing him to meet his gaze and stay there in the light.

"Please," Shane said, his voice soft but steady, solid in a way he hadn't felt in hours. "Continue." He was greedy for more, he was hungry, for once in his life, he wanted every single piece this man was willing to offer him.

For a moment, Ilya just looked at him. His chest rose and fell with a shaky breath. His lips parted. Closed. Parted again.

"Ya khochu vernut' kazhdy god, kotoryy my potratili zrya. Khochu vse eto vremya obratno, yesli by mog." The words found him once again, but softer now, stripped of the panic. A rough, desperate whisper. *"No raz ya ne mogu, ya khochu khotya by vse, chto u nas yeshchyo budet. Vsyu. Ya khochu byt' tvoim. Po-nastoyashchemu. Navsegda."* His hand came up and covered Shane's where it still rested against his face.

His hand came up, large and warm, to cover the back of Shane's hand where it still rested against his cheek, trapping Shane's touch against his skin as if he needed it to survive the next sentence.

"Ya nikogda nikogo ne lyubil tak, kak lyublyu tebya. Nikogda. I ya khochu vse to, chego nikogda ni s kem ne khotel. Khochu prosypat'sya ryadom s toboy. Khochu gotovit' tebe zavtrak. Khochu ostavat'sya doma s toboy i smotret' televizor vmesto togo, chtoby kuda-to vykhodit'. Khochu sport' s toboy po pustyakam, a potom mirit'sya potseluyami. Khochu derzhat' tebya za ruku tam, gde nas vse vidyat. Khochu tselovat' tebya kazhdoe utro i chuvstvovat' vkus tvoyego chaya u tebya na gubakh vsyu ostavshuyusya zhizn'. Khochu vse eto obychnoye, domashneye, tikhoye—vse to, chto s toboy nikogda ne budet skuchnym."

Shane felt the vibration of each promise through his fingertips. He watched Ilya's mouth tremble on the final syllables of the domestic confession, the sheer weight of asking for a normal, quiet life threatening to undo him completely.

"Khochu, chtoby ty nauchil menya, kak eto—imet' sem'yu. Nastoyashchuyu. Takuyu, v kotoroy ne nado khodit' na tsypochkakh. V kotoroy net khlopayushchikh dverey. V kotoroy nikto ne ukhodit. V kotoroy my prosto... ostayomsya." Ilya's thumb began to stroke a frantic, trembling rhythm over Shane's knuckles. The Russian superstar, the man who thrived on chaos and arrogance, was physically shaking as he delivered the last piece of his heart. *"Tak chto ya sproshu tebya tak, kak dolzhen byl sprosit' uzhe davno. Po-nastoyashchemu. S zavtrakom v postel' i so vsej etoy romanticheskoy erundoy."*

He stopped. He took a slow, rattling breath, his eyes tracing the line of Shane's mouth before lifting back to meet his gaze.

"Sheyn Kholander, ty khochesh' byt' moim parnem?"

The words hung in the air between them. Shane didn't know what they meant—not exactly—but *he knew*. He knew from the way Ilya was looking at him, like he was dismantling every wall he had ever built, brick by brick, stone by stone, until there was nothing left between them. Like he was handing Shane something he had never given anyone else—something fragile and precious and terrifying. His whole heart, maybe. His whole self. All of it, finally, without reservation.

"Be my boyfriend?" Ilya repeated in English now. For all his mocking of Shane earlier, this was important for him too. It was perhaps the most important question he would ask in his life.

Shane smiled. The tears he had been holding back for what felt like hours, for what felt like years, finally spilled over—one, and another, and then a million more, tracing slow, warm lines down his cheeks. He nodded. Once. Twice. His throat was too tight to speak, his ribs feeling too fragile to contain a heart that had grown too big for the space it had been given. But he didn't need to speak. He leaned forward, pressing his forehead to Ilya's, feeling the warmth of his skin, the dampness of his tears, the shaky exhale that fanned across Shane's lips.

And he let the word out on a breath, a whisper, an exhale—something that had been waiting to be said for years, something that had always been true, something that was finally, finally his to give.

"Yes."

Ilya's face broke into something radiant. Something young. Something free.

He leaned forward, mindful of the tray between them, and kissed Shane's forehead, his cheeks, his nose, his mouth. Soft kisses, quick kisses, kisses that tasted like salt and sweet and something that might have been joy, something that might have been the first evening of the rest of their lives.

"You are boyfriend now," he said against Shane's lips.

"Yeah," Shane breathed.

"Mine."

"Yes."

He kissed him again. And again, like he couldn't contain himself now that he was free to be affectionate with Shane. When he finally pulled back, his eyes were still bright, still wet, but there was something else there too—something lighter, something that looked like the first crack of light after a storm.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. They just looked at each other, breathing the same air, their foreheads still touching, their hands still tangled together between them. The weight of what had just passed between them settled into the silence, not heavy, not suffocating—just *there*. A new thing they were both learning to carry together.

Ilya's thumb traced slow circles on Shane's knuckles. His breathing was still uneven, still catching every few seconds, but the frantic edge had faded. Shane watched him come back to himself—watched the walls he had let fall begin to reassemble, but differently this time. Softer. More like windows than barricades.

And then Shane moved.

He didn't think about it. Didn't plan it. His hands came up to frame Ilya's face, his thumbs brushing against the tear tracks still wet on his cheeks. A sudden tremor passed through Ilya, his eyes searching Shane's, and Shane—who had never been good with words, not in English, not in French, not in any language that required him to translate the chaos in his mind into something orderly and comprehensible—leaned in and kissed him.

He kissed the tears from Ilya's cheeks first. The salt of them was sharp on his lips, and he tasted the shape of Ilya's vulnerability there—all the things he had said in Russian, all the walls he had taken down, all the years he had spent holding himself together finally allowed to come apart. Shane kissed each tear away like it was something sacred, something worth collecting.

Then his mouth found Ilya's eyelids, pressing softly against the delicate skin there, feeling the flutter of Ilya's lashes, the way his breath stuttered. He kissed the space between his brows, where the tension of carrying an entire nation had carved a permanent furrow. He kissed the bridge of his nose, the corner of his jaw, the hinge of it where Shane had seen him clench his teeth through a hundred interviews, a thousand games, a decade of pretending he didn't feel anything at all.

He kissed Ilya's forehead and felt the tension there begin to ease. He kissed his temples, where Shane had watched him massage away headaches after games, after long flights, after nights spent in hotel rooms that weren't theirs. He kissed the small scar above Ilya's eyebrow—the one from a game three years ago, the one Shane had traced with his fingers reminding himself that *Ilya was real, Ilya was here, Ilya had survived*.

And finally, when he had kissed every part of Ilya's face, when there was no inch of skin left untouched, when Ilya's breath was coming in soft, uneven waves against his mouth, Shane kissed his lips.

Soft. Slow. Deliberate.

He tried to pour everything he didn't have words for into that kiss—the ten years of wanting, the hunger that had never quite gone away, the way Ilya's voice sounded in Russian, the way his hands had trembled when he said *ty—moy dom*, the way Shane had felt something crack open deep within him and fill with light. He tried to tell Ilya, without a single word, how much he loved him, how much he meant to him, how he wanted this for the rest of his life.

Ilya made a sound against his mouth—something small and soft, something that might have been a gasp or a sob or the beginning of a laugh. His hands came up to grip Shane's wrists, not pulling them away, just holding on. Like Shane was the only thing keeping him tethered to the earth.

When Shane finally pulled back, Ilya's eyes were open again, watching him. His face was still wet, still flushed, but the vulnerability there had shifted into something else. He was much more centered now, looked more like himself.

"You," he said finally, his voice barely a whisper, "are going to be the death of me, Hollander."

Shane smiled. It was wobbly and probably stupid-looking, but he didn't care. "I really hope not; the league would be very boring if I have no one to compete against."

"Ah yes, because I am the best player that there is."

"Fuck you," Shane said, but it came out more like an *I love you* than an insult, since he couldn't stop smiling. "Are you okay?"

"I am okay." Ilya's mouth curved into a timid smile. His thumb brushed over Shane's knuckles one more time before he let go. Then he pulled back, his eyes catching on the tray still sitting between them, and something shifted in his expression—the familiar light coming back, the teasing edge returning, but gentler now, like he was testing it out, seeing if it still fit.

He gestured at the tray. "Now, after my beautiful speech, you eat the food I made for you."

Shane laughed. It came out lighter than he expected, freer. And he felt a profound sense of peace settle over his shoulders, grounding something that had been rattling loose for a very long time. "Yes, sir."

Ilya's eyebrows shot up. Something flickered in his eyes, dark and amused. "Now, Shane, do not start something you cannot follow. Calling me like that, you know we do not have much more time."

Shane could feel his skin on fire, but he was still smiling. "Asshole."

He ate all the yogurt, all the blueberries, drank his tea. Ilya stole the last blueberry off his plate and popped it into his mouth with a smug look, and Shane should have been annoyed. He wasn't. He watched him chew, watched the way his eyes crinkled at the corners, watched the way the fading afternoon light caught in his hair, the curve of his jaw. He looked happy, comfortable. He looked like all of Shane's dreams come true.

"You are staring," Ilya said, not opening his eyes.

"I'm not," Shane corrected.

Ilya opened his eyes. Caught Shane's gaze. Held it. blinding smile tugged at his mouth. "Is okay. You can stare. I do not mind."

Shane's face warmed a bit more, and he looked away, reaching for the last of his tea. "This is going to be the only exception," he said, nodding at the tray. "Eating in bed. We're not making this a habit."

Ilya made a sound that might have been a laugh, might have been a scoff, for Ilya's own good Shane chose to believe it was a laugh. "We will see."

"I'm serious."

"Of course you are." Ilya took the tray from his lap, seeing that Shane had finished, and stood up. "You are very serious person, Shane Hollander. Very boring. Very responsible. Would not want to get crumbs in your very clean sheets."

Shane grabbed a pillow and threw it at him. Ilya caught it with his free hand, one-handed, without looking, and the easy show of reflex did something to Shane's lower belly that he refused to acknowledge.

When he came back to the bedroom, Shane was still sitting in bed, still in his t-shirt and boxers, still not quite ready to move. Ilya stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, and looked at him. His arms were crossed, his hair was still a mess, and he was wearing Shane's sweatpants, Shane's hoodie—the ones he had pulled on before going to the kitchen. He looked comfy and happy.

"You should get dressed," he said. "You have to go to hospital. Your mother is waiting."

"I know," Shane said, but didn't move a muscle.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "So why are you still in bed, Hollander?"

He looked at him. At the way the last of the sunset caught on his shoulders, covered by the borrowed hoodie. At the way his eyes were soft, warm, looking at Shane like he was all of his past and all of his future combined in just one person. Like he was his entire world.

Something pricked at the back of Shane's eyes.

"I don't want to get up," he said, voice rough.

Ilya's mouth curved. "No?"

"No."

He pushed off the doorframe and moved back to the bed slowly, with the kind of confidence that only made Shane more nervous, more aware, more incapable of remembering why he was supposed to get going instead of watching the Russian move toward him like some kind of predator stalking its prey.

"That is very irresponsible," Ilya said as he climbed onto the mattress again, one knee sinking into the bed beside his thigh. "You have responsibilities. This is very un-Shane-like for you. You are a good son. You are—"

He leaned in before finishing, close enough that Shane could feel the warmth of his breath against his mouth, close enough to catch the tiny gold flecks in his eyes and the scar above his eyebrow, the dark, blown-wide pupils that always made him feel like something inside him had been specifically selected for destruction.

"—very distracted," Shane finished quietly.

Ilya smiled like that was exactly the answer he'd wanted. "Da. Is one of my best qualities."

"Your best quality is being annoying."

"No," he said, his mouth twitching. "My best quality is being beautiful. This is known."

Shane kissed him before he could say anything more.

It wasn't gentle, and not because he meant for it to be rough, but because the moment his mouth touched Ilya's, something in him gave way all over again. Ilya made a pleased sound low in his throat and kissed back immediately, one hand settling at Shane's waist and the other bracing beside his hip. Shane had the stupid, disorienting thought that he was never going to get used to this—to being wanted so openly by the person he had wanted most in the world for so long.

The light in the room had gone thick and golden, turning everything softer around the edges, and still he felt overexposed under it, like the entire afternoon had narrowed to the shape of the man over him, the heat of his mouth, and the unbearable knowledge that this was not stolen anymore. This was not a hotel room and a lie and a deadline. This was not a few desperate hours between flights and games and pretending. Suddenly he couldn't remember why he was supposed to get dressed, why he needed to exist outside of this moment, away from this bed. But he made the effort anyway, because he was supposed to be *good*, to be responsible.

"Shit," Shane muttered against Ilya's mouth, because apparently even in the middle of actively making bad decisions he still had enough self-awareness left to feel guilty about it. "I really do need to go to the hospital."

"Mhm," Ilya murmured, like he was listening, though his mouth had already shifted to Shane's jaw.

"And you need to go to Boston," he continued, like he wasn't the one who had initiated all of this.

"Terrible situation," came the response against his skin.

"You have practice."

"Tragic."

"We have a game in two days." Ilya pressed a slow kiss just beneath his ear, and Shane's eyes fluttered shut before he could stop them. "*Fuck*. Stop doing that."

“You don’t sound convincing.”

A broad palm slid under the hem of Shane’s shirt then, flattening against his bare stomach, and his entire body reacted at once. His breath caught. His hips twitched upward involuntarily. One of his hands tightened hard in the fabric of the hoodie stretched across Ilya’s shoulders.

He lifted his head just enough to look at him properly, and there was something in Ilya’s expression that made his pulse jump—something dark and satisfied and patient, like he had just found the exact place to press.

“You want me to go?” he asked.

Shane should say yes. He should be responsible. He should remember that Ilya was supposed to be in Boston, that they were rival captains. Common sense and years of conditioning had taught him exactly how to put everyone else first, how to compartmentalize want until it became manageable, how to survive by starving in controlled portions.

But Ilya was looking at him like he would stay if asked.

Worse, he was looking at him like he *wanted* Shane to ask.

The hand slid lower, fingers tracing a slow path down Shane’s stomach, past his navel, stopping just at the waistband of his boxers. It set every nerve in his body on fire. *And fuck it.* This man was his boyfriend now. *His.* Shane wanted him here. In his bed. In his apartment. By his side, at least for this couple of difficult days.

“No,” Shane heard himself say, his voice thick enough that he almost didn’t recognize it.

“No, I don’t want you to go.”

"Good." The smile was slow, lethally dangerous. "Good boy, Shane. Be selfish for once."

That landed somewhere deep, in the oldest and most private part of Shane, in the locked place where all his wanting had lived for years, compressed into something neat and survivable and painfully small. He had spent most of his life trying to be good. Be enough. Be what everyone needed him to be. He had never once taken something for himself without measuring the cost.

But Ilya—infuriating, blunt, impossible Ilya—had never once seemed interested in any of those rules.

He wanted Shane greedy. He wanted him honest. He wanted him with his hands open instead of clenched.

And maybe that was what made this feel so different from every other time they had ever ended up like this, tangled together in a bed with too much history between them and not enough oxygen in the room. It wasn’t only that they were finally together, not just technically, not just in the private grammar they had built for themselves over ten years of

bad timing and worse choices. It was that for the first time, he knew Ilya wasn't just taking his body because it was there and familiar and easy to want.

He was taking it because he meant to keep everything attached to it.

The thought hit Shane hard enough to make him reckless. To make him want to devour him whole.

He grabbed the front of the hoodie with both hands and hauled him down into another kiss. There was no room left in it for hesitation. He kissed him like he was trying to answer every year they had wasted. Ilya kissed back like he had been waiting just as long to stop holding himself in check, and the force of the response pressed Shane flat against the mattress again, breathless and half-dizzy with how quickly everything inside him tipped from aching to desperate.

He had kissed him in the dark so many times he could have done it blind. Had memorized the shape of his mouth half-asleep, half-drunk, half-broken open by need. He knew the scrape of stubble at his chin, the way he exhaled through his nose when he was trying not to make noise, the exact point where a kiss turned into something rougher if Shane bit just hard enough.

But daylight changed things.

Or maybe being loved did.

Because this didn't feel like every other time. It felt bigger than that. It felt exposed. It felt final in a way that made his whole body hum with adrenaline. Ilya was here in his apartment, in his clothes, in his bed, and Shane didn't have to pretend this meant less than it did. He didn't have to act casual afterward. He didn't have to leave the best parts of himself behind in some anonymous room and then carry on like none of it had touched him.

He could just have this. He could just have him.

His hand slid up into the soft hair and tightened without thinking, and the sound Ilya made into his mouth—low, involuntary, devastated enough to go straight through his ribs—nearly undid him on the spot.

Shane did it again, more deliberately this time, and felt the other man's entire body react above him.

"Fuck," Ilya breathed, not so much a curse as an accusation.

He should have been embarrassed by how much satisfaction that gave him, but he was too far gone for embarrassment to matter. He was so tired of being careful. So tired of feeling like he had to ration every part of himself, even here, even with Ilya, even in the moments where his body wanted to give up every secret it had ever kept.

God, he wanted skin.

His other hand found the hem of the hoodie and shoved upward impatiently. Ilya pulled back just enough to understand, then stripped it off in one rough motion and tossed it somewhere behind him. For a second, Shane just looked.

He had seen him shirtless a hundred times. More than that. He had traced those shoulders and chest and back in hotel rooms across North America, in dim bathrooms and anonymous beds and all the ugly temporary spaces they had used to pretend this was manageable. He knew the broad lines of him, the scar above his ribs, the tattoo on his chest, the familiar gold cross resting over his sternum and catching a sudden, sharp sliver of the late-afternoon light. He knew the way his body shifted when he laughed, the way his muscles tensed when touched somewhere he particularly liked.

But there was something almost unbearable about seeing him like this here, in this room, in this light, with Shane's sweatpants hanging low on his hips.

Shane's sweatpants.

It was such a stupid detail to get stuck on, and yet it made something possessive and hot unfurl inside him all at once.

Ilya caught him staring and smiled with immediate, infuriating self-satisfaction. "You are looking at me like you have plans."

Shane reached for the waistband of the sweatpants before he could think too hard about what he was doing.

Ilya's eyebrows lifted.

"Take them off," Shane said, more roughly than he intended.

That got his full attention. "Very demanding, Hollander."

For one sharp second, he just looked down at him, and Shane felt the atmosphere in the room change. Not dramatically, just a slight shift in gravity, a small, dangerous tilt. Ilya was kneeling right between his legs, the heavy weight of him pinning the mattress down.

Instead of leaning back, Ilya shifted his weight and rose completely upright on his knees. He straightened his spine, pulling his hips away just enough to give a front-row seat to the broad lines of his chest and the sharp V of his abdomen, but keeping his full height. The movement forced Shane to look up, making the Russian tower over him in a way that felt deliberate, overwhelming, and entirely consuming.

He hooked his thumbs into the waistband. And then he just held them there, waiting, his eyes dark and completely fixed on Shane's, like he knew exactly what he was doing to him.

Shane nearly lost his mind.

"You could do it faster," he muttered, his mouth suddenly dry.

Ilya's mouth twitched. He finally began to push the fabric down, dragging the heavy cotton agonizingly slowly over his thighs. "Could," he agreed. "Will not."

"Asshole."

"You like it."

Staying perfectly upright, Ilya shoved the sweatpants down past his knees, pulling one leg free and kicking the fabric off the edge of the bed with a careless flick of his ankle. They hit the floor with a soft thud.

And then there was just him, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs, towering over him in the fading light.

Shane had woken up to him exactly like this just an hour ago. He had seen him soft and warm and tangled in the sheets, half-asleep and entirely domestic. But the context was dangerously different now. The quiet intimacy of waking up together was gone, replaced by the heavy, deliberate reality of him kneeling right there, his chest heaving slightly, looking unbearably pleased with himself. And right at eye level, straining against the tight dark fabric of his underwear, was the undeniable evidence of exactly how much Ilya wanted him.

The sight of him—so open, so devastatingly arrogant, and completely *his*—was enough to make Shane surge upward, tangling his hands in Ilya's hair, and pull him down into a bruising kiss before his own brain could catch up. Ilya yielded to the pull instantly, letting his torso drop, following him back down to cage him against the mattress. He braced one arm beside Shane's head to support his heavy weight, settling flush over him once more.

This time he met him with a different kind of force. Something more possessive than just hunger or heat. Something that felt almost like relief sharpened into urgency.

His hands moved with a ruthless purpose.

The arm not supporting his weight shifted; his broad hand curled around the back of Shane's neck, long fingers tangling in the short hair at his nape, holding him exactly where he wanted him. The other one slid down the line of his ribs under the t-shirt, over his waist, and hooked heavily over his hip bone. The grip was hard, a thumb pressing into the dip of the pelvis with enough pressure to leave a warning there, an anchor making sure Shane stayed perfectly aligned beneath him.

With a low, guttural sound into his mouth, Ilya used that grip to drag Shane's hips flush against his own, locking them together. And then, he started to move. It wasn't frantic, but a slow, heavy, relentless roll of his hips that ground them together through the thin layers of their underwear.

The sudden, agonizingly direct friction sent a violent shockwave down his spine. Shane gasped, breaking the kiss, his own hips instinctively snapping up to chase the rhythm. Ilya took immediate advantage, burying his face in the crook of Shane's neck, his teeth scraping over the frantic pulse jumping beneath the skin, never once stopping that maddening, continuous drag of his hips.

And Shane let him.

That was the thing that felt almost more intimate than the kissing, more than the bruising heat of their bodies grinding together, more than the dizzying physical pull of being wanted. He surrendered the control he usually guarded so fiercely. Not passively, not because he was frozen or overwhelmed, but because something inside him finally, beautifully gave way every time Ilya claimed that authority with such quiet, devastating certainty. Every time he made decisions with those heavy hands, pinning him down, demanding trust enough to just let go and follow.

And Shane did trust him. More than anyone. More than was probably reasonable.

Enough to let himself stop performing competence for five fucking minutes. Enough to let himself be held down by the one person who had always seen straight through him anyway.

Ilya's mouth moved to his throat, and he tipped his head back without being asked. He could feel the smile against his skin at that, the pleased little shift of the mouth before teeth grazed lightly at the spot beneath his jaw, sending a clean, sharp pulse of heat straight through him.

"Ilya," Shane breathed, the word coming out thin and fractured.

He paused, lips still brushing the frantic pulse there. "Again," he murmured.

Shane swallowed hard. "Ilya."

The broad hand at the back of his neck tightened in immediate approval.

Again.

He felt absurdly wrecked by how much that did to him.

Ilya's free hand slid up under the shirt once more, higher this time, long fingers spanning his ribs. His body gave the answer before his mouth could. He arched into the touch immediately, his breath stuttering, one knee falling open on the bed without conscious permission.

"Off," the command came softly, tugging at the fabric.

Shane lifted his arms, and Ilya stripped the shirt over his head in one smooth motion. Then, he stopped. Just long enough to look at him.

And *looked*.

Not in passing. Not distractedly. Not like this was just one more hotel room, one more secret hookup, one more time taking a body he was used to having. He looked with focus, with utter possessiveness, with the kind of direct, heavy attention that made Shane feel stripped far beyond the loss of fabric. They had done this a hundred times before, but never with the lights entirely on. Never with the agonizing clarity of knowing exactly what they meant to each other.

His skin went hot under the scrutiny. He fought the ingrained instinct to fold in on himself, to make a joke, to break the unbearable intensity of it somehow before it reached too deep. But Ilya's hand came up and caught his jaw before he could turn his head away.

"No," he said quietly.

Shane's eyes flicked back to his.

"You keep your pretty eyes on me." The words were low and even and impossible to ignore. Not harsh. Not cruel. But unmistakably not a request.

And Shane, whose whole body had been wound tight with too many years of being seen incorrectly or incompletely or not at all, felt a phantom ache expand behind his ribs, pulling hard enough to physically hurt. Because Ilya wasn't looking at him *despite* his body. He was looking at him like it was a privilege. Like he had been waiting for this exact view his entire life. Like there was not a single part of him he wanted less once it was fully offered.

"Look at you," Ilya murmured, his thumb brushing once over Shane's lower lip. "Look at what I get to have now."

He made a sound before he could stop it—small and humiliating and honest enough that it made the other man's expression darken instantly. There was no mockery in it. No meanness. Just want. Just pure satisfaction. Just that same brutal sincerity he brought to everything he cared about too much to handle gently.

"I'm serious," Ilya said, when he still didn't answer. "No more hiding with me."

Something inside nearly split open. Shane managed a single, shaky nod.

He had spent years making himself manageable. Smaller. Quieter. Easier to hold without inconvenience. Even here, even in sex, there had always been some sliver of him still braced, still waiting for the point where wanting too much would become embarrassing. Where his body would become too obvious, where the need in him would stop being something that could be laughed off and start being something ugly and difficult and impossible to disguise.

But Ilya was looking at him like he wanted all of it. The ugly parts too. *Especially* those.

"Tell me," he demanded softly, the familiar arrogance in his voice completely swallowed by devotion. "Say you are mine."

Shane's next exhale came out terribly shaky. "I'm yours."

Ilya's whole face changed. Then he kissed him again, and this time, there was no gentleness left anywhere in it.

He felt himself go with it instantly.

Ilya kissed like a man who had spent ten years trying not to take too much and had finally decided that was no longer his problem. His hand slid into Shane's hair and tipped his head exactly where he wanted it, fingers spreading at the base of his skull to hold him there as his

mouth moved with hungry precision. Then he shifted them with one decisive movement until Shane was flat on the bed again and Ilya was over him properly, skin finally, beautifully flush against skin. The gold cross on Ilya's chain swung and trapped itself flat between their hammering hearts, a brief, shocking point of familiar cold metal against Shane's bare, heated chest that made him gasp into the kiss. One thigh pressed between his knees, forcing them apart with enough steady pressure to make his breath hitch embarrassingly hard.

There. That too.

That control. That certainty. That complete lack of apology. He loved it so much he almost hated himself for it.

Almost.

Because the truth was that there was relief in it too. Relief in not having to steer. Relief in not having to be the one holding everything together for once. Relief in being known well enough that the other man could just take over and trust him to follow where he was led. And Shane followed.

God, he followed.

He pulled Ilya closer with one hand hooked at the back of his shoulder and dragged his nails lightly down the length of his back with the other, just enough to feel muscle jump beneath skin. The response was immediate. The broad body tightened. The mouth broke from his long enough for a low, wrecked sound to escape, and the noise hit Shane so hard he did it again, slower this time, more deliberate, just to feel the effect of it.

"Fuck," Ilya said into his throat.

A wild, almost dizzying rush of satisfaction went through him. "Yeah?"

Ilya lifted his head. There was something almost feral in his expression now, something hot and focused and just restrained enough to be dangerous.

"Careful," he said.

Shane should have listened. Instead, he smiled—small, shaky, and entirely too pleased with himself—and dragged his nails down that back one more time. Ilya arched into him, curving like a bow drawn tight. The sound he made—low and guttural, something between a growl and a moan—went straight through Shane like lightning, like fire, like the very first time he had ever felt those hands on him and realized he would never want anyone else.

But that was apparently the wrong choice.

Ilya made another sound, deeper this time, then caught both of Shane's wrists in one hand and pinned them above his head in a movement so quick and smooth he barely processed it before he was there, breath punched out of him, staring up with his pulse thundering everywhere at once.

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

Ilya's mouth brushed his once, not quite a kiss. "You are being very brave today."

His entire body lit up with something sharper than want. Something that went bright and electric under his skin and settled low in his stomach all at once. The pressure around his wrists was firm, controlled, unmistakable, and it made something inside him go loose in a way that felt almost humiliating in its immediacy.

He could have pulled free if he'd wanted to. *Probably*. Ilya was stronger, but Shane wasn't exactly small, and this was not about force in any real sense. It was about permission. It was about being held there because he was letting him. Because he trusted him. Because he liked this enough that the thought alone made heat flood low and fast through his entire body.

And Ilya knew. Of course he knew.

"Tell me to stop and I stop," Ilya murmured against his ear, his voice suddenly stripped down to something simpler and more serious beneath the heat.

Shane's chest tightened.

There was something about being looked at like this, wanted like this, and still being asked. Still being given the choice. Still being trusted with the absolute power to end it at any point. Knowing that he was loved enough to walk away if asked. It nearly made him come apart before anything had even happened.

Instead, he just looked back and said, because it was the truest thing in his heart: "Don't."

Ilya exhaled once through his nose, like that answer had physically cost him something. Then he bent and kissed him again, deep and consuming, keeping the wrists securely anchored. Shane made a sound into his mouth that he would have died before making with anyone else.

They stayed like that long enough for Shane to stop thinking in complete sentences. Long enough for his body to dissolve into pure response. Long enough for the room to shrink down to the pressure of Ilya's hands, the heat of his mouth, and that endless, devastating roll of his hips. His mind was spinning, completely scrambled by the sensory overload.

It made absolutely no sense. They weren't even doing anything yet—not really. Compared to the bruising, frantic pace of how they usually fucked, the desperate urgency they usually needed just to get off, this was practically nothing. Just the continuous, heavy drag of arousal against his own, the friction of cotton and heat, the unyielding weight holding him down.

And yet, every single one of his nerves felt absolutely fried.

He had never been this overstimulated in his entire life. The sheer emotional weight of being loved like this, combined with that slow, never-ending friction, made him infinitely more desperate and wrecked than he had ever been during their hardest, roughest hookups. And that was maybe the strangest part of all—not how intense it was, not even how quickly it built, but how *safe* it felt inside the intensity. How terrifyingly easy it was to stop bracing

himself, knowing that Ilya was not going to run away because he wanted too much, needed too openly, or unravelled so completely over so little.

Ilya's mouth dropped to the heavy curve of Shane's shoulder, teeth grazing the sensitive skin right above his collarbone. He let out a soft, helpless whimper, his spine arching slightly off the mattress to chase the heat of the contact. Ilya's hand finally left his hair, trailing a slow, burning path down the center of his chest, he dragged it flat over Shane's sternum, letting the weight of his hand map the frantic thud of Shane's heart before sliding lower.

"Ilya," he gasped, his voice unrecognizable—rough and needy and wanting in a way he had never let himself be. "Ilya, please—"

Ilya's mouth was on his again before he could finish, swallowing the words. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything except hold on to the feeling of that hand splaying wide over his stomach, the thumb brushing dangerously close to his waistband.

"Tell me what you want," Ilya demanded against his mouth, his voice strained enough that the command barely held together. "Tell me, Shane. I'll give you everything. I'll give you the fucking world."

But Shane didn't want the world, didn't need it. The things he wanted were quite more simple, though more difficult to say out loud. Even though Ilya had made the effort to fuck the shame out of him over the years, it was still agonizingly difficult to be explicit, to voice his dirty, selfish needs out loud after a lifetime of swallowing them down. But the absolute devotion radiating from the man above him made the shame impossible to hold onto.

"You," he said, his voice cracking beautifully. "I want—I want you. I want—" He couldn't find more words, couldn't find anything except the desperate need to close the last fraction of distance between them.

"Good," Ilya growled, his hips snapping forward to emphasize the praise, drawing another wrecked sound from Shane. He was usually more demanding, loving to make him beg properly, but he wasn't going to be mean right now. Not when they were both so raw, their love practically bleeding through their skin. "Good boy. You get what you want now, Shane. You deserve it."

He trailed open-mouthed kisses over Shane's collarbones as he spoke. At the same time, his long fingers unlaced from Shane's wrists, finally letting them fall free. But before he could even react, the hands traveled south, broad palms gripping the backs of his thighs to haul his hips up and open him wider. His legs fell open without thought, his body moving on pure instinct to make space. The sudden, agonizing friction of the hips rolling forward into his own, deeper now with the new angle, made them both gasp—it was almost too much.

Fingers slipped beneath the elastic of his boxers. The rough, callused pads brushing against the hyper-sensitive skin of his lower stomach sent violent shivers up his spine. The fabric was pulled down slowly, deliberately. Shane lifted his hips without being asked, completely desperate to feel skin against skin.

Freed from the pin, his hands immediately came up to grip broad shoulders, nails digging into heavy muscle as the hips rolled again. The wet, searing friction of his bare skin finally sliding against soft fabric sent a blinding flash of heat through his veins.

"You are so beautiful," Ilya murmured against his lips, his voice thick with a decade of starved want, never breaking his punishing, hypnotic rhythm. "You have no idea what you do to me. What you have always done to me. Every time I saw you across the ice, every time I watched you skate, every time I had to pretend I didn't want to just tear your gear off and put my hands on you—"

Shane whimpered, bucking upward on his own accord, blindly seeking more friction, more pressure, more of anything he was willing to give. "Ilya—"

"I know," he soothed. The broad hands slid from the backs of the thighs, thumbs pressing firmly into the sensitive, trembling skin of the inner legs, pushing him even wider. "I know, *solnyshko*. I've got you. You're doing so well for me. Just let go. I've got you."

Instead of using his hands, Ilya shifted his weight and drove one heavy, hair-roughened thigh directly up between Shane's legs, pressing hard against Shane's aching center. Shane's entire body arched off the mattress into the brutal friction, a broken, helpless sound falling from his lips.

Ilya's hand moved up to cup Shane's jaw, his thumb wiping a stray bead of sweat from his cheekbone, holding him firmly in place. His mouth followed, pressing a hot, bruising kiss to the corner of Shane's mouth before his teeth scraped lightly along his strong jawline, his tongue soothing the sting a second later.

"So responsive," Ilya breathed directly against the damp skin of his throat. The deep vibration sent another violent shockwave straight down to his groin. "So perfect. You are so perfect, Shane. Every sound you make—every time you move—*fuck*—"

Desperate for the taste of him, he fisted his hands blindly in the messy hair, hauling him back up. Ilya went willingly, crushing his mouth over Shane's in a deep, wet kiss. Legs instinctively wrapped around the narrow waist, heels locking at the small of his back, dragging him as close as physically possible. The pressure coiling in his lower stomach wound tighter and tighter with every grinding movement, every stroke of the tongue, every filthy, beautiful word of praise that fell from those lips.

Ilya broke the kiss, chest heaving as he pulled back just enough to watch him. The gold cross dangled freely from his neck, swaying slightly with his ragged breaths, catching the fading light. It was such a small thing, but seeing it hanging there between them, gleaming against the backdrop of Ilya's bare, sweat-dampened chest, drove Shane absolutely out of his mind with the sheer intimacy of it.

"Look at you," he rasped, his gaze dark and devouring as it swept over the flushed, pliant body beneath him. "So open for me. So good. You are taking this so well. Just let it happen. I have you."

Without breaking eye contact, he reached down to his own waist. He hooked his fingers into the waistband of his boxer briefs and shoved them down and off in one quick, impatient motion. Shane barely had a second to process the sight. He barely had time to take in the thick, heavy length between them, slick with pre-come and twitching with the exact same desperate need that was currently tearing Shane apart. Before he could even gasp, long fingers reached down and wrapped firmly around both of their lengths at once, squeezing them flush together.

The intense, overwhelming heat of skin on skin, the slick friction, and the crushing reality of being gripped so tightly against the man he loved shattered the very last of his coherent thoughts. His eyes rolled to the back of his head. His spine bowed completely off the bed as a ragged, tearing sob ripped from his throat. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything but let his hips buck wildly into Ilya's relentless grip. The edges of the world blurred into nothing but the crushing heat of Ilya's body and the endless string of praise that was pulling him apart and putting him back together at the same time.

"You are so good," Ilya groaned, his voice wrecked, matching the furious rhythm of the hips with the steady, punishing stroke of his heavy hand. "So good for me. So perfect. You are everything, Shane. Everything."

The praise washed over him, each word sinking directly into his bloodstream, filling the hollow spaces he had carried for a decade. He was good. He was perfect. And Ilya was the one saying it.

The grip was uncompromising, fingers slick with their shared heat. He worked them together with long, agonizingly tight strokes, the pad of his thumb pressing heavily into their slick, hyper-sensitive skin with every upward glide. The friction was a blinding, white-hot flash of pleasure that grounded him to the mattress even as his mind completely splintered.

His jaw worked frantically. He was so utterly overwhelmed, his brain so completely scrambled by the sensory overload, that he desperately tried to form a sentence, to beg, to explain that he was actively breaking apart.

"I—Ilya, I can't—" Shane babbled, his voice a high, fractured mess of consonants and breathless whimpers. "It's—you, I'm—fuck—too much—"

Ilya's entire face softened at that. It changed all at once, like something inside him had simply given way. Whatever sharpness had been left in him melted clean out of his expression, leaving behind something unbearably open—fond to the point of reverence, almost dazed with it, as though the sight of Shane like this still had the power to undo him every single time.

He bent over him slowly, tenderly, like he had all the time in the world. His mouth brushed Shane's damp temple first, warm and lingering, the soft press of affection against overheated skin.

"Shh, *malysh*, shhh," he cooed, his voice low and honey-soft, ruined at the edges but still impossibly gentle—a dizzying contrast to the ruthless, demanding pace of his hand. He

kissed the corner of Shane's eye, swallowing the frantic babbling. "Don't think. Just feel. I've got you."

Shane made a sound so soft it was almost embarrassing in its sweetness, a tiny, broken keening that seemed to get trapped somewhere in the back of his throat. His body gave up on language before his mind did. He could only cling tighter.

"That's it," Ilya murmured, his breath hot against Shane's ear as his strokes went faster, harder, pushing them both right to the precipice. "Let go for me. I'm not going anywhere. You are mine, Shane. And I am yours. Forever."

With that, Shane finally shattered. His whole body arched helplessly off the bed, a sharp, ruined cry breaking out of him with Ilya's name tangled somewhere inside it. His arms locked around the broad shoulders on pure instinct, pulling him down, closer, tighter, as if even now it was somehow possible to get him nearer. His nails bit hard into the heavy muscle of Ilya's back, cruel and desperate and thoughtless in the sheer force of it, leaving deep, brutal scratches in their wake. It hit him so hard it stole the shape of the room, and his first coherent thought afterward was that he had probably just embarrassed himself beyond recovery.

His second was that he did not care.

Because Ilya followed him a split second later. Shane felt it happen before he fully understood it—the broad chest shuddering against his own as Ilya spilled into his hand, the way the large body went taut and then completely helpless all at once, the way his mouth opened on Shane's name like it had been pulled out of him against his will. Ilya came with his forehead knocking clumsily against Shane's shoulder, his breath breaking apart in ragged, wrecked little sounds that were so unlike him they made something deep and unbearably fond ache in Shane's chest. He sounded gone. Stripped down to something trembling and human and so obviously in love that it almost hurt to look at him.

For a moment, neither of them could do anything except breathe.

Ilya stayed folded over him, panting hard into the curve of his neck, every inch of him warm and heavy and boneless in a way that felt almost unreal. Shane could feel the aftershocks still moving through him in tiny, involuntary tremors. He could feel the damp heat of his skin, the frantic rhythm of his pulse, the soft drag of his breath every time he exhaled.

Slowly, as the haze began to clear, Shane's hands loosened their desperate, painful grip. His fingers uncurled from where they had been digging into Ilya's skin. Almost apologetically, his palms flattened out, sliding gently down the sweat-slicked expanse of that broad back. He began to stroke him. Light, feather-soft touches, tracing the very muscle he had just marked, tracing the curve of his spine, soothing the skin with a tenderness he didn't know he possessed. It was a quiet, devastating apology and an anchor all at once.

When Ilya finally lifted his head, it was slow, almost lazy, as if even that required monumental effort.

The look on his face nearly undid Shane all over again. He looked wrecked, in the soft, devastating way people only ever looked when they had forgotten entirely how to hide.

His mouth was parted, swollen and pink from kissing and breathing and saying Shane's name into his skin. His lashes were damp. His cheeks were flushed high with heat. And there was something so naked in his expression—so full, so quietly stunned, so deep in the afterglow of being loved and loving back—that Shane felt his own chest go painfully tender around it.

Like his heart had just turned too soft to survive inside him.

It hit him then, with a sudden, quiet kind of awe. He wasn't the only one. For all that this had been simple—just friction and skin and the agonizing weight of being truly present with each other, so completely tame compared to the frantic, bruising way they usually fucked—Ilya was just as utterly destroyed by it. The sheer, crushing intimacy of the moment, the absolute devotion of giving Shane exactly what he needed and watching him take it, had fried Ilya's nerves just as thoroughly. It had brought him to the exact same breathless, trembling edge.

Ilya looked at him for one long second, like he was trying to memorize the exact shape of his face in this moment. Then, he leaned in. So slowly Shane could feel the anticipation of it before it even happened—the heat of his breath, the brush of his nose, the barely-there graze of his mouth, as if he was asking without words: *still? still? still?*

Shane answered by tilting his chin up before he could even think about it.

And then Ilya kissed him.

So softly it almost made Shane ache. It was barely more than a press at first, damp and salt-sweet and impossibly tender. No urgency left in it at all. Only affection. Only relief. Only that terrible, overflowing sweetness that comes after you've already given someone everything and somehow still want to give them more.

Shane made a tiny sound into it—high and sleepy and helpless in a way that would have mortified him in any other circumstance—and Ilya answered with a quiet, wrecked hum of his own, low in his throat. An absolute, biological instinct to comfort back.

The kiss deepened only by accident. Neither of them seemed capable of letting it stay small. Slow. Sleepy. Open-mouthed and almost embarrassingly affectionate. Ilya kissed him like he was still half-drunk on him. Like he could stay there for hours. Like Shane's mouth was something warm and beloved he had every right in the world to come home to.

And Shane kissed back like he was still falling apart from tenderness. Every time their lips parted, he chased him with another soft little sound, another weak, instinctive tilt of his mouth, unable to bear for it to be over.

It drew a noise from Ilya that sounded a lot like disbelief and pure love. His hand slid up, slow and heavy with exhaustion, until it found Shane's jaw. He cupped it like it meant something monumental just to hold him there. His thumb dragged lazily over Shane's cheekbone, touching him for the absolute sake of touching him.

The next kiss was even softer. And the next one softer still. Little, helpless things. Sweet, sleepy, almost absent-minded presses of his mouth that somehow felt more intimate than anything that had come before them. One at the corner of Shane's lips. One right against the center of his mouth. One so slow and lingering it felt less like a kiss and more like Shane was eating honey.

When Ilya finally spoke, he didn't pull away enough to really do it. He said it directly into Shane's mouth, his lips still brushing his when he formed the words.

"I love you," he whispered. His voice was hoarse, completely stripped bare, all the usual wit and armor and sharpness gone out of it. What remained was just the truth, simple and devastating and so sincere it made Shane's eyes sting.

Shane's hand moved from Ilya's back, sliding almost clumsily up to his head, trembling a little from exertion and aftermath and the sheer, unbearable force of feeling too much at once. He buried his fingers in the messy curly hair, stroking the soft strands at the nape of his neck with impossible sweetness. A full-body shiver wrecked its way down Ilya's spine at the touch, followed by a tiny, completely surrendered sound.

"I love you too," Shane breathed back, and even that came out sounding half-lost, half-dreaming, like he still hadn't fully come back to earth.

Ilya smiled into the next kiss. Shane felt the soft curve of it against his mouth, the sweetness of it, the way it changed the entire shape of it into something even more unbearably fond. He kissed him again just because he could. Then again, because apparently that still wasn't enough. Lazy little things. Sweet and stupid and full of serotonin and devotion. They were simply too happy to stop touching each other, but too tired to do anything about it except keep pressing close.

Eventually, Ilya let out a long, heavy exhale, the kind that seemed to come from somewhere all the way at the bottom of his soul. And then, finally, he let himself go completely. He lowered his full weight down over Shane in one slow, boneless collapse, burying his face in the crook of his neck. Shane let out a soft little *oof* at the impact, but he was smiling before the sound had even fully left him.

For a long moment, neither of them moved. The room was quiet except for the ragged sound of their breathing, the soft rustle of sweat-dampened sheets, and the distant hum of the city outside. Ilya's dead weight was incredibly warm and solid against him, his heart hammering a low rhythm directly against Shane's ribs. Shane's arms came up, his hands flattening over the sweat-slicked expanse of Ilya's back, wrapping around him, holding him there, not wanting him to move. Not ever wanting to let go.

Ilya's breath was warm and sleepy against the skin. One of his arms was still around Shane's waist. The other was tucked under him somewhere. Their legs were tangled. Their bodies were warm and damp and heavy in the way that always felt strangely more intimate than anything that came before it. The room had gone quieter around them, the kind of quiet that only really existed after something had been said without words and answered in full. Shane stared at the ceiling for a second, trying to gather himself back into something recognizable.

And then he realized, with a kind of slow, disbelieving shock, that he didn't feel wrong. Didn't feel guilty. Didn't feel embarrassed. Didn't feel that familiar, immediate recoil after want had been answered—that strange, old emptiness that usually opened up inside him the second everything was over, as if his body had been briefly convinced it could be filled and then remembered, all at once, that it was not allowed to stay that way. But there was no recoil now. No drop. No quiet disgust waiting for him on the other side of being wanted.

In its place there was only warmth.

A fullness so unfamiliar it almost made him emotional on the spot.

He swallowed hard and tightened his arms around Ilya on instinct, as if his body had understood before the rest of him had that this was not something he wanted to lose hold of. Ilya must have felt the shift in him, because he lifted his head slightly and looked at him, his expression still hazy around the edges but attentive in the center, as if even half-wrecked he was incapable of not noticing Shane.

“What?” he asked quietly.

Shane shook his head against the pillow.

Ilya narrowed his eyes. “Shane.”

He should have made a joke. He should have said nothing. He should have let the moment pass before he ruined it by saying something too earnest and too naked and too difficult to take back. Instead, because apparently today was the day he was going to let Ilya see all of him whether he survived it or not, he told him the truth.

“I don't feel empty anymore.”

Ilya went still.

The expression that crossed his face then was so naked, so devastatingly tender, that Shane almost regretted saying it—not because it wasn't true, but because he did not know what to do with being looked at like that. Like he had just handed Ilya something fragile and precious and long-starved. Like Ilya would kill to keep it safe.

“Oh,” Ilya said. And then, with a gentleness that felt almost obscene after everything else, he lifted one hand and cupped the side of Shane's face. “Oh, solnyshko.”

Shane didn't know what that meant, not exactly, but it didn't matter. It was the tone that undid him. The softness of it. The reverence. The quiet ache tucked inside it, like Ilya understood far more than Shane had actually said and was answering all of it anyway.

Because this was what he had wanted, wasn't it? Not only the heat and the hunger and the relief of finally being touched the way he had always wanted to be touched by this man, but this too—the aftermath, the staying, the softness that did not ask him to earn it first.

He felt his face heat almost immediately. “Sorry,” he murmured, suddenly unable to look at him for more than a second at a time. “That sounded insane.”

“No,” Ilya said, so softly it made Shane’s throat tighten. “No, it did not.”

He looked at him for another second, his thumb brushing once beneath Shane’s cheekbone, and then leaned down and kissed his forehead like he was trying not to say something too large out loud. Shane closed his eyes and pulled him closer until there was no space left between them at all, and Ilya came without resistance, settling against him like he belonged there, like this had always been the shape they had both been moving toward even when they were too stupid or too scared to admit it.

For most of his life, Shane had been reaching.

Reaching for a version of himself that was easier to love. Smaller. Quieter. More manageable. Reaching for the perfect son, the perfect captain, the perfect face to show the world. Reaching for control and calling it discipline. Reaching for the kind of self-denial that could be mistaken, from a distance, for strength. Reaching for the hunger he had learned to live with so well he had almost stopped recognizing it as hunger at all. The hunger for food he would not let himself eat, for rest he would not let himself take, for softness he did not know how to ask for, for the boy—then the man—he had wanted for so long he had eventually taught himself to want around it, instead of through it.

He had spent years convincing himself that wanting was dangerous. That needing was weakness. That the only way to survive was to make himself smaller and smaller until he fit cleanly into spaces that had never really been built for him at all.

And Ilya—impossible, caring, relentless Ilya—had refused to let him.

He had looked at all the broken, hungry, folded-up parts of Shane and said I want all of them. Had asked him, in Russian, in the language of home and anger and tenderness and everything Shane still did not know how to untangle, to be his boyfriend. Had taken him apart with patience and praise and hands that never once asked him to become less in order to be loved properly.

And Shane, who had spent his whole life translating himself into a language other people could understand, creating masks and versions of himself for every person and every occasion, had finally found a place to rest, a safe corner in a world that would eat you alive if you let it.

He lay there with the fading gold light stretched across the bed and Ilya half on top of him, his own pulse finally beginning to slow. In the quiet of the room, listening to the steady rhythm of Ilya’s breathing against his throat, he felt something he had almost never let himself feel before. It was something deeper than the physical warmth of the skin pressed against his, something that had been waiting for him all along beneath years of control and perfection and relentless self-containment. It was quiet and terrifying and almost too good to touch directly. For the first time in what felt like his entire life, he did not feel like he was reaching for a piece of affection just out of his grasp. For the first time, he did not feel like he was bracing himself, waiting for the hunger to return and remind him that he was not allowed to be full. He simply felt wanted. Safe. Held.

His face pressed into Ilya's hair before he could stop himself, and then the tears came—quiet and hot and helpless under the overwhelming, terrifying, beautiful weight of being loved not despite himself, not around himself, but in the exact shape of who he was.

Ilya stirred against him, his hand moving to press flat against Shane's chest, right over his heart.

"You are crying again," he murmured, his voice thick with sleep and tiredness.

Shane smiled into his hair. "I know."

"Is happy crying or sad crying?"

Shane thought about the years of hunger. About ten years of looking away. Of hiding, even from himself. About all the parts of himself he had spent so long trying to starve into silence. About all the people who loved him and all the ways he still did not fully know how to let them. He thought about his mother, and how terrified he still was of telling her the truth, of letting one more person see him clearly and trusting that she would stay. And then he looked down at the man in his arms.

Ilya made him brave. Or maybe not brave exactly, but braver than he had ever managed to be on his own. He made the world feel less punishing. Less narrow. Less built around the constant fear of being not enough. Beside him, the unknown still existed, but it no longer felt impossible to survive.

"Happy," he said finally. "It's happy crying."

Ilya lifted his head just enough to look at him. His eyes were half-lidded, his hair a mess, his lips red and swollen, his cheeks still faintly flushed.

Shane was pretty sure he was the love of his life.

For a long moment, Ilya just looked at him, as if making sure he was telling the truth. Then he smiled—that small, private smile that had always felt like it belonged only to Shane.

"Good," he murmured, and lowered his head again, pressing his face back into the curve of Shane's neck, his breath warm and steady against his skin. "Is good."

Shane held him there in the quiet of his apartment, in the late afternoon light, and for once he let the rest of the world wait. He let his phone stay untouched. Let the hospital exist somewhere beyond the walls of this room. Let Hayden wait. Let his father wait. Let his routines and structures and obligations wait. Let the fear wait. Let the future wait. Let all the questions that would come after this wait too.

And for one small, fragile, impossible second, he let himself keep what he wanted.

He let himself hold on to the man he loved.

He let himself be full.

Chapter End Notes

I honestly thought that the author's curse was like, a joke, and then I published my first fic and then my dad got cancer and like three people in my family died and my anxiety and depression skyrocketed???? So I guess it's very much real. But well, I do love to write even when it stresses me out (this is supposed to be my hobby btw), and it's a really good distraction too.

This was my first time writing sex, so it is what it is. I'm really sorry if it's not enough or if it feels cringey, but I felt this scene was essential for their characters. As uncomfortable as I may be writing it (only because I've never done it before lol), this is the most important language they have. And the way they have sex here is a reflection of what they're finally letting themselves have, so narratively speaking, it was kinda a necessity.

Also, I have absolutely no idea about Russian. Like, none. I prayed to God that what I wrote made sense and sounded normal. What it was meant to say was something like this:

"I have loved you for ten years. Ten whole years. And believe me, I tried to fight it. I tried not to love you. I tried to forget you. I tried to convince myself that one day it would fade, that I would wake up and you would no longer be under my skin, no longer living in every part of me.

But you never disappeared. I still thought about you. I still searched for you without meaning to, still found myself returning to you again and again, even when I was doing everything I could to stay away. Every night, every game, every goddamn day—you were there. In my mind. In my heart. In every breath I took.

And I don't want to hide anymore. I don't want to keep pretending there's nothing between us. I don't want these borrowed rooms, these secrets, this half-lived version of a life. I want you—truly, fully, openly. I don't want to keep going back to Russia feeling like I've left the most important part of myself behind here with you. It will always be my homeland, but you... you are my home. And every time I left, every time I came back from there, I came back broken—like I had to teach myself how to breathe without you all over again. I don't want that anymore.

I want back every year we wasted. I want all that lost time, if I could get it back. But since I can't, then I want everything we still have left. All of it. I want to be yours. Truly. Completely. For as long as I'm allowed to.

I have never loved anyone the way I love you. Never. And I want all the things I never wanted with anyone else. I want to wake up next to you. I want to make you breakfast. I want to stay home with you and watch TV instead of going out. I want to argue with you about stupid things and then make up by kissing you. I want to hold your hand where everyone can see. I want to kiss you every morning and taste your tea on your lips for

the rest of my life. I want all of it—the ordinary, quiet, domestic things that would never be ordinary if they were with you.

I want you to teach me what it means to have a family. A real one. The kind where no one has to walk on eggshells. The kind where doors don't slam and people don't leave. The kind where we simply... stay.

So I'm asking you now the way I should have asked a long time ago. Properly. With all of it—the breakfast in bed, the ridiculous romance, the whole thing.

Shane Hollander... will you be my boyfriend?"

If anyone actually speaks Russian and reads this, please correct me. I'm begging.

ANYWAYS, let's hope that it doesn't take me fucking forever to write the last chapter. See you then, and have a nice and beautiful day!!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

My lovelssss,

Chapter 3 is finally here. FINALLY. I have it ready.

It took me way longer than I expected, mostly because I already knew what I wanted to write, but actually getting there was another story entirely. I struggled with this chapter so much, so I'm really sorry it took me this long to post it.

Life's been kind of busy lately with uni and everything else, so writing has been harder than usual. But genuinely, there wasn't a single day where I wasn't thinking about this story in some way. Every couple of days I was opening my notes, writing something, deleting something, changing something, rereading something. I'd literally be sitting in class and suddenly open my notes app just to write a paragraph or a random line before I forgot it.

Also, I read all your comments. Every single one. And I really mean that. I'm so grateful for all the love, kindness, and energy you've sent me through this fic. I wish I could reply to all of you properly, and maybe someday when life calms down a little, I will. But even when I don't answer, please know I still read everything, and it genuinely means so much to me.

And obviously, as always, my favorite thing ever is when you guys copy and paste your favorite lines/fragments in the comments. I love seeing what stood out to you. But honestly, I appreciate every comment, from the one-word reactions to the giant paragraphs you take the time to write. I love you all very much, and I really love sharing this story with you.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this chapter. It took me a lot longer than usual, and out of everything I've written for this series so far, Yuna's POV was probably the part I loved writing the most. It also made me cry the most while writing it, so... good luck with that.



Come say hi on [Twitter](#) if you want!

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

Gravity usually operated on Shane as a strict, unforgiving mechanism, demanding he rise, schedule, and execute. But as the late afternoon light filtering through the bedroom blinds began to step into the cooler, bruised blue of early evening, the heaviness keeping him

tethered to the mattress had nothing to do with obligation or exhaustion. It was entirely composed of the man breathing slowly against his shoulder.

The air in the bedroom had changed, a subtle shift that Shane's brain registered before he even opened his eyes. For years, the vulnerable space that followed having Ilya in his bed had always been ruled by a ruthless, ticking countdown; rushing through flight schedules, impending dawns, and the suffocating reality of borrowed time. But lately, that fleeting window had grown heavy with a creeping grief, a hollow exhaustion of leaving and being left that Shane was rapidly losing the strength to hide. The air used to feel thin and rationed, like the wasn't enough oxygen in any room for the both of them to stay for more than a couple of hours. Now, in the fading late-afternoon light filtering through the blinds, there was no frantic rush to put their armor back on, no desperate calculation of the minutes they had left; instead, the air around them felt rooted, like it was infinite.

They stayed in bed long after the adrenaline had completely bled out of their systems, suspended in a quiet, isolated bubble that Shane was fiercely reluctant to pop. The silence in the apartment wasn't the lonely kind he had grown so used to over the past few years. With his needs sated, his belly full, his heart exploding, and the warm, constant rise and fall of a breath against his own sternum, he was sure he had never felt less alone. It felt like the perfect place for him, like he was finally exactly where he belonged.

He had known this for quite some time now, actually; that in every stolen moment with this man, his mind found the only place it allowed itself to truly rest, but really surrendering himself to the idea was making his throat pull dangerously tight all over again. He didn't have time for that, though, not when the real world was still ticking outside the window. Not when his mother was still in a recovery ward across the city, waking up in a body that had been put back together with titanium. And he knew, with the nagging precision of his internal clock, that they could not stay hidden in these sheets forever.

Ilya knew it too, of course. He was annoyingly observant, and by now, incredibly attuned to the exact moment tension began to creep into Shane's spine. So, with lazy movements, he shifted his weight, pressing a slow kiss to his bare shoulder before pulling back just enough to let the cooler air slip between them. Shane swallowed the whine that threatened to leave his mouth at the sudden loss of his human-sized weighted blanket.

"We need to get up," Ilya murmured, his voice a low, gravelly vibration against his skin. "You need to be there for your mama."

It was a testament to how fundamentally things had shifted between them that Shane didn't immediately panic at the reminder; that his first thought wasn't that Ilya was pushing him away. That he understood, that Ilya was simply taking the decision off his shoulders. Shane let out a long, reluctant exhale before he forced himself to nod, sitting up fully once his boyfriend threw himself onto where the sheets were surely cold.

"Are you really not going back?" He murmured, his eyes dropping to his hands as he picked at a loose thread on the blanket. The question slipped out before he could carefully screen it, his voice dropping into a quiet, defensive register that betrayed a fragile insecurity he hated but couldn't quite suppress. Ilya still had a life, a team, and a meticulously managed career

five hundred miles away that he couldn't just ignore or run away from, no matter how big his heart was and how good his intentions were.

Ilya shifted, rolling slightly so he could look up directly at him. His expression was incredibly soft, wiped entirely clean of the arrogant, abrasive mask he wore for the cameras. "I am staying," he stated, his heavy accent wrapping around the words with absolute finality, leaving no room for argument. "For these two days, at least, I am here. We will figure out the rest later."

And because he somehow always knew exactly what Shane needed, he casually added, "We can drive together to Boston on Friday. For the game. We can take my car. If you want." He was so calm when he proposed the idea that, if it wasn't for the way he was absentmindedly rubbing his own hand—the way he always did when he was nervous—Shane wouldn't have noticed the toll this truly took on him. "Or you can fly with team. Like normal. If it is too much."

He stared at him, his analytical brain quickly processing the magnitude of the offer. Traveling with the team was a sacred, non-negotiable routine. It was structured, predictable, and expected. Choosing to drive miles across an international border with the captain of the opposing team was professional heresy. It was also exactly what Shane wanted.

"I'll drive with you," Shane said smoothly, watching the immediate relief wash over Ilya's eyes. "On one condition."

Ilya raised an eyebrow, his confidence returning in a flash. "And what would that be?"

"You're not driving like a lunatic," Shane countered deadpan, leaning back against the headboard. "I may have been dead to my feet last night, but I still know how to do math on how fast you got here, Rozanov. You're not pulling that shit with me in the passenger seat."

Ilya let out a rich, warm laugh, the sound filling the small bedroom. He leaned down, pressing a smiling kiss to Shane's hip. "I would never be irresponsible with you in the car, *zlotse*."

Shane tilted his head, catching Ilya's gaze with a sharp glint. "So you admit you were being irresponsible."

Ilya groaned letting his heavy head drop directly onto Shane's stomach in a dramatic, theatrical display of suffering. "You are so boring," he grumbled into his bare skin, his breath hot against the muscle. "A total buzzkill. Get in the shower before I change my mind and leave you here to walk to Massachusetts."

Shane let out a quiet, breathy chuckle, the sound vibrating through his ribs and into the heavy weight of Ilya's skull resting against him. He let his fingers thread through the messy, dark hair at the nape of Ilya's neck, lingering in the warm, grounding contact. A part of his reptilian brain still desperately wanted to dissect the sheer danger of a midnight drive from Boston to Montreal, to properly berate the Russian on the reckless behavior. But feeling the steady, living heartbeat pressed securely over his skin, Shane filed the lecture away for another time.

"Then get off me, you massive baby," he murmured, gently pushing at Ilya's broad shoulders to dislodge him.

The reality of leaving the warm, insulated sanctuary of the bed was a reluctant, slow process. They untangled their limbs with a shared, lingering sluggishness, the cooler ambient air of the apartment rushing over Shane's skin the moment he pushed the duvet aside. Ilya followed right behind him as he padded barefoot across the hardwood floor toward the en-suite, like he too couldn't bare the distance between their bodies.

The bathroom filled with steam. Thick. Enveloping. They left the harsh overhead lights off, using only the softer vanity bulbs. Shane stood under the hot spray. The water drummed against his aching shoulders, washing away the hospital's sterile scent and the dry sweat from his skin. Ilya stepped in behind him, large hands sliding naturally over Shane's hips, seamlessly fitting their bodies together.

They had shared dozens of showers over the last ten years, but the parameters had always been strictly controlled. The logic behind sharing the space had always been cleanly categorized in Shane's mind. Sometimes they were purely practical, a rushed necessity to wash off sweat before catching separate flights. Other times they were just an extension of the bedroom, a heated, slippery continuation for a second round. And sometimes, after the roughest nights, when Shane's filter had shattered and left him raw and desperate for something to hold him together, Ilya would step in and bathe him. Slow. Deliberate. The kind of careful that didn't ask permission.

But it had never been like this. Before, there had always been a structural limit—an invisible boundary of self-preservation drawn in the steam, a strict cap on how much emotional vulnerability they were allowed to acknowledge without the cover of adrenaline or routine.

Now, the wall was gone.

The shower was almost unbearably tender. Ilya took the soap, washing his back with slow, deliberate strokes, his hands acting as a heavy, steady anchor on Shane's hips whenever his exhausted legs felt unsteady. Every movement was laced with a devastating, open permission to care. Ilya pressed a kiss to the back of his neck, murmuring a quiet, raw confession of love directly against his wet skin, the press of his lips a warm weight that lingered long after the water running over them had started to turn cold. It wasn't just the heat of the spray that was finally melting the deep, residual panic out of Shane's chest.

When Shane turned around to return the gesture, taking the soap from Ilya's slick fingers to drag it carefully over his broad, bruised shoulders, he was struck by the staggering ease of it all. It felt as though they had spent a decade starving for this specific kind of affection, stockpiling every suppressed touch and swallowed word. Now that the lock was finally broken, now that they were allowed to just *be*, neither of them knew how to stop giving it. It was effortless, domestic, and so profoundly grounding that Shane let his eyes drift shut, resting his wet forehead against the solid wall of Ilya's collarbone just to let himself be held.

"I should not go with you," Ilya said suddenly over the rush of the water.

Shane's eyes snapped open. His heart gave an uncomfortable, erratic thud, the familiar prickle of anxiety instantly rising in his chest. He turned his head, looking up at Ilya, his mind immediately leaping to the worst conclusions.

"Why? Do you—are you changing your mind? About her knowing?"

"No. Never." Ilya caught Shane's chin, his grip firm and grounding, forcing Shane to look directly into his eyes. There was no hesitation there, only a deep, protective seriousness. "I am not hiding anymore, Shane. But think about your mother. She just survived a plane crash. They took out an organ. They put screws in her leg. She is going to be exhausted, in pain, and on very heavy drugs."

Shane swallowed, the logic of it hitting him like a splash of cold water.

"She needs to look at you and know you are safe," Ilya continued, his thumb gently smoothing over Shane's wet cheekbone. "She does not need her only son dropping massive bomb the second she opens her eyes. A secret boyfriend? Who is also the magnificent Ilya Rozanov? It is too much. You do not overwhelm her right now."

"You're right," Shane admitted reluctantly, the tension bleeding out of his wet shoulders. He leaned back against the solid wall of Ilya's chest, letting out a heavy sigh. "I hate it, but you're right. We'll wait a few days. Until she's stronger."

"I am always right," Ilya murmured, pressing a warm kiss to the wet column of Shane's neck. "Now wash your hair. We are running out of time."

When the water finally shut off a few minutes later, the sudden absence of the white noise left the bathroom feeling thick and quiet. Before the chill of the winter air could even register against Shane's wet skin, Ilya was already moving. He reached past the glass and pulled a thick towel from the rack, wrapping it securely around Shane's shoulders—tending to Shane first, always first, his heavy hands rubbing briskly up and down Shane's arms to make sure he was warm before he even bothered reaching for a second towel for himself.

Shane stood there, water dripping from his hair onto the plush bath mat, holding the cotton tight around his chest as he simply watched him. The way Ilya navigated the space—wiping the condensation from the mirror, reaching for a comb, moving with a relaxed, unhurried grace—made it look as though he had belonged in Shane's bathroom for years.

That quiet, efficient momentum carried them into the bedroom. Shane leaned against the frame of his closet, still toweling his hair dry, and watched as Ilya unapologetically raided the clothes they had left piled on the floor hours earlier. Ilya pulled on Shane's grey sweatpants, the hem sitting noticeably too high above his ankles, and tugged Shane's oversized black hoodie over his damp hair. The visual of the massive Russian forward casually drowning in Shane's clothes, radiating the sharp, familiar scent of Shane's eucalyptus soap, sent a fierce, possessive spike of warmth straight through Shane's chest.

Turning to his own wardrobe, Shane bypassed his usual structured blazers and rigid team apparel. Instead, he pulled on a comfortable pair of worn denim jeans and reached for the thick, soft grey sweater his mother had given him last Christmas. It was heavy, familiar, and

practically radiated comfort—a physical armor he needed before stepping back into the sterile, terrifying halls of Sacré-Cœur.

When they met by the front door, Shane grabbed his wallet from the console table, turning to look at the man standing in his hallway. He felt a sudden pang of guilt at the thought of leaving Ilya behind after everything he had done. "So you're staying here, then?"

"I am taking you," Ilya corrected easily, nudging his feet into his shoes.

Shane's brow furrowed, his logical brain instantly snagging on the logistics. "Ilya, visiting hours don't end until nine. I'm going to be up there for a while. What are you going to do, sit in the hospital parking garage for hours?"

Ilya paused, looking up with an expression of profound, exaggerated confusion. "Do not be ridiculous, Shane. I will drop you off, I will come back here to sleep in warm bed, and then I will drive back to pick you up."

Shane stared at him, his independent nature completely glitching at the unapologetic domesticity of the plan. He was so deeply conditioned to manage his own schedule, to never ask for a ride, to never be an inconvenience to anyone else's time, that the offer felt entirely alien. "*That's* ridiculous. I'm perfectly capable of operating my own car. I'll just drive myself."

Ilya stepped fully into Shane's personal space, his physical presence easily overwhelming the weak protest. He held out a large, expectant hand, his palm flat and steady between them. "Keys."

Shane's hand hovered instinctively over the ceramic bowl on the console table, but he didn't reach inside. He just stood there, his jaw tight, completely paralyzed by the conflicting desires to maintain his rigid control and the sudden, overwhelming urge to let Ilya take it entirely.

"Give," Ilya murmured, the single word low, heavy, and absolutely unyielding.

When Shane still didn't move, trapped in his own silent hesitation, Ilya didn't push back. He simply reached around him, the solid heat of his chest brushing warmly against Shane's shoulder, and plucked the keys from the ceramic bowl himself. He dropped them into the pocket of the borrowed hoodie with a smug, metallic jingle.

Decision made then.

The drive across Montreal was quiet, insulated by the heavy hum of the car's heater. The city was already surrendering to the long, creeping dusk of late afternoon. By six o'clock, the winter light was thinning into a bruised, muted violet over the St. Lawrence River, draining the color from the concrete and leaving the skyline sharp and cold against the horizon.

Shane sat in the passenger seat, his knees pulled slightly together, watching the blur of taillights bleed into long, red streaks on the wet asphalt. His phone felt like a dense, physical weight pressing against his thigh. It had buzzed the second they stepped out of his apartment,

delivering a brief, exhausted text from his father: *Back in Montreal. At the hospital now. See you soon.* The message was supposed to be an anchor, a concrete confirmation that his family was reassembling and the terrifying vacuum of the previous night was over. But instead of settling him, the handful of words had acted like a tripwire. It immediately reignited the low, familiar hum of anxiety, a steady, nervous frequency vibrating back to life at the base of his skull, reminding him that the protective, insulated bubble of the last twelve hours was officially gone.

He would have to face, now with a rested brain a lot less panic overflowing his veins, the cold clarity about exactly what he had done at four in the morning. He was going to have to walk into that hospital and look into his dad's normally calm, steady eyes and face the sober, waking reality of the ten-year secret he had detonated in the middle of a waiting room. And then, he would have to walk past his father, step into the surgical step-down unit, look at his mom, and actively continue to lie to her.

He rested his temple against the cool glass of the window, the sudden drop in temperature sending a shock through the thick wool of his sweater. His mind, usually so meticulously categorized, felt like a tangled spool of wire. Half of his brain was trapped in the hospital, bracing for the smell of antiseptic, the rhythmic beep of monitors, and the sight of his mom, small and pale. The other half was stubbornly anchored to the man sitting two feet away.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shane tracked the slow, competent sweep of Ilya's hand as he steered the car through the heavy, slow-moving traffic on Autoroute 15. The streetlamps flickered on, casting rhythmic, strobing bands of golden light across Ilya's profile. He looked impossibly solid in Shane's borrowed clothes, his jaw set, his eyes scanning the road with the same aggressive, hyper-focused intensity he used to dissect a defensive zone.

Shane felt a sudden, terrifying rush of affection that made his throat ache. It was dizzying to look at Ilya and realize the parameters of his entire life had been fundamentally rewritten in the span of twelve hours. He was staring at his boyfriend. A future that had seemed completely unimaginable—a life where he didn't have to parcel himself out into small, acceptable pieces—was suddenly sitting in the driver's seat of his car, wearing his clothes, and taking part of the weight of the world off his shoulders.

Sensing his eyes on him, Ilya reached out, his hand crossing the center console without taking his eyes off the brake lights ahead. His large, warm palm closed firmly over Shane's knee, his thumb pressing down with a heavy, grounding pressure that cut right through the rising static of Shane's anxiety. He didn't speak. He didn't offer a hollow reassurance. He just anchored him to the present, his grip a silent promise that whatever was waiting for them at the end of the road, Shane wasn't walking into it alone.

The steady, radiating heat of Ilya's palm was a physical tether, pulling Shane back from the jagged edge of his own spiraling thoughts. He let his head drop against the leather headrest, allowing his breathing to gradually synchronize with the low, powerful vibration of the engine beneath them. Outside the heavy glass, the Montreal dusk was a frigid, blurred streak of wet asphalt and biting wind, but inside the cabin, the atmosphere felt heavily, almost suffocatingly insulated.

Shane watched the fluid, unconscious adjustments Ilya made to the steering wheel, observing the casual, arrogant mastery he held over the heavy machinery. It was a deeply grounding sight. But watching the icy road slide past the windshield also tripped a relentless, analytical wire in Shane's brain.

In the quiet sanctuary of the bedroom, tangled in the lingering warmth of the sheets, it had been easy to accept Ilya's teasing concession about his driving. And last night, in the freezing hall, Shane had willingly filed the argument away, content to let the impossible miracle of his boyfriend's presence outweigh the logistics of how he had actually arrived. But sitting here now, feeling the true velocity of a car, one with much less power, and watching the unforgiving concrete of the Autoroute fly by, the fragile truce he had struck with his own anxiety completely dissolved.

His mind began to rigidly categorize the timeline. He calculated the exact mileage between the Boston city limits and the island of Montreal. He measured the hour he had blindly called Ilya's number from the freezing of a bathroom's floor against the exact moment the massive Russian had miraculously materialized in the surgical waiting area.

He did the math in his head. Boston to Montreal. Five hundred miles. Three and a half hours. The numbers didn't lie, and they didn't leave room for luck. A silver Porsche on black ice. No sleep. No caution. Just speed and the desperate need to arrive. The image painted itself behind his eyes—a car wrapped around a concrete overpass, steam rising from a crumpled hood, a phone still ringing in a cold asphalt.

Shane stared blindly at the blur of the taillights, feeling the sudden, violent starvation of his own control, he pressed his palm flat against his thigh to stop the shaking. The realization twisted into a tight, hard knot under his ribs, completely overriding his need to maintain their quiet peace.

"Can we talk about last night?" He asked quietly, his voice cutting through the ambient noise of the heater.

Ilya's thumb stopped its slow, rhythmic stroke against Shane's denim-clad knee. For a fraction of a second, his broad shoulders tensed before the familiar, armor-plated smirk slid into place, visible even in the dim glow of the dashboard. "You mean how I confessed my eternal, undying love in a depressing hospital hall and you wept like baby?"

Shane let out a short, reluctant huff of laughter, a small release of pressure in his chest. "First of all, I said it first," he corrected, his tone slipping effortlessly into the cadence of their decade-old rivalry. "And second, you were crying too."

"Fake news," Ilya countered instantly, not taking his eyes off the freeway. "Your brain was compromised by panic and you hallucinated the tears."

"You're an asshole," Shane muttered, though the insult carried all the weight and texture of an endearment. "But no. That is not what I want to talk about." He turned his head on the headrest to look at him fully. "I want to know how you actually got here. From Boston to Montreal. In that amount of time."

Ilya downshifted as the brake lights ahead of them flared a bright, violent red. "I got in my car," he stated matter-of-factly. "I merged onto the interstate. I crossed the border. I parked."

Shane gave him a flat, unimpressed look, completely immune to the deflection. "I figured out the geography on my own, Ilya."

Ilya shrugged, a slow roll of his right shoulder. "Then what do you want to know?"

"How fast were you going?"

The casual, teasing energy vanished from the confines of the car like a blown fuse. The grip Ilya had on the steering wheel tightened, the leather creaking faintly under his large hands. He didn't answer right away. He just stared straight ahead, the strobing golden light of the streetlamps catching the hard, uncompromising lines of his profile.

"Ilya."

"I do not know," Ilya said finally. The words were quiet, stripped of their usual arrogance, leaving behind a raw, gravelly honesty that made Shane's stomach drop. Ilya offered another shrug, stiffer this time. "I am not lying to you, Shane. I genuinely do not remember looking at the dashboard. The entire drive is... blurred."

He swallowed hard, his jaw working as he navigated a lane change with mechanical precision. The hand on Shane's knee squeezed down again, harder this time, as if he needed to verify that Shane was solid flesh and bone, that he was actually sitting here breathing in the passenger seat.

"The only thing I was thinking about," Ilya murmured, his voice dropping into a register so thick with devotion it was almost painful to hear, "was the sound of your voice on the phone. You said you were scared." Ilya glanced at him, just for a second, his dark eyes burning with a terrifying, absolute sincerity. "After that, nothing else mattered."

The weight of that confession settled directly into the center of Shane's chest, heavy and absolute. For a moment, the only sound in the car was the rhythmic clicking of the turn signal and the rush of winter wind against the glass.

Slowly, operating more on instinct than conscious thought, Shane unclasped his own hands. He reached down and covered the large, heavy hand Ilya still had clamped over his knee. His fingers traced the familiar landscape of Ilya's knuckles—the rough, permanent calluses built from years of gripping a composite stick, the faint, raised scars from old blocked shots. With gentle, deliberate pressure, Shane lifted Ilya's hand from his knee and pulled it into his own lap, cradling it securely between both of his palms. He began to stroke his thumb across the back of Ilya's hand in a slow, continuous rhythm, a quiet, tactile mechanism meant to soothe the frayed edges of both their nervous systems.

"Weren't *you* scared?" Shane asked softly, his voice barely louder than the hum of the heater.

Ilya didn't hesitate. "Of course. That is why I pushed the car. I needed to get to you."

Shane looked down at their intertwined hands, his thumb pausing its slow sweep over Ilya's skin. A profound, aching sadness suddenly tightened his throat. "No, Ilya," he corrected gently, turning his head to look at the sharp, illuminated lines of Ilya's profile. "I meant... weren't you scared for yourself? That you could lose control? That something might happen to you?"

The question hung in the warm air of the cabin. Ilya kept his eyes locked strictly on the road ahead, tracking the sea of red taillights as the traffic slowed near the exit for the hospital. His jaw worked, a muscle ticking under his skin, but his expression remained a perfectly blank, unreadable mask.

"It did not occur to me," Ilya said.

He stated it as a simple, objective fact, entirely devoid of drama or self-pity. The chilling nonchalance of it made the breath catch in Shane's lungs. Shane studied him, watching the flickering amber glow of the streetlamps wash over his boyfriend's face, and felt a sudden, terrifying shift in his understanding of the man beside him.

Shane had always known that Ilya carried a lingering melancholy—a quiet, pervasive aura of sadness that seemed to shadow him even in his brightest, most arrogant moments. He had cataloged it as grief, a natural byproduct of the losses Ilya had suffered when he was young. But looking at the rigid set of Ilya's shoulders now, Shane realized it was something deeper. It was a structural flaw in Ilya's psychology, a fundamental lack of self-preservation. Ilya didn't just love Shane with an overwhelming intensity; he loved Shane to the complete, dangerous exclusion of his own life. The realization that Ilya's absolute devotion was rooted in a belief that he himself was entirely expendable made Shane feel physically ill.

He swallowed hard, fighting the urge to pull Ilya over and shake him until he understood his own worth. But Shane knew better than to push a completely shattered filter right now. They were ten minutes away from a trauma ward. This, too, needed to be a conversation they had with time, along with a thousand more.

"Okay," Shane whispered, his voice thick with a complicated, aching grief. He pressed Ilya's hand tighter between his own. "Just... please don't ever do that again."

"Yes, of course," Ilya drawled, his tone dripping with thick, protective sarcasm. "Next time your mother's plane drops out of the sky and you call me crying in the middle of a panic attack, I will stay on my couch. I will finish my movie and perhaps make some popcorn. It is a very reasonable request."

"Ilya."

Shane didn't raise his voice. He didn't argue. He just spoke the name like an anchor, low and steady, pulling Ilya back from the defensive ledge.

The heavy, combative tension drained out of Ilya's frame in a single, exhausted exhale. He let his head fall back against the headrest for a fraction of a second before refocusing on the traffic. Beneath the safety of Shane's palms, Ilya twisted his wrist, turning his hand over so he could weave their fingers together. He squeezed Shane's hand with a desperate, bruising grip.

"Okay," Ilya murmured, the sarcasm entirely gone, replaced by a soft, gravelly surrender. "I promise."

For the remainder of the drive, they didn't let go.

The tangled knot of their hands rested heavily on the center console, Ilya's thumb dragging slow, repetitive lines across the back of Shane's knuckles. It was a small, steadying friction that seemed to actively rewire the atmosphere inside the cabin. The heavy, grief-stained undercurrent of their conversation slowly dissolved into the hum of the heater, replaced by a quiet, fragile warmth. Shane watched the snow-dusted silhouettes of the Montreal suburbs blur past the window.

The soft, insulated bubble of their isolation finally broke when Ilya turned the wheel, navigating the sharp concrete incline into the parking garage of Hôpital du Sacré-Cœur.

Unlike the desolate, echoing cavern they had fled at five in the morning, the structure was now packed. Evening visiting hours and the overlapping shifts of the medical staff meant Ilya had to navigate a slow maze of sensible, salt-stained SUVs and compact commuter cars.

It didn't take them long to spot it. Even tucked into a shadowed corner on the second level, Ilya's silver Porsche stood out like an obnoxious, six-figure beacon of reckless devotion. Its sleek, aggressive lines looked utterly ridiculous parked among the practical reality of a Quebec trauma center.

Shane stared at it through the windshield, his deeply ingrained need for order and efficiency suddenly flaring back to life. "This makes absolutely no sense," he muttered, the familiar, comforting rhythm of complaining about Ilya's ideas settling over him. "We could have taken an Uber here and driven your car back. Or you can just drop me off, take the Porsche, and let me drive my own car home later."

Ilya didn't even tap the brakes, his eyes scanning the next row for an empty spot. "Neither of those are viable options."

"They are perfectly logical options."

"Shane," Ilya said, his tone dripping with patient amusement. "Do you really want a Montreal Uber driver—who undoubtedly listens to local sports radio—figuring out that Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are sharing rides and holding hands? You want the entire league to know we are together before your mother does?"

Shane pressed his lips together, reluctantly conceding the point. The hockey media in this city was a ravenous machine; they couldn't afford to be careless on day one. "Fine. The Uber is out. But I could still drive myself home. I'm not panicking anymore, Ilya. I slept. I ate. I'm completely capable of driving my own car tonight. When are you even going to get *your* car?"

Ilya finally found an empty space, smoothly backing Shane's heavy SUV into the spot with one hand on the wheel. He shifted into park and killed the engine. The sudden silence in the

cabin was thick. He turned in his seat, the ambient, incandescent light of the garage catching the infuriatingly tender curve of his mouth.

"It does not matter," Ilya said, unbuckling his seatbelt. "I will get it before we leave for Boston on Friday. But tonight, I am coming back here to pick you up."

"Ilya—"

"It is my job as boyfriend, Shane," Ilya interrupted smoothly, his voice dropping into a low, uncompromising register. "Let me do it."

The word hit Shane right in the center of his chest, completely short-circuiting his analytical brain. It still felt too big, too new, carrying a staggering emotional weight that instantly dismantled all his logical arguments. He felt a sudden, traitorous heat rise up the back of his neck, flooding his cheeks with a warm flush he couldn't hide.

He broke eye contact, staring down at his lap as he unclasped his seatbelt with clumsy, suddenly numb fingers. "You're ridiculous," Shane mumbled, the reprimand entirely ruined by the breathless, embarrassed affection leaking into his voice.

Ilya just smirked in the dark, looking immensely satisfied with himself, and Shane didn't argue anymore.

He didn't immediately move to open the door, though. The heavy clatter of a distant elevator echoed through the concrete structure of the parking garage, a harsh reminder of the dazzling reality waiting just beyond the stairwell. Inside the cabin, the air was still warm and thick with the safe bubble they had built. Shane chewed on the inside of his lower lip, his hand resting hesitantly on the door handle. The prospect of stepping out of the car felt like stepping out of an airlock without a suit.

Ilya seemed to sense the hesitation. He shifted in the driver's seat, the thick grey fabric of Shane's borrowed hoodie pulling across his broad shoulders. "Call me," he instructed, a firm, logistical anchor thrown directly into the rising tide of Shane's anxiety. "If you want to leave earlier, you call. If you need me to come up, you call. If you just need to hear my voice, you call. And text me what the doctors say about her charts. Visiting hours' end at nine, yes? I will be right here at nine-fifteen."

Shane looked over at him, his eyes catching on the faint, bruised shadows of exhaustion sitting high on the Russian's cheekbones. Ilya had driven halfway across the eastern seaboard in the dead of night, navigated Shane's complete psychological collapse, and was now actively managing his schedule like a glorified chauffeur. The familiar spike of guilt—the deep-seated, persistent fear that his needs were simply too much to be endured for long—flared up sharply under his ribs.

"I'm just using you as a taxi," Shane murmured, hating how small his voice sounded in the quiet car. "You came all this way, and I'm just kicking you out to sit alone in my empty apartment."

Ilya's expression softened instantly. He reached across the center console, his large, warm hand wrapping securely around Shane's wrist where it rested on his thigh. The physical contact was an immediate, grounding shock.

"Shane," Ilya said slowly, making sure every syllable landed with deliberate weight. "I like doing this for you. I want to do this. Let me." He rubbed his thumb over the jut of Shane's pulse point, a silent, tactile reassurance. Then, Ilya's mouth tipped up into a faint, self-assured smirk. "Besides," he added, his tone lightening just enough to shift the heavy atmosphere, "I drove through the night. I am exhausted. Going back to your quiet, dark apartment to sleep for three more hours and eat all your food without you complaining about my manners sounds like vacation. I am being entirely selfish."

He knew Ilya was lying, but he let him. Because the lie gave him a practical reason to accept the care without feeling like a burden. And it worked like a charm, because the tight knot in his chest loosened fractionally. He turned his hand over, tangling his fingers briefly with Ilya's before finally pushing the heavy car door open.

The damp, freezing air of the underground garage immediately rushed in, biting at his exposed skin.

"Nine-fifteen," Shane confirmed, his voice finding its steady rhythm as he stood up on the salt-stained pavement.

"Nine-fifteen," Ilya echoed from inside the warm cabin. "Go. Kiss your mother for me."

Shane grabbed the edge of the door to swing it shut, but his hand froze. The biting chill of the concrete structure seemed to sharpen all at once, snapping against his skin.

The words were ordinary. A casual goodbye. Kiss your mother for me. But his mother was in a hospital bed, alive, breathing. Ilya's mother was dead. Had been dead for years. Had been found by Ilya, alone. And that was all Shane knew, because he hadn't really asked more—*God he hadn't asked*—His exhausted brain had filed the confession away, too numb to process it. But now, standing in the freezing garage, the weight of it hit him all at once. The quiet, permanent ghost of Ilya's mother seemed to step seamlessly into the freezing space between them. Shane felt a sudden, sickening drop in his stomach, a wave of profound, devastating grief for the boy Ilya had been, coloring his entire perception of the man sitting in the driver's seat.

He stopped, his knuckles turning white on the metal frame, and turned back to look into the car, his eyes wide and flooded with a sudden, suffocating panic.

"Ilya," Shane started. His voice fractured over the two syllables, stripping them down to something raw and defenseless in the echoing concrete space.

Ilya blinked. The brief flicker of confusion in his eyes cleared the moment he tracked the sudden, hollow devastation on Shane's face. He realized exactly what he had just said. A long, heavy exhale left his lungs, pluming in a thick white cloud of condensation that temporarily blurred the freezing space between the open door and the cabin.

"Shane. No," Ilya said, his voice dropping an octave. He shook his head once and leaned back, retreating slightly into the shadowed interior of the SUV. It was a subtle physical shift, but it drew an immediate, ironclad boundary in the damp air. "Do not do that."

Shane gripped the edge of the open door, his chest aching with the sudden, desperate urge to lean back inside the warm cabin and pull Ilya apart until he found where it hurt. "I just—"

"I did not mean it like that," Ilya interrupted smoothly. His gaze was entirely clear, stripped of the ghosts Shane was trying to project onto him. "It was just a sentence, Hollander. I am fine. Really. Nothing is wrong."

Shane stood frozen on the salt-stained pavement, his teeth sinking nervously into his lower lip. He was searching the uncompromising lines of Ilya's face for the lie, bracing himself to carry the weight of a grief he had accidentally unearthed.

Instead, a slow, teasing warmth finally cracked the rigid set of Ilya's jaw. The corners of his mouth tipped upward into a soft, impossibly fond smile, completely changing the architecture of his face. He looked at Shane standing out in the biting cold, eyes big and shining and drowning in an oversized sweater and looking utterly wrecked.

"You look like *kotenok* abandoned under rain," Ilya murmured, the Russian word slipping out wrapped in a thick, gravelly affection.

Shane's brow furrowed. He stood there shivering on the damp pavement, feeling entirely wrong-footed by the sudden shift in the current. He pushed his chin down into the collar of his sweater, his defensive pout deepening. "I don't know what that means," he mumbled, his voice dropping into a tiny, petulant register.

Ilya's smile widened, a quiet laugh vibrating in his chest as the remaining tension bled completely out of the car. "It means kitten," he translated, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Really, Hollander. You looked exactly like one. So easy to scare."

Shane let out a short, indignant huff. He could feel a sudden, traitorous heat blooming across his cheeks, a bright, sweeping flush that had absolutely nothing to do with the biting wind cutting through the concrete structure. He dropped his gaze to the asphalt, the heavy, lingering adrenaline slowly dissolving into a warm embarrassment. "Okay, fine," he muttered, kicking at a loose pebble near the tire. "I'm sorry. For overreacting."

He kept his eyes focused on the ground, letting the freezing dampness of the garage press against his back. The phantom grief had receded, carefully shelved by Ilya's easy teasing, but the sudden absence left a quiet, heavy realization settling in its wake. If anything, dodging the wreckage right now just meant they were going to have to have yet another monumental conversation about *that* specific topic later. It was a daunting, quiet paradox. For the microscopic slivers of time they actually had for each other in their heavily regulated lives, they had a staggering, overwhelming backlog of things they desperately needed to talk about.

"It is fine," Ilya said gently, his voice pulling Shane out of his head. The teasing lilt was still there, but the steady, protective undercurrent had returned. Ilya leaned a little closer to the open door, resting his forearm against the steering wheel. "And while looking at your

beautiful face is one of my favorite pastimes, you really do need to go. Your parents are waiting."

The casual compliment made the heat in Shane's face flare all the way to the tips of his ears. He swallowed hard, his grip on the edge of the heavy door tightening as he tried to mentally brace himself for the hospital corridors. "Right. Okay. Bye."

The words tumbled out clumsy and rushed. And then, before his meticulously cautious filter could screen the impulse, the next sentence simply slipped out of his mouth.

"Love you."

It was entirely instinctual, just a reflex, a casual, parting truth that was already beginning to wire itself into his muscle memory.

The effect on the man in the driver's seat was immediate. Ilya froze, the teasing glint in his dark eyes melted into something incredibly bright and reverent, a quiet, staggering awe that seemed to physically alter the temperature of the air between them. His smile softened into something completely unguarded.

"Bye, *zlotse*," Ilya murmured, his voice dropping into a register so tender it made Shane's ribs ache. "I love you, too."

Shane finally pushed the heavy SUV door shut. The solid, metallic thud echoed through the empty structure, severing the insulated warmth of the cabin, but as Shane turned away from the car, the freezing of the underground garage didn't feel nearly as hostile as it had five minutes ago. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and started walking toward the brightly lit elevator bays, the suffocating anxiety of the impending meeting replaced by a quiet, steady lightness in his chest.

The double doors to the surgical step-down unit were heavy, requiring a firm push that sent a dull ache through Shane's tired shoulders. The corridor beyond them was significantly quieter than the emergency wing had been at dawn. The ambient noise was tightly regulated, dictated by the soft, rhythmic pings of telemetry monitors and the squeak of rubber-soled shoes on bleached linoleum.

He found his father standing in the hallway outside room 412. David Hollander looked ten years older under the unforgiving fluorescent lights, the deep lines around his mouth carved out by a night of sheer, unadulterated terror. But the moment he looked up and caught sight of Shane walking down the corridor, the rigid, braced set of his shoulders instantly collapsed.

He didn't wait for Shane to reach him. David closed the distance in three long strides and pulled Shane into a desperate, crushing embrace.

For one terrifying, breathless second, the floor seemed to completely drop out from under Shane's feet. His stomach plummeted, his heart launching into a frantic, hammering rhythm against his ribs as his brain instantly short-circuited. *She's worse*, his brain instantly misfired, his hands hovering uselessly in the space between them. *Something went wrong*.

But David was holding him too tightly for that. Panic didn't feel like this; didn't have this specific, steady weight behind it. This was something else entirely.

"I love you," his dad murmured thickly into the wool of Shane's sweater. *"I'm so incredibly proud of you."*

Oh.

The frantic, blinding spike of adrenaline in his veins abruptly stopped dead. Shane blinked, the sterile white walls of the hallway swimming back into focus as the context of the hug finally registered. The sudden realization of what this was *actually* about washed over him.

Historically, they were not a physically affectionate pair. It wasn't born from a lack of love, but rather a mutual, unspoken understanding of Shane's rigid boundaries. David had always been carefully respectful of Shane's space, letting firm handshakes or brief pats on the shoulder do the heavy emotional lifting. But standing in the corridor, grounded by the solid, unshakeable weight of his father's arms, Shane found that the very last thing he wanted was space.

He let his eyes slide shut, burying his face in the familiar, grounding scent of his dad's aftershave and faint sawdust, finally bringing his hands up to grip the worn fabric of David's jacket. He exhaled a long, shaky breath, letting himself sag just a fraction into the embrace; allowing the steady, unconditional warmth seep into the exhausted cracks of his nervous system.

"You're really okay with it?" Shane asked, his voice muffled against David's shoulder. He kept the pronoun deliberately vague, unable to say the actual words out loud just yet, but the ten years of heavy, suffocating silence hung thickly in the space between them.

David's grip tightened, his calloused hand pressing firmly against Shane's spine. "I'm okay with whatever makes you happy, son," he said, his voice a steady, uncompromising rumble. "No matter what. No matter *who*."

When David finally pulled back, he didn't step away entirely. He kept one hand resting heavily on Shane's shoulder, his other hand coming up to briefly, gently cup the side of Shane's face. His thumb brushed over Shane's cheekbone, his quiet, observant eyes systematically cataloging the pale exhaustion and the faint, lingering redness around Shane's eyes.

"Did you rest?" His dad asked quietly.

Shane nodded, forcing himself to maintain the direct eye contact. "Yes, I dropped dead the moment my head hit the pillow." He tried to joke, but his flat voice drained all the humor from it. David smiled anyway.

The horrific reality of the plane crash, combined with the raw, bleeding confession seemed to have stripped away all their usual, polite reserves. The sheer violence of the last twenty-four hours had stripped them both down to the studs, leaving a raw, unfamiliar openness in its wake, both anchored by the terrifying knowledge of how easily they could have lost Yuna.

His dad dropped his hand, taking a half-step back to give Shane room to breathe. He glanced past Shane's shoulder toward the heavy double doors at the end of the hall. "Did you come alone?"

"Yes," Shane said quickly. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans, a sudden, defensive rush of nervous energy making him shift on his feet. "He... Ilya thought it was best to let Mom rest. He didn't want to overwhelm her right now. Not while she's on so much medication."

David let out a quiet hum of agreement, nodding slowly.

Shane couldn't leave it there, though. He got a sudden, almost childish urge to prove that Ilya was good, to meticulously lay out the evidence of his boyfriend's care.

"But he insisted on driving me here," he blurted out, the words tumbling out a little too fast. "And he's coming back to pick me up tonight. He wants to be here, to tell her. As soon as she's strong enough."

David's eyebrows lifted. A faint, knowing amusement touched the tight corners of his exhausted eyes. It had to be a completely unprecedented dynamic for him to witness—seeing his fiercely independent, rigidly controlled son standing in the harsh light of a hospital corridor, practically vibrating with nervous, protective energy over the man he loved.

"Did he now" David said softly, the corner of his mouth tipping up, and a quiet affection lacing the words. He looked at Shane, really looked at him, and offered a soft, genuine smile. "He seems like a good man. A sensitive one."

Shane felt a warm, sudden tightness swell in his throat, not entirely different from the embarrassment he had felt in the parking garage. He let out a small, unsteady breath, the last defensive wire in his chest finally unspooling.

"Yes," he agreed softly, the absolute truth of it settling heavily in his bones. "He is."

David shifted his weight. The faint, fond amusement faded from his features, replaced seamlessly by the steady, protective anchor Shane had relied on his entire life. "So," he asked, keeping his voice low, a private frequency beneath the ambient hum of the cardiac monitors down the hall. "How do you want to handle this?"

The question was simple, but it instantly triggered a fresh, suffocating wave of guilt in the center of Shane's chest. A cold, leaden weight settled directly into his stomach, instantly dissolving the lingering lightness Ilya had left in his blood, and the warm, fragile relief of his father's acceptance was immediately swallowed by the harsh reality waiting just beyond the door where his mom was laying. Shane had spent his entire adult life meticulously compartmentalizing his existence to protect the people he loved from the fallout of his reality.

A hospital was a place of brutal, anatomical transparency—a terrible environment to harbor a lie, because the very walls are built around laying flesh and bare bone. And yet, standing under the shimmering lights, Shane realized he was about to actively enforce one. He was

taking the heavy, meticulously constructed architecture of his closet and dropping it squarely onto his father's shoulders.

"I'm not going to tell her," he said. The syllables clicked into the sterile air like the locking mechanism of a heavy vault. He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, starving himself of the comfort of his father's gaze. "Not about him. Not about any of what happened last night." He swallowed hard against the sharp, chemical tang of iodine and bleach hanging in the air.

"Dad, I..." His meticulously controlled voice fractured, betraying the raw, exhausted boy underneath the captain's exterior. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry that I'm dragging you into the middle of this. I hate that I'm making you lie to her."

David didn't hesitate. He stepped forward, entering Shane's line of sight so completely that Shane was forced to look up from the floor.

"Shane," David said, his tone stripped of any lingering exhaustion. It was thick with a fierce, unequivocal certainty that left absolutely no room for argument, that seemed to physically push back the sterile chill of the corridor. "Listen to me very carefully. I would never breathe a single syllable of this to another living soul unless you explicitly wanted me to. Not even to your mother."

Shane's brow furrowed, a sudden, painful ache blooming behind his ribs. He knew how deeply his parents loved each other. They were a unified front, entirely transparent in their thirty years of marriage. To ask David to build a wall between himself and Yuna felt like a fundamental violation of who his father was. "But she's your wife."

"Yes, she is my wife," David agreed softly, his steady eyes locking onto Shane's with an unwavering intensity. "But you are my son."

He let the distinction hang in the cold, clinical air, allowing the absolute, unshakeable weight of it to settle over them.

"Maybe someday you will understand the difference," David murmured, his voice softening into a quiet, gravelly comfort. He reached out, his warm hand gripping Shane's shoulder in one firm, grounding squeeze. "In the meantime, you need to understand that I'm never going to force you out until you are ready to walk in the light yourself. You don't have to carry any guilt for that."

To walk in the light.

The phrase echoed in the silent space behind Shane's ribs, carrying a strange, staggering weight. For a decade, the concept of 'the light' had been entirely synonymous with violence. It was the blinding, aggressive flashes of media scrums, the relentless, unforgiving glare of the public eye, and the terrifying prospect of millions of strangers eating of his deepest, most closely guarded vulnerability. To step out into that kind of light had always felt like handing a loaded gun to the rest of the world, pointing the barrel directly at his own eyes, and simply bracing for the inevitable recoil with his teeth gritted.

But hearing the words spoken in the low, steady timbre of his dad's voice fundamentally stripped the concept of its edges. It didn't sound like a spotlight anymore. It sounded like a calm morning. It felt warm, livable, and startlingly inevitable.

For the first time in his adult life, stepping into the light didn't look like a catastrophic press conference; it looked like the passenger seat of his own car, sharing a mundane, quiet drive to the arena without constantly checking the rearview mirror. It felt like the sudden, expansive ability to pull a full, unobstructed breath into the very bottom of his lungs. It felt like the profound, painful relief of finally stretching a muscle that had been cramped and atrophied for twenty long years.

"Okay," Shane breathed out. He sounded distant, almost hollow, his mind still halfway suspended in that sudden, sunlit vision of a future he hadn't fully allowed himself to want until today, his thoughts entirely consumed by the realization that maybe he didn't have to carry this suffocating armor forever.

David watched him for a second longer, ensuring the panic had truly receded from Shane's posture, before offering a sharp, decisive nod. "Alright," David said softly. The fierce, uncompromising intensity dialed back into a steady, familiar warmth. "Let's go see your mom, then."

His father's hand shifted, sliding up from Shane's shoulder to rest at the nape of his neck, his fingers brushed gently through the short hairs there, a slow, grounding touch that anchored Shane instantly back to the present.

It was a remarkably simple, instinctive gesture, but it sent a sudden, aching tightness straight to Shane's throat. It was the exact way David used to comfort him when he was eight, standing at the edge of a freezing rink, quietly bracing him before a daunting drill. Despite the thick wool of his sweater, the C he wore in his jersey, and the sheer, exhausting weight of his meticulously managed life, Shane felt suddenly and acutely young. He felt exactly like a small boy standing in the towering shadow of his father, being gently, firmly prepared to walk into something terribly difficult.

And as he turned to face the heavy wooden door of the patient room, listening to the rhythmic, mechanical heartbeat of the monitors waiting inside, Shane took a deep breath and realized that, for today at least, that was exactly what he was.

The transition from the hallway into his mom's room felt like stepping into a pressurized cabin. The air was dim and artificially cool, strictly regulated by the rhythmic, mechanical hiss of the oxygen concentrator and the slow, steady drip of IV fluids.

Yuna Hollander was asleep when they walked in. She looked terrifyingly small against the stark white of the hospital linens, her usually vibrant face pale and completely drained of color. The violent reality of the crash was mapped out across her body in the form of bruising that was already blooming into deep, ugly shades of violet along her collarbone, and the heavy, immobilized mass of her right leg under the blankets.

David immediately claimed the stiff plastic chair beside the bed. He leaned forward, carefully enveloping Yuna's uninjured, IV-free hand between both of his own, pressing a long, silent

kiss to her knuckles. For a moment, Shane just stood at the edge of the bed, carefully avoiding the thick tangle of clear tubing, and watched the slow, shallow rise and fall of her chest.

He felt the ridiculous urge to grab his dad's hand.

For the first hour, the room was quiet. A nurse had slipped in to check Yuna's vitals, offering them a hushed, clinical roadmap of the days ahead. The groggy, endless sleeping was to be expected; a combination of the heavy anesthesia lingering in her system and the aggressive doses of the drugs they gave her to manage the trauma of a shattered femur and a splenectomy. She would need to stay in the acute care ward for at least another eight to ten days to monitor for infections and begin basic, non-weight-bearing physical therapy.

After she was discharged, going back to Ottawa was out of the question for at least a month. So, in quiet whispers over the sterile bed rail, David and Shane had quickly mapped out the logistics: once Yuna was discharged, they would move directly into the guest room of Shane's apartment for the next three to four weeks, staying until she was safely cleared to travel.

It was a perfectly structured, logical plan. But sitting in the vinyl visitor's chair, watching his father keep a quiet, unwavering vigil by the bed, the deception felt like a corrosive acid slowly eating through Shane's stomach lining. He had built his entire life around protecting his parents, but now, every time David offered him a reassuring glance across the mattress, Shane felt the sickening weight of complicity. He hadn't just kept a secret; he had dragged his dad into the dark with him, forcing a wedge of silence into a thirty-year marriage.

A soft, distressed rustle of sheets pulled Shane sharply out of his head.

Yuna's brow furrowed in her sleep. Her head turned on the thin pillow, and she let out a short, sharp gasp as the movement pulled at the fresh, stapled incision across her abdomen.

David was out of his chair before her eyes even opened. He leaned over the bed, his large hands immediately finding the unbruised side of her face, his thumb smoothing the hair back from her damp forehead with an agonizing, practiced tenderness.

"I'm here, sweetheart," he murmured, his voice dropping into a register Shane had rarely heard; something soft and entirely unguarded. "Don't try to move. You're alright."

Yuna's eyelids fluttered, fighting a losing battle against the heavy, chemical haze of the Dilaudid pulling her under. When she finally managed to pry them open, her dark eyes were unfocused, swimming in the dim, artificial light before finally locking onto David's face. The harsh lines of pain bracketing her mouth instantly smoothed out. A slow, exhausted smile cracked her dry lips.

"Hey," she rasped, the single word paper-thin and brittle.

"Hi, beautiful," David whispered. His own smile was impossibly soft, though the muscles in his jaw were tight with the effort of holding himself together for her. He carefully lifted a

small paper cup from the rolling tray table, feeding a single ice chip past her lips to soothe her throat.

Shane watched them, a sudden, suffocating lump rising to block his airway. He had spent the last years living entirely out of a suitcase, measuring his life in flight schedules, hotel parameters, ADs events and the grueling, isolating momentum of an NHL calendar. He had convinced himself that the scheduled Sunday phone calls and the brief, regulated summer visits were enough.

But seeing them now—stripped of their usual indestructible parental armor, reduced to this raw, terrifyingly fragile reliance on each other—the illusion completely shattered. He felt a profound, physical ache behind his ribs, a sudden and overwhelming grief for the years of distance he had imposed on them.

He missed them.

The realization was heavy and devastating, striking him even as they were right in front of him, breathing the exact same sterile air. They were each other's entire world, a quiet, unshakeable ecosystem built over years of absolute devotion. Standing in the shadows of the hospital room, watching his father anchor his mother to the earth with nothing but the touch of his hands, Shane suddenly felt like a ghost who had spent a decade haunting the perimeter of his own family. Like they didn't know him, and like he had forgotten them.

He forced himself to stand up, his chest aching as he stepped closer to the opposite side of the bed. He reached out, carefully wrapping both of his hands around her left hand, avoiding the taped IV line taped to the back of her wrist. "Hi, Mom."

Yuna's heavy eyes shifted to him, the drug-softened smile widening just a fraction. "*Shēn-chan*." Despite the monitors, the tubes, and the sheer trauma her body had absorbed, the stubborn, unshakeable warmth that defined her completely overtook the clinical chill of the room. "You look exhausted, *Takaramono*."

"I'm fine," Shane choked out, the lie practically a reflex. His mom rarely used those Japanese honorifics anymore, not since he had grown into the rigid, disciplined man the NHL required him to be.

As a child, the endearments had been so seamless that he hadn't even realized she didn't call him by his Western name until he was well into his teens; it had been his natural state of being. But now, hearing the soft, familiar syllables felt like a serrated blade across his skin. A sharp, localized pain flared in his throat, making it nearly impossible to swallow. He felt like an intruder in his own childhood, a ghost wearing the skin of the boy she was remembering.

His thumb gently stroked her knuckles as the guilt flared back up, hot and unforgiving. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here when you woke up. I shouldn't have gone home."

"Nonsense," Yuna whispered, her eyelids drooping heavily. She squeezed his fingers with a fraction of her usual strength. "There is absolutely no reason for you to break your back in a terrible plastic chair when you have a perfectly good bed waiting for you at your apartment."

Shane's traitorous brain vividly supplied the rest of the image; a perfectly good, warm bed, and the heavy, encompassing arms of a massive Russian forward waiting inside it to hold him together. A violent wave of heat rushed up his neck, flooding his cheeks with a dark, embarrassing flush. He dropped his gaze to the stark white of the bedsheets, profoundly grateful for the dim lighting as he violently shoved the thought back into its meticulously locked box. "I still should have been here."

"You are here now," David intervened, his tone practical, seamlessly taking the pressure off Shane. He kept his hand resting gently over Yuna's. "But we need a schedule. One of us is going to be in this room with you at all times."

"David, no," Yuna protested weakly, shifting her shoulder and instantly wincing at the pull of the bruised muscle. "You can stay. But Shane has a season to play, he has practice, games."

"The team knows what happened, Mom. Management is giving me the necessary space," It was only a half-truth, but she didn't need to know the precarious reality of his professional obligations right now. "I'll go to the morning skates, and of course I'll play the games, but every single free second I have, I'm going to be right here."

Yuna looked at him, her dark eyes shiny with the heavy painkillers, before her gaze slid back to her husband. The soft, fond pride radiating from her face was absolutely devastating.

"Look at that, David," Yuna murmured, her voice thick with emotion as she drifted back toward sleep. "Look at the good son we raised."

Shane froze, the words hitting him directly in the center of the chest. *A good son*. A good son who had built an entire, impenetrable museum of his life precisely so she couldn't see inside it. A good son who was currently standing in a sterile trauma ward, violently wishing he was buried in the heavy, suffocating warmth of a *man's* arms. The dissonance felt like an exit wound. He stared down at the stark white of the bedsheets, absorbing the terrible, unearned grace of the pedestal she had just placed him on, and felt absolutely ravenous with the guilt of it.

He prayed she would never know how much of a lie it really was, prayed that she would love him still, when she inevitably finds out.

By nine o'clock, the surgical step-down unit began its slow transition into a nocturnal rhythm. The harsh, clinical glare of the corridor fluorescents was dialed back to a muted, bruised amber, and the frantic daytime momentum of the ward settled into a quiet, heavily regulated stillness. Inside Room 412, the shadows stretched long across the linoleum.

Shane sat rigidly in the vinyl visitor's chair, watching the slow, narcotic rise and fall of his mother's chest. Visiting hours were officially over, but his body stubbornly refused to initiate the sequence of standing up. The idea of walking out of the pressurized atmosphere of this room and leaving them behind felt physically impossible, a violation of the heavy, protective instinct currently suffocating his chest.

"Alright," David said quietly. He was standing on the opposite side of the bed, stretching the stiff muscles in his back. "It's time for you to go, Shane."

Shane's jaw tightened. He looked helplessly at Yuna's sleeping form, her pale face completely relaxed in the chemical grip of the painkillers. "I can stay. They'll let me stay if I ask."

"You aren't asking," David replied, his tone perfectly level. He pulled the thin hospital blanket a little higher over Yuna's shoulder. "And you have someone waiting for you down in the garage."

"He'll understand," Shane said quickly, already shaking his head. The thought of Ilya idling in the freezing, subterranean concrete was a sharp prick of guilt, but it was immediately swallowed by the desperate, clawing need to remain anchored to this room, next to his mom. "I'll text him. He can go back to the apartment and sleep. Dad, please."

David stepped around the foot of the bed. He didn't argue. He simply raised one hand, a calm, palm-out gesture that instantly absorbed and neutralized Shane's frantic momentum.

"Do you remember what I told you out in the hallway?" David asked, his voice a low, gravelly rumble that barely disturbed the quiet of the room. "Who you two are to me."

Shane swallowed hard, the chemical air of the room suddenly catching in his throat. He nodded once, unable to force an argument past his teeth.

"Good," his dad said. He stepped closer, his large frame blocking out the blinking telemetry monitors, forcing Shane to look at him. "This is my job, Shane. My job is to sit in this chair, watch those monitors, and take care of my wife. My *other* job is to make sure my son is rested, healthy, and exactly where he needs to be." He paused, letting the heavy weight of the boundary settle over the bed. "And you have morning skate at Brossard in less than twelve hours."

For the first time in his meticulously categorized life, the mention of the ice didn't feel like a sanctuary. It felt exactly like what it was: a cage he had built with his own two hands. He had spent his entire adult life submitting to the unrelenting, unforgiving machinery of the NHL schedule, treating the isolation of it as his primary organizing principle. A dark, bitter wave of frustration welled up in Shane's throat. Hockey had always been his religion, but right now, it felt more like a massive, immovable wall built directly between him and the people he loved than his own carefully constructed museum. Now, it demanded his blood, his sweat, and his absolute devotion, completely blind to the fact that his family was currently passed out in a hospital bed.

David watched the deeply uncharacteristic resentment flash across Shane's eyes. He sighed, his expression softening with a devastating, weary empathy.

"It's just until the game on Friday," his dad reminded him, keeping his voice steady to anchor Shane against the rising tide of his own anxiety. "After that, you have a three-week homestand. You won't have to pack a bag or get on a plane. You can spend every afternoon right here if you want to. But until then, your body has to be ready to play. You cannot afford to burn out."

"I'm an adult, Dad," Shane argued, his voice a low, desperate rasp. He gripped the plastic armrests of the chair, his knuckles turning white. "I can manage my own fatigue. *I can handle*

it."

David shook his head, a slow, definitive movement. "Taking care of mom is *my* responsibility, not yours. And I don't care how old you are, or what letter they decided to stitch onto the front of your jersey. I'm your father, and I'm not going to let you run your physical and mental health into the ground for us."

The uncompromising love in the statement stripped away the last of Shane's defensive armor. He looked up at his dad, his vision suddenly blurring, completely exposed under the dim hospital lights.

"But Dad," Shane whispered, his voice fracturing perfectly down the middle. "I would. I would do it for you two."

David's face broke into a sad, incredibly tender smile. He reached down, his heavy hand cupping the back of Shane's neck, his thumb pressing warmly into the tense muscles there.

"I know you would, son," David murmured softly. "That's exactly why I'm not going to let you, so go home."

That was how, fifteen minutes later, Shane found himself closing the door of the passenger seat of his own car, a tired resignation seeping from his entire body. The leather was cold against his back, a sharp contrast to the warmth he had been clinging to inside the hospital.

The moment his eyes found Ilya's in the dim glow of the dashboard, everything else stopped mattering. Those impossibly soft, terrifyingly perceptive eyes tracked the lingering red rims of Shane's own in a single, unhurried sweep; cataloguing the bone-deep exhaustion carved into his jaw, the pale, hollow look of a man who had spent three hours watching the monitors above his mother's bed as if sheer will could keep them steady. Seeing the kindness in that gaze acted like a solvent against the lump that had been lodged in Shane's throat all evening, instantly dissolving the lingering panic, the guilt, and the chemical residue of the hospital ward.

Shane didn't wait for Ilya to ask how it went, didn't wait for the carefully timed joke he knew was already forming behind that infuriating smirk. He just leaned across the center console and kissed him.

Their teeth clicked in the dim light, it was neither a neat nor particularly elegant collision but the sheer grounding effect of the impact instantly tethered him to the moment, soothing his fried nerves. Ilya let out a low sound against his mouth, his large hand coming up to immediately cup the back of his neck, thumb pressing into the exact same tense muscles his dad had soothed ten minutes ago, but with a completely different anchoring heat. When he finally pulled back, Ilya's thumb was pressed hard against his pulse point, his dark eyes tracking Shane's face with the focused, possessive attention he was still getting used to seeing in the other man's features.

The drive back to the apartment was a study in physical exhaustion. Shane shut down almost the second Ilya shifted the SUV into drive. The sheer chaos of the last forty-eight hours had finally caught up with him, stripping him down to a state of hollowed-out compliance. He let

Ilya steer him through the front door, let him take his heavy wool coat, and surrendered completely to the quiet care his boyfriend wrapped around him. He ate the bowl of soup that was set in front of him without really tasting it, his eyes fixed blankly on the grain of the kitchen table, too starved of sleep to calculate anything beyond the motion of lifting the spoon.

After that, time felt non-linear; slipping through Shane's fingers in strange, disjointed intervals. One blink and he was sprawled sideways on his living room couch, his head pillowed heavily on Ilya's thigh, staring blankly at the muted television screen. The empty soup bowls sat unwashed on the kitchen counter; a quiet testament to the fact that his body was still reluctantly following the basic mechanics of survival.

Outside the frosted windows, Wednesday night had deepened into a pitch-black, frozen expanse, but inside the apartment, the air was warm and insulated. Knowing how frantic tomorrow would be, Shane had stubbornly refused to go to the bedroom just yet. He had insisted on spending a little more time anchored to the sofa, hungry for every quiet minute he could spend simply existing beside his boyfriend.

Ilya's hand was buried in his hair, his long fingers executing a slow, rhythmic massage against his scalp that was actively melting the last of his higher brain functions. It was a terrifyingly domestic position, one that felt like it had skipped over a decade of necessary dating milestones and landed them directly into the weary, comfortable intimacy of a married couple. But surprisingly, there was not a single atom in Shane's body that panicked at the physical reality of it, and he was fairly certain his calm had absolutely nothing to do with the exhaustion dragging him under.

"What are you thinking about?" Ilya murmured into the dark, his voice a sleep-heavy rumble vibrating through Shane's ear.

"I'm not sure I'm able to think about anything at all. I'm too tired," Shane mumbled, letting his eyes slide shut. He turned his head toward the heat radiating from the body beneath him, burying his nose against the soft cotton of the borrowed hoodie stretched across Ilya's stomach.

Ilya smiled, his chest vibrating with an immensely pleased hum. He clearly enjoyed having Shane so thoroughly melted and relaxed across his lap, a devastatingly far cry from the rigidly structured, anxious mess he usually was.

Shane shook his head against his belly, fighting a losing battle against gravity. "Wanna stay a little longer with you."

"Okay." Ilya paused, his thumb resuming its slow path behind Shane's ear. Recognizing that he was actively fighting his own exhaustion, he seamlessly shifted gears. "Tell me about your mama then."

"She likes to garden," Shane murmured, the thought drifting out of the tired haze in his mind before he could filter it. "She used to plant hydrangeas at my childhood house, before I got drafted. We had this tiny patch of dirt in the backyard, and she was absolutely ruthless about it. Had this absurd vision of growing our own vegetables." He let out a soft exhale. "She'd be

out there at six in the morning, swearing at the squirrels in Japanese because they kept digging up her bulbs."

Ilya's chest shook with a chuckle. "Your mother swearing? I do not believe it. She seems like a very polite lady."

"She is polite. Until you mess with her garden," Shane said, a small, exhausted smile tugging at his mouth as the memory flickered to life behind his eyelids. "I used to follow her around with this plastic yellow trowel. I was supposed to be helping, but mostly I just ended up lying in the dirt watching ladybugs." He said it without a trace of hesitation or shame, which was its own kind of evidence of his exhaustion.

Ilya tilted his head down, his blue eyes catching the dim light of the TV screen, shining with a sudden, devastatingly bright affection. "A little boy lying in the dirt, watching bugs," he murmured, the teasing entirely absent from his voice for once, replaced by something much softer. "It is fascinating how you were boring even as a kid."

"Fuck off," Shane retorted, swatting weakly at the man's arm, though there was no real bite to the movement. "Did you have a garden? In Moscow?"

The hand stroking his arm paused for a fraction of a second. Even though there wasn't any shift in the atmosphere, Shane still felt the barely perceptible stillness that suddenly settled over Ilya's frame, like a heavy door being carefully pushed open.

"No," he said quietly, his gaze drifting away from Shane's face toward the dark window. "We lived in apartment block. Concrete everywhere. Eighth floor. Only thing we grew was black mold in the bathroom." He dragged his hand down to rest flat against Shane's chest, the warmth of his palm a heavy comfort. "But there was a plaza. A few blocks away. In the summer, the city planted roses there."

Like any other time Ilya offered some glimpse into his childhood in Russia, Shane laid completely silent. He ignored his own exhaustion entirely, focusing every ounce of his attention on the man above him, catching the softness that washed over his features; a boyish, entirely unguarded awe that illuminated his eyes, catching the faint ambient light of the city like polished glass.

"Mama loved them," Ilya murmured, his accent thickening around the memory. "She would hold my hand, and we would walk there when the sun was going down. She didn't want to play or run. She just wanted to sit on the peeling green bench and look at the roses. For hours."

He had never seen Ilya look like this. The sheer, unadulterated love radiating from him was staggering, but it was the childlike innocence of it that made Shane's heart pull painfully tight.

"Tell me more?" he whispered, keeping his voice impossibly gentle, afraid of pushing too far. He reached up, his fingers brushing a stray curl away from Ilya's forehead. "What was she like?"

Ilya leaned into the touch, closing his eyes for a long moment. "She was magic," he said softly. "Not like the mothers on the television, you know? She was not organized. Sometimes she forgot to buy groceries, or she would let food burn on the stove because she would get distracted watching snow out the window."

He let out a small, wistful breath. "She was tired a lot. Always said *Moskvá* winter was too heavy for her bones, so she stayed in bed on more dark days. My father hated it. Said she was lazy." A dark shadow crossed Ilya's face. Shane wasn't always good at naming the exact, complicated emotions people wore on their features, but he had spent a decade memorizing this man. He didn't need to guess what the sudden, defensive tightening of Ilya's jaw meant. "But she was not. She was just delicate. And when she was happy, Shane, she filled the whole apartment. She smoked cigarettes by the open window and sang. She had voice like an angel. She would tell me stories about the stars until I fell asleep."

He lay perfectly still, his thumb resting gently against Ilya's cheekbone as a wave of sorrow crashed over him. The air in the room felt heavy, saturated with the phantom scent of old smoke and the memory of a woman Shane would never get to meet. He felt a profound, aching wish that he could have known her; the woman who had planted the seeds of the tenderness Ilya worked so hard to hide.

But beneath that wish, a more complicated realization began to take root. As Ilya spoke, Shane's analytical brain—the part of him that processed patterns and structures with cold precision—couldn't help but notice the jagged edges of the story. He thought of his own mother and the fierce, protective shield she had built around his childhood. Her love had been a constant, stable presence; her sacrifices were methodical and designed to ensure he never lacked for a single thing.

Ilya's mother had been a different kind of weather.

Shane listened to this stories and felt a sharp, protective pang for the boy who had to navigate those unpredictable tides. Ilya's voice was full of love. But to Shane it was also, unmistakably, the voice of a child who had spent years being the steadiest thing in an unsteady house. It was a terrifyingly fragile way to grow up.

He felt a surge of conflicting emotions, a bitter taste rising in his throat as he thought of the irresponsibility hidden within that magic. He wanted to be angry for Ilya, to resent the parents who had left their son so bare in such a dangerous world. But looking at the radiant, unguarded softness on Ilya's face, Shane forcefully swallowed the judgment. He refused to villainize the woman his boyfriend loved more than anything in the world. Instead, he let the anger dissolve into an overwhelming ache for the man above him.

He thought of everything Ilya had endured, everything Shane couldn't even begin to imagine, and how, despite all of it, he was still here; giving everything he had to the people around him. Even now, in the middle of Shane's own family crisis, Ilya had been the steadiest thing in the room. The eye of the storm. The hand that kept finding Shane's in the dark and holding on.

"What was her name?" He whispered hoarsely

“Irina.”

"She sounds beautiful."

"She was," Ilya agreed, a wistful smile pulling at his lips. "She would make fire alarm go off, and my father would be so angry, but she would just grab my hands and make me dance with her in the smoke while we opened the windows. She made everything feel like a game. Like the world was not so serious."

"I bet it was fun."

"Da, with her, always."

Shane reached down, his fingers wrapping gently around the wrist that was still resting securely over his chest. He didn't offer pity, because Ilya would hate it, and he didn't point out the tragic undertones of the story, because Ilya didn't need him to. He just held him, letting his thumb stroke the pulse point there, silently absorbing the absolute privilege of being trusted with these fragile, shattered pieces of the past of this beautiful, kind man.

Shane loved him so much it felt like a physical ache sometimes.

Eventually, the rhythmic ticking of the wall clock and the heavy, narcotic warmth of the apartment won the battle against their desire to stay on the. The transition was a sluggish affair that ended with them in the en-suite bathroom, brushing their teeth shoulder to shoulder, the space feeling much smaller than usual with both of them on it. Shane caught Ilya's gaze in the mirror; a brief, blue-on-brown collision of eyes that were both embarrassingly, ridiculously content.

The terrifying domesticity of the moment didn't send him into a spiral, instead, looking at the sleepy, ridiculously fond expression reflected back at him, Shane just felt warm, an embarrassing swell of happiness settling deep in his chest.

Minutes later, safely swallowed by the dark and comfortably tangled together beneath the heavy warmth of the duvet, he pressed his face into the crook of Ilya's neck. He was so tired his bones ached, but as Ilya's arm wrapped securely around his waist, Shane found he wasn't quite ready to let the night end.

"Tell me one of them," he whispered, his voice already slurring with sleep. "One story about the stars."

He felt Ilya's chest rise with a slow, contented breath before the low, gravelly timbre of his Russian-accented English began to map out constellations in the dark.

Thursday arrived with the unforgiving shrill of his alarm at six in the morning, shattering the comfortable peace of the bedroom. Shane's hand shot out automatically, slapping the snooze button with blind precision. His body felt like it was made of lead, his muscles screaming in protest against the mere concept of movement. Beside him, Ilya groaned, pulling the duvet over his head and throwing a heavy, possessive leg over Shane's thighs to pin him to the mattress.

"Cancel the day," Ilya had mumbled into the pillows. "Tell them you died."

Shane just rolled his eyes and kissed him on the temple, murmuring his goodbyes as he got up to start his day.

The transition from the warm, tangled sheets of his bed to the freezing, sterile ice of the Brossard practice facility felt like walking through molasses. For the first time in his life, the life he built in this sport didn't feel like a sanctuary. The drills, the systems, the sharp scrape of skates against the clean white surface; it all felt like tedious white noise. His body executed the motions flawlessly, muscle memory carrying the captain of the Voyageurs through a rigorous hour of practice, but his mind was miles away, split desperately between a hospital bed and his own apartment.

The tightness in his chest eased, just a fraction, when he stepped off the ice and Hayden fell into step beside him in the corridor leading to the locker room. His best friend didn't ask about Ilya. He didn't ask about the waiting room or the confession or any of the seismic, world-altering events of the last forty-eight hours. He just put a hand on his shoulder, asked how his mother was doing, and listened with the patient attention that had always been the irreplaceable thing about Hayden Pike.

Nothing had changed. If anything, there was something easier in the space between them now, like the sharp, unobstructed pull of clean oxygen in a room that had been sealed shut for a decade. For the first time in his adult life, he didn't have to constantly monitor the perimeter of their friendship for cracks where his secret might bleed through.

Shane changed out of his gear feeling marginally more human.

Still, he couldn't shake the sickening guilt of leaving Ilya behind in the apartment that morning.

I'm sorry, he had texted while untying his skates, his thumbs moving frantically over the screen. I'm leaving you alone in a city that hates you, locked in an apartment, while I go hang out at a hospital all day. This is the worst first week boyfriend behavior ever documented.

His phone had buzzed less than thirty seconds later.

i am currently wearing your most comfy sweatpants eating all your imported blueberries and watching a documentary about deep-sea squids on your gigantic television, Ilya's reply read. i am practicing my duties as a trophy husband. do not disturb my process Hollander. go be with your mama

Shane couldn't fight the growing smile on his face even if he had wanted to, earning him a deeply concerned look from his goalie. But he didn't care, he just let the sweeping wave of affection carried him all the way to Sacré-Cœur.

The day at the hospital was a grueling exercise in emotional endurance. Yuna was awake for longer stretches, her pain more manageable but her exhaustion profound. She asked him about practice in a voice that slurred softly at the edges, and he answered carefully, forcing himself to look at her eyes. Sitting in that vinyl chair, holding her hand while actively lying by omission, felt like swallowing broken glass. But every time his phone buzzed in his pocket with a text from Ilya, the atmosphere of the trauma ward felt a little less suffocating.

In the evening, by the time Shane unlocked his front door, the exhaustion had settled deep into his bones—only for him to pause in the entryway. The apartment smelled distinctly of rosemary, olive oil, and something savory roasting in the oven.

"Ilya?" Shane called out, his voice a quiet rasp through the hallway as he shed his outer layer. He kicked off his shoes, carefully lining them up right next to his boyfriend's in the entryway. He found himself smiling at the comforting image.

Ilya emerged from the kitchen, wearing a black apron over a white t-shirt, holding a wooden spoon like a weapon. "Ah. You survive. Good. Was about to start a duel with your oven. It was being very stubborn about temperature."

Shane let out a tired laugh, walking toward him and leaning his forehead against Ilya's shoulder. The Russian smelled like spices and his own warm, cedar scent, and Shane practically melted into the contact. "What are you doing?"

"I am making chicken," Ilya declared, pressing a kiss to the top of Shane's head. "Because if I have to look at another one of your sad, unseasoned meal-prep containers in the fridge, I am going to call the police." He paused, his large hand rubbing slow circles into his tense back. "Also, your father came by."

Shane lifted his head. "Yes, he mentioned he would. Was everything good?"

"Da," Ilya said. He stepped back, breaking the comfortable warmth of their embrace, and immediately started tapping the wooden spoon restlessly against his other palm. "He needed to shower and get fresh clothes for tomorrow. He was here for two hours maybe." He shifted his weight, crossing his arms tightly and then dropping them just as fast to gesture toward the kitchen island. "He is a very quiet, very large man. Sat right there and drank tea, and I swear to God, I forgot how to speak English for twenty solid minutes."

A slow, delighted smirk spread across Shane's face. The sheer mental image of Ilya Rozanov—the terror of the Eastern Conference, a man who regularly fought defensemen who outweighed him by thirty pounds with a smile—sweating bullets in a kitchen while trying to brew tea for David Hollander was the greatest thing he had heard all week.

"Did you behave?" Shane asked, keeping his voice perfectly deadpan. "Please tell me you didn't threaten my father with that wooden spoon."

"I was a perfect gentleman," Ilya insisted defensively. "I asked him about the weather in Ottawa. We discussed hockey. All very normal Hollander's topics of conversation." He lowered the spoon, his expression softening into something warmer. "But he thanked me. For staying with you. He truly is a good man, Shane."

The smirk faded from Shane's lips, replaced by a quiet, overwhelming gratitude. "Yeah," he whispered. "He is."

They ate at the small dining table. And just like last night, Shane was practically falling asleep into his plate, the exhaustion making his limbs heavy, but he couldn't stop looking across the table at Ilya. Tomorrow was Friday. Tomorrow they had to get in a car and drive to Boston for six hours straight; the longest the two of them would spend confined in such a tiny space together. Shane was honest enough with himself to admit that it made him a little nervous. Not to mention how the peaceful bubble they had created in his apartment was about to pop, and they were going to have to merge this impossible reality back into the loud, public sphere of the NHL.

"I hate that you have to leave," Shane said quietly, pushing a piece of chicken around his plate. "I hate that I have to go with you, and leave her here. And I hate that I left you alone all day."

Finishing the last of his meal, Ilya set his fork down with a soft clink. He reached across the small table, covering Shane's restless hand with his own, trapping the silverware against the wood. The teasing, arrogant edge he liked to wear was completely gone from his face, replaced by that heavy, unwavering devotion that still made Shane's heart pound against his ribs like he had just skated a ten-minute shift.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice a steady anchor in the dim dining. "You did exactly what you were supposed to do today. You played hockey, and you were there for your mother. You do not ever have to apologize for leaving me while you do that." He squeezed his hand, his blue eyes fierce in the warm overhead lighting. "Tomorrow, we drive to Boston. I beat you on the ice in front of all my fans, and then you come back here to your family. We will figure everything else out later."

Shane pulled his hand out from under Ilya's just to point his fork threateningly across the table.

"You are absolutely out of your mind if you think you're getting a single point on Friday." His voice didn't rise a fraction of a decibel; it was calm and entirely serious. "I could play on three hours of sleep and a sprained ankle and still embarrass you in your own home."

Ilya's mouth twitched. "I do not know this, *zlotse*. Your legs will be heavy. Your brain is distracted. I will skate circles around you, score a hat trick, and then buy you dinner to make you feel better about your terrible performance."

"I'm going to cross-check you into the boards so hard you'll forget how to speak English."

"Promises, promises," Ilya purred, entirely unbothered. He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest, radiating an infuriating satisfaction. "You can try to hit me, but you

will have to catch me first."

"Asshole."

"*Da*, and to make sure you are fully rested for your humiliating defeat, I will be perfect chauffeur tomorrow. Will drive flawlessly. You will be so relaxed you will sleep the entire way."

Shane crossed his arms tightly over his own chest, glaring at him with a bone-dry expression. "If you go one single mile over the speed limit, I'm grabbing the steering wheel, and driving us both into a ditch."

Ilya gasped, pressing a large hand over his heart. "But you would lose the game!"

"It will be worth it if I get to destroy that monstrosity you like to drive."

"You are so mean to me," Ilya sighed happily, the threat rolling right off him. He stood up, walking over the small table just to press a lingering, unapologetic kiss to the sensitive skin right beneath Shane's jaw. "I cannot wait to spend the rest of my life with you."

A violent, traitorous flush immediately rushed straight up Shane's neck, turning his cheeks and the tips of his ears a burning, humiliating red. Ilya pulled back just far enough to catch the physical evidence of his panic and absolutely lost it, throwing his head back with a loud, delighted laugh that echoed through the room. Stripped entirely of his biting composure, Shane scowled deeply and shoved at the Russian's solid chest, a grumpy, defensive gesture that only made Ilya laugh harder as he easily absorbed the hit, completely entertained by his own handiwork.

Friday morning broke over Montreal with the kind of brittle, blinding clarity that only existed in the dead of winter. It was so early that the streets were completely deserted, the sun still just barely scraping the horizon. The sky above was an unforgiving, cloudless light blue, and the air was sharp enough to physically sting the inside of Shane's lungs as he stepped out of his apartment building, a heavy duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

Ilya had slipped out of Shane's apartment before dawn, taking an Uber across the city to retrieve his car from the concrete filled parking garage, sparing him the "emotional whiplash"—*as his boyfriend had put it*—of going back to the hospital just to fetch a vehicle.

By the time Shane stepped out of the building, the car was already idling at the curb, exhaling thick, white plumes of exhaust into the freezing air.

He stopped on the sidewalk and just stared at it. He didn't know much about cars—his own SUV had been selected based entirely on safety ratings, trunk space, and how well it handled the weather and the routes he frequented—but he didn't need to be an automotive expert to

recognize that the machine idling in front of him was an absolute hazard to public safety. It sat ridiculously low to the ground, painted a sleek, aggressive silver that looked like liquid metal in the morning sun. The front end was all gaping air intakes, and the back featured a massive, obnoxious carbon-fiber wing that seemed entirely unnecessary for anyone not actively participating in a professional track race. It didn't purr; it growled, a low, guttural vibration that Shane could feel in the soles of his boots.

Ilya was leaning against the passenger side door, wearing a tailored black peacoat and a pair of dark sunglasses—where he had gotten them, God only knew, and Shane was honestly not interested in asking—looking like he had stepped directly out of a European espionage film.

"This looks like a mid-life crisis," Shane said, his voice flat as he approached the vehicle.

"You are just jealous because your car looks like it belongs to a soccer mom who volunteers at PTA," Ilya pushed off the door, effortlessly plucking the duffel bag from Shane's shoulder to stow it in the impossibly tiny trunk space at the front of the car. "This is German engineering, Hollander. She is a work of art."

"I cannot believe you drove *her* through the mountains in the middle of the night," Shane muttered, giving one of the pristine, low-profile tires a thoroughly unimpressed look.

Ilya just laughed, a low, delighted sound that rumbled in the quiet morning air. He stepped back into Shane's space, reaching out to tap a gloved finger lightly against the underside of his stubbornly set jaw. He opened the passenger door with a sweeping, dramatic gesture.

"Just get in, *kotenok*. The seats are heated. You will learn to respect her."

Shane rolled his eyes, but the corners of his mouth betrayed him as he sank into the low, bucket seat. The interior was a cocoon of dark leather, carbon fiber, and a ridiculous amount of suede. When Ilya slid into the driver's seat and closed the door, the heavy, mechanical thud instantly severed them from the biting Montreal wind and isolated them completely from the rest of the world.

As they merged onto the freeway, heading south toward the United States border, the tense, jagged energy that had been humming in Shane's blood for the last three days began to smooth out. The environment outside the tinted glass mirrored the steady unwinding of his chest. The dense, vertical concrete of the city slowly gave way to the sprawling, snow-dusted expanses of the Quebec countryside. By the time they crossed the border into New York and transitioned onto Interstate 89, cutting through the vast, quiet mountains of Vermont, the world had opened up into an endless ocean of pristine white and towering, frosted pines. The highway stretched out ahead of them like a long, dark artery connecting the two halves of Shane's life.

True to his word, Ilya was driving with a restraint that Shane knew was taking physical effort. The speedometer hovered exactly at the legal limit, the massive engine beneath them practically purring in frustration at being so heavily leashed.

Shane rested his elbow on the center console, letting his hand fall open. Ilya didn't even look away from the road; his right hand simply dropped from the steering wheel and slotted perfectly into his, their fingers tangling together in a familiar knot.

"You know," Ilya murmured after a long stretch of comfortable silence, his thumb dragging a slow line across Shane's knuckles. "When your father came to the apartment yesterday... I was terrified."

Shane turned his head, watching the winter sun cast flickering, strobing bands of light across Ilya's golden hair through the pine trees. "Why? You said everything went well, you literally offered him tea."

"I offered him tea because I needed an excuse to look at kettle instead of his face," Ilya admitted, a dry, self-deprecating humor coloring the words. "He is very large, Shane. And he is very quiet. The entire time he was sitting at your island, I kept waiting for him to yell. Or to hit me."

Shane's breath hitched, a cold spike driving through the warm comfort of the cabin. His fingers instinctively tightened around Ilya's. "My dad would never hit anyone, Ilya. Especially not you."

"I know this now," Ilya said softly, his gaze fixed on the asphalt unwinding before them. Edges of something raw and fragile were bleeding into his expression as he spoke. "You must understand... my experience for how fathers react to disappointment is very different from yours."

The sprawling, sunlit mountains of Vermont suddenly felt very distant. Shane stayed perfectly still, terrified that any sudden movement would make Ilya close the door he was finally prying open. "What do you mean?"

Ilya didn't answer immediately.

Shane watched him and couldn't tell, at first, whether the silence was the language barrier or something harder than that. Then he thought about every other time Russia had come up in conversation—the way Ilya's shoulders did that specific thing, the way his accent thickened around certain words like they were heavier in their original language—and he was inclined to think that this time, for once, Ilya didn't have the words even in Russian.

"Grigori demanded perfection. If I made mistake, he punished me. By any means he deemed necessary," Ilya continued, his voice dropping into a flat, detached register that broke Shane's heart more than tears would have. "I knew your father reacted well in the hospital... but since you weren't there, I expected the worst. I expected him to tell me I ruined his son."

Ilya swallowed hard, a muscle feathering in his jaw. "Instead, he looked at me and fucking thanked me. What am I supposed to do with that?"

Shane's eyes burned. He looked down at their joined hands, absorbing the magnitude of the grace his father had unknowingly extended, and the devastating reality that Ilya had spent his entire life believing he didn't deserve it. Suddenly, an overwhelming wave of gratitude for David Hollander washed over him, anchoring him to the earth and helping him find his voice again.

"I didn't know you thought like that," he choked out, his grip on Ilya's hand turning almost desperate. "Tell me you don't actually believe that bullshit, Ilya. Because I'm nowhere near perfect, and you didn't ruin anything. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me."

Once again the silence stretched. Well, this conversation was proving to be fucking fruitful.

Ilya's jaw worked, a small, barely perceptible movement, like he was deciding whether the question deserved an honest answer or not. His gaze stayed fixed on the road. A logging truck merged into their lane ahead of them, and Ilya adjusted the wheel with the same automatic, unhurried precision he used on the ice; body doing one thing while the mind was somewhere else entirely.

"Does it matter?" he said finally, his voice carefully leveled, the accent thick and flat.

"Yes," Shane said. No pause, no qualification. "Of course."

The pine trees blurred past the tinted glass, dark and enormous against the white.

"I do not know," Ilya said finally. The words came out flat, stripped of their usual arrogant scaffolding, and all the more devastating for it. "I do not know if I believe it. That I did not ruin anything."

Shane opened his mouth. Ilya shook his head, a small, terse movement, and Shane shut it.

"Let me finish." Ilya's thumb resumed its slow sweep across Shane's knuckles, the motion automatic, the way breathing is automatic—something the body does to survive while the mind does something harder. "I know what you are going to say. I know you do not see it that way. But knowing you believe something and believing it myself are not the same thing, and you of all people should understand that."

Shane closed his mouth, frowning at the sudden, uncomfortable heat prickling at the base of his neck. His jaw locked automatically, his muscles tensing with the irrational, knee-jerk instinct to pull his hand away.

"My whole life," Ilya continued. He stopped. He swallowed, visibly fighting for the English words that were literal enough, harsh enough. "I am too loud. I am too angry. I destroy things. I destroyed my relationship with my family. I was problem for every team I played for before Boston. I ruined it with women." A short, humorless exhale. "And then there was you. And I was so sure if I let myself want you properly—if I made it real, and public—I would destroy you, too."

Shane's chest ached with the specific pain of recognition. The way you could love someone so much that the love itself became terrifying, became evidence of how much you could really hurt them.

"Ilya—"

"Your father thanked me," Ilya cut him off quietly. Not with sharpness. Just with the specific emphasis of a man who is still actively trying to process a thing that doesn't fit the shape of

his understanding. "He looked me in the eye and said thank you, and I genuinely did not know what to do. Because fathers do not thank the person who causes their son pain." His jaw worked. "Fathers look at you the way mine looked at me. Like you are a mistake they have to fix."

"Your father," Shane said, keeping his voice very controlled and very level because the alternative was making Ilya pulled over and said something that would take twenty minutes to say and approximately zero of those minutes would be useful, "is not a metric. He is not the standard. He is clearly one deeply broken man who raised you in a way that was cruel, if the fact that his voice is still the loudest one in your head when someone is kind to you is something to go by. But that's not the truth about you, Ilya. He was wrong. You are very kind, and very good, and you deserve nice things too."

It was difficult for Shane to talk sometimes. Most of the time there was an indestructible filter between his brain and his mouth that prevented him from saying what he truly felt, and what came out was generally something entirely different. But he didn't stutter once, this time, and his voice was as clear as his thoughts.

Ilya was quiet for a moment.

"You sound like a therapist," he said.

"Well, maybe you should consider going to a fucking therapist, then." Shane shot back, his voice thick.

"I do not need to pay a stranger to tell me how my own brain works," Ilya snapped. Their joined hands broke apart as he pulled away, gripping the steering wheel with both hands until the leather creaked. His jaw set into a stubborn, defensive line, his entire body leaning toward the driver's side door as if to create distance.

"You clearly fucking do," he retorted, his temper flashing hot and fast to meet Ilya's, crossing his arms tightly over his chest and huffing a sharp, agitated breath, "because your brain is currently letting a man who lives on another continent dictate how you accept a 'thank you' from mine."

"It is not that simple, Shane!"

"It's exactly that simple!"

The cabin filled with a sudden, suffocating tension. They both glared at the windshield, chests heaving, the familiar friction of an argument sparking instantly between them—their default, automatic defense mechanism whenever the vulnerability got too sharp. But just as quickly as the anger had flared, the fight visibly drained out of the Russian. Ilya's shoulders dropped, the rigid line of his back softening in heavy defeat.

"I do not want to fight, sorry. It is true I do not believe I am the best thing that has happened to you," he admitted, his voice dropping into a quieter register. Honest in the raw, careful way he was only ever honest when he had run out of energy to perform otherwise. "But I know I want to be. And I know I would—" He stopped. Swallowed. Started again. "I would do

anything to make it true. To be worth it. To be someone who does not cost you more than I give back."

"You already are," Shane said.

"Shane—"

"You drove through a blizzard."

"That is not—"

"You sat in my kitchen and made my father chamomile tea and were terrified, and you stayed anyway," Shane said, cutting him off with ruthless precision. "You stayed alone in my apartment without complaining once, just so you could hug me at night, and so I wouldn't be alone the little hours I was not with my mom. You have not once, in the last couple of days, made me feel like my falling apart was an inconvenience."

Shane uncurled his arms from his chest, reaching across the center console and rested his hand on the back of Ilya's neck, his fingers sliding into the short, soft hair at the nape. It was a grounding, possessive gesture, forcing Ilya to feel the steady heat of him despite the road still stretching out between them.

"I know you don't believe it, which is fucking bullshit," Shane continued, his voice dropping an octave, filled with a fierce, quiet conviction. "But I'm not asking you to. Not yet, at least. I'm just telling you that the evidence exists, and I intend to keep adding to it until your stupid brain understands that you are exactly what I need, and more importantly, what I fucking want."

The silence that followed was softer, a space where both of them took the opportunity to calm themselves.

"You are very stubborn," Ilya murmured, though he leaned his head back just a fraction, pressing into the palm of Shane's hand.

"As if you didn't know that already," Shane huffed, though the bite in his voice had finally been replaced by tenderness.

The corner of Ilya's mouth quirked up. He cut a brief, sidelong glance toward Shane—a quick flash of blue eyes behind his sunglasses that was equal parts exhausted and desperately fond. "So pretty when you get angry, *kotenok*."

Shane made a low noise in the back of his throat, a sharp, grumbling sound of protest, that he would rather die than admit it sounded anything like a disgruntled purr, but the look on Ilya's face told him that was exactly what the Russian was thinking. He didn't pull his hand away, though. Instead, he stayed exactly where he was, his fingers moving idly through the short hair at the nape of his boyfriend's neck, watching the dark blur of the highway. It was a fragile peace, bought with too many words and a lot of blood pressure, and they both seemed content to just breathe in it for a while.

After a few miles, once the tension had fully bled out of Ilya's shoulders, he reached over and rested his palm heavy against Shane's thigh, his thumb beginning a slow, rhythmic stroke that felt entirely subconscious.

"My father..." Ilya's voice fractured slightly, the heavy accent thickening around the edges. He took a slow breath, his grip on the steering wheel turning white-knuckled again. "He is sick now. Alzheimer. It started a few years ago. It is getting worse."

Shane's head snapped up, his fingers going still in Ilya's hair. "Holy shit."

"Da, *holy shit*," Ilya echoed with a short, humorless laugh. "I do not like to talk about it." His gaze remained stubbornly fixed on the road, his knuckles standing out like white stones against the steering wheel. "When I go back to *Moskvá* in the summers, sometimes he does not recognize the apartment. Sometimes he forgets my brother's name."

Ilya swallowed hard, a muscle ticking violently along his jaw. "Most of the time he just thinks my mama is still alive. The man who spent fifteen years making sure I never said her name out loud, who acted as if she had never existed at all, now wakes up and asks me where Irina has gone."

A sudden, white-hot rush of protective rage flared in the center of Shane's chest as the psychological horror of his boyfriend's life hit him with full force. An uncharacteristic surge of anger that tasted like battery acid in the back of his throat. He looked at Ilya—this beautiful, complex man who might not have always been kind, but had always felt like a safe space. A man who smiled like the sun and had a heart to match it, who inspired him to be brave for the first time in his life—and felt an overwhelming, almost violent hatred for the father that made him believe he was unworthy of love.

Feeling the tremor of old, unhealed grief in the man beside him, Shane realized with absolute, terrifying clarity that if he ever had the misfortune of being in the same room as Grigori Rozanov, the only thing that could possibly prevent him from leaving the man bleeding on the floor was the fact that his mother's words were etched into his very bones, ghost-writing every action he made.

Kids like us look up to you, Shane.

You can't act like the other boys, Shane.

You can't give them a single reason to dislike you, Shane.

The internal mantras of a lifetime felt thin and brittle now. Had he possessed even a fraction less self-restraint, he would be booking a one-way flight to Moscow right now just to track the man down, and he wouldn't feel a single ounce of regret for the stain on his reputation.

"If I ever meet him," he said, his voice dropping into a dark register that contained absolutely zero percent humor, "Alzheimer's or not, Ilya, I'm going to punch him right in his miserable mouth."

Ilya's head snapped toward him, dark blue eyes wide with pure shock. And then, a sudden, booming laugh erupted from his chest. It was a rich sound that bounced off the leather and carbon fiber of the cabin.

"You?" Ilya wheezed, highly amused. "Shane Hollander, golden boy of the NHL, assaulting a sick, elderly Russian man?"

"I'd probably end up with assault charges," Shane maintained, completely stony-faced, though his pulse was fluttering at the beautiful sound of Ilya's laugh. "But it would be worth every single loonie. I'll run him over with a Zamboni. I don't even care."

Ilya pulled Shane's hand from his hair down to his mouth, pressing a desperate, grinning kiss to his knuckles. "You are incredibly vicious when you want to be, *solnyshko*. It is very hot."

"I'm serious," Shane grumbled, though he let his thumb stroke the smooth skin of Ilya's jaw.

"Of course you fucking are," Ilya murmured, his eyes glowing with a dark, shimmering heat as he glanced at Shane before returning his focus to the road. "You are *moy beshenyy kotik*, after all."

The playful heat in the cabin settled into something more profound as Shane leaned back, his hand still anchored on Ilya. "I don't want you to ever doubt my dad again," his voice dropped all pretense of humor. "I don't want you to be afraid of him. I know it's probably difficult, but trust me. He's truly a good person. Fuck, Ilya he's *your* dad now."

Ilya let out a shaky breath, and guided their joined hands to his own lap, resting them there, heavy and connected, as if he needed to feel Shane's weight pressing directly against him to keep from drifting away. "I am not sure that's how it works, *solnyshko*. You cannot simply decide that your dad is mine, too."

"Too late. I already decided it."

"He *is* a very good man," Ilya whispered finally, his voice thick and scraped raw, as if the admission itself had been a physical struggle.

"So are you," Shane vowed quietly, his heart aching at the small, fragile crack in Ilya's armor. "And whether you like it or not, you're stuck with us."

Ilya didn't answer that, but he didn't pull away either. He just held Shane's hand against his own thigh, letting the miles of snow-dusted American highway blur past the windows in silence.

As they crossed into Massachusetts, the stark isolation of the mountains gave way to the dense, creeping sprawl of the Boston suburbs. The traffic thickened, the sky traded its brilliant blue for a hazy, exhaust-choked grey, and the heavy gravity of their professional lives began to press against the tinted windows of the Porsche.

Shane felt his stomach tighten. They were no longer two men driving through the mountains; once again they were the captain of the Montreal Voyageurs and of the Boston Bears, and the

world they had temporarily outrun was waiting for them.

The NHL was waiting among the towering glass skyscrapers. Tonight, they would step onto the ice at the Garden, wrapped in opposing colors, surrounded by twenty thousand screaming fans and the flashing lenses of the sports media. They would have to be rivals again. They would have to hit each other, slash at each other, and pretend the space between them was filled with bad blood instead of absolute devotion.

Ilya navigated the chaotic grid of downtown Boston with practiced ease, eventually turning down a quiet side street two blocks away from the luxury hotel where the Voyageurs always stayed. He pulled the car flush against the curb and threw it into park.

Shane unbuckled his seatbelt, but he didn't reach for the door handle. The silence that followed the sudden cessation of movement was deafening. The engine rumbled low beneath them, a steady vibration that did nothing to mask the crushing reluctance settling over the cabin. He stared out the windshield, his chest aching. All he had to do was open the door, step out into the freezing wind, and walk back into the carefully constructed, suffocating closet of his public life.

He didn't want to move.

"I hate this," Shane murmured, the words tearing out of him before he could stop them. "I hate that I have to get out of this car and pretend I hate you."

For years, saying goodbye had been a necessary, agonizing mechanism of their survival. It had always hurt, but it had been easier to ignore; to make himself believe that it didn't mean anything, that he could live a normal life never knowing how Ilya's curls looked in the morning, which side of the bed he preferred, or how he liked his coffee—two spoons of sugar and a splash of milk, not too hot. He knew this now, just as he knew the answers to every question he'd ever had about the man he loved, and a million more that hadn't even occurred to him until the last couple of days. All the tiny, vital things he had gathered and registered while living in the same space, asking every question he could. And so, knowing exactly what he was leaving behind in this car, the prospect of walking away felt physically impossible.

Ilya turned to him, the seat leather creaking. His face was drawn, exhausted, but his eyes were entirely soft. He reached across the console, his large hands framing Shane's face, pulling him into a slow, bruising goodbye; heavy with reluctance and the lingering taste of the long drive. Shane tangled his hand in the collar of Ilya's coat, holding him there for an extra second, breathing in the scent of cedar and expensive leather, branding it into his memory to survive the next twenty-four hours.

When they finally broke apart, the cold air of the Boston afternoon felt like an intrusion.

"I hate it too, sweetheart."

"It sucks," Shane complained, his hands gripping the lapels of Ilya's coat. He rested his forehead against Ilya's, closing his eyes. "I feel like I just got you. And now I have to go

stand across the ice from you and let my teammates cross-check you while I look the other way."

Ilya let out a soft, huffing laugh. "Your teammates could not hurt me if I gave them a baseball bat. Do not worry about me."

"I always worry about you," Shane admitted, his voice a frail whisper. He pulled back just enough to look at the man he loved. "Call me after the game? Even if it's late?"

"I will call you before you even take your skates off," Ilya promised, pressing one last, lingering kiss to Shane's forehead. "Go. Your shitty team is probably wondering where their fearless leader is."

Shane nodded, forcing himself to let go. His muscles heavy and protesting as he pushed the heavy door open, the cold air of the Boston afternoon hit him immediately, sharp and unforgiving. He grabbed his duffel bag from the tiny trunk, slinging it over his shoulder. For a moment he just stood on the cobblestones, the biting wind whipping through his hair, and watched as Ilya lowered the passenger window.

"Have a terrible game, Hollander," he said, the arrogant, familiar smirk back in place, though his eyes were painfully soft.

"Go to hell, Rozanov," Shane shot back, the corner of his mouth tipping up into a fond smile.

He watched the silver Porsche roar to life, the exhaust echoing down the alleyway as Ilya pulled away, the taillights disappearing around the corner. As he stood there for a moment longer than necessary, the roar of the city traffic washing over him. The cold was seeping through his jacket, but his mind was running at a thousand miles an hour.

He was fucking done waiting.

He turned and started walking toward the hotel, his jaw set in a hard, uncompromising line. Ten years of back alleys. Ten years of separate flights, of stolen hours in dark rooms, of checking the rearview mirror before he allowed himself to feel anything. It was exhausting and cowardly. And standing there, with the ghost of Ilya's kiss still burning on his mouth and the reality of his dad's acceptance echoing in his ears, Shane realized he was fucking done waiting.

He didn't know how he was going to do it. He didn't know the logistics or the PR strategy or how to navigate the fallout of two rival captains building a life together in plain sight. But as the glass doors of the Voyageurs' hotel slid open to receive him, he set his jaw and made a quiet, unshakeable vow to himself.

He was going to find a way to fix this. Because five hundred miles was too far, and he refused to spend the rest of his life watching the man he loved drive away.

The game in Boston was exactly what Shane's frayed nervous system needed.

Ilya was a relentless, suffocating force on the ice, playing with a brutal, unapologetic swagger that demanded his absolute, unblinking focus. For three solid hours, the terrifying reality of his mother lying in a hospital bed with a shattered femur ceased to exist. There was no trauma, no sterile hospital air, no suffocating guilt; there was only the sharp scrape of skates, the burning in his lungs, and the desperate, all-consuming mission of trying to beat Ilya Rozanov to the puck.

Boston won, 4-2. As the final horn blared through the arena, the captain of the Voyageurs was suitably irritated; He *was* a professional athlete, the meticulously disciplined captain of a storied franchise, and losing a hockey game would always inherently taste like ash on his tongue. But underneath the heavy scowl he wore for the cameras as he skated off the ice, the enamored boy in him was undeniably thrilled. He had watched Ilya celebrate with his team, a blinding smile lighting up the Russian's face, and Shane had finally allowed himself to recognize the warm satisfaction blooming in his own chest for what it actually was.

He was genuinely happy when Ilya was happy.

It was an entirely new metric of success.

(That didn't mean he wasn't going to pointedly ignore Ilya's gloating texts for at least an hour. He *was* still grumpy.)

The return to Montreal was a harsh drop in temperature. Shane flew back with his team, leaving Ilya in Massachusetts, and the physical separation immediately felt like a phantom limb. It was completely absurd. They had routinely gone months without seeing each other over the last decade, subsisting on radio silence and carefully maintained distance. But now that the door had been kicked wide open, the hunger, which Shane had spent his entire life learning to starve into submission, was back with a vengeance, loud and completely unmanageable.

Text messages quickly proved insufficient. Within two days, their banter evolved into nightly phone calls. Any moment Shane had free—walking to his car, sitting in the empty locker room after morning skate, or laying in the dark of his bedroom at night—he would dial Ilya's number. The glowing screen became his only tether. He would give Ilya meticulous updates on Yuna's physical therapy and her drug charts, and Ilya would complain about his linemates and the terrible coffee at the Bruins' practice facility.

It was utterly domestic and intoxicating. It was also driving Shane absolutely out of his mind, because all he wanted was to reach through the speaker and pull Ilya so deep into his own skin that there would never be space for either of them to breathe alone ever again.

He spent hours staring at the ceiling in the dark, turning the problem over and over. He needed a way for them to exist in the same physical space without the hockey media launching a full-scale forensic investigation into why the captains of two fiercely rival

franchises were suddenly grabbing coffee on a Tuesday afternoon. He needed a strategy. A system. A perfectly calculated loophole.

It hit him on a Sunday at two in the morning.

The winter wind was howling against his bedroom window, rattling the glass, but inside his head, the pieces had brilliantly snapped together. He didn't check the time as he grabbed his phone and hit call.

Ilya answered on the second ring. His voice was gravelly, panicked, and heavily accented with sleep. "Shane? What is wrong? Is your mama-?"

"We are going to start a foundation," Shane announced into the dark room, entirely bypassing a greeting.

On the other end of the line, there was a heavy, confused rustle of sheets. "What? Shane, I do not understand."

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, letting his head fall back against the headboard. A sharp flare of frustration hit him; not at Ilya, but at himself. He opened his eyes and glanced at the nightstand, where a beginner's Russian workbook sat in a pristine, intimidating stack. He cursed his own linguistic incompetence. He wanted so badly to be able to explain the frantic, brilliant fire in his brain in the language that Ilya dreamt in. He took a slow breath, promising himself that the day would come when he could cross that barrier, when he could own every single part of the man softly breathing in his ear.

"I'm sorry," Shane softened his voice, slowing his cadence into something gentle and grounding. "I didn't mean to scare you. Everyone is fine. I just figured it out, Ilya."

"Figured what out, *zlotse*?" Ilya mumbled, the panic receding into sleepy confusion.

"Us. How to be seen together," Shane explained, the adrenaline making him sit up. "We create a joint charity. A foundation. When we launch it, we tell the press that after years of playing against each other, we developed a mutual respect; that we became good acquaintances behind the scenes and decided to partner up for a good cause."

His leg couldn't stop bouncing in a restless, insistent rhythm against the mattress. "We can host summer hockey camps for kids. Co-sponsor tournaments. If the media knows we are business partners for a charity, it completely reframes the 'public enemy' narrative. If a paparazzi catches us grabbing coffee, or walking into an arena together, it won't be a scandal. It gives us an excuse to exist in the same space without the world losing their shit."

The silence over the receiver lasted only a few seconds before Ilya let out a sharp, breathless laugh. It was a beautiful sound, the Russian waking up completely to the sheer audacity of the plan. "A foundation. You want to start a charity just so we can go to Starbucks without wearing sunglasses?"

"I want to be able to walk down the street with you," Shane corrected softly.

"You are a terrifyingly calculating man, Shane Hollander," Ilya breathed out, the teasing dissolving into pure warmth. "It is perfect. A summer camp for the children. I will teach them how to properly dangle through a defense, and you will teach them how to eat tasteless broccoli. The league will love it."

Shane smiled, his chest swelling at his boyfriend's praises, but he felt his pulse begin to flutter erratically against his collarbone. He traced the spine of the Russian workbook with his index finger, suddenly acutely aware of the freezing wind screaming against the windowpane outside. He hesitated, his meticulously controlled filter trying to brace him for the emotional drop.

"There's something else," he murmured, his voice dropping to a near-whisper. The expansive, triumphant energy in the bedroom condensed into a tight, fragile sphere. "I was thinking about the cause. What the foundation should actually be for."

"Okay," Ilya said quietly. "Tell me."

Shane swallowed hard. He spoke slowly, treating the words with the utmost care. "I think it should be for mental health. To help people struggling with depression. To provide resources and spread awareness about suicide prevention." He waited a heartbeat, his own pulse thudding loudly in his ears.

"We can name it the Irina Foundation."

The line went entirely dead.

For what felt like a lifetime there was absolutely no sound from Boston. The silence was so thick and heavy, that Shane physically ached with the distance. He wished, with a sudden, violent desperation, that he could reach through the phone and materialize in Ilya's bedroom. He needed to see his face. He needed to know if he had overstepped, if he had taken something too sacred and mishandled it.

Say something, he pleaded silently. *Please*.

Then, a sound cut through the static.

A small, sharp sniff.

"I love you so fucking much," Ilya choked out. His voice was completely wrecked, wet and shaking in a way that shattered Shane's heart into a million pieces. "That is great idea."

A hot, sudden prickle of tears flooded the back of Shane's eyes. He pressed his free hand over his mouth, overwhelmed by the desperate, clawing urge to wrap his arms around Ilya's broad shoulders.

"Yeah?" Shane managed to ask, his own voice wavering dangerously.

"Da," Ilya wept softly. "So fucking great. Mama would have loved it too. She would have... she would have loved you."

Shane completely lost the battle against his own tears. They spilled hot and fast over his cheeks, dropping silently onto the collar of his t-shirt. There was no one here to see him break, no cameras, no expectations to manage. There was just the man on the other end of the border who had somehow made Shane's heart large enough to hold all of this.

He wasn't particularly religious. He never had been; faith had always felt like something that required a surrender of control he wasn't built for, a leap into the dark that his meticulously analytical brain simply refused to take. But there was a place inside his mind that belonged to no one. Not the public, not his parents, not even Ilya, no matter how hard he tried to find his way in. It was the one room Shane had never learned to share, the one place where he was accountable to nothing and no one but himself.

In that place, quietly and without ceremony, he sent something toward Irina Rozanova. Not quite a prayer. Something more like a promise. That he would spend whatever time he was given protecting her son, taking care of him. Always. Whatever that looked like.

"I'm sure I would have loved her too, baby," he whispered back into the dark, his voice thick with a shared grief for a woman he had never met.

He stood in the dark, listening to the shaky, synchronized rhythm of their breathing across five hundred miles. The distance was still there, vast and punishing, but it no longer felt insurmountable. As soon as he had a free afternoon, he was going to start drafting the paperwork. He would organize the board, file the permits, and maybe, once his mom was healed and he had finally told her the truth about the man he loved; he would ask her to help him build this dream that would free them, at least a little bit.

A week and a half later, the sterile, meticulously curated architecture of Shane's Montreal apartment had been thoroughly and unapologetically hijacked.

For years, his living space had been a physical manifestation of his brain: sparse, highly organized, and completely devoid of anything unpredictable. Now, there was a rented medical bed dominating the guest room, a complex array of pill organizers lined up like a small infantry on his pristine quartz kitchen counter, and the constant, lingering scent of the sharp herbal tea his mom insisted on drinking three times a day.

It was chaotic, loud and entirely disruptive to his deeply ingrained routines. Shane had never loved his apartment more.

Yuna Hollander had been officially discharged from Sacré-Cœur on a crisp Tuesday morning, and wheeled through his front door by a profoundly relieved David. The transition hadn't been easy—the pain medication made her groggy, and the frustration of being immobilized with a titanium-pinned femur frequently drove her to snap at the television—but by the end of the week, the terrifying fragility that had haunted her hospital room was beginning to burn

off. The color had returned to her cheeks. Her voice had regained its familiar, commanding edge, mostly used to instruct David on how he was chopping vegetables incorrectly from her perch on the living room sofa.

Shane stood by the kitchen sink, a damp dish towel in his hands, watching them. The late afternoon light was pouring through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting a warm, honeyed glow over the hardwood. His dad was diligently attempting to dice a bell pepper, absorbing Yuna's barrage of critiques with the patient smile of a man who was just happy his wife was alive to yell at him.

A tight knot of anticipation flared to life right behind Shane's sternum. It wasn't the cold, suffocating panic of the past decade; it was something more urgent, the physical sensation of running out of road, paired with the desire to just accelerate and jump.

His dad finished transferring the vegetables into a pan and stepped away to wash his hands, moving to stand next to Shane at the sink. The running water masked their voices from the living room.

"She looks good," Shane murmured, keeping his eyes fixed on the soapy water. "She didn't even need the heavy painkillers this morning."

"She tried to walk to the bathroom without her crutches yesterday when I wasn't looking," David turned the faucet off, grabbing a towel to dry his hands. He looked over his shoulder at Yuna, his expression softening into an exhausted gratitude. "The physical therapist said she's stubborn, said she's already days ahead of schedule on her mobility. I told him he has no idea."

Shane let out a dry, quiet snort. "She's going to try to drive by next Tuesday. You better hide her keys."

David chuckled, then his gaze drifted from his wife to fix on Shane's profile with that steady, grounded attention that always made him feel like he was being read directly. His grip on his own dish towel tightened. He took a slow, measured breath, forcing oxygen into lungs that suddenly felt a size too small. "Dad," he started, his voice dropping into a low, private register.

David turned completely back to him, his perceptive eyes immediately catching the sudden, rigid shift in Shane's posture.

"I think it's time," he forced the words out, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs. He didn't need to specify what he meant, of course his dad understood. "She's stronger now. I want to tell her."

David reached out and placed a large, warm hand on Shane's shoulder, giving it a firm, grounding squeeze. It was an anchor, tossed expertly into the rising tide of his anxiety.

"Okay," his dad's voice was a steady rumble of blind support. "Whenever you are ready, son. I'll be right there beside you."

He offered his dad a small, shaky nod, a wave of love for the man nearly stealing his voice. But as comforting as David's presence was, Shane knew with absolute certainty that he couldn't do this without Ilya in the room.

That night, long after Yuna had been helped to bed and the apartment had fallen into a heavy winter silence, Shane retreated to his own bedroom. He closed the door, letting the darkness envelop him, and grabbed his phone almost blindly.

Ilya answered on the first ring.

"*Priviet, zolotse*," his voice rumbled through the speaker. It was low and laced with that infuriating, effortless warmth that immediately acted like a muscle relaxant on Shane's nervous system. "Tell me you are in bed, if you are watching game tape at one in the morning again, I am calling your coach and telling him you have terrible attitude."

Shane let out a long, heavy sigh, burying his face into his pillow. He felt his shoulders drop a full three inches, the chronic tension of the day melting away at the simple sound of a Russian endearment. "I'm in bed, idiot. Stop trying to sabotage my career. How was practice?"

"I am trying to preserve your pretty face from exhaustion wrinkles. And practice was a tragedy," Ilya complained dramatically, the sound of a zipper being pulled echoing over the line. "My winger has the spatial awareness of a blind pigeon. If I have to pass the puck to empty ice one more time, I am retiring and moving to Canada to become your personal chef."

Shane snorted. "You made chicken exactly one time, Rozanov. Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"It was an exquisite chicken," Ilya defended smoothly. "How is the warden today?"

"Bossy. Highly critical of my dad's cooking," Shane said, a fond smile pulling at his lips. He rolled onto his side, pressing the phone closer to his ear, greedy for the sound of Ilya's breathing. "But she's getting better. She actually laughed at a terrible joke Hayden told when he stopped by earlier."

"Ah. A woman of terrifying resilience and terrible taste in comedy," Ilya mused. "I love her already."

Shane closed his eyes, the joke hitting the exact, tender bruise in his chest. His fingers curled tightly into the edge of his pillowcase. "I want her to love you too," he whispered into the dark room.

The teasing lilt instantly vanished from the line. The silence that followed was attentive and painfully gentle. "Shane?" Ilya asked softly.

"She's fiery again, and strong," Shane continued, his voice tight, the anxiety finally bleeding through his composed exterior. "Strong enough, Ilya. I want to tell her."

"Okay," Ilya said softly, the reverence in his voice making Shane's heart stutter. "Okay, *solnyshko*. If you are ready, then it is time."

"I want to do it. But I can't... I don't want to do it without you. I need you here."

Ilya let out a ragged breath that transform into a frustrated groan that vibrated through the speaker.

"Shit," Ilya cursed. "Shane... we leave tomorrow for West Coast trip. California, Seattle, Vancouver. Back-to-back games. We do not have break longer than twenty-four hours."

Shane closed his eyes, a cold, leaden weight dropping directly onto his chest. He knew the NHL calendar was a ruthless, unforgiving machine, but the reality of it still felt like catching a blindside hit. "When are you back on the East Coast?"

"Two weeks," Ilya admitted, his voice sounding completely defeated. "Fourteen days, *solnyshko*. I cannot get to Montreal until the twenty-third."

Fourteen days. Two more weeks of sitting next to his mother on the sofa, holding her hand, and swallowing the truth whole. Two more weeks of monitoring his own pronouns, of carefully curating his stories, of actively keeping the most vital, beautiful part of his life shoved into the dark. Shane's chest ached with the impending exhaustion of it all.

"Okay," he whispered, his voice thin and hollow in the quiet room. "Two weeks. I can wait two weeks."

Ilya didn't answer immediately. Shane could hear the faint, clinical hum of a high-end ventilation system in the background, the physical proof of the hundreds of miles separating them. When Ilya finally spoke, his voice was so unbearably tender it made Shane's throat ache.

"Shane, listen to me," the heavy Russian accent seemed to thicken, carrying the full weight of his devotion. "You do not have to wait for me. If this is hurting you, you stop the lie. You sit down with your mama tomorrow, and you tell her whatever you need to, *malysh*. You let her hold you, and you take that weight off your chest."

Shane frowned, his brow furrowing in the dark. "What are you talking about? Of course I'm waiting. I'm not doing this without you-

"I can wait," Ilya interrupted, gentle but firm. "You do not have to mention my name yet. You can tell her about me later, when she is already used to the idea, when the shock is gone. I do not mind, Shane. Leave me out of it for now. I will survive."

Shane sat up abruptly, the blankets pooling at his waist. A sudden, white-hot flash of anger spiked in his veins, immediately followed by a devastating sorrow. Ilya was offering himself up as collateral. After a decade of being hidden, of being a dirty secret Shane kept locked away, Ilya was actively volunteering to stay in the shadows just to make Shane's life a little easier, to cushion the blow for Yuna.

"No," Shane said.

The single word dropped into the stillness of his bedroom like an anvil; heavy, immovable, and echoing with absolute finality. He pushed himself up, resting his back against the headboard, his fingers gripping the phone so tightly his knuckles ached. The darkness of the room suddenly felt less like a hiding place and more like a cocoon that was actively, violently splitting open.

"Shane, be logical—"

"Baby, listen to me," he interrupted, the endearment tearing out of him with a raw, desperate authority. Shane gripped the phone tighter, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs. "I'm not doing that. I spent ten years compartmentalizing you, Ilya. Ten years pretending you didn't exist outside of hotel rooms. I'm never doing that again."

He swallowed hard, fighting the sudden, hot sting of tears behind his eyes. He pictured Ilya sitting alone in his Boston house, trying to shrink himself down so he wouldn't take up too much space in Shane's life.

"If I'm stepping into the light, I'm bringing you with me," Shane vowed, his voice dropping into a quiet, ferocious register. "Not a single second later. If she gets me, she gets you. I'm not coming out in halves. You aren't a footnote, and you aren't a secret; you're my boyfriend. I made up my mind. I will wait for you."

For a long, agonizing minute, there was nothing but the sound of static and the faint, ragged sound of Ilya breathing. When he finally spoke, his voice was completely ruined, thick with an emotion so vast and overwhelming it barely fit through the speaker.

"Okay," Ilya choked out, a wet, rough sound that shattered the last of Shane's composure. "Okay. Fourteen days, *moya lyubov*. I will be there."

Shane let out a long, unsteady exhale, the phone still pressed against his ear long after the call had ended. The amber glow of the Montreal streetlights filtered through the blinds, casting long, geometric shadows across the duvet. Outside, the drip, drip, drip of the thawing ice from the balcony was the only sound in the apartment.

He lay there, listening to it.

For years, his mind had functioned exactly like that frozen water; rigid, structured, locked in a state of permanent, defensive suspension. He had survived by keeping his world compartmentalized, turning his own existence into a strict ledger of debts and payments.

How could you possibly justify being ungrateful when your parents had already hollowed out so much of their own lives to build yours? How could you look at the people who had sacrificed every early morning, every drop of their energy, and every ounce of their unconditional support, and selfishly ask them to carry even more?

Did that make him a bad son? For the vast majority of his meticulously managed life, wrapped in the suffocating perfection he had demanded of himself, he was absolutely certain

that it did. He had starved his own desires simply because asking his parents to hold the messy, complicated truth of his sexuality felt like placing an unbearable weight on shoulders that were already carrying his entire career. He had convinced himself that staying quiet, staying small, and staying flawlessly normal was the only acceptable currency to repay their debt.

He had starved himself of his own life just so they wouldn't have to worry.

But.

He turned his head against the pillow, watching a stray beam of amber light cut through the dark of the room.

He thought about the hospital corridor; his father's hand at the back of his neck, the absolute, unshakeable weight of it. David hadn't looked disappointed, nor like a man being asked to carry a heavier burden. He had looked like someone who just wanted to see his son stop hurting. Nothing more complicated than that.

And then, without warning, the image that had been forming in the background of his mind for weeks finally came into focus.

He tried to summon the nightmare he had played on a loop since the moment he realized that fantasizing about women did to him exactly what fantasizing about the structural integrity of a Zamboni's water tank would—which had been a devastating realization to have at fourteen.

The career implications, what the world he loved so much would think of him, the crushing disappointment in his mother's eyes after everything she had given up for him, the deafening silence from his father, the sudden withdrawal of their warmth. He had lived inside that nightmare for so long it had started to feel like memory. Like something that had already happened.

But now, with Ilya's love acting like a soothing balm for his anxious brain, it was strangely easy to be brave.

He couldn't actually picture them getting angry anymore.

The realization was slow, and then it was everything. It bloomed in his chest, terrifyingly bright, thawing the last patches of frost around his lungs. He had spent years building the cage himself. Not out of their expectations, but out of his own fear. Out of a love so enormous and so badly translated that it had convinced him the safest thing he could do for the people he loved was to disappear the parts of himself they might struggle to hold.

Maybe asking them to love him a little bit more wasn't a burden at all. Maybe asking them to love this other, hidden part of him—to love the boy who loved Ilya Rozanov—wasn't a betrayal of their sacrifice. Maybe it was just the final, missing piece they had been waiting to hold all along.

Because if his mom had thrown her body against a seatbelt at a hundred miles an hour over a frozen field just to stay alive. If she had fought through surgery and titanium and the slow,

grinding indignity of relearning how to walk. She was, by any metric Shane had ever used to measure anything, the strongest person he knew.

Which means she was strong enough to hold the whole, unedited truth of him. And keeping himself locked away hadn't been protecting her. It had been depriving her of actually knowing the son she had fought so hard to give the life he now led.

As the fourteenth day approached, the atmosphere inside his mind shifted from dread to a terrifying, electric anticipation. The air in his apartment seemed to hum with it, the winter sky outside turning from a bruised, muted gray to a sharp, blinding white. The storm was breaking. He was absolutely terrified, his stomach constantly churning with a nauseating mix of fear and adrenaline, but underneath the panic, there was a relentless, glowing core of certainty.

The morning before Ilya arrived, he stood at the kitchen window with a mug of black coffee, watching the frost melt in dripping, rhythmic lines down the balcony glass. He had been awake since five. Not with the restless, anxious insomnia he knew so well—the kind that spun scenarios and catastrophized outcomes until his mind was a white-hot, humming machine—but with something else, something much more quiet. He had woken up and simply lain in the dark, feeling the slow, steady thaw of something that had been frozen for a very long time.

He thought about the hospital corridor, his father's word in the back of his mind. *Until you are ready to walk in the light yourself.*

He thought about sitting in the passenger seat of a silver Porsche going seventy miles an hour through Vermont, watching Ilya's profile in the winter sun. *It did not occur to me*, he had said, when Shane asked if he had been scared for himself. The chilling, simple honesty of it. The love so vast it had obliterated his own sense of self-preservation. Shane had spent the weeks since carrying that admission very carefully, like something fragile and sharp at the same time, because although he understood exactly *why* Ilya had done what he did, he realized it wasn't a wound he could fix with words; he could only show up, consistently, until Ilya understood through sheer evidence that his own life was a thing of value that he needed to protect, not just for Shane, but for himself.

He thought about his mom on his sofa, watching the snow by the window. He thought about the way she had looked at his dad in the hospital, that first night, after she finally opened her eyes; the way the pain in her face had simply gone somewhere else the moment she found his. Which made him inevitably thought of Ilya's own parents.

For twenty-seven years, Shane had operated on the logic of scarcity. He had treated his heart like a limited resource, something to be rationed and guarded, convinced that if he let too much out—or let too much in—the whole structure of his life would collapse under the weight of it. He had spent his life practicing how to be enough for everyone else while starving himself of the very thing that made the effort worth it.

Standing there in the quiet kitchen, watching the winter finally lose its grip on the glass, a sudden, violent surge of impatience rose up in his chest. It was a physical ache, a restless, thrumming demand from the person he had been suppressing since he was seven years old.

He was done.

He was done starving for affection in the three-minute intervals between flight calls. He was done with the shadows, with the half-truths, and with the suffocating discipline of being the perfect son at the expense of being a whole person. If his parents could love each other through crisis and decades of sacrifice, and if Ilya could love Shane through ten years of silence and five hundred miles of distance, then Shane was finished pretending he didn't need any of that love.

Ilya was coming home, and Shane was finally going to turn every goddamn light on.

The winter sun had finally broken through the dense Montreal cloud cover, spilling bright, geometric pools of gold across the hardwood floors of Shane's living room. It was the first genuinely clear afternoon after nearly a week of relentless, oppressive snow, and the light felt almost aggressive in its generosity; too much warmth arriving too suddenly, the way grace sometimes does.

Yuna Hollander adjusted her position on the sofa, letting out a quiet, measured exhale. It had been nearly four weeks since the crash, and while the violent, blinding agony of the first days had receded into a dull, manageable throb, her body still felt like a heavily mortgaged property. The titanium rod running the length of her right femur ached with a deep, weather-sensitive stiffness, and the phantom emptiness beneath her ribs where her spleen used to be left her feeling strangely incomplete. But today, wrapped in a thick cashmere throw and bathed in the sudden, generous sunlight, the pain was merely background noise. For the first time in a month, she felt remarkably good.

Her son had been pacing between the kitchen island and the edge of the living room rug for the better part of twenty minutes, his path as rigid and predictable as a metronome. He wasn't frantic—she had never known her adult son to be anything but a fortress of discipline—but the contained, kinetic energy practically vibrated off his rigid shoulders, reminding her of his teenage years. He kept adjusting the cuffs of his sweater, checking his phone, and shifting his weight with the restless cadence of a caged animal.

Yuna watched him over the rim of her teacup.

She shifted her gaze to her husband; David was sitting in the armchair opposite her, casually reading a book. He was entirely too relaxed, the contrast between his serene posture and Shane's vibrating anxiety was glaring. When he raised his eyes enough to look straight at hers, Yuna raised an eyebrow, shooting him a questioning look.

He just smiled—a small, infuriatingly calm curve of his mouth—and turned the page. "It's nothing," he murmured, his voice a low, soothing rumble that didn't match the heavy anticipation in the room at all.

Before Yuna could press the issue, the electronic chime of the apartment doorbell pierced the quiet. Shane flinched as if a gun had gone off. He practically sprinted toward the entryway, his movements jerky and entirely stripped of his usual grace.

Yuna frowned, the gentle warmth of the sun suddenly feeling a shade cooler against her skin. "Were we expecting someone?" she asked, her voice calm but threaded with mild confusion.

David casually bookmarked his page and set the novel aside, a distinct, unmistakable glint dancing in his eyes: a mischief that he usually reserved for when he had successfully hidden her Christmas presents. "You'll see."

She could hear the front door opening, followed by the muffled thud of winter boots being kicked off and murmurs she couldn't make out. And then, stepping into the sunlit expanse of her son's living room, was none other than Ilya Rozanov.

Yuna's mind stalled. She knew the face, of course. Aside from the fact that this man had been her son's most bitter, aggressive rival for the better part of a decade, any hockey fan knew the face of one of the best centers the league had to offer. But the towering, broad-shouldered Russian forward currently standing in her son's apartment did not look like the arrogant, chaotic villain she was used to seeing on television.

She could swear he looked terrified, though he was doing a pretty decent job of masking it.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Hollander, good evening." Ilya said. His voice was deep, laced with a heavy accent, but it wavered ever so slightly on the vowels; it was startlingly polite. He was standing rigidly, his large hands awkwardly shoved into the pockets of his dark jacket, looking entirely unsure of what to do with his own massive frame.

"Hello, son," David replied without missing a single beat. His voice was a welcoming anchor that completely ignored the absurdity of the situation. "How have you been? I saw you play last night. You did great out there."

"Thank you, sir," Ilya breathed out, his rigid posture dropping a fraction of an inch. Yuna watched, utterly fascinated, as a genuine, almost shy smile flickered across Rozanov's face at the praise. He looked incredibly relieved.

Yuna couldn't make the pieces fit. The scene in front of her simply refused to make sense. David's easy, unquestioning calm. The reality of Rozanov—the Ilya Rozanov—currently sweating in the middle of Shane's living room. And her son. Her intensely private, tightly wound boy, standing just a few inches away from him, looking for all the world like a man bracing for a firing squad.

But Yuna's *okaasan* had raised a woman with impeccable, unflappable manners. You did not stare, and you certainly didn't interrogate a guest in the doorway, even if the floor had just dropped out from under you. So, forcing her hands to steady, she carefully smoothed the cashmere blanket over her lap. She sat up a fraction straighter, letting decades of practiced, quiet grace bury the absolute chaos in her head.

"Good evening, Mr. Rozanov," Yuna said, her voice smooth, firm, and flawlessly kind. She gestured gracefully to the loveseat opposite her. "Please, have a seat. Shane, honey, bring your guest something to drink."

Ilya moved stiffly, lowering his large frame onto the edge of the chair as if he expected the cushions to collapse under him. He shot a quick, desperate glance at Shane; something fleeting passing between them, an amity that she had no idea existed between the boys. Shane nodded jerkily, and practically fled into the kitchen, leaving them alone in the sunlit living room.

Yuna took a slow, deliberate sip of her herbal tea. The silence stretched, thick with the afternoon light and the heavy, unsaid words hovering in the air.

She looked at David. Her husband merely shrugged, the mischievous glint still dancing in his exhausted eyes; he was completely at ease it seemed. Which meant this was some orchestrated confrontation that these two boys had somehow coordinated, and that David had clearly known about. The realization settled warmly into Yuna's chest; whatever was happening, David approved of it, which meant she had nothing to fear.

So, she used the quiet moments of Shane's absence to study the man sitting across from her, and making him squirm a little; a small payback for all the times he had hurt her boy on the ice, or taken a trophy from his hands.

Rozanov was clearly trying to project a relaxed posture—leaning back slightly, resting his large hands on his knees—but it was a fragile armor. It absolutely did not fool her; It wouldn't have fooled any mother, to be honest. Beneath the heavy muscle, the expensive clothes, and the intimidating reputation, Yuna saw exactly what he was in this moment.

He was picking nervously at a microscopic thread on the seam of his jeans. His gaze kept darting toward the kitchen, tracking the faint sounds of Shane opening a cabinet. Without his helmet, his jersey, and the practiced sneer he wore for cameras, Ilya Rozanov looked jarringly, unexpectedly young. He was nervous, vibrating with what she could only guessed was the same anxiety that had filled Shane all day.

The faint, nervous clinking of glass announced her son's return before he even stepped out of the kitchen. He walked back into the living room carrying two glasses of water, his knuckles bone-white around the cold rims. The subtle tremor in his hands was a glaring betrayal of his meticulously maintained composure. Yuna watched him set the glasses down on the coffee table with exaggerated, unnecessary care, as though the task required his complete concentration. Then, instead of retreating to the safety of the single armchair, he lowered himself onto the very edge of the loveseat, right next to Rozanov, leaving a careful few inches of space between them.

The atmosphere in the room shifted instantly. The golden sunlight stretching across the rug seemed to hold its breath. The room was suddenly so quiet that Yuna could hear the soft, mechanical hum of the refrigerator.

Every thought of the strange Russian man left her mind as she focused entirely on her son's nervous eyes. Shane stared at his own hands, his fingers twisting into a rigid, bloodless knot

in his lap. He swallowed hard. The silence stretched, fragile and terrifying, as Yuna waited. This was certainly a strange change of plans for her calm evening, but for once, she was curious enough to let the boys across from her—who amusingly looked like they were sitting outside the principal's office—explain themselves before asking any questions.

"Mom," Shane finally started, his voice fracturing over the single syllable. He cleared his throat, a sharp, nervous sound, and forced himself to try again. "I... we... there's something I need to tell you. Something I should have told you a very long time ago."

Yuna kept her posture relaxed, leaning back against the plush cushions despite the dull ache radiating from her leg. She folded her hands softly in her lap. "alright, I'm listening."

He took a jagged breath, his chest heaving under the thick wool of his sweater. He looked briefly at Ilya. It was a microscopic movement, a fleeting, desperate glance seeking permission or strength. Ilya answered with a slow, imperceptible nod, his blue eyes burning with an absolute, devoted certainty.

The invisible exchange did not escape Yuna's notice. But it only helped to make her even more confused. What could Shane possibly need to tell her that required the encouragement of Rozanov, of all people?

"I'm gay," Shane said, the words tumbling out in a rushed, desperate exhale. And then, before the air could even settle around the confession, pushing through the terrifying freefall. "And Ilya and I... we're together. We have been. For a long time actually."

He stopped, his jaw snapping shut as though he had to physically lock the rest of the words inside to keep from completely falling apart.

Okay.

So her son was gay.

Okay.

She could work with that.

Actually, it was as if someone had suddenly handed her the cipher to a code she had been trying to read for more than twenty years. Every lingering, unexplained shadow in Shane's life suddenly flooded with light. The intense, almost obsessive focus on hockey. The polite, hollow distance he kept from the world. The way he seemed to carry an invisible, crushing weight, convincing himself he had to be flawless to earn his place in their family, in the world.

Yuna looked up, meeting Rozanov's—Ilya's—gaze first. *Well fuck.*

Ilya *fucking* Rozanov was her son's boyfriend. What even was her life right now? She was actually profoundly grateful that she was already sitting down; her aching leg aside, Yuna was fairly certain she would have ended up on the floor by now otherwise. Maybe she was still in a coma in that hospital bed, and these past few weeks had all been nothing but a

dream. Maybe this was her brain taking all the little pieces of things she had subconsciously registered throughout Shane's life and finally putting them together in the image of her son coming out to her. And her torturous, twisted subconscious had decided to turn it into a fucking joke by having him date the captain of the fucking Bears, of all the men in the world. Of all the men who had ever existed on the face of the planet.

She knew better than to believe that to be true, of course. The lingering ache in her healing ribs was far too sharp to be an illusion. And the man sitting across from her—the swaggering, arrogant Russian nightmare of the Eastern Conference, the very same player who had bruised her son into the boards more times than she could count—was currently looking at her with an expression so nakedly terrified it bordered on reverence. No dream could manufacture *that*.

A complicated, messy knot flared in her chest. But Yuna couldn't afford to untangle the monumental complication of what Rozanov meant for Shane's life right now. So, she did what she had always done when faced with an overwhelming crisis: she compartmentalized. She neatly folded the impossible problem of *who* her son loved, and shelved it for later.

She turned her gaze back to her son—and immediately, the noise in her head went quiet.

Shane was sitting on the edge of the loveseat with his hands still knotted in his lap, staring at the rug, his shoulders braced against an impact that Yuna had no intention of delivering. He was completely still. He was barely breathing. He had the expression of someone who had leapt from a great height and was still waiting to find out whether the ground was going to come up to meet him.

Her son. Her beautiful, brilliant, painfully private son, who had just handed her the keys to every locked room he had ever built.

"Shēn-chan," She said softly.

He looked, in this moment, less like the man she had watched lift a franchise on his shoulders for the last five years, and more like the boy she had found sitting alone at the edge of the rink at eleven years old after a bad practice, knees pulled to his chest, refusing to cry until he thought no one was watching.

She had pretended not to see him then, too. She had given him the privacy of it, because that was what he seemed to need.

She wasn't going to do that anymore.

"I love you so much, thank you for telling me." Yuna shifted on the couch, ignoring the dull ache in her leg, and fixed her son with a look of absolute, unconditional devotion. "It's a beautiful thing to know you."

Shane let out a shaky, abbreviated exhale and folded forward, resting his head in his hands. He murmured a broken, "*Fuck*," as if the weight of the world had suddenly been lifted off his shoulders. She watched as Rozanov placed a comforting hand over her son's shoulder, and

miraculously, Shane seemed to relax completely under the touch. Which forced her to confront the *other* big confession that had been made in the room this afternoon.

She took a deep breath.

"And welcome to the family, Ilya. I suppose this explains why David has been acting so remarkably smug all afternoon. He loves to surprise me." She shot her husband a piercing look, which he responded to with an unapologetic smile; beaming from his armchair, looking like he had personally orchestrated the goddamn moon landing.

Ilya let out a breath that sounded suspiciously like a sob, his head dropping back against the cushion as a brilliant, watery smile broke across his face. He squeezed Shane's shoulder so hard it physically shifted her son's arm. "Thank you, Mrs. Hollander. It is the greatest honor of my life."

"Well," David said, from his armchair. His voice carried the same quiet, grounded warmth he used for everything that truly mattered to him—the specific register Yuna had learned to recognize over thirty years of marriage as the one that meant he was speaking from his very heart. "For what it's worth, Ilya, we're just glad you're here. Officially."

Ilya looked at David, his chest heaving with a shaky breath. He opened his mouth to reply, his hands coming up as if to physically grasp the words from the air. "I... Mr. Hollander, I want to say..." He stopped, his thick brows pulling together in a sharp, frustrated line. "I do not have the right... the English for this. It is too..." He gestured vaguely between his own chest and the room, swallowing hard. "It is not enough words to say what this is for me. But... *thank you*."

Yuna watched the massive, formidable athlete stumble over his second language, and something in her chest softened completely.

She thought of her own parents. She remembered being a little girl, remembering how often she had been forced to translate the world for them—a strange, overwhelming world they had abruptly decided to live in just to give their children a better life. She remembered watching them work so hard to form the right English words, their tongues stumbling over rigid consonants that sounded absolutely nothing like the beautiful, witty Japanese that was so deeply woven into their souls.

They had been magnificent in Japanese. Her mother told stories that made entire rooms lean forward; her father argued with a precision that could dismantle any position and leave its holder somehow grateful for the experience. They were funny and sharp and tender and entirely, beautifully themselves—in Japanese. In English, they became careful. Slower. They reached for words the way you reach for objects in the dark, by feel, hoping you've grabbed the right one.

Yuna had spent years translating the world for them. The customs, the humor, the social machinery of a country that had not been built with them in mind, that they had chosen anyway. She had watched them pour themselves into a language that would never quite fit the shape of who they were, their beautiful, funny, finely-tuned Japanese compressed into something blunter and slower, like a river finding its way through unfamiliar stone.

She had loved them fiercely for it. And she had never, not once in her adult life, stopped being aware of what it cost.

Yuna, who had spent her whole life knowing exactly what it looked like when someone was trying very hard to make themselves legible in a language that wasn't built for them, found herself feeling a profound, aching rush of empathy for this man. She had not expected to feel tender toward Ilya Rozanov today. She had not expected a great many things about today.

She looked at him; this massive, terrifying, apparently completely defenseless man sitting in her son's living room, and thought: *Well. Might as well.*

She watched him.

It was what she did best, and what Shane had always underestimated about her; the particular, patient quality of her attention. She had spent thirty years watching her son from arena bleachers, from kitchen doorways, from the passenger seat of a car on the way home from practices he didn't want to talk about. She knew how to observe without being observed in return.

Ilya's hand was still moving in slow, steady circles across Shane's back. It wasn't a conscious gesture—that much was obvious. He was simply providing comfort; giving it freely, like it was something he had been providing for so long he no longer had to think about. At some point in the last few minutes he had shifted closer on the loveseat, closing the careful, respectable distance her son had originally left between them, and his other hand had found one of Shane's and simply held it, his thumb moving in the same unhurried rhythm as his palm on Shane's back.

Shane, for his part, still had his free hand pressed over his face, still working on breathing like a man who had forgotten the mechanics of it. He hadn't acknowledged the shift in distance. He had simply accepted both the hand and the closeness, the way you accept warmth from a source you've stopped noticing because it has always been there.

How long have they really been together? She couldn't help but wonder.

She had spent years building a mental file on Ilya Rozanov, the way any mother builds a file on the person who appears on her son's radar often enough to constitute a pattern. She had told herself it was tactical—know your enemy, understand the opposition—but honesty compelled her to admit now that it had never been purely tactical. Shane talked about Ilya Rozanov the way he talked about very few things: with an involuntary specificity. The wrong call in the third period. The shift where he'd done something Shane hadn't anticipated. *Rozanov again.* Always with that particular flatness in his voice that Yuna had learned to recognize as the sound of Shane trying very hard not to sound like anything at all.

She had watched the rivalry for years from arenas and living room televisions. She had seen the hits, the penalties, the press conference soundbites sharpened into weapons. She had seen the specific, competitive electricity that ran between them on the ice—visible even through a screen, even from the upper bowl, the kind of charged awareness two players develop when they have spent years learning each other's instincts well enough to anticipate them.

She had attributed it to hatred. A reasonable conclusion, she felt, given the available evidence.

She was being confronted now with the considerable inadequacy of that conclusion.

The man sitting on her son's loveseat was not the arrogant, destabilizing force she had catalogued. He was—and she was still somewhat processing this—gentle. In the specific way of very large people who have learned to be careful with the things they don't want to break. The hand on Shane's back moved like he had memorized the geography of it. The hand holding Shane's held on like letting go was not something he was prepared to consider. He was also, Yuna noted, not looking at her. He was looking at Shane. He had been looking at Shane almost continuously since he sat down, with the focused, peripheral vigilance of someone running a constant, quiet assessment.

She thought about what it meant; the specific texture of it, the years required to produce it. You did not develop that quality of attention in a few months. You developed it over a long time, in secret, in the margins of a life that hadn't made room for it. You developed it by paying attention when no one knew you were paying attention, by learning someone in the only increments available to you.

Her son, who trusted no one easily and no one completely, had trusted this man with the whole of himself. For God knows how long.

She thought about Shane at eighteen—the year he was drafted, the year everything became real and enormous and unforgiving. She thought about how young he had been, how determined, how already so fluent in the language of self-containment. She tried to picture him at eighteen meeting Ilya Rozanov for the first time, and then immediately stopped, because the image produced an ache she wasn't ready to sit with yet.

They had known each other for over ten years; how much of that time had they spent hiding? For the well-being of her own heart, she decided not to dwell too much on that, truly hoping it hadn't been that many years.

She looked at Ilya's profile; the strong jaw, the slightly crooked line of his nose that spoke of at least one break never properly set, the dark circles under his eyes that matched Shane's almost exactly. She looked at the way he was sitting; close enough to be a physical presence, far enough to still be deniable, the precise geometry of a person who had spent years learning to be near someone without being allowed to really touch them.

Of course, Yuna thought, and the thought arrived not as a conclusion but as a recognition—the specific quality of understanding something you realize you have always, on some level, already known. Of course her boy would fall for the only other person in the world who could match his pace. Who could possibly be as good as he was. Who would look at all that discipline, all that ferocious, relentless self-demand, and not flinch from it—because he carried the same weight himself, in his own way, in his own language.

Of course it would be someone Shane couldn't have easily. Of course it would be someone who required years of patience and silence and the particular, exhausting courage of loving something you aren't allowed to say out loud.

Her son had never done anything the simple way. She didn't know why she would have expected this to be different.

Ilya's thumb traced another small circle against Shane's knuckles. Shane exhaled slowly, his shoulders dropping a fraction of an inch. Yuna watched, and felt the last of her resistance—the part of her that had been reflexively categorizing Ilya Rozanov as a problem to be managed—dissolve quietly into the afternoon light.

But as Yuna looked back at her son, the warm atmosphere in the room suddenly felt entirely disconnected from the reality of the boy sitting on the loveseat.

Despite Ilya's best efforts—and Yuna could tell that if it weren't for his presence, her son would probably be in a much worse state—Shane's shoulders were still locked in a rigid, agonizing tension. He looked like a man who had been pardoned from a death sentence but still believed, fundamentally, that he deserved the execution. The guilt rolling off him was a palpable, corrosive thing, eating him alive right in front of her.

Yuna's heart broke for him. She could see exactly what was happening. Her son, who had spent his entire life meticulously managing his composure, was crumbling under the unbearable weight of his own guilt. He was probably—stupidly—thinking of the years of lies, of the fact that she had almost died in a plane crash without knowing who he truly was. He was deeply, fundamentally terrified of his own vulnerability, and the overwhelming grace of her acceptance was only making him feel more unworthy of it.

He couldn't even look her in the eyes.

She knew Shane better than anyone in the world. She knew that pushing him to look at her right now, forcing him to engage in a tearful, emotional catharsis in front of an audience, would feel like a violation to him. He needed to fracture, but he needed to do it safely, without feeling like he was being perceived by the entire room.

"David, darling," Yuna said, her voice dropping into a polite, but unequivocally firm register. "Would you be so kind as to take Ilya for some fresh air and give us a moment alone?"

Ilya blinked, instantly sitting forward, his protective instincts flaring as he looked at Shane's bowed head. But David was already standing up, recognizing the quiet authority in his wife's tone without needing it explained.

"Of course," David murmured smoothly. He reached out and tapped Ilya's shoulder, a silent, commanding gesture toward the hallway.

Ilya didn't move immediately. He turned toward Shane instead, dipping his head slightly, trying to catch his eye. "Shane?"

Shane gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. And Ilya read every syllable of it. He held his gaze for one more beat, then released his hand with a deliberateness that suggested the letting go required a conscious decision.

Yuna offered Ilya a soft, apologetic smile as he hesitantly stood up. "I know it is terribly impolite of me to ask a guest to leave the room," she added, her tone laced with a dry, self-deprecating warmth. "Normally, I would take my son into the other room myself, but you will have to forgive me making an exception today. My leg is currently refusing to cooperate with standard social etiquette."

Ilya stopped.

He looked at Yuna for a moment and something in his face did a complicated, quiet thing. The hard line of his jaw softened. His eyes moved from her to Shane, then back to her, reading the room with the same rapid, instinctive intelligence she had watched him use on the ice to find the play before anyone else saw it. Whatever he found, it rearranged something in his expression. The urgency went out of his shoulders.

"It is not impolite at all, ma'am," Ilya said softly, offering her a respectful, reverent nod. He looked at Shane one last time—a silent promise of absolute devotion—before following David out of the living room and disappearing down the hall.

Yuna was certain of one thing, watching him go: if Shane had wanted him to stay, Ilya would have stayed. He would have stayed without hesitation, without weighing the cost to whatever impression he was trying to make, without calculating whether defying her request would be the wrong move in a room where the verdict on him was still technically pending. He would have simply stayed, and because Shane's nod had said *go* he went but if it had said anything else, nothing else in the room would have mattered.

A warm, quiet gratitude moved through her, slow and settling, finding its way into the spaces the last of her resistance had just vacated.

She hoped he would always be this careful with her son. Shane had so few wants of his own. He had spent so long subordinating them, filing them away, convincing himself they were too expensive to have, that Yuna sometimes wondered if he still knew how to locate them. He had given so much of himself to hockey, to the team, to the performance of being exactly what everyone needed him to be, and asked for so little in return.

Her son had somehow, in the margins of a life that hadn't made room for it, found the one person who paid that quality of attention to him.

The heavy silence returned to the sunlit room, but this time, it was empty of expectations. There was no one left to perform for. There was only a mother, and the son she loved more than life itself.

"Shēn-chan," Yuna said softly.

He flinched. A single, hot tear broke free, tracking a silent path down his cheek, but he didn't raise his hand to wipe it away. Such a martyr, her son; it always worried her, the lengths he was willing to go to punish himself when he thought he hadn't met a standard—even though that wasn't how they had raised him. She and David had never asked for penance. She still wasn't entirely sure where he had learned to offer it so readily.

"Come sit next to me, please *bōya*."

The endearment did something to him. His throat worked. He sniffed once, sharp and involuntary, and even then couldn't quite bring himself to refuse her—he never could, not when she used that word, not since he was four years old and it had meant *you are small and safe and entirely mine*. With shaky legs he got up from the loveseat and walked the few steps to the sofa, lowering himself carefully onto the cushion beside her.

Yuna waited until he had settled. Then she reached over and covered his hand with hers.

"Would you tell me what's got you so worked up?"

"I'm sorry," Shane whispered. The words fractured into the quiet room, sounding exactly like the little boy who used to apologize for tracking snow onto the kitchen floor—as though the offense were enormous, as though the appropriate response to his own existence in a difficult moment was immediate contrition. "I'm so sorry, Mom. I really tried. I tried so fucking hard." He stopped, his jaw tightening. "I just didn't want to disappoint you."

Yuna's heart broke, cleanly and quietly, right down the middle. She had spent her entire life trying to protect him from the harshness of the world, only to realize that the most dangerous place for Shane had been inside his own head, trapped by the terrifying, suffocating expectation of perfection he had built out of his love for her.

She thought about how long he must have been measuring himself against an invisible standard she had never set and he had never stopped reaching for.

"Look at me, my beautiful boy," she commanded gently.

It took him a moment, but Shane finally lifted his head. His dark eyes, so painfully identical to her own, were overflowing—a dam finally breaking after a decade of holding back the flood.

"You could never, in a thousand lifetimes, be a disappointment to me," Yuna told him, the absolute, objective truth ringing through every syllable. "My only sorrow is that you carried this heavy thing all by yourself for so long. That you thought you had to be a perfect, unblemished thing for me to love you."

Shane's breath hitched, a soft, broken sound that echoed in the sunlit room.

"I didn't want to ruin it," he confessed, the raw, bleeding core of his fear finally exposed to the air. "You and Dad gave up everything for me. You built my whole life. I thought if I wasn't... if I wasn't what you expected, I would be ungrateful. I thought asking you to love this part of me was asking for too much."

"Oh, *Shē-mushi*," Yuna sighed.

She hadn't called him that in a very long time. Years, maybe. She wasn't even sure he remembered—*Shē-mushi*, Shane mangled into something smaller and softer, tangled together with *mushi*, bug. Shanebug. An endearment that she had used when he was very small and

the full word had felt insufficient for the specific, overwhelming tenderness of looking at him. It had fallen away somewhere in his adolescence, in the years when he had needed her to treat him like someone who was becoming rather than someone who still needed to be held. She had put it away carefully, the way you put away something precious when the occasion for it has passed, not quite ready to let it go entirely.

The word was enough to break him completely.

Shane reached forward with an uncharacteristic urgency, pulling her into a hug with the careful, deliberate mindfulness of a man who remembered exactly where her incisions were even in the middle of falling apart—because that was who he was, even now, even in this. She felt the fabric of her sweater grow warm against her shoulder. That was the only indicator that Shane was really crying. Not a single sound escaped him. He wept in absolute silence, the way he had learned to weep a very long time ago, when he had decided that the sounds of his own grief were too much to ask anyone to hear.

"You listen to me," Yuna said, her voice low and steady and entirely without softness—not because she didn't feel it, but because she knew her son, and she knew that softness right now would undo him before she had finished. "Your father and I did not sacrifice anything. We made choices. Every single one of them, freely, because we wanted to. Because you were worth wanting to." She could feel her own eyes filling, but she kept her voice perfectly steady, anchoring him with the calm, quiet dignity she had always carried. "You were never a debt, Shane. You were never something we were owed repayment for. You were just—" she exhaled slowly, "—you were just our son. That was always enough. You were always enough."

She felt him inhale against her shoulder. A long, shuddering breath, pulled in and held, the specific way he breathed when he was trying to absorb something without letting it destroy him entirely.

She tightened her arms around his back and let him take his time.

"You never have to earn your place with me," she murmured into the quiet room, letting him weep, letting him finally be messy and broken and entirely human. "You are not a project, Shane. You are my son. There is no version of you that I do not want. Do you understand me? I want all of it."

Shane nodded against her shoulder, a wet, shuddering movement.

Yuna closed her eyes.

She thought about all the versions of him she had watched him try to be over the years. The perfect student, the perfect teammate, the perfect captain. The son who never complained and never asked for too much and never let anyone see him stumble. She had watched him build that person with the same ferocious, exhausting dedication he brought to everything, and she had called it discipline, and she had been proud of it, and she had not once stopped to ask him what it cost.

She knew now. She could feel the cost of it in the careful, controlled silence of his crying. In the way he had spent ten years deciding that the truth of himself was too much to hand to the people who loved him most.

She pressed her lips to the top of his head.

The golden afternoon light stretched across the living room floor, quiet and oblivious to the seismic shift occurring within its reach. Shane's broad shoulders shook as he buried his face in the crook of Yuna's neck. She closed her eyes, resting her cheek against the crown of his head, her hands moving in slow, rhythmic strokes down his spine, feeling the ragged, desperate catch of his breathing.

This was her baby.

Her miracle baby, her whole heart, her entire purpose. She had dedicated every waking second of her adult life to ensuring he would be happy, comfortable, and thriving in the sport he loved most in this world. This was her baby, whom she had made herself. For nine months, she had carried him, knitting together his tender heart, his beautiful, bountiful nose, those sparkling dark eyes, and that brilliantly, wonderfully neurotic brain that she recognized with the specific, rueful intimacy of someone who had been living with its source material her entire life.

She was so proud of him; of all the parts of him that were entirely, stubbornly his own, and of all the parts that reflected hers. Her little mirror. Her mini me.

Still, she had wanted him to have David's calm, even prayed for it, in the private, superstitious way she prayed for things she wanted badly. David's steadiness, David's ability to look at a crisis and simply begin solving it without first catastrophizing every possible outcome. She had the hurricane inside her, had always had it, and she had not wanted to hand it down.

Her Shane had been so good at pretending. So extraordinarily, exhaustingly good at it, that she had almost convinced herself the prayer had been answered. That the stillness he projected was real stillness, inherited from his father, rather than a performance maintained at enormous personal cost.

She had believed what she wanted to believe. That was the beginning of it, she thought. That was where she had first gone wrong.

She was her mother's daughter after all.

Her own mother had been the same—eyes open and seeing nothing, because seeing would have required sitting with something painful, and there was always too much to do. Her grandmother too. It was practically a lineage. The women in her family had always been magnificent at love and selectively blind to its failures. She had read enough books on motherhood over the years to know this was not uncommon—that mothers are often the last to see their children suffering precisely because the possibility of it is too enormous to look at directly.

She had always believed herself exempt. She had prided herself on being observant. On understanding Shane's face before he could speak, on reading the specific frequency of his silences, on knowing him in that particular, complete way that she had assumed was hers by birthright and effort both.

She had understood him, she thought. A long time ago. When he was still small enough to be entirely hers, before the world had begun its long project of claiming him. She had understood every cry, every silence, every small tightening around his eyes that meant he was afraid but wouldn't say so. She had been so certain of that knowledge, had worn it with a quiet pride.

And then at some point, without her noticing exactly when, her son had become someone she didn't always recognize. Not a stranger, but a man who had learned to be illegible to her in the specific ways that mattered most. She wasn't sure when it had happened. When he had started lying and she had stopped asking questions. Whether those two things had occurred simultaneously, each one enabling the other, or whether one had come first and made the other inevitable.

Where had they gone wrong, Shane and her? Where had they fallen apart?

Somewhere between David teaching him to skate and Shane lifting the Cup for the first time, she had stopped understanding and started managing. And her son—her brilliant, adaptive, deeply lonely son—had simply learned to work around her. Had learned that the version of himself she could handle was the version that needed nothing, asked for nothing, required no accommodation beyond the ice time and the training schedules and the logistical machinery of his career that she had always been so efficient at providing.

For the few miraculous minutes, long before the world had any claim to him, when she was the only person in the universe who knew Shane existed, she had made a silent vow. She had promised to love her baby more than life itself, to be his ultimate sanctuary, and to protect him from the cold hands of the world for as long as she drew breath.

Looking at him now, folded in half under the crushing weight of his own shame, a nauseating wave of guilt flooded her chest.

Had she failed?

Had her fierce, all-consuming love and her own vicarious ambition blinded her to her baby's feelings? She was his mother. She was supposed to know the shape of his soul better than anyone. She thought she did. But how could a good mother not know that her baby had been bleeding out in silence for years?

It had never been her intention to manage his life. She had not set out to erase him, to take away his choices, to build a version of Shane Hollander that left no room for Shane. She had only ever wanted to take care of him. To clear the path so he could do the thing he loved most in the world without having to worry about everything else—the finances, the logistics, the relentless, grinding mechanics of a professional career that chewed through people who weren't prepared for it. She had wanted to be the person who handled the things he didn't have the bandwidth to handle himself.

But she had spent so much time being his manager and so little being just his mom.

The dampness of his tears soaked through the fabric of her sweater, warm against her collarbone. He still wasn't making a sound; weeping in complete silence, as if he had spent years deciding that the sounds of his own grief were too much to ask anyone to hear.

When had he learned that? she thought. *When did I teach him that?*

The question moved through her slowly, finding every hollow in her tired soul. She thought about what he had looked like when he lifted his head and apologized; not for hiding, not for lies, but for *loving someone*. How could a good mother unknowingly exert such crushing pressure that her child thought he needed to apologize for the simple, human truth of who he loved? His eyes wet and open and braced, like he had already decided the blow was coming and he had chosen to take it standing.

After a long moment, she felt him shift against her shoulder; a small, deliberate movement. His grip on her sweater loosened slightly, his breathing uneven but no longer desperate.

"I didn't want to lie to you," Shane choked out, the words muffled against the fabric of her shirt. "Mom, I swear to God, I never wanted to lie."

Yuna shifted closer, ignoring the sharp, protesting ache in her pinned leg. "I know, *mochi*," she murmured softly, her voice thick with unshed tears. "I know you didn't."

"I just..." Shane pulled away from his hiding place, though he kept his gaze fixed blindly on the rug. His face was blotchy, his eyes shining with a terrified, exhausted grief. "I'm the only one you have. You and Dad gave up everything for me. All your time, all your money. You built your whole lives around making sure I succeeded."

He swallowed hard, his throat working convulsively. "And I was already so different. I was already the quiet kid, the weird kid who needed everything to be perfect. Already the only one who looked like me in every room I walked into, already managing everything the league required of me just to be taken seriously." His voice went thinner, more frayed. "I couldn't be one more thing that didn't fit. I couldn't give the world another reason to look at me sideways. And I couldn't bear the thought of disappointing you after everything you sacrificed to get me here."

The confession hung in the air, razor-sharp and absolutely devastating.

She saw it all now, vividly illuminated in the wreckage of his confession. The agonizing, relentless pressure to be absolutely perfect. The crushing weight of maintaining a pristine, unbreakable public image. The isolating reality of already being one of the few Asian kids in an idiotically homogenous league, constantly scrutinizing himself to ensure he didn't give the world one more reason to look at him sideways. He had spent years starving himself of his own truth, folding himself into smaller and smaller shapes, all because he was petrified of disappointing her, of disappointing the sport he gave up everything for.

She had watched him navigate it from the outside, had been proud of how seamlessly he seemed to move through it, and had not stopped to ask herself what seamless cost. Had not

asked herself what it felt like to be perpetually, precisely calibrated to a room's expectations before you even stepped into it.

He had been doing it everywhere. Not just on the ice. *Everywhere*. Including here, in his own family, with the people who were supposed to be the one place it wasn't required.

He had chosen to be profoundly, desperately alone rather than risk breaking his mother's heart, or risk losing his rightful place in the sport that filled his veins and pushed him through every decision of his life.

Her sweet boy. Her brave, foolish, heartbreaking boy. How had he looked at everything she and David had given him and concluded that their love had a ceiling? That there was a weight it could not bear?

And then, beneath the grief, something quieter. Something that had been forming since she watched Ilya's hand move in slow circles against Shane's back, since she had recognized the quality of that attention and understood how long it must have taken to develop.

Nine months making him and twenty-seven years watching the world try to unmake what she had built, and she had been proud, always proud, of how well he withstood it.

She had not understood, until this moment, that some of the unmaking had been hers.

"Shēn-chan," Yuna whispered, her voice fracturing. She reached out, sliding her hands over his forearms, her grip firm and demanding. "Look at me. Please, look at me."

He lifted his head, his eyes finding hers. He was no longer her baby; he was all grown up now, a man and a captain, his broad shoulders filling out the thick wool of his sweater in a way that still caught her off guard sometimes—the sheer, physical fact of the person he had become, so much larger than the boy she kept reaching for in her memory. But as the sunlight caught the sharp, beautiful angle of his profile, Yuna's breath hitched.

He looked like her otōsan. He had always looked like her otōsan—the same depth in those dark eyes, the way they absorbed light rather than reflected it, the quiet, watchful intelligence behind them that made you feel, when they turned on you, that you were being understood more completely than you had intended. Her otōsan had been a man of few words and enormous presence, and Shane had inherited both, along with the jaw from David and something around the mouth that belonged entirely to himself.

Her beautiful son, a living canvas of everyone she had ever loved. She had made him and loved him and, somewhere along the way, had failed to tell him clearly enough that the making was unconditional. That there was no version of him she had not already agreed to love before he existed. She was telling him now. It was late, and it was not too late, and she was telling him now.

She had spent thirty years trying to be the steady one between the two of them, the composed one, the one who anchored everyone else in the storm. But as she looked into his beautiful eyes, she felt her own composure crack directly down the middle—with the overwhelming,

ferocious, entirely involuntary love of a mother looking at her child and finally, fully, seeing him.

All of him. Every part he had hidden and every part he had shown and every part he had spent years deciding was too much to ask her to hold. She had never needed him to decide that for her. Had never needed him to protect her from the truth of him.

Oh, how she had missed him. Her son. Her miracle baby. She had thought this was normal—that missing your children was simply the tax on raising them well, on sending them out into the world equipped to leave you. She had grieved the loss of him by increments, had told herself this was what love required.

But Shane had missed her too.

He had been right here, in every phone call and every visit and every careful, managed conversation, and he had been missing her from six inches away—missing the version of her he didn't know how to reach anymore, the one who had held him before he learned to hold himself together.

Yuna had not seen it, had not seen a great many things.

She pressed her lips to the crown of his head.

She would fix this. Not all at once—she was practical enough to know that twenty years didn't mend in an afternoon. But she would begin here, in this room, in this light, with her hands on his back and his face against her shoulder and the irreversible knowledge that she had spent nine months building this heart, and she was not finished with it yet.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed, the apology tearing out of her very center.

Shane shook his head frantically, a small, wounded sound escaping his throat. "No, Mom, you didn't—"

"I did," Yuna insisted, her voice fierce and absolute through her tears. "I pushed you to be the best, and I forgot to tell you that you were already enough exactly as you were. I just—" She let out a wet, trembling breath, her thumbs stroking his damp skin. "I just never wanted you to be alone. You were always so independent, so isolated in your own world. Even as a little boy. You would go so far inside yourself and I could never quite reach you, and I didn't know how to—" She stopped. Started again. "I just wanted someone to hold your heart. I didn't care who it was, Shane. I just wanted you to be loved."

Shane stared at her.

Something in his expression shifted; a slow rearrangement, like watching ice move. Like watching something that has been frozen for a very long time begin, finally, to remember that it doesn't have to be.

"I'm loved," he said. His voice was barely above a whisper, rough and unsteady, but the certainty underneath it was absolute. "Mom. I'm so loved, I promise."

Yuna searched his face. "Yeah?"

"Yes." He swallowed, his eyes bright and wet and entirely, completely present. "I felt alone for a long time. For a really long time. But I have him now." A pause; small and private, like he was carefully turning something over before handing it to her. "And he's perfect."

Yuna was quiet for a moment.

She thought about the man in the other room. The hand that had found Shane's and simply held it, without being asked. The look in his eyes.

"How long have you and Ilya been—" she paused, finding the word, "—together."

Shane's eyes dropped to his hands. A small, complicated expression moved across his face—something between pride and grief.

"A little before our rookie season, on and off since then," he said quietly. "So. Almost ten years."

Almost ten years. There went any chance of even a single piece of her heart surviving this conversation.

Sitting in the quiet of the living room, the weight of Shane's confession settled into the marrow of her bones like the titanium in her leg—cold and permanent. It was one thing to hear the words "I'm gay"; it was another entirely to absorb the staggering reality that her son and Ilya had been tangled in this secret, quiet orbit since they were eighteen years old. For a decade, they had existed in a state of perpetual concealment, loving each other in the margins of their lives while the world celebrated their manufactured animosity.

The realization pushed Yuna to the edge of her endurance. She had done nothing but love Shane, yet that love had somehow led to this: her only child hurting for nearly a decade, convinced that he could not go to her for comfort. She had spent his entire life trying to insulate him from the harshness of the world, only to realize she had inadvertently created a vacuum where he felt unsafe to confide in the one person who was supposed to be his sanctuary.

The damage was deep, and the sting of it was sharpened by the fact that it was entirely unintentional. She had valued discipline, mental toughness, and resilience above all else, believing she was giving him the tools to survive an unforgiving league. Instead, she had boxed him into a pristine, golden mold that left him no room to breathe.

"Ten years," Yuna said softly, mostly to herself.

Shane swallowed. "It wasn't—" he started, then stopped. Started again. "It wasn't always hard. Some of it was—" another pause, and this time the complicated expression on his face shifted into something quieter, something she recognized as the specific tenderness he reserved for things he didn't want to accidentally damage by describing them wrong. "Some of it was the best thing in my life. Even like that. Even hidden."

Yuna looked at her son.

She thought about a boy of eighteen, standing at the edge of everything, choosing to love something anyway. Choosing to keep it, even at that cost. There was a kind of courage in it that had nothing to do with hockey, nothing to do with anything she had ever trained him for—a raw, stubborn, entirely human courage that he had arrived at entirely on his own.

"Then I'll have to thank him," she said softly. "For taking care of the heart I couldn't protect."

Shane shook his head, the movement small and immediate, a reflex. "That's not—Mom, I didn't want to leave you out. That was never—" His voice broke on the last syllable. He pressed on anyway, pushing through the freefall of it. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to be enough. I didn't want to ruin the life you built for me."

"You have always been enough," Yuna vowed, the words arriving from somewhere so deep and so certain they barely needed her voice to carry them. She leaned forward and pressed a long, fervent kiss to his forehead, holding it there for a moment—feeling the warmth of his skin, the specific geography of him that she had known since before he knew himself. "Since the second you took your first breath, you were enough. Being gay, loving that boy who is currently in the other room probably awkwardly trying to have a conversation with your father—" Shane let out a wet, startled sound that was almost a laugh. "—none of that ruins anything," Yuna continued, pulling back just enough to look at him. "It just means I finally get to know the whole of my son."

Shane closed his eyes.

Yuna rested her forehead against his, her hands still cupping his face, her thumbs moving in slow, unhurried arcs across his cheekbones. She let the quiet hold them both. The afternoon light was almost entirely amber now, the room softening around them, the long blue edge of evening beginning to gather at the windows.

"You never have to hide again," she said, her voice dropping into something low and fierce and entirely without condition. "I love you. All of you. And I'm so incredibly proud—" her voice caught, just slightly, "—of the man you are. Of the man you are still becoming."

Shane made a sound against her palms. Small and broken and, underneath it, unmistakably relieved—the sound of something that has been held under pressure for a very long time finally, finally being allowed to surface.

The amber light stretched long across the carpet. Outside, the balcony kept dripping—patient, unhurried, indifferent to the enormity of what was occurring inside. Yuna kept her hands cupped around her son's face, her thumbs still moving in their slow arcs, and let the quiet do what quiet does when you finally stop fighting it.

She watched Shane's face. Watched him absorb it; actually take it in. His eyes were still wet, but the desperate, hunted quality that had lived in them since he walked into the room was entirely, irrevocably gone.

He swallowed. His hands came up to cover hers where they rested against his cheeks, his fingers wrapping around her wrists—not pulling them away. Just holding on.

"There's nothing to forgive," Shane vowed, his voice dropping into a tender, broken whisper. "But if you need to hear it, if it helps you: I forgive you. For anything you think you did wrong. I forgive you."

He let out a long, shuddering exhale, the last remnants of his lifelong tension finally leaving his body. "I'm just... Mom, I'm just so incredibly glad you're here. I was so terrified I was going to lose you before I could tell you the truth, before you could meet the man I love."

The words hung in the sunlit air, completely stripped of their former terror. He had said it out loud, into the quiet space of his living room, to his mother, and the sky hadn't fallen. The apartment was still warm. The sunlight was still pouring through the windows. Of course he loved Ilya—Yuna wouldn't have thought Shane would bring someone home if that weren't the case. But it was the first time he had said it out loud. The first time in her son's entire life that she had heard him say he loved someone outside of their family.

Yuna closed her eyes, a profound, sweeping peace settling deeply into her bones. The heavy, corrosive guilt that had momentarily threatened to drown her began to recede, washed away by the absolute certainty of his forgiveness. She had made mistakes. She had been blind to his suffering. But they had survived it. They were here, on the other side of the lie, and her son was finally, truly whole.

"I'm right here, Bōya," Yuna whispered fiercely, kissing his forehead with all the devotion she possessed. "I'm right here. And I'm not going anywhere. No matter who you love, what you want to do with your life, or where you want to go; you will always get to come home to me. Always. "

Yuna pulled him back in, her arms wrapping around his broad shoulders, her chin finding the crown of his head.

She held her son in the fading afternoon light, in the apartment he had filled with the careful, sterile evidence of a life lived at a precise and exhausting remove from himself, and she felt the irreversible quality of a thing being set right. The way bones knit, the way winters end.

Slowly, and then all at once.

Chapter End Notes

I've been thinking about changing the summaries of all my fics because I genuinely hate most of them. I'm a perfectionist and I cannot stand the idea of something not being good and people still having to read it. Which is also why I'm constantly re-editing everything all the time.

The problem is that I'm absolutely terrible at writing summaries. Titles too, honestly, but unfortunately those are harder to change. So if any of you have ideas for summaries, please feel free to DM me on X or leave a comment, because I really do want them to be good, I just never know how to write one without sounding cringe.

And actually, while we're talking about this... how bad of an idea would it be to change the titles of some stories? Because I've genuinely considered changing this one since I don't really love it anymore, but I don't know if that would just confuse people since everyone already knows it by this name. What do you guys think?

Also, because apparently I don't know how to stop writing these two, I already have three more drafts started for other fics about them. So... stay tuned, I guess.

That being said, you'll probably have to wait a little. I'm kind of burnt out right now, and this chapter took way more out of me than usual, so I'm going to take a small break and focus on life for a bit.

Anyway, this has been such an incredible journey, and honestly a really challenging one too. I have never written anything this long in my life, and I really, really wanted to give it an ending that felt worthy of the story. Having said that, I will probably continue editing this fic until I'm satisfied or until the end of time. Whichever comes first.

Love you all. I hope you have a nice day, a good life, and I'll see you in the next read.

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