

the courtship of ilya rozanov

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/81874976) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/81874976>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Game Changers Heated Rivalry - All Media Types , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid , Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander & Rose Landry
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander , Rose Landry
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Post-Scene: Ilya Rozanov Makes Tuna Melts in Episode: s01e04 Rose , Miscommunication , Mutual Pining , Hurt/Comfort , Jealousy , Blow Jobs , Tender Sex , shane is trying very hard , ilya is also trying very hard (to misunderstand) , Soft Shane Hollander , Soft Ilya Rozanov , Good Friend Rose Landry , Implied/Referenced Suicide , (Irina Rozanova's) , Good Friend Svetlana Vetrova , Angst with a Happy Ending , Ilya Rozanov Needs A Hug , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-03-26 Completed: 2026-04-28 Words: 75,309 Chapters: 5/5

the courtship of ilya rozanov

by [cherrylilies \(cherrydialectic\)](#).

Summary

After the tuna melt meltdown, Shane meets Rose Landry, has several deeply inconvenient revelations, and decides to do the only sensible thing: win Ilya back with sincerity, logistics, and a frankly alarming amount of emotional effort.

Ilya, meanwhile, mistakes every tender gesture for the kind prelude to an inevitable goodbye.

Or: Shane is living in a romcom. Ilya is living in a Russian tragedy.

Chapter 1: dinner, apologies, and other catastrophes

Chapter Notes

hi, and welcome!!! i told myself enough new works. i need to focus on wrapping up the other wips i have, but i have genuinely been thinking about this for the better part of two weeks, so it had to be done, i fear. it's set after the tuna melt fiasco, but before rose and shane date date. as the summary suggests, i just really wanted to have shane think he's apologizing and fixing things, and making his intentions super clear, meanwhile ilya thinks he's about to be put down. i think this is the only chapter really that's a liiiiiiittle angsty?

anyway, i hope you enjoy! let me know if i messed anything up timeline-wise or if you see anything off. i tried to proofread, but at 16k words, at some point my eyes glazed over.

unfortunately, this bears saying given where we're at right now, but in the words of hudson williams, fuck ai

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

Shane has been sleeping badly for fourteen days.

Not *not sleeping*, exactly. He still goes to bed at the same time every night. He still puts his phone facedown on the nightstand at ten-thirty. He still keeps the room cool and his blackout curtains drawn. He still wakes at six. It is only the quality that has gone to shit, which feels less defensible somehow. Shane can fix a schedule, but he can't seem to fix this.

At 3:14 a.m., his mind wakes him with the same sharp, sick certainty every night, like he has forgotten something important. Then he lies there in the dark with his jaw locked and his heart beating too hard, staring at the faint line where the blackout curtain fails to meet the wall, while his thoughts move in circles he is too disciplined to call panic.

It's not panic, only a disruption to routine, that's all. And the problem with a disruption to routine is that it should, by definition, be temporary.

Shane gets through practice. He gets through workouts and video sessions and interviews and flights. He gets through carefully portioned meals and eight hours in the dark. He keeps waiting for the jagged feeling under his ribs to dull into something manageable. And yet, it doesn't.

He gets home after morning skate and finds the apartment quiet, which should be a relief, but instead the quiet has spent the last two weeks becoming a little accusatory.

He drops his keys into the bowl by the door and toes off his shoes in a straight line. His duffel goes into the laundry room. He showers. He changes. He stands in his kitchen in a long-

sleeved gray shirt and sweats, opening and closing the refrigerator without taking anything out.

There is half a prepared dinner on the top shelf, measured into containers two days ago. There are berries in glass bowls. Yogurt. Cut vegetables. Grilled chicken. Everything is *exactly* where it is supposed to be.

He closes the fridge.

The game is on in the living room, Boston playing somebody forgettable. Shane watches maybe ninety seconds before he realizes he has no idea what happened in any of them. His attention keeps catching on stupid things. A commentator says *Rozanov* and Shane's whole body goes tense before his brain can catch up.

He mutes the television.

That, more than anything else, pisses him off.

It's one thing to be distracted. It's entirely another to have become the kind of person whose nervous system apparently responds to a last name like its been jolted.

He sits back on the couch and scrubs a hand over his mouth.

He has not let himself replay the whole thing. That seems both unwise and unproductive. What he gets instead are fragments, arriving whenever they please.

The couch under his knees, the smell of toasted bread and melted cheese, embarrassingly domestic. A voice, warm and wrecked and far too close.

Shane.

He shuts his eyes.

No. That is as far as he allows it.

He had left because he needed to leave. Because something had tipped, suddenly and irreversibly, from manageable to not. Because there are moments when a person understands, with perfect unwanted clarity, that if he stays where he is for one second longer, he will have to confront some larger, more dangerous truth.

So he had stood up.

He had said the first stupid thing that came to mind about a team thing, which had been idiotic enough on its own. Then Ilya—of course—had looked up at him from the couch, flushed and disbelieving and still trying to make a joke out of it.

"You? You forgot team meeting?"

Shane had not answered properly. He knows that. He had said he should go. He had thanked him for the tuna, which in retrospect is maybe one of the *most humiliating* sentences any

human being has ever spoken aloud. He had pulled on his jeans with hands that did not feel fully attached to his body. And then, because apparently he had also temporarily lost all higher brain function, he had left wearing Ilya's shirt.

Shane opens his eyes and stares at the muted game.

He still has the shirt. It's folded in the back corner of his dresser under things he never wears, which is a choice so obviously insane that he refuses to examine it even a little.

His phone rings.

He actually startles, which makes him annoyed before he even sees the screen.

J.J.

Shane answers on the fourth ring.

"Hollander," J.J. says by way of greeting. "What the fuck are you doing right now?"

Shane looks at the silent television. "Nothing. Why?"

"Fuck that. Get your ass downtown."

Shane closes his eyes. "No."

"You know my buddy François? The chef?"

"From Djon-Djon?"

"Yes, from Djon-Djon," J.J. says impatiently. "He's having some little after-hours thing at the restaurant, and get this—the cast of fucking *X Squad* is gonna be there."

Shane opens one eye. "All of them?"

"I don't fucking know. Enough of them."

There is noise behind J.J., music, voices, what sounds like somebody yelling in French over a burst of laughter.

"There are some fucking hot chicks in that movie, man," J.J. continues. "Get in your car."

Shane leans his head back against the couch and says nothing.

"Hollander."

"No."

"Why not?"

Because he is two weeks out from a catastrophic hand job and one first-name slip away from a personality change, he thinks.

What he says is, "I'm tired."

"Oh my God," J.J. says. "You're always tired, *Capitaine*. It will be *fun*. Come on."

Shane rubs at the bridge of his nose.

His first instinct is still to say thanks, but no thanks. But he knows J.J., and saying no just means J.J. will call every hour for the rest of the night to inform him exactly what he is missing, with photos. Also possibly voice notes. Also possibly a live video of some actor Shane has heard of but cannot identify trying to dance on a banquette.

Besides, he does not actually have anything to do tonight except watch the end of a Boston game and quietly panic about his freshly unearthed feelings about Ilya Rozanov.

He straightens.

His freshly what?

Shane goes very still.

The apartment, already quiet, seems to sharpen around him.

On the phone, J.J. is still talking. "—seriously, get over here, François asked about you, and there's this actress, hold on, what's her name—"

"No," Shane says.

J.J. pauses. "No, you're not coming?"

"No," Shane says again, too quickly this time. "I mean—that's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?"

Shane stands up. "Nothing."

"Capitaine."

He is already moving toward the bedroom, pulse suddenly uneven for reasons he resents on principle.

No. Absolutely not.

He yanks open his dresser drawer.

"Are you coming or not?" J.J. asks.

Shane looks down at the row of folded shirts, all of them organized by color because of course they are. His hand stops on black cotton before he can think better of it.

He stares.

For a moment he doesn't understand why his chest feels tight. Then he realizes exactly which shirt he is looking at.

Shane shuts the drawer hard enough to rattle the frame.

"Hollander?" J.J. says again.

"Yes," Shane says.

"What?"

"I said yes."

J.J. whoops directly into his ear. "My man. Twenty minutes."

Shane hangs up without saying goodbye.

For a second he just stands there in the middle of his room, breathing a little too shallowly, staring at the closed dresser like it has personally offended him.

This is ridiculous. He does not have feelings. He has, at most, an unresolved reaction to an awkward incident that got out of hand.

He drags a hand down his face.

Then, because apparently tonight is dedicated to bad decisions, he changes into dark jeans and a charcoal sweater, grabs his keys, and leaves before he can talk himself out of it.

Montreal in November looks slick and expensive at night, all cold light and wet pavement. The city is full in a way that no other is, somehow denser, looser around the edges, more comfortable with itself. Shane drives with one hand on the wheel and tries not to think in complete sentences.

(It does not really work.)

By the time he parks near the restaurant, his nerves feel sanded down to something bright and raw. He can already hear noise from inside before he gets to the door, the warm swell of voices, music, glassware, laughter. He stands on the sidewalk for one extra second in the cold, looking through the front window at movement and light and people who all appear to be having a significantly easier time being alive than he is.

Then he goes in.

Djon-Djon is darker than he expects, but packed with players, kitchen staff, people he vaguely recognizes from television, people in expensive coats with camera-ready smiles. The whole place smells rich and warm and alive: fried food, rum, spice, citrus, wine. Somebody claps him on the shoulder within ten seconds of arrival. J.J. appears from nowhere, looking inappropriately pleased with himself.

"You came."

"I'm aware."

"You look hot and miserable. Great work."

"Thank you."

J.J. laughs. "Come meet people."

For the next half hour, Shane is introduced to a rotating cast of names he will not remember. An actor with a jawline that deserves its own tax bracket. A producer from Vancouver. A woman from wardrobe who seems delighted by his existence for reasons entirely opaque to him. The chef, François, flourishing a dish towel and kissing both of J.J.'s cheeks before shaking Shane's hand and insisting he eat something.

He does not eat something, and the room keeps getting louder.

That happens, he supposes, when a party tips past whatever invisible threshold separates gathering from event. People are drunker now, or on their way. The music has gone up. Somebody is pressed too close to his side while trying to get past. Somebody else laughs right into his ear. The actor with the tax-bracket jaw is telling a story Shane cannot begin to follow.

His skin starts to feel too tight. He lasts another eight minutes.

Then he slips out of the conversation with what might have been a nod and might have been an apology, moves through the crush of bodies toward the back of the restaurant, and finds an empty table in the corner, half-shadowed and mercifully unoccupied.

He sits down.

The relief is immediate and undignified.

He puts his drink on the table and exhales slowly, once, trying to reset himself. The table is still sticky from whoever had it before. There is a candle burning in a low glass holder near the wall, the flame making a warm little pulse against the dark. From here, he can still hear the party, but at a distance. It's manageable—almost.

"Please tell me you're hungry."

Shane looks up.

A woman is standing at the edge of the table with a plate in her hands, hair loose around her shoulders, expression hopeful and amused.

"The chef handed me these fritters," she says, "and they look delicious, but I can't possibly eat them all."

She sets the plate down between them and slides into the seat across from him like this is the most natural thing in the world.

She is familiar in the way famous people are familiar now: half-assembled from trailers, interviews, ads before YouTube videos. He knows exactly enough about *X Squad* to recognize one of its leads and not enough to understand why she is offering him food like they are already in the middle of a conversation.

Then she smiles at him, quick and easy, and picks one of the fritters up between her fingers.

"They smell incredible," she says.

She bites into it. Her eyes widen instantly.

"Oh my god," she says around the mouthful, lifting a hand to cover it a second too late.
"These are so good."

She swallows, laughs at herself, and points at the plate.

"You have to eat some."

Despite himself, Shane smiles.

It has been a while since anyone has spoken to him with that particular combination of confidence and total lack of agenda.

"Sorry," she says. "I'm a pig. I'm Rose, by the way."

She holds out a perfectly manicured hand across the table.

Shane shakes it. Her palm is warm. "Shane."

"I know," she says.

That startles a laugh out of him before he can stop it.

"Right," he says. "Sorry. Obviously."

"Shane Hollander," she says, like she's testing the full name for rhythm. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too." He nods at the plate. "And thank you, I guess."

"For rescuing me from the burden of too many fritters? You're welcome."

She takes another one, then tips the plate in his direction with a look that suggests she fully expects obedience. Shane, who has eaten with the kind of discipline that would probably horrify half this restaurant, picks one up.

It is still hot. He breaks it open and steam slips out, carrying salt and spice and something rich he can't place. He takes a bite.

Rose leans forward slightly. "Right?"

He chews, then nods once. "Those are really good."

"I know." She beams, absurdly pleased. "You looked like you needed to be ambushed with carbs."

"I did?"

"A little."

That should, under most circumstances, make him defensive. Instead he finds himself asking, "How can you tell?"

Rose gestures vaguely with the fritter in his direction. "You came in looking like someone had forced you here under duress."

"Close enough."

"Friend dragged you?"

"Teammate."

"Ah." She settles back against the booth. "That explains the expression. Teammates are always trying to enrich your life in ways that feel suspiciously like harassment."

Shane huffs out a quiet laugh. "Yes."

"There we go," she says, pointing at him like she's caught something. "That's the face of a man who knows exactly what I'm talking about."

He should probably say something about being a fan. That seems like the normal thing to do. But the truth is, with her sitting there in the flicker of candlelight, stealing food from a communal plate and talking to him like they are already in on the same joke, she is weirdly easy to forget as a person he's supposed to be impressed by.

Still, manners are manners.

"I'm a huge fan," he says.

Rose puts a hand dramatically to her chest. "Well. Would it surprise you to know I'm a fan of yours?"

"You like hockey?"

"I was born and raised in Michigan," she says. "Damn right I like hockey."

"Oh." He feels himself smile again. "Well. Thanks."

"You're welcome." She points at the fritters. "Eat another one, Shane Hollander."

That, somehow, is how it starts.

Later, if he were forced to explain what exactly makes the next forty minutes so easy, Shane would have trouble with it. Nothing dramatic happens. There is no lightning strike, no

cinematic sense of destiny. Rose is simply easy to talk to in a way he has not expected from anyone in a long time, maybe ever. She asks questions without making them feel like traps. She listens to the answers. She tells stories that are actually funny. She laughs with her whole face.

At some point he takes off his jacket and drapes it over the back of the booth. At some point he stops tracking the room.

They discover, by accident, that they have both spent childhood summers at lakeside cottages.

"Wait," Rose says, narrowing her eyes at him over the candle. "Like actual Canada cottage-country summers? Canoes, bug spray, wet towels, somebody's uncle trying to start a barbecue with lighter fluid?"

Shane smiles. "Pretty much."

"Oh my God." She presses a hand to the table like this is genuinely moving news. "Mine's in Michigan, obviously, but still. Same exact energy. My brother used to spend half of August trying to break his neck jumping off the dock."

Shane thinks of long stretches of lake water gone silver in evening light, of his mother shouting at him not to run on the rocks while doing exactly that herself minutes later.

It should not feel notable, how quickly the conversation folds itself into something comfortable. But it does. Shane is used to spending a fair amount of energy in new company figuring out what version of himself will be easiest to maintain. The polite one? The guarded one? The hockey one? With Rose, none of those seem particularly necessary. He doesn't know what to do with that at first, so he keeps talking anyway.

She tells him about her brother, who played hockey in college before becoming an engineer.

"That's a brutal stereotype," Shane says.

"I know. We're all embarrassed."

"And your parents?"

"Government," she says. "Both of them. Very glamorous upbringing. We had spreadsheets."

Shane laughs. "Mine too."

"No way."

"Yes way."

She points at him again, pleased. "See? This is what I'm saying. We're practically the same person."

"I don't think that's true."

"No?" She studies him for a beat, faux-serious. "Okay, fair. You definitely color code your closet or something."

He opens his mouth, then stops.

Rose's grin goes delighted and wicked. "Oh my God. You do."

"It's practical," Shane says, because he has apparently decided humiliation is a useful conversational strategy tonight.

"I knew it!"

"That isn't weird."

"Maybe only a little weird."

"It's efficient."

"It's deeply charming, Shane."

He clears his throat and reaches for another fritter he is no longer remotely pretending he doesn't want.

"Have you been to Montreal before?" he asks.

"Once," Rose says. "I was shooting a role in some super terrible FBI-versus-terrorists thing. I can't even remember what it was called."

"Under Dark."

She stares at him. "Oh my God. Shut up. You saw it?"

Shane shrugs, smiling. "I fly a lot. I watch a lot of movies."

"It was terrible."

"It was not good."

"It was *so* bad."

"You were fine in it."

Rose groans and drops her forehead briefly into one hand. "This is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me about that movie."

He smiles into his drink.

"Thankfully it was a small role," she says. "And I was only here for a week that time. In summer."

"It's a little different in the winter."

She leans in, lowering her voice like she is about to tell him a secret. "Michigan, remember? Winter can't scare me."

Something light and fluttery shifts low in his stomach. It is not fireworks but a small, surprised movement, as if some part of him has sat up and taken notice.

He feels heat climb into his face and is abruptly grateful for the dimness of the booth.

"So," he says, aiming for smooth and probably landing somewhere just north of functional, "you going to be in town for a while this time?"

Rose smiles.

It is not a smug smile, exactly. More a knowing one. Like she understands perfectly well that he is no longer asking about snow.

"For a little while," she says. "Why?"

Shane has had reporters corner him after playoff losses with less alarming directness.

He could answer in any number of normal ways. Most of his teammates would. He, unfortunately, is himself.

"I was just wondering," he says.

"Mm-hm."

"Because you said—"

"I know what I said."

He gives her a look.

Rose laughs and relents. "Yes. I'll be around for a bit."

"Okay."

"Okay," she echoes, and there is something openly amused in it now.

By the time the party finally begins to thin around the edges, Shane has lost track of how long he has been sitting there and that's maybe the strangest part.

He had come to the restaurant prepared to endure an hour of noise and social obligation and leave with a headache. Instead he is tucked into a corner booth talking about childhood summers and terrible action movies with a woman who is funny and sharp and beautiful in a way that doesn't make him tense. It just makes him want to keep listening.

Rose checks her phone and makes a face. "Wow. Okay. I should probably go before somebody from my team starts thinking I died in Montreal."

Shane glances toward the windows. The dark outside has gone thicker, later. "Right."

The word comes out with more regret than he intends.

"Well," she says, reaching into her bag, "we should probably do the modern adult thing and exchange numbers before this becomes one of those tragically missed connections people sing about."

Shane laughs softly. "Probably."

They trade phones.

He watches her type her number into his contacts with quick, efficient taps. Her nails are pale pink, neat and glossy in the candlelight. When she hands the phone back, their fingers brush.

Ridiculous that he notices. He notices anyway.

"There," she says. "Now you can text me if you ever need movie recommendations, or someone to validate your closet organization."

"I don't need validation."

"No?" She rises from the booth, collecting her coat. "You looked pretty pleased when I called it charming."

Shane stands too. "I think you imagined that."

"I definitely didn't."

They are close now in the narrow space beside the table, enough that he catches the clean, expensive scent of her perfume under the restaurant's haze of spice and wine.

Rose smiles up at him.

For one brief, disorienting second, Shane has the feeling that this might be what people mean when they talk about things clicking. Not because he is overwhelmed. The opposite, actually. Because he isn't. Because standing here with her feels easy. Nice, even.

Really nice.

"I'm glad you came tonight," she says.

He surprises himself by answering honestly. "Yeah. Me too."

Her smile warms.

Then someone across the room calls her name and the spell—or whatever this is—loosens.

Rose steps back, slipping into her coat. "Text me, Shane Hollander."

"I will."

She gives him a tiny salute and turns away, weaving back into the thinning crowd with the kind of unstudied confidence some people seem to be born with.

Shane stands there for a second after she's gone, one hand still resting on the back of the booth.

Then he looks down at his phone.

Rose Landry.

He leaves the restaurant with a little spring in his step, which is embarrassing, but true.

Outside, the cold hits him cleanly enough to wake every inch of him. He turns his collar up, exhales into the night air, and starts toward his car with his hands in his pockets and a strange, light feeling moving through him.

It has easily been the best connection he has ever made with a woman.

Possibly with anyone.

He likes Rose. He wants to get to know her better. He is excited by the idea of spending more time with her.

And she is obviously very pretty, but mostly he just loves talking to her.

She is funny, and she asks a lot of questions, but none of them make him uncomfortable. None of them feel like pressure. None of them seem designed to pull him into some version of himself he can't quite inhabit.

In the car, waiting at a red light, he laughs once under his breath.

His standards, apparently, are insane.

Still.

Shane likes a girl.

The thought settles over him warm and neat and oddly satisfying, like the final piece of something clicking into place.

By the time he gets home, he is still smiling.

Ilya has, in the past two weeks, become a deeply embarrassing person.

Not publicly! Publicly he's fine.

Publicly he is still charming and a menace and very handsome, which is frankly all anyone can reasonably ask of him. He goes to practice. He does media. He scores once against New York and gets called *electric*. He goes out with teammates, flirts with a waitress because she

flirts first and because muscle memory is a powerful thing. He lets two different people tell him he looks tired and lies to both of them.

He is, outwardly, a picture of health.

Privately, he has become the sort of man who stares at his own couch like it has personally betrayed him.

This is not ideal.

The couch is fine. Innocent, probably. It's just a couch. Expensive, low-backed, purchased because it looked modern and comfortable enough. It is not the couch's fault that Ilya now cannot look at one end of it without remembering exactly how Shane had braced a hand there, breath going rough, eyes half-shut and then suddenly very much open.

That part is unfortunate.

The more unfortunate part is that the memory does not even get to stay sexy.

No, because the second it gets anywhere near sexy, his brain helpfully supplies the rest: Shane jerking back like he has been burned. Shane getting to his feet too fast. Shane saying something idiotic about a team thing in the tone of someone escaping a fire. Shane pulling on his jeans with that awful, blank look on his face. Shane leaving.

Shane leaving in Ilya's shirt, for extra insult.

That detail, more than most of the others, keeps coming back to him with the kind of petty persistence usually reserved for some kind of dental pain. It's not even his favorite shirt. It's literally just a black T-shirt, soft from wear, maybe a little stretched at the collar. Completely ordinary. Which somehow makes it worse. Intimacy should at least have the decency to attach itself to objects with some glamour. Not a shirt that he likes to sleep in sometimes.

He had almost said something about it at the door.

Actually, that is a lie. He had almost said a lot of things.

You're wearing my shirt.

Stay.

I didn't mean anything by it.

Please don't go like this.

Instead he had said, "Hollander," like maybe the right tone could rewind thirty seconds and save his dignity.

(It had not worked.)

He says it again now, to the empty apartment, trying the memory on in a different voice.

"Hollander."

Nothing.

Yes. Excellent. Very healing.

He throws the dish towel in his hand onto the counter and opens the fridge.

There is no food in it that he actually wants. This is not unusual. He shops with the vague, aspirational optimism of a man who believes his future self may one day become interested in cooking and then punishes that man by refusing to make something before the hunger takes over. There is mustard. There are eggs. There is half a container of yogurt, a lemon with the texture of old skin, beer, pickles, and an entire shelf devoted to condiments he bought for one recipe and never used again.

He stares into the cold light for a long moment and then shuts the fridge without taking anything out.

The problem with humiliation is that it would be easier to live with if it would just stay humiliation.

If this were only embarrassing, if Shane had panicked because things got weird, because sex got a little too personal, because Ilya had made some tactical error in timing and accidentally turned a hand job into an emotional ambush, then fine. Mortifying, yes. But survivable. Ilya has survived worse things.

The trouble is that it does not feel like embarrassment.

It feels like grief, which seems excessive.

He resents it.

He goes back to the couch, as if repeated exposure might somehow strip it of meaning, and sits down hard enough to make the cushions complain. He should turn on music, or the TV, or call someone. He does none of those things. Instead he sits in the middle of his own expensive taste and stares at the dark windows.

Ilya can see his own reflection faintly in the glass, long and blurred. A gloomy Russian trapped in a luxury condo, dying of feelings. It is so pathetic it would be funny if it were happening to someone else.

He leans his head back and closes his eyes.

This, too, has become a problem.

Because in the dark, the whole thing gets less avoidable.

He had planned that night.

Actually, *that* is maybe the most humiliating part of all, even now.

Not in some grand romantic sense; Ilya is not insane. He had simply... optimized conditions. Which is not the same thing. It's just smart. Practical. Shane—Hollander should have been proud.

He'd known neither of them needed to be up early the next morning. He'd gone grocery shopping. He'd made the tuna melts because Shane likes them and because there is something soothing about feeding a man before you try to convince him to stay in your bed. He even put hockey on afterward, because Shane gets quiet and loose with a game on, and Ilya had thought maybe if he let him settle there first, all warm and pleased and a little loose-limbed, it would be easy.

Not easy, exactly. Nothing with Shane is ever easy. But possible.

He had planned the wording too.

Casual. Barely interested. A thing tossed off after sex like it means nothing either way.

You can stay, if you want.

Not: Please stay the night because I am getting dangerously attached to your stupid freckles and I think if you left right now I might feel weird about it.

And it had worked!

Shane had said yes.

Ilya feels his whole body go traitor-soft at the memory before the rest of it slams in behind. Because yes, Shane had said yes. And yes, for one shining stretch of time afterward, Ilya had been absurdly, quietly happy. He had hidden it, obviously. He is not a complete amateur. But inside he had felt something bright and ridiculous uncurl.

Then he had ruined everything with one word. *Shane*.

He presses the heels of his hands against his eyes.

The mortification of that moment remains almost artistically pure. Because it's not only that the name slips out. It is that he hears himself say it and instantly knows exactly how it sounds—too naked, too soft, too honest by half—and has just enough time to watch Shane hear it too.

And then, worst of all, Shane says his name back.

Ilya.

For a split second, relief had flooded him so fast it was almost dizzying. A stupid, helpless surge of happiness, because somewhere in his ruined little lovesick brain he had thought—what? That they had crossed some invisible threshold together? That the air had changed? That this was the beginning of something instead of the immediate end of it?

Idiot. Complete *fucking* idiot.

He laughs once, sharply, into the empty room.

This is the sort of thing that happens in Russian novels, he thinks. Men suffer one emotionally significant glance and spend the next three hundred pages wandering around in snow, making it everyone's problem.

Unfortunately, he has always privately believed himself above that kind of behavior.

Unfortunately, he may have been wrong.

Because now, sitting alone in the apartment where he had so carefully arranged one nice evening, Ilya is forced to consider a possibility so grotesque he almost rejects it on aesthetic grounds.

He had not just wanted Shane to stay the night.

He had wanted it too much.

He frowns at nothing.

No. Obviously not.

He had wanted Shane to stay because it would have been pleasant. Convenient. Good sex, good company, no commute.

That's all. (Except that if it were all, Shane leaving would not still feel like this.)

If it were only sex, or ego, or routine, Ilya would have already folded the whole incident into one of the many private boxes labeled **embarrassing but educational** and moved on with his life.

He has not moved on with his life. He has, in fact, spent two weeks being haunted by a man who left in his shirt.

Slowly, with the nasty inevitability of a bruise surfacing, the truth rises.

"Oh, fuck," Ilya says to the apartment, and the apartment, predictably, offers no useful response.

He sits up straighter.

"No," he tells the room.

But it is already too late, because once the thought arrives, everything rearranges itself around it with sickening efficiency.

Why had the night mattered so much? Why had he planned it? Why had the yes felt so good? Why had the leaving felt like someone had reached into his chest and squeezed?

Because he is in love with Shane Hollander.

Ilya stares at the opposite wall.

Well.

That is bad.

That is, in several important respects, a disaster.

He tries very hard, for almost five full seconds, to come up with another explanation.

None present themselves.

Because really, what else could explain this level of sustained psychic damage? Certainly not sex. Not rivalry. Not habit. Not even the particular drug of wanting someone who rarely gives anything away and therefore makes every small tenderness feel stolen and precious.

No, this is worse than all that.

This is love.

With boring Hollander.

With his stupid freckles and his horrible self-control and his giant competent hands and that face he makes when someone says something unsound about defensive coverage. With his refrigerator full of gross smoothies, probably, and his expression of deep moral disappointment whenever Ilya eats anything with grease. With the quiet, impossible steadiness of him. With the fact of him.

"*Blyat*," Ilya mutters.

He drops his head back against the couch and laughs again, this time softer and much less convincingly amused.

Of course. Of course this happens to him.

He falls in love exactly once in his life and it is with the most emotionally constipated man, who reacts to hearing his own first name during a mutual hand job like he has just been called to deathrow.

Wonderful. Perfect. Very fair.

He should call someone. He absolutely cannot call anyone.

What would he even say? *Hello, Sveta, terrible news, I have accidentally become a character in a drama miniseries. Hello, Marleau, I regret to inform you that I have developed a rich inner life and it is ruining everything.*

No. Better to die quietly.

He gets up and paces once through the apartment, which solves nothing. The same facts remain waiting for him when he circles back.

He is in love with Shane.

Shane panicked and ran.

Shane has not texted.

That one hurts in a fresher way than the others.

Because even now, even after the walkout, even after the silence, even after two weeks of increasingly theatrical self-pity, some stupid part of him had apparently been waiting. For a text, a joke, an excuse, something, anything casual enough to preserve their pride and significant enough to reopen the door.

Nothing has come.

Which means one of two things: either Shane is too freaked out to deal with him, or Shane simply does not want to.

Both possibilities are terrible. One is just more flattering than the other.

Ilya goes back to the kitchen and finally opens a beer.

He drinks half of it standing at the counter. The cold bitter taste gives him something simple to focus on for a second. He exhales and lets the bottle thud down gently beside the sink.

Fine.

Fine.

So. He is in love with Shane Hollander. This is humiliating and inconvenient and cannot, under any circumstances, become public knowledge while he still values his own life. But knowledge, unfortunately, does not require action. Plenty of people go around quietly in love with impossible people and continue functioning. Russian literature would have far fewer pages if this were not true.

He can manage it.

He will manage it.

What happened in October happened. Shane panicked. Ilya survived. He will survive this too. He will see Shane again eventually, because hockey is a disease and the NHL is a small town dressed up as the world. When he does, he will act normal. He will be unbothered. He will maybe die a little, but privately, with dignity.

Yes.

Good.

Excellent plan.

He takes another drink.

Then, because the universe enjoys cheap symbolism, his phone lights up on the counter.

For one impossible second his whole body goes *electric*.

He snatches it up.

Not Shane.

Just a Carmichael asking whether he's going out.

Ilya stares at the message, then laughs at himself so hard it almost becomes something uglier.

"Look at you," he says softly to no one. "Pathetic."

He types back that maybe he'll come. What else is there to do?

He is in love with Shane Hollander now. Apparently this is his life.

He may as well put on a nice shirt.

The second time Shane sees Rose, he takes her to dinner.

By then they have been texting for a few weeks, which is not a fact he examines too closely because the obvious answer—that he likes hearing from her, that he has started looking for her name on his screen with a degree of anticipation that would probably interest Hayden deeply and unfortunately—is one he prefers not to hand to anyone else.

They text about stupid things, mostly. Bad airport coffee. Her filming schedule. His travel schedule. The fact that one of the assistant coaches in Montreal says *power play* like it's a magic spell. Rose sends him a photo of a truly deranged craft-services tray with the caption **this is not food, this is a cry for help**. Shane sends back a picture of the salad he is eating in his hotel room with **speak for yourself** and she replies **you absolute hostage**.

They FaceTime twice by accident and once on purpose.

The accidental ones happen because she calls instead of texting and he answers before thinking about it. The on-purpose one happens late, both of them in different hotel rooms, Rose with wet hair and no makeup, Shane in a gray T-shirt, pretending he's not surprised by how easy it feels to sit there looking at each other while talking about nothing important.

Afterward, Hayden texts him because he had been on his way out when Shane picked up.

Hayden: are you smiling at your phone rn 🐱

Shane: No

Hayden: liar. also ask her out properly or i'll do it for you

So he does. Or close enough.

He asks if she wants dinner while they are both in Montreal again before her shoot moves back to Toronto.

Rose texts back in under a minute.

Rose: yes! but if this is a date you have to promise not to wear a quarter zip

Shane: That's very specific

Rose: iykyk

So yes. It's a date, or at least date-adjacent, and other people are going to think what they think. Hayden, when Shane mentions it, makes a sound like he has just won the lottery.

"Rose Landry?" he says. "You're taking Rose Landry to dinner?"

"I'm going to dinner with Rose."

Hayden stares at him. "That is the same sentence I just said."

Shane leaves before the conversation can deteriorate further.

Dinner itself is lovely.

That is the first problem.

Rose is wearing a cream-colored sweater that makes her eyes look darker and small gold hoops that flash when she turns her head. She smiles at him when he walks in, warm and unguarded, like she is actually happy to see him and not performing happiness as social labor, and something in his chest loosens on instinct.

They talk as easily in person as they do over text, maybe more easily. He forgoes his diet because it *is* a date. There is wine and bread and a board that Rose keeps calling "adult Lunchables" until Shane nearly chokes. She tells him a story about an actor who keeps improvising dramatic pauses into scenes where his character is supposed to be unconscious. Shane tells her about a guy in juniors who tried to play an entire road trip with two fractured fingers because he thought taping them together counted as medical care.

Rose laughs so hard she puts a hand over her mouth.

"You're cute," she says.

Shane blinks.

She smiles into her wineglass. "Have I told you how cute you are?"

"No," he says, and feels heat rise immediately into his face.

"Well, you are."

He looks down at the charcuterie board because suddenly the quality of the olives seems so very interesting.

Rose laughs softly. "See? That. Very cute."

He should probably flirt back. Most men would. *Ilya* would, with enough charm to start a small fire. Shane, unfortunately, is limited to looking at her over the rim of his glass and saying, "I don't think I'm supposed to respond to that."

"You could say thank you."

"Thank you."

"There you go." She pops a piece of cheese into her mouth. "Growth."

He laughs.

And that is the second problem.

Everything about this is good. Better than good. Rose is funny, smart, beautiful, kind. The conversation never sticks or strains. He likes her. He likes being here. He likes the warm line of candlelight on the side of her face and the way she leans in when she is listening and the fact that she keeps stealing from his plate without asking.

On paper, it should be perfect.

Instead there is a small, increasing sense that he is missing something obvious.

Rose reaches across the table at one point to take a piece of bread from his side of the board, her fingers brushing his knuckles.

It's... nice. That's all.

He notices because he has been half-waiting, all evening, for something sharper. Some rush. Some urgency. Some instinctive pull toward more.

Nothing comes, and the absence of it begins to feel very loud.

After dinner, Rose says, "Walk with me?"

So they do. Montreal is still cold enough to feel clean. Their breath ghosts in the air as they turn down a quieter street, restaurant windows glowing gold around them, wet pavement reflecting traffic lights in broken ribbons of color. Rose walks with her hands tucked into the pockets of her coat, shoulder just near enough to his that he is aware of it without thinking too hard about why.

For a while they talk about easy things.

Firm opinions on hotel thermostats and the best temperatures to set them at. Whether snow is better when it arrives all at once or in mean little installments. Rose says she misses Michigan winters in a way that sounds like she mostly misses being young in them. Shane says the cottage is nicer in summer anyway and then, because apparently his mouth is running without sufficient supervision tonight, adds, "Fall too, actually."

Rose glances sideways at him. "You talk about that cottage like it's sacred."

There's something in her tone that makes him feel like the natural progression would be inviting her, but instead he shrugs. "It's quiet there."

"Hm."

"What?"

"Nothing." She smiles.

They walk another half block before Rose says, lightly, "Can I ask you something?"

Shane immediately distrusts this. "Depends."

She huffs a laugh. "That's fair." Then, after a beat: "Do you actually like me, or do you just like how easy I am to talk to?"

He turns his head toward her. Not because it is an especially difficult question, but because it somehow feels like she's expecting it to be one.

"I like you," he says.

"I know." Rose's voice is gentle. "I like you too."

He waits.

She looks ahead, not at him. "I just don't think you like me in the way you're trying to."

Cold slides under his coat.

"That's not—" he starts, and stops.

Rose glances up. "It's okay."

He lets out a short breath. Rose slows a little, making him slow too. "Shane, you are having a very nice time with me. You text me. You call me. You make me laugh. You like talking to me."

He says nothing.

"But tonight feels a little like..." She tips her head, searching. "Like you're trying to see if you can make yourself want something."

He stops walking. Rose takes two more steps before stopping too.

The street around them stays quiet. A car moves slowly past. The headlights bounce off her hoops.

Shane says, "I *do* like you."

"I know." Rose smiles, a little apologetic. "But I also know what it feels like when a man is trying very hard not to kiss me."

Heat climbs hard into his face.

"Rose—"

"No, listen." She steps a fraction closer, not enough to crowd him. "I'm not offended. I promise. You haven't done anything wrong." Her mouth quirks. "Honestly, if anything, you've been almost aggressively respectful."

He looks away.

"I think," she says softly, "you met me and thought, finally. Here. A woman I really like. This should work."

His throat tightens.

Because yes, maybe not in those exact words, but it's near enough to make his pulse jump.

Rose watches his face and then winces a little.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm going about this the wrong way."

Shane frowns. "Going about what?"

"Shane. I really like you. But I'm getting the sense that maybe I'm not...doing it for you."

Heat climbs hard into his face. "You are."

Rose's expression goes impossibly gentle. "You like talking to me."

"Yes."

"But do you actually want to kiss me?"

He opens his mouth, but nothing useful comes out. He makes a sound halfway between a laugh and surrender.

Rose steps closer to the curb, keeping her hands in her pockets. "I know you enough by now to know you're kind. And careful. And trying. I also know you don't look at me like a man who wants me, not really."

He says nothing.

Because the worst part is that she isn't wrong.

He does want things from her. Time. Ease. Conversation. Her quick mind and her funny mouth and the relief of being around someone who doesn't ask anything jagged of him.

He just does not want—

Rose watches him go quiet and says, much more softly now, "Have you ever been with a man?"

Shane's head comes up.

This is the part where he should lie.

He has spent most of his life getting good at lying by omission. By framing. By tone. By deciding, very firmly, which truths get to count.

But Rose is looking at him with such straightforward kindness that the lie feels exhausting before he even builds it.

"Yes," he says.

The word hangs between them in the cold.

Rose nods once, like she has only confirmed what she already knew. "Okay."

He looks down at the pavement.

"Was it different?" she asks.

He laughs once under his breath, humorless and startled. "Yes."

"Better?"

The answer arrives before he can stop it, before he can discipline it into something vaguer and safer. It springs into his mind in the form of golden-brown curls damp with sweat, hazel eyes gone bright and sharp and then suddenly, disastrously soft. A laugh in the dark. Big hands on Shane's hips. A mouth at his throat.

The smell of toasted bread and melted cheese clinging stupidly to the room.

The sound of his own name in Ilya's voice.

Then the silence after.

Then Ilya saying *Hollander* like he could still pull it all back.

Shane's whole chest goes tight.

"Yeah," he says, and his voice is lower than he means it to be. "Yeah. It was better."

Rose doesn't say anything for a moment.

When he finally looks at her, her face is open and very, very gentle.

"Oh," she says.

It is somehow the kindest possible response, and also the most unbearable, because now that he said it there is no room left to misunderstand himself.

Rose tilts her head. "Was it just sex?"

He *should* say yes.

He does not.

He looks away.

That, apparently, is answer enough.

Rose exhales softly through her nose. "Okay. So maybe this isn't really about me at all."

A laugh nearly gets out of him, except there is nothing funny in the sudden sick clarity of it.

Because no, it isn't about Rose.

It has maybe never been about Rose.

It has been about finding someone lovely and easy and possible and still carrying, in the back of his mind, the shape of a person who is none of those things. It has been about trying to make himself fit somewhere cleaner, simpler, less dangerous.

And failing.

He puts a hand over his mouth.

Rose waits.

When he finally speaks, it is so quiet he almost doesn't recognize his own voice.

"I handled something badly."

Her expression changes, not in surprise, but in understanding.

"With him?"

Shane closes his eyes.

There is no point pretending she doesn't know now.

"Yes."

Rose is quiet for a beat. Then: "Do you care about him?"

The laugh that escapes him this time is brief and rough and not remotely amused.

That is answer enough too.

"Oh, honey," Rose says softly.

He actually flinches.

For a second neither of them says anything. The cold settles around them.

Rose says, "Okay. Here's my professional diagnosis."

Despite everything, he gives her a look.

She smiles, small and warm. "You are not secretly in love with me. Tragic, I know."

He huffs a breath.

"You do like me. Correctly." She nudges his sleeve lightly with the back of her fingers. "And I like you. Correctly too, I think."

He swallows. "Rose—"

"No, let me finish. I'm on a roll." Her smile fades into something steadier. "I think there's a *m-someone* you care about very much. I think whatever happened with them scared the shit out of you. And I think you came to dinner with me partly because I felt like an answer that wouldn't blow up your life."

Shane stares at the sidewalk. Every part of that sentence feels impossible. Every part of it feels, nauseatingly, accurate.

"And for the record," Rose adds, "none of that makes you a bad person."

He looks up.

She holds his gaze. "Confused, maybe. A little repressed? But not bad."

A startled laugh gets out of him then, broken around the edges.

"Thanks," he says.

"You're welcome."

They start walking again, slower this time.

After half a block, Rose says, "So. Are you going to tell me his name?"

Shane nearly trips.

She laughs. "That's a no?"

"That is absolutely a no."

"Fair enough." She tucks her hands deeper into her coat pockets. "Do I know him?"

Shane says nothing. Rose glances up at him then goes quiet for a second, watching his face with that awful focus of hers, like she can see the thought arrive before he can hide it.

"Oh," she says. "Another player?"

Shane almost chokes on his next breath, and Rose hastens to add: "You don't have to tell me who! I'm nosy, not insane. Wow. Okay. That's why this feels impossible to you."

A startled breath of laughter gets out of him. Because yes. Because impossible is one word for it. There are others, none of them better.

She grins. "There you are."

He shakes his head.

Rose studies him for a second longer, then says, "Okay. Then here's my advice."

Shane gives her a wary look. "Should I be worried?"

"Probably." Her mouth twitches. "First, stop taking women to dinner to prove a point to yourself. It's flattering in the short term, but the long game is terrible."

Despite himself, he smiles weakly at her.

"Second," she says, "whatever happened with him? You very clearly did not walk away from it feeling done."

His chest tightens.

Rose's voice softens. "And third, if you care about him this much, then maybe the problem isn't that your life would get messier. Maybe the problem is that you already know he matters."

Shane's throat works, and Rose tilts her head. "Can I ask one more rude question?"

"You were going to anyway."

"I was." She smiles. "Did you hurt him?"

He looks away again.

Rose exhales softly. "Okay."

That one word is somehow worse than judgment would have been.

"I'm not saying that to make you feel bad," she says. "I'm saying it because if you did, and you care about him, then that's your next move. Not me. Not another dinner. Not more overthinking. Him."

For a second Shane can't speak.

Rose studies him, then adds, with just enough lightness to keep him from bolting, "God, I love being right. This is terrible for you, but fantastic for my personal brand."

He laughs despite himself, rough and brief.

"You're awful."

"I know." She beams. "And extremely helpful."

They walk a few more steps in silence, the cold biting through his coat, the city all wet light and blurred headlights around them.

Then Rose says, much more casually, "So. What's the plan?"

Shane blinks at her. "The plan."

"Yes." She sounds faintly offended. "Don't tell me you don't have one. You are the most plan-shaped man I've ever met."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Rose gives him a long look. "Shane."

He exhales through his nose.

She points at him. "Exactly. So. What is the plan?"

He shoves his hands deeper into his pockets. "There is no plan."

"Bad answer."

"There really isn't."

"Okay, then let me make one for you." Her tone stays light, but she bumps her shoulder against his arm. "Don't spiral. And maybe don't date some other woman to see if that helps. It won't. You figure out what you actually want from him. Not in some giant, terrifying, forever sense. But, you know, the next honest thing."

"The next honest thing," Shane repeats.

"Yes." She glances up at him. "An apology, maybe. A conversation. A text that isn't weirdly vague and emotionally evasive. Whatever fits the damage."

His pulse gives one hard, ugly kick.

Rose sees it happen and nods once, as if that confirms something for her.

"Right," she says. "So probably an apology."

He says nothing.

Rose is merciful enough not to look triumphant. "For what it's worth, I don't think you seem like someone who's scared of him."

Shane frowns. "No?"

"No." She smiles, small and knowing. "You seem like someone who's scared of how much he matters."

For a second the only sound between them is the wet hiss of tires on the street.

Then Rose says, "Which, inconveniently, usually means you're already in pretty deep."

Shane winces.

Rose softens again. "Hey."

He looks back.

"You don't have to tell me anything else tonight. But I am on your side now, so if you're going to have a crisis about this, at least do it with better support."

That gets a real laugh out of him.

"There," she says, pleased. "See? Already helping."

By the time they get back to where her driver is waiting, Shane feels wrung out in a way that is somehow cleaner than before, as if she has reached into the mess of him and at least sorted things into piles.

Rose turns to face him fully.

"Let's be friends," she says.

Shane blinks. "What?"

"I'm serious." She points at him. "Not fake polite friends. Real friends. Text me all the time. Send me pictures of depressing hotel salads. Let me bully you about your emotional life when necessary."

He stares at her.

Rose's expression softens. "I mean it, Shane. You seem like you could use someone in your corner."

For one awful second, he thinks he might embarrass himself.

Because she is right. He could. He *really, really* could.

He clears his throat. "I'd like that."

"Good." She smiles. "Then it's settled."

Her driver gets out to open the back door. Rose ignores him for one second longer and steps in to hug Shane quickly, tightly, like this is already decided and already safe.

He hugs her back.

"Text me when you get home," she says, pulling away.

"Okay."

She slides into the car still smiling. "And Shane?"

He braces automatically. "What?"

Rose smiles, all warmth and mischief and terrible certainty. "If this is as important as I think it is, apologize first and panic later."

The door shuts.

Shane stands on the sidewalk while the car pulls away, hands in his coat pockets, breath white in the cold.

He is not cold enough. He is, in fact, having several simultaneous bodily reactions he does not appreciate.

He starts walking without deciding where.

Because once Rose said it, his mind does something treacherous and immediate: it stops trying to protect him.

It takes all the things he has kept in separate locked compartments and lays them in one line.

Ilya's body under his hands.

Ilya's laugh.

Ilya's mouth.

The impossible relief and danger of being with him.

The way Shane had looked for him without meaning to. Thought about him without permission. Wanted him in ways that had never felt clean or temporary or controllable enough to survive scrutiny.

The reason leaving had felt less like discipline and more like panic.

He stops under a streetlamp and shuts his eyes.

"Oh, fuck," he says softly to no one.

The first game after the break is in Montreal, which feels rude.

Not because Ilya dislikes Montreal. Montreal is fine. Well, he hates Montreal, but that's not the problem. No, the problem is that Montreal is where Shane keeps things. His life. His routines. His little secret real-estate arrangement for the specific purpose of having sex in private like they're in a nineteenth-century novel.

It is also, apparently, where Shane decides to ruin Ilya's evening.

The game itself is unhelpful. Too close. Too fast. Too full of accidental body contact that feels suspiciously designed by God to make Ilya insane. Shane is all over the ice in that controlled, infuriating way of his, efficient and sharp and impossible to lure into anything stupid. He scores twice. Of course he does. Ilya spends the entire second period resisting the urge to cross-check him directly into a higher state of consciousness.

They lose in overtime.

This improves nothing.

Back at the hotel, Ilya showers, changes, and opens a miniature bottle of vodka from the minibar with the solemnity of someone preparing to make poor choices. He has almost talked himself into ordering fries and watching bad television when his phone lights up.

Jane.

Just that. His name on the screen.

For one disgraceful second, Ilya's entire body goes bright and stupid.

He stares.

The text is painfully simple.

Jane: Are you around tonight?

Ilya sits very still on the edge of the bed, phone in one hand, tiny bottle of vodka in the other.

Ah. So this is how it happens.

Not by gradual fading-out, not by silence, not even by cold professionalism and the long humiliating death of pretending not to care. No. Apparently Shane Hollander has decided on direct communication, which means one of two things: either he is finally so eaten alive by guilt that he wants to apologize, or he has reached some point in his increasingly plausible relationship with Rose Landry where tidying up loose ends has become morally urgent.

Neither option is good for Ilya's health.

He puts the vodka down.

The smart thing would be not to answer.

The smart thing would also have been, at several earlier points in his life, not to sleep with Shane Hollander repeatedly, not to let himself start looking forward to stupid hotel rendezvous and secret arrangements, and not to fall in love with him.

Smart, sadly, has never been the governing principle here.

Ilya types back: **maybe. why?**

Three dots appear almost immediately.

Disappear.

Reappear.

Shane is, naturally, bad at texting. Even his indecision is tightly wound.

Jane: Can you come by?

Ilya laughs once, softly and without humor, to the empty room.

Can he come by? Of course. What a perfectly normal question asked by perfectly normal men who absolutely have not rearranged each other's internal organs over the last several years.

He should say no.

He types: **busy**

Then stares at it.

Deletes it.

Ilya: where?

The reply comes fast enough to feel almost eager, which is probably projection and certainly dangerous.

Jane: The building. I'll send you the front door code.

Ilya closes his eyes.

Well, that's new.

Not the building itself. The building has been theirs, in its way, for a while now—neutral ground, private, bought and maintained by Shane with the sort of logistical precision that would be unbearably romantic if it belonged to literally anyone else.

No. What is new is *use the front*.

No sneaking in through the back. No texting from downstairs like a teenager outside a parented house. No waiting to be admitted like contraband.

The front door code.

It is such a small thing, and it slams into him with terrifying force.

A second text appears.

Jane: 1842

Ilya stares at the code until the screen dims in his hand.

This is, he thinks, exactly how condemned men must have felt upon being informed that the governor had approved one final good meal.

He types almost back: **you are weird tonight**

Here's the thing: Ilya could still refuse. This remains technically true. In practice, Shane Hollander has only ever needed to ask once.

He stands up.

"Pathetic," he informs himself in the mirror while pulling on a clean black sweater. "No self-respect. Zero. None."

The man in the mirror looks handsome and unconvinced.

He takes a car.

The city is all wet pavement and reflected light, early January cold sharpening every edge of it. Montreal after a game night always feels a little overexcited, as if the whole place is still vibrating from the arena. Ilya sits in the back seat and tries not to think in complete sentences. It does not work. His thoughts keep circling the same handful of intolerable facts.

Shane texted first. Shane asked him over. Shane gave him the code. Shane is dating Rose Landry?

Maybe not officially. Maybe not in public, not cleanly, not by the standards of people who like labels and certainty. But enough. Enough that people talk. Enough that their names have appeared together in enough places that Ilya has had to perform not caring with the concentration of a surgeon.

Rose is beautiful, and smart, and easy to talk to even in the two interviews Ilya has seen her give. Which means, naturally, that she is exactly the sort of woman Shane should want. The sort of woman people like Shane eventually choose when they are done collecting mistakes in secret.

Maybe she knows about Ilya. Maybe she does not. Maybe Shane has done the decent thing and told her there had once been some complicated situation with a someone and that he needs to shut the door properly before moving on.

Maybe this is that.

The car stops at a light. Ilya looks out at a couple huddled under one umbrella, laughing at something private.

Disgusting.

When the driver pulls up outside the building, Ilya tips him and gets out into a rush of cold so sharp it feels medicinal. He stands on the sidewalk for one second longer than necessary, looking up at the familiar windows.

He has been here enough times that the building itself carries a charge now, but he's never been in the lobby.

Ilya lets himself in.

The code works on the first try, which is offensive. Of course it does. The lobby is warm and quiet and polished enough to suggest nobody in it has ever once made a messy decision. Ilya catches his own reflection in the elevator doors as he waits: dark clothes, hair still damp at the temples from the shower, expression hovering somewhere between murder and surrender.

He looks, unfortunately, like a man going willingly to his own destruction.

The elevator ride is too short.

By the time he reaches the door, his pulse has gone annoyingly uneven. He knocks once because he refuses to seem overeager, even in private, even now.

The door opens almost immediately.

And there is Shane.

For a second, Ilya registers him only in pieces.

Bare feet. Dark jeans. The line of his shoulders. Mouth set too seriously. Eyes fixed on Ilya with an intensity that is either desire or disaster. A black cotton t-shirt, soft with wear, collar slightly stretched.

Of course Shane Hollander opens the door to this strange, terrible evening wearing one of Ilya's own ghosts.

For one hideous second Ilya forgets how to speak.

Shane notices him noticing. His hand tightens once around the edge of the door.

"I still have it," he says, which is perhaps the least helpful possible explanation.

"Yes," Ilya says. "I see that."

Excellent. Good. Very smooth.

Something flickers across Shane's face—embarrassment, maybe, or just the knowledge that this is not exactly subtle behavior. He steps back to let Ilya in.

The apartment feels different.

It is still the same clean investment space, all sleek and expensive minimalism and windows showing off the city. But there are small changes. Lamps on instead of the overheads. Food on the table by the kitchen—actual food, plated, warm, clearly arranged to be eaten by two people who are not in a hurry.

Shane has set the table. Nothing crazy, Shane is too practical to become a candlelit man overnight. But there are plates. Napkins. Water glasses. Actual effort.

On one plate sits a piece of salmon with brown rice and something green and joyless beside it, which is so aggressively Shane Hollander that Ilya almost laughs.

The other plate is carbonara. Real carbonara too, glossy and rich and indecently beautiful under a drift of black pepper, the sort of dish no one orders accidentally for another person unless he has been paying attention.

Ilya takes off his coat slowly.

"You made me a separate meal," he says.

Shane closes the door and takes the coat from him before Ilya can decide whether to be offended by that. "I ordered dinner."

"Yes," Ilya says. "And apparently had mine selected by a man trying to seduce me or apologize to me or possibly both."

Shane hangs up the coat with maddening efficiency. "Do you want a Diet Coke?"

Ilya looks at him.

This, more than anything so far, makes the whole thing feel unreal.

"You invited me over after a game," he says carefully, "to this apartment, while wearing my shirt, and now you are offering me a Diet Coke and a custom pasta situation."

Shane's mouth presses thin. "Do you want one or not?"

Ilya has half a mind to say that what he needs is vodka, or perhaps immediate unconsciousness. Instead he hears himself say, "Obviously."

Shane sets the can in front of him on the counter, cold and silver and beaded with condensation. Such a tiny, stupidly thoughtful thing. Such a perfect little act of domestic violence. Shane doesn't sit immediately. He stands across from him with a glass of water in one hand, looking as if he has rehearsed calm and found it inadequate.

This should, probably, be more reassuring.

Instead it makes Ilya feel like prey.

"So," he says, because somebody has to do something. "Either you've developed a surprising interest in hospitality, or something is wrong."

Shane looks down at his water for one second, then back up.

"I owe you an apology."

There it is.

The room seems to go a little hollow around the sentence.

Ilya had expected this. Or some version of it. He had, in fact, been narrating the evening toward it since the first text. And yet hearing it out loud still lands with the clean, private force of injury.

He leans one hip against the counter and smiles because the alternatives are uglier.

"For October?"

Shane—no, *Hollander* nods.

Years, reduced to one month. One night. One stupid domestic disaster and all the silence after it.

Ilya takes a sip of Coke because his hand is not as steady as he would prefer.

"All right," he says. "Go ahead."

Hollander sets down his glass.

"I shouldn't have left like that."

The directness of it is disorienting. Hollander is honest by temperament, yes, but rarely in this particular way.

Ilya says nothing.

He keeps going. "It was unfair. You didn't do anything wrong, and I handled it badly."

Ilya studies Shane's face.

He looks serious. A little tense. More than a little, actually. There is a line between his brows that wasn't there when he opened the door. His free hand is braced against the back of a chair hard enough that the knuckles have gone pale.

This, at least, appears genuine.

"How badly?" Ilya asks, because if he does not joke he may do something much more humiliating.

Hollander blinks. "What?"

"On a scale," Ilya says, "from mildly rude to absolute emotional terrorism."

"Asshole." To his credit, Shane almost smiles. "Closer to the second one."

"Hm." Ilya taps one finger against the Diet Coke can. "Good. I appreciate self-awareness."

Some fraction of tension shifts in Hollander's shoulders.

"I'm serious, Rozanov."

The word lay flat between them.

Ilya feels it, that tiny old familiar distance, surname to surname, safe ground, hockey ground, the place where this can still be contained.

Then Hollander's expression changes.

Something in him tightens, then gives.

"Ilya," he corrects, quietly.

The sound of his first name in Hollander's mouth should not still do this much damage. It is, frankly, unsporting.

"I know," Ilya says lightly. "That's what's making this creepy."

Hollander looks at him for a long moment.

"I'm serious," he says again. "Ilya."

The second time is worse.

Ilya has called him Hollander so long it has become part of the architecture of them, a wall, a game, a shield. Even at his softest, his stupidest, his most accidentally honest, he still cannot quite drag Shane into the open air of a first name now. Not with this much blood in the water.

So of course Hollander chooses tonight to cross the line first.

"What happened?" Ilya asks.

It is not the question he meant to ask. The one he meant to ask was *why now?* Or maybe *is this your idea of ending things with dignity?* Or, if he were braver and much stupider, *is this because you're trying to get rid of me before you become someone else's in public?*

Hollander looks away.

For one brief hopeful second, Ilya thinks he will not answer.

Then Shane says, "I didn't know how to deal with it."

The hope dies immediately. Or rather, rearranges itself into something worse.

"With what?" Ilya asks.

Hollander's jaw tightens.

"With..." He stops.

Ilya waits. He has become very good at waiting for Hollander to force words through impossible terrain.

Hollander drags a hand over the back of his neck. "With what it meant."

Ah. There. Yes. Perfect. A knife, delicately inserted.

Because that could mean anything. The sex. The first-name slip. The intimacy. The risk. The possibility. It could mean *you matter too much* or *this got too real* or *I was afraid*.

Ilya, being an optimist in the Russian style, immediately assumes the version most likely to ruin him.

He looks down at the counter and laughs once under his breath.

Shane's eyes come back to him, sharp now. "I'm trying."

"I can see that."

And he can. That is the problem. Shane is trying. The whole room smells of effort and intent. The food, the table, the front door code, the apology itself. Everything arranged with the kind of care that feels less like lust and more like ceremony.

Hollander pushes off the chair and comes a step closer.

"I know I handled it badly," he says. "I know I made it worse by not saying anything." A beat. "I'm sorry."

There it is again. Clean. Undressed.

Ilya has wanted this apology for months.

That, too, is part of what makes it terrible.

Because now that it exists, now that Hollander has given it to him in a voice low and rough and unmistakably sincere, Ilya has no protection left but interpretation. And interpretation, unfortunately, is where he does his finest work.

This, he thinks, is how men apologize when they are trying to leave behind something beautiful instead of cruel.

He should leave now.

He knows this with the calm certainty of a man watching his own house burn down from the sidewalk. It's his and it's going to be gone forever. Accept the apology. Make a joke. Thank Hollander for the Diet Coke and the carbonara and the emotional terrorism. Preserve some dignity. Get out before whatever comes next can kill what remains.

Instead he says, "You set the table."

Hollander blinks. "Yes."

"You ordered carbonara."

"Yes."

"You are wearing my shirt."

A flush rises along Hollander's cheekbones, faint but visible. "Yes."

Ilya folds his arms. "You see why I find all this mildly alarming."

To Hollander's credit, he does not deny it.

"I wanted tonight to be good," he says.

Oh. *Oh*. Right. This is what this is.

One good night. One beautiful, careful offering in place of a future. A mercy. A concession. The sort of thing a kind man might do if he knew he was about to break your heart and wanted, at minimum, to be remembered as decent.

A hot, stupid wave of grief rises so suddenly Ilya almost laughs at it.

"Well," he says, because if he doesn't speak now he may say something honest, but his voice is rough, "that depends what happens next, doesn't it?"

Something flashes in Hollander's expression then—confusion, maybe, but also hunger. Relief. Something bright and immediate enough that Ilya almost misses it because he is busy dying.

"I wanted to see you," Hollander says.

That should not be as bad as it is.

Ilya stares at him.

Because yes, obviously. That is why he texted. That is why Ilya is here. And yet the way Hollander says it—plain, almost stubborn, as if it matters that Ilya hear the wanting in it—makes something low and dangerous uncurl in Ilya's chest.

He should ask what he means.

He should ask about Rose. About why now. About what happens after tonight.

Instead he thinks, with a kind of cold doomed clarity: *If this is the last time, then fine. Let it be the kind of last time that haunts him.*

He steps forward first.

Hollander's eyes widen just slightly.

Then Ilya kisses him.

It is not gentle. Ilya is not built for gentleness under these conditions. It is part surrender, part fury, part self-destruction. He gets a fist in the front of the black T-shirt and drags Hollander into him like he is starting a fight, or ending one.

For one sharp second, Hollander goes still with surprise.

Then he makes a low sound in the back of his throat and kisses Ilya back hard enough to blur the room.

This, then, is how it happens.

Not neatly. Not wisely. With both of them still half-standing in the glow of the kitchen lights, dinner cooling on the table behind them, apology still hanging in the air like something fragile and unfinished.

Hollander's hands land on his waist, then his back, then one rises into his hair as if he can't decide where to hold him and so must try everywhere at once.

Ilya kisses him harder out of pure injured greed.

He has no right to greed. He knows that. Hollander is probably with Rose, or nearly with Rose, or on his way toward some clean public life that has no room in it for this. Tonight is a kindness. An exception. A folded flag.

So Ilya takes it with both hands.

When they finally break apart, it is only far enough for breath.

"Hollander," he says, still unable to do it, still unable to drag Shane into the same raw open space Shane has already stepped into with him.

Hollander's forehead knocks once against his.

"Ilya," he says, like a correction and a plea all at once.

That, more than anything, is what nearly does it.

Ilya laughs softly, the sound wrecked around the edges. "You are making this very difficult."

"I know."

"No," Ilya says. "I don't think you do."

Hollander draws back just enough to look at him properly. "Then tell me."

Terrible idea.

Unacceptable.

So naturally Ilya kisses him again.

The second time starts slower, the kind of kiss that should perhaps belong to people with futures. Then Ilya feels Hollander soften under his hand for one stupid, deadly second, and whatever remains of his good judgment disappears entirely.

His mouth moves down to Hollander's jaw, his throat. Hollander's head tips back with the smallest catch of breath, and the sound goes straight through Ilya like a blade.

There it is.

That is what he wants.

Not just to have him. To undo him. To make him feel good enough that the body remembers even if he refuses to. To leave some mark deeper than bruises, something that lingers under the skin. If Shane is going to leave, let him leave carrying this.

"Food'll get cold," Hollander says, voice rough now, and absurdly, unbelievably, still trying to behave like a person with an intact frontal lobe.

Ilya laughs against his throat.

"Later," he says.

And maybe that is the moment it changes, because there, with Hollander breathing hard under his mouth and his own hand spread wide over the black cotton of his shirt, the name in Ilya's head finally gives way.

Shane.

Of course it is Shane now.

Shane makes a broken sound when Ilya bites lightly at the place where neck becomes shoulder, and that is that. Whatever fragile pretense of restraint had still been standing folds in on itself at once.

Ilya walks him backward.

Shane goes.

That is almost as intoxicating as the rest of it. That Shane lets himself be moved, lets himself be directed, lets Ilya crowd him all the way back until the edge of the dining table presses into the backs of Shane's thighs and he stops there with both hands braced on Ilya like he is trying very hard not to look as wrecked as he already does.

"You planned all this," Ilya murmurs, mouth brushing the corner of Shane's jaw. "Very sinister."

Shane's hand tightens in his hair. "Ilya—"

"No, don't worry." He kisses him again, slower now just to feel the shiver it gets him. "I'm deeply charmed."

Shane actually laughs, once, helpless and low, and the sound of it nearly sends Ilya to his knees on the spot.

Instead he gets his hands under the hem of the t-shirt—*his* t-shirt, still—and drags it up and off in one impatient motion.

Shane lets him.

The sight of him half-undone in the warm apartment light, broad shoulders and flushed skin and that controlled face gone visibly strained around the edges, hits with enough force that Ilya has to stop for a second just to take him in.

Shane notices.

"What?" he asks, already defensive from sheer reflex.

Ilya slides his hands over his ribs, down his sides, savoring the heat of him. "Nothing."

"That doesn't sound like nothing."

"It is just," Ilya says, almost kindly, "very unfair that you look like this while apologizing."

Shane's mouth twitches despite himself. "You kissed me first."

"Yes." Ilya leans in and says it right into his mouth. "Excellent decision on my part."

Then he kisses him again because the alternative is thinking, and thinking is what ruined October.

After that, movement takes over.

Shirts on the floor. The edge of the table. Shane's hands everywhere now, less careful, more openly needy. Ilya taking what he wants because he can, because Shane is here and warm and answering him like he means it. Because this is, apparently, his last chance to make Shane come apart in his hands and he intends to do it thoroughly.

By the time they make it to the bedroom, Shane is breathing like someone who has lost the argument with himself and knows it.

Good.

Ilya wants that too.

The room is dimmer than the kitchen, softer at the edges. The bed is neatly made because of course it is. Shane stops only long enough to look at Ilya like he might say something, something real, something dangerous, and Ilya cannot allow that. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

So he puts both hands on Shane's chest and pushes him back onto the bed.

Shane goes, eyes still on him.

There is something about that, about Shane letting him take the lead without resistance, without games, that goes straight to the worst, most hopeless part of Ilya. It feels like trust. It feels like mercy. It feels, disastrously, like being wanted in a way that extends beyond hunger.

He cannot afford to think that.

So he doesn't.

He climbs over Shane and kisses him until the room narrows to heat and breath and the increasingly ragged sounds Shane keeps failing to hold back. Every time Shane's control slips, even a little, Ilya feels the victory of it low in his bones.

Yes, he thinks wildly. This. Give me this.

He wants Shane flushed and shaking and open. Wants to be the one who puts that look on his face. Wants, with a kind of ugly, aching tenderness, to make him feel so good he cannot possibly reduce this later into a mistake he once made in Montreal.

Shane's hands slide over him, down his back, then settle hard at his waist as if he cannot stop himself from holding on.

"Ilya," he says, and now it sounds different. Not just his name. A request. A warning. A surrender.

Ilya kisses him slower for a minute after that, because he can. Because Shane lets him. Because every second they drag this out is another second Shane is still here, still under him, still choosing this.

Then he shifts lower.

Shane goes tense beneath him immediately, already understanding enough to make a low sound in the back of his throat.

"Ilya—"

"Yes," Ilya murmurs against the hot line of his stomach. "Be quiet."

Shane actually laughs once at that, breathless and disbelieving, but his hand is already in Ilya's hair, tight and wanting. Ilya mouths lower, taking his time with it, kissing and biting lightly at the inside of Shane's thigh just to feel him twitch.

He wants him impatient.

Wants him needy.

Wants him stripped down to want so completely that there will be no room left for doubt.

When he finally puts his mouth on him, Shane inhales so sharply it almost sounds pained.

There.

Ilya nearly closes his eyes at the force of it.

He goes slow on purpose. Slow enough to make Shane feel everything. The heat, the wet slide of his mouth, the deliberate drag of tongue and lips and suction, all of it measured to draw reaction instead of racing toward an end. His hand strokes where his mouth doesn't reach, keeping the pace steady, controlled, maddening.

Above him, Shane is trying to hold still and failing.

That is one of the things Ilya likes best about him in bed, actually—that all that careful competence, all that discipline, can only survive pleasure for so long before it starts to fracture. Shane's control never shatters all at once. It comes apart in visible lines: the way his breathing changes first, then the tension in his thighs, then the hand in Ilya's hair tightening by degrees until he is one minute away from losing the ability to pretend this is anything but overwhelming.

Ilya works him closer and then eases off.

Shane makes a sound of half frustration, half disbelief.

"Cruel," he says.

Ilya smiles without lifting his head. "Yes."

He uses his fingers then, careful and slow, his free hand guiding and opening, making Shane take it one inch at a time while his mouth keeps him hard and wanting and distracted. It is almost mean, how well it works. Shane's hips lift helplessly off the bed. His hand slides from Ilya's hair to his shoulder, then back again, as if he can't decide whether to drag him higher or hold him exactly where he is.

"Fuck," Shane says, low and wrecked.

Ilya hums around him just to make him feel it.

He wants this exact thing: Shane flushed and open and trying so hard not to beg. The sound of his breathing blown apart. The involuntary flex of his stomach every time Ilya goes a little deeper, strokes a little slower, presses in with another slick careful finger and feels Shane's whole body react.

This is not about getting it over with, or even really about sex anymore. It's about memory. Leaving something behind.

About making Shane feel so good that whatever he does after tonight, whoever he goes home to, however he eventually explains this to himself, his body will still remember being taken apart by Ilya's hands and mouth and patience.

He works him steadily higher, then backs off again.

Shane swears and reaches for him blindly, fingers catching in his hair. "*Ilya*."

It's not a complaint. Not even really a protest.

Ilya lifts his head just enough to look at him.

Shane is beautiful like this, wrecked already, mouth parted, eyes dark and unfocused, every line of him strained toward more. There is frustration there, yes, but under it something hotter and much worse: trust. He is letting Ilya do this. Letting him set the pace, hold him under it, decide when enough will be enough.

That nearly undoes Ilya all by itself.

He slides his fingers deeper, finds his sweet, sweet spot, watches the way Shane's body opens for him, and sucks him down again at the same time.

Shane jolts.

"Jesus Christ," he says, voice gone completely.

Ilya almost laughs.

Instead he keeps going.

Every movement deliberate. Every reaction studied and stored away. He learns Shane again this way: what makes him gasp, what makes him tense, what makes his hand go hard and helpless in Ilya's hair. He edges him until Shane is shaking with it, until his thighs are tense and his breathing comes broken and thin, until even the smallest change in pressure tears helpless sounds from him.

And still Ilya doesn't let him go over. He wants more.

Wants Shane opened properly, wants him desperate enough that when Ilya finally gives him what he wants there will be no surviving it cleanly.

At one point Shane reaches down, gets a hand under Ilya's jaw, and tries to pull him up.

"Come here," he says.

Ilya lets himself be dragged up just long enough to kiss him.

Shane kisses him like a man starving now, all the restraint gone out of it. His hands are everywhere. They're at Ilya's neck, his back, his hips, hauling him closer as if he can't stand

the distance even measured in inches. When Ilya settles between his legs again, Shane follows instinctively, body arching into his, mouth open against his throat.

God, he's beautiful, Ilya thinks, with vicious fondness.

Then he pushes him back down into the bed and goes to work in earnest.

By the time he finally lines himself up, Shane is flushed all the way down his chest, visibly shaking, every careful layer of composure worn thin. But he is still there in it with Ilya, still reaching, still kissing him whenever he can, still using those big capable hands to pull Ilya in harder, closer, deeper, like he can't bear even the smallest distance between them now.

Ilya loves him so much in that moment he could bite through his own tongue.

So he kisses Shane instead and pushes in slow.

The first sound Shane makes is enough to send a pulse of heat straight through Ilya's whole body. It's low and broken and helplessly honest, dragged out of him by stretch and relief and the simple fact of finally getting what he has been held just short of for too long.

Ilya stops for a second just to feel him.

To feel the way Shane opens for him and tenses around him and then, little by little, lets him in all the way. To watch the exact moment Shane's eyes fall shut, the moment his mouth goes soft with it.

"Shane," Ilya says before he can stop himself.

The effect is immediate.

Shane's whole body goes taut under him, eyes opening wide for one brief exposed second before closing again.

There.

That.

Ilya almost breaks from the force of it.

So it really is that simple, apparently. One first name, one crack in the old architecture, and suddenly the man under him is not Hollander anymore, not the careful defenseman, not the rival, not the problem to solve. Just Shane. Shane, who tastes like apology and is looking at Ilya now as if looking is dangerous and doing it anyway.

It should terrify him more than it does.

No—that is a lie. It terrifies him exactly enough. He just does not stop.

He starts moving slowly, because after all of that he can't do anything else at first. Slow enough to make them both feel every inch of it. Slow enough that Shane's hands tighten and

his breath catches and his hips start trying, involuntarily, to meet him. Slow enough that the room narrows to heat and friction and the increasingly wrecked sounds Shane makes when Ilya brushes exactly where he wants him.

Shane kisses back like he means to devour. Pulls Ilya down over him whenever he can reach. Moves with him, chases the next thrust, the next one, already too far gone to hide how much he wants it. At one point he gets a hand between them just to touch Ilya, just to feel him, and the need in the gesture nearly strips Ilya down to bone.

"Ilya," Shane says again, lower now, rough and half-lost. "Don't—"

Which is funny, because what follows is not a request to stop but the opposite. Don't go slow, maybe. Don't tease. Don't make this unbearable.

Ilya kisses him through the rest of it. Gives him exactly enough mercy to keep him wrecked. He keeps one hand on Shane because he wants all of him lit up at once, wants there to be nowhere in this moment not marked by Ilya's touch.

And that is the real undoing, maybe. That Shane lets him have this. Lets him set the pace, drag the pleasure out, make him shake for it. Lets Ilya watch him come apart piece by piece. But also gives back, takes back, insists on touching him, kissing him, pulling him closer like this is happening to both of them, not just one.

Ilya has never been less protected in his life.

He edges Shane one last time by accident or cruelty or grief. He slows just enough at the brink to make him open his eyes and look at him with something so raw and dazed and pleading in it that Ilya's heart feels like it tears.

"Please," Shane says, and that is all.

Ilya takes him over hard after that, kissing the sound of it out of his mouth, and Shane comes apart beneath him with a low wrecked cry, one hand clamped bruising-hard on Ilya's hip, the other dragging him down as close as possible. The sight of it, Shane flushed and open and undone by Ilya's mouth and hands and body, by his own name in Ilya's voice, is almost enough to finish him on the spot.

But he holds on for another few thrusts because he wants Shane drowning in it, wants the aftermath to last, wants him oversensitive and still taking pleasure like a wound.

Then it takes Ilya too.

He goes with his face buried against Shane's throat, his own breath breaking apart around a sound that feels ripped out of somewhere much less survivable than sex.

Afterward Shane folds around the aftermath of it with a kind of stunned, breathless stillness that is almost harder to bear than the sounds he made getting there. Ilya stays over him for a second, braced on shaking arms, and watches the pulse beat wild at Shane's throat.

He should say something filthy and light and familiar and safe.

Instead he brushes the hair back from Shane's forehead with a hand that is much too gentle and immediately hates himself for it.

Shane catches his wrist before he can pull away.

For one suspended moment they just look at each other.

This is where the danger lives, Ilya thinks.

He kisses Shane again to break it.

Softer this time. Slower. Ruined around the edges.

When he finally rolls onto his back, the room feels both too warm and much too exposed. His own breathing sounds loud in his ears. Beside him, Shane turns toward him almost at once, like he has not yet remembered how to stop reaching.

One hand settles on Ilya's stomach, then drifts slowly higher and back down again, absent and warm and so thoughtlessly intimate that it makes something deep in Ilya flinch. It's too much.

Ilya has survived many things. Tender aftermath is not traditionally among them.

He shifts, meaning perhaps to sit up, or find his clothes, or run dramatically into the night before he says something unforgivable.

Shane's hand settles more firmly on his hip.

"Stay," he says.

Ilya closes his eyes.

Of course Shane wants him to stay. Of course he wants the whole evening completed properly, every soft edge attended to, every break in the night smoothed over until it can pass for something whole. Of course he is kind enough to make this hurt as much as possible.

He keeps his face turned into the pillow, breathing carefully through the sudden tightness in his chest.

Then Shane adds, after a beat, voice rough and lower than before, "Don't go yet. The food's still out there."

Ilya opens his eyes and turns his head.

Shane is looking at him with sleep-heavy eyes and flushed skin and hair gone messy against the pillow, one hand still warm on Ilya's hip. Then he smiles—small, soft, almost shy in the dim light.

It blinds Ilya, or maybe stabs straight through.

Because this, too, is different. This easy, unguarded little smile like there is nowhere else Shane would rather be. Like Ilya is not an aftermath to be managed but someone still wanted once the wanting has already been answered.

Before Ilya can think what to do with that, Shane leans in and kisses him, mouth warm and slow against his, as if this is the most natural thing in the world. As if they have all the time there is.

Ilya lets it happen because resisting would require a kind of strength he does not currently possess.

When Shane draws back, his thumb brushes once, absent and careful, over Ilya's side.

"You'll stay, yeah?"

"Okay," he says.

It comes out softer than he means it to.

Beside him, Shane's hand slides once over the back of his shoulder, then settles there again, steady and thoughtless as a promise.

And Ilya stays.

Because he is weak, weak, *weak* where Shane is concerned. Because the bed is warm and Shane's body is warmer and whatever sentence is coming will come whether he leaves now or an hour from now or after cold pasta at midnight. Because if this is the last good night before the execution, apparently he is enough of a cliché to take every minute of it he can get.

This kindness is worse.

If Shane were cruel, Ilya could survive it. Cruelty has edges. You can brace against it. Bleed neatly. Make a joke and move on.

This careful, impossible tenderness offers no such defense.

Shane is trying to make tonight good.

And Ilya, idiot, fool, tragic Russian peasant in a very expensive bed, knows exactly what kind of men do that.

The kind who are about to leave.

Chapter End Notes

ahhh!!! if you made it this far, thank you!!! i hope you enjoyed it!! things are to pick up i promise, and ilya will absolutely think he has gone insane. i hope the tonal shift between

haha im in a romcom vs tragedy came across!! let me know what you think :)

see you all in the next one 

Chapter 2: a very good sign

Chapter Notes

this took unfortunately longer than i anticipated to come out (curse u grad school), but i'm hoping to get the next update out by the weekend! I also wanted to say thank you so much to all of you for the genuinely heartwarming comments. it means the world to me, and makes sharing these little musings and silly fics and ideas so worth it ❤️

i promise i'll get to replying to everyone soon!

double also, i had to google "word for players that defend other players in hockey games" so take anything hockey with a grain of salt fr

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

Shane does not, *absolutely not*, Google things like **flirting over text examples**.

This is partly because Shane does not generally think of himself as a flirt, and partly because the internet is full of people who think the path to another human being's heart is either manipulative mind games or prolonged eye contact. He knows this because he has spent the last nine minutes discovering it firsthand.

Across from him on the kitchen island sits his laptop, open to an article with a title so humiliating he exits out of it before fully processing the tab.

His recent search history *would* read, in order (were he not currently browsing incognito):

- flirting naturally
- signs someone likes you back
- how often do you text someone you like
- what counts as flirting
- ~~difference between like and love~~
- ~~can people tell when you're in love~~
- casual text ideas
- how to be more interesting

Beside it is his phone, where Rose has just texted him:

Rose: okayyyyyy how's operation get your man

Rose: wait no that sounded creepy

Rose: anyway did you text him

Shane looks at the message.

Then he types:

Shane: Not yet

The typing bubble appears immediately.

Rose: why

Rose: no actually don't answer that, i know why

Rose: just text him something normal

Shane glances at the clock on the microwave even though nobody is here to accuse him of anything. It is 8:11 a.m. He got back from his run twenty minutes ago. He has already stretched, showered, made breakfast, and answered one email. He has not texted Ilya.

It is *not* the same thing as avoidance. He's just thinking about the right timing.

Shane: Define normal?

Rose's answer comes back so fast it almost feels prewritten.

Rose: anything that is

Rose: not hockey

Rose: not sex

Rose: not apology 2: apology harder

Rose: literally just talk to him

Shane locks his phone and puts it facedown on the counter, because she is not wrong and it's annoying.

The problem is not that he does not want to text Ilya. The problem is that now that he has decided to do this properly, every possible opening feels loaded. *How are you* sounds fake. *Good morning* is deranged. *Thinking of you* would have Ilya calling 911.

He had thought, briefly, that the internet might help. (It has not.)

He has learned that strangers online use the phrase *be yourself* with suspicious confidence. He has learned that "playful teasing" is apparently meant to feel natural. He has learned that many men giving dating advice online should probably be barred from speaking to other human beings.

He has also, against his will, made a spreadsheet.

This is not as incriminating as it sounds.

It is just an Excel file.

A private one.

A highly organized one.

The file is tucked inside a folder with game clips and travel schedules and titled Offseason **Reference**, which is bland enough to be defensible if anyone ever sees it, which no one ever will, because Shane is not an idiot.

He opens it now.

There are four tabs.

Likes/Dislikes

Maybe Do

Definitely Do

Absolutely Not

Shane stares at the screen for a second with the detached disbelief of a man who has somehow found himself halfway through building a small incriminating database and would still like to argue this is normal.

The first tab is the most filled out.

Under **Likes**:

- Diet Coke
- dogs
- postgame fries
- ***Russian*** vodka
- winter in theory

There's a note beside that last one which reads:

- claims Russians don't get cold / **false**

Shane stares at it, then adds:

- gets cold easily and refuses to admit it
- hands and lips get chapped in the cold

Below that are other notes, more specific, less easy to explain if read aloud by a prosecutor:

- likes being thought about more than he pretends

- responds better to specific questions than vague ones
- gets quieter when actually upset
- jokes more when cornered

He scrolls lower.

Under a category he had, for some reason, labeled **After**, there are only two entries.

- likes to stay close for a while
- gets cuddly after sex

Shane goes completely still. He reads the line back once, feels heat climb hard into his face, and immediately looks over his shoulder even though he lives alone and no one is here.

Then, because apparently this is where his life is now, he password-protects the file. That seems prudent.

His phone buzzes again.

Rose: did you die

Rose: or are you overthinking a text still??

Shane locks the laptop.

There is, in fairness, a reason Rose is allowed to bully him about this. She is the only person on earth who knows enough to be useful and is far enough outside of it to stay sane. Since dinner, since that walk, since the impossible clarity she had handed him in the cold and then refused to let him make dramatic, she has appointed herself his personal crisis manager with suspicious enthusiasm.

Some of her advice has been obvious.

Don't disappear.

Be consistent.

Say what you mean.

Some of it is more specific.

Ask about things he actually cares about.

Remember details.

Don't make everything about hockey.

Don't make everything about sex either.

One message from three days ago still sits in the chat:

Rose: you do not have to be smooth

Rose: you just have to be sincere and not insane

Shane, unfortunately, is beginning to suspect those two conditions may be mutually exclusive for him.

He locks his phone without replying, takes his coffee to the sink, and tries not to think about any of it for the next hour.

Then he goes for another run.

Montreal in January is hard and bright with cold. Shane likes that part. The air is sharp enough to cut through thought if he keeps moving fast enough. His route takes him through streets edged with old snow and grit, past bundled pedestrians and delivery trucks and the occasional cyclist who appears to have made several poor life decisions in a row.

The first twenty minutes help.

By the thirty-minute mark, his thoughts are trying again.

Not in straight lines. They never come in straight lines when it comes to Ilya. More in flashes, observations with nowhere useful to go.

The fact that he likes dogs enough to stop mid-scroll when one appears on his phone.

That last one had happened after one of their meetings once.

They had been half-dressed on the bed afterward, Ilya loose-limbed and quiet in the warm, unfocused way he got sometimes once the sharpness had gone out of him. He'd been scrolling through his phone with the lazy concentration of someone not entirely back in his own body yet when he made a sound under his breath, not quite a laugh.

Shane had looked over, expecting a text, or hockey, or something worth mocking.

Instead Ilya had turned the phone toward him and said, with a kind of genuine delight so unguarded it had startled Shane a little, "Look at him."

It was a video of a corgi in a yellow raincoat launching itself into a puddle with complete commitment.

Shane had looked.

The dog had, admittedly, been pretty cute.

Ilya likes dogs.

This fact stays with him for no particularly good reason until, on the loop back toward home, he sees the dog.

Small. White. Some fluffy indecisive breed. It is standing at a crosswalk in a green cable-knit sweater and four tiny black booties, looking faintly aggrieved by the terms of its own existence.

Shane slows.

The dog looks up at its owner as if appealing to a higher authority.

Something in Shane's chest gives a weird, light jump.

This is ridiculous.

He has never in his life interrupted a run to speak to a stranger about their dog.

He's about to do it anyway.

The woman holding the leash glances up, startled, when he stops a polite distance away. Shane is abruptly aware that he is sweaty, breathing hard, and probably looks mildly deranged.

"Sorry," he says. "I just—"

He looks down at the dog.

"That's a good dog."

The woman laughs immediately, which is at least encouraging. "He knows."

He looks down at the dog, who is now staring at him with round, suspicious eyes from inside its sweater.

Shane surprises himself by smiling. "Can I ask what kind he is?"

That becomes, somehow, a conversation.

A short one. Manageable. The dog is a bichon-poodle mix named Marcel. He is five. He hates the booties but tolerates the sweater. He once escaped a groomer and made it halfway down the street before being recovered.

Shane nods as though this is all important information.

Then, before he can overthink it, he hears himself say, "Would you mind if I took a picture?"

The woman blinks. Then her expression goes delighted in a way that suggests she has instantly built a more flattering story about this interaction than reality deserves.

"Oh my God," she says. "Of course."

So Shane crouches in slushy snow in expensive Reeboks and takes a picture of Marcel, who sits down in protest halfway through and looks even more offended.

It is, *objectively*, an excellent photo.

He thanks the woman, nods once at Marcel, and finishes the run with his heart beating too hard for reasons no amount of cardio explains.

By the time he gets home, showered and dressed and standing in his kitchen with protien smoothie in one hand and his phone in the other, the picture is still there waiting.

Marcel in his tiny sweater. Marcel in his tiny booties.

Shane stares at it for longer than necessary, then opens his messages.

Lily sits near the top of the list. He taps into the thread.

For a second he considers just sending the photo with no explanation, but that seems abrupt.

Shane: Saw this on my run and thought you'd be annoying about it

He looks at the sentence.

Deletes *annoying*.

Types *insufferable*.

Deletes that too.

Finally he settles on:

Shane: Saw this on my run and thought you'd like it :)

Then he attaches the picture.

Looks at both of them.

Feels, absurdly, like a man standing on the edge of a cliff wondering whether the water below is survivable.

His thumb hovers.

Then he sends it.

For one second nothing happens.

Then the screen changes to *Delivered*.

Shane sets the phone face-down on the counter as if it has become dangerous to hold.

He takes one sip of his smoothie, puts the glass down, picks the phone back up immediately.

No answer yet.

That's normal. People are sometimes busy. Ilya has a life, contrary to how often Shane's attention has recently started behaving as though he does not.

Shane walks to the fridge and back for no reason.

Was the smiley too much?

Then, because apparently he has lost all shame, he opens the spreadsheet again and adds under **Definitely Do**:

- dogs in sweaters

Then his phone buzzes, and he picks it up so fast he nearly drops it.

Lily: what the fuck

Lily: why is he dressed better than you

Shane stares at the screen.

Then, helplessly, he laughs.

Something warm and stupid spreads under his ribs.

He types back:

Shane: Asshole

Shane: His owner said he's difficult about clothes

The answer comes so quickly it feels almost like being touched.

Lily: same 😏😏

By the time Shane reads that twice, a third message appears.

Lily: send more dog updates if you see any

Lily: this is your responsibility now

He leans one hip against the counter and smiles down at the phone before he can stop himself.

There is something quietly destabilizing about this, about how easy it is to feel the connection click through three stupid texts about a tiny dog in booties. Rose had said to text him something normal. Shane had not fully believed in the concept. But here it is, apparently: ordinary life, opened a fraction and offered over.

It feels ridiculous. It feels *good*.

He types:

Shane: noted

Then, after a beat:

Shane: his name is Marcel

Lily: of course it is

Lily: tell marcel i love him if you see him again

Shane looks out the kitchen window at the hard white morning and thinks, with a strange small certainty that feels a lot like momentum.

The first dog photo is, in Ilya's professional opinion, deeply suspicious.

Well, not the dog itself. Ilya can admit the dog is excellent. Tiny, white, and over-dressed—for a dog. No, the suspicious part is the fact that Shane has sent it at all.

Jane: Saw this on my run and thought you'd like it :)

Ilya stands in his kitchen with the fridge open and stares at the message. It's not a sexy text (not that Shane ever initiates *those*), or even a hockey related one.

It's a thought. A thought that Shane had while running, in broad daylight, entirely unrelated to the usual situations in which they occur to each other.

This is, frankly, more destabilizing than any kind of sexy text Shane could send him.

He looks at the photo again and squints.

The dog is wearing a green sweater and tiny black booties and has a vastly exasperated expression.

He does not answer immediately.

This is important. Not because he is playing games. He is, unfortunately, too sincere in his private suffering for games at the moment. But because replying too quickly would suggest eagerness, and eagerness in this situation is indistinguishable from volunteering for execution.

So he waits.

He drinks water.

He closes the fridge.

He opens it again.

He zooms in on the dog, which is humiliating.

He types *what the fuck why is he dressed better than you* and deletes *the fuck* for half a second before putting it back, because dignity is relative and this deserves profanity.

By the time he sends it, a reasonable six minutes have passed.

Ilya: what the fuck

Ilya: why is he dressed better than you

The reply comes quickly enough that Ilya's body betrays him before his pride can intervene.

Jane: Asshole

Jane: His owner said he's difficult about clothes

Ilya laughs out loud in his empty kitchen and replies: same 🙄🙄

Then, because he likes playing fast and loose with his heart:

Ilya: send more dog updates if you see any

Ilya: this is your responsibility now

So, that's the first real problem. The *second* is that Shane *keeps doing it*.

Not dog photos every day—that would be insane because Shane doesn't even have a dog, and Ilya's not sure he even likes them.

Instead it's other things. Small things. Little daily fragments.

A skyline after a run, all pale winter light and ugly-beautiful clouds over Montreal.

Jane: Is Boston freezing too?

A link to some stupid hockey article.

Jane: Did the guy who wrote this ever even watch a hockey game?

A text at 10:42 p.m. from some hotel in some city neither of them should still be awake in.

Jane: Did you see Hunter's goal at tonight's game?

It is all so normal that it starts to become dangerous.

At first Ilya answers carefully. Slowly. With ample, healthy amounts of suspicion.

He makes himself wait ten minutes. Fifteen. Sometimes longer, if he is feeling especially committed to the principle of it all.

He tells himself he is maintaining balance.

Then Shane sends him a picture of an extremely ugly knit hat in a store window with:

Jane: If I score more goals than you next game, you have to wear this for a week straight

And Ilya replies in under a minute.

That's the beginning of the end.

He starts answering after practice, still half-dressed at his stall with his towel around his shoulders. In the gym between sets, pretending he is checking messages from management. On the bus. In cabs. In line for coffee. Once, during lunch with three teammates after a home win, while Cliff Marleau is in the middle of explaining in great detail why some restaurant serves "the best fries in the US, maybe the world."

Ilya looks down when his phone buzzes.

Jane: Found another dog

Jane: He's less impressive than Marcel

Jane: But still solid, I think

Attached is a squat little dachshund in a red puffer jacket, standing in a snowbank much larger than him that you can't even make out his little legs.

Ilya smiles before he can stop himself.

Across the table, Marleau goes abruptly silent, which should have warned him, if he weren't so busy smiling like a lovesick fool at his phone.

"That face," Marleau says, pointing at him with a fry.

Ilya looks up. "What face?"

"The one you make when your Montreal girl texts you."

"I don't have a Montreal girl."

Marleau leans across the table, squinting. "You were smiling."

"I was not."

"You absolutely were," says Carmichael.

Ilya sets his phone face down beside his plate with as much dignity as a man can reasonably summon while being ambushed over lunch by teammates and fries.

"There is no Montreal girl."

Marleau grins. "Okay. Then whoever she is, she's got you bad."

"There is no she."

Carmichael raises a brow. "Interesting."

Ilya glares at all the three of them. "You are all deeply annoying."

"Sure," Marleau says. "You've only been on that phone every day for like two weeks."

Ilya gives him a flat look. "That is called texting. Happens when you have friends. You should try it."

"It's called being whipped," Cliff says cheerfully.

Carmichael laughs. "You don't even leave with anyone anymore."

"Well, that's just rude," Ilya says.

"It's true," says Smitty from the end of the table, not looking up from his burger. "You used to be more community-minded."

Ilya stares at all of them.

"You are all disgusting."

"Yes," Cliff says. "But are we wrong?"

Ilya reaches for his Coke and takes a long drink purely to avoid answering.

The problem is, they are not entirely wrong.

Not about the Montreal girl, obviously. That part is idiotic. There is no girl. There is only Shane Hollander and his increasingly alarming ability to insert himself into the ordinary shape of Ilya's days without even being in the same city.

But they're not wrong that he *is* answering. He is always answering. He has, in recent weeks, become the sort of man who checks his phone after morning skate hoping, with no dignity whatsoever, that Shane has some random thought he wants to share with Ilya.

And the really humiliating part is that he likes the ordinary-ness of it.

He likes that the texts are not always about sex, and that Shane seems to think of him while buying coffee, while running, while reading stupid articles, while moving through the dull daylight hours of a life that used to feel sharply separate from Ilya's.

That may be worse than wanting him.

Ilya: built wrong

Ilya: but red is his color

The reply comes before Cliff can finish stealing half his fries.

Jane: He's like a hot dog drenched in ketchup

Ilya's whole chest does that stupid warm tightening thing again.

Across from him, Cliff narrows his eyes. "See? There. Again."

"What."

"That look."

"For fuck's sake, there is no look."

"Buddy," says Carmichael, "if there isn't a girl in Montreal, there should be. You'd be unbearable at long distance."

They move on, eventually. Teammates are, blessedly, distractible. Someone brings up video review, someone else starts arguing about music in the room, Smitty becomes passionately

invested in whether anyone has ever eaten six grilled cheeses in one sitting.

Ilya keeps texting Shane under the table discreetly.

This is how it happens, apparently.

At first he is careful. Then he is responsive. Now he is anticipating.

Morning is dangerous now. That is when the run pictures come most often. Sky, dogs, one deeply territorial squirrel. Ilya wakes up and, before he is even properly upright, some traitorous part of him wonders whether Shane saw anything worth sending.

Afternoons are for hockey or food or things Hayden apparently said that delighted or irritated Shane enough to preserve.

Evenings are less predictable. Those are the worst ones. A delayed flight. Some absurd little observation from the road. Sometimes nothing, which is somehow not a relief. Sometimes a text arrives just when Ilya has decided to be normal and not check his phone for an hour.

It gets into everything.

He answers after lifts. In the tunnel after practice. In the elevator. In the back of cabs. Once outside a club, while trying to light a cigarette, and Cliff is keeping him company.

Cliff glances over when Ilya's phone buzzes.

Ilya doesn't look up. "You are obsessed with me."

Marleau just laughs.

The thing is, none of this helps the tragedy of it. If anything, it makes it worse, because now there are two stories happening at once.

In one, Shane is texting him dog pictures and bad smoothies and hockey links and apparently thinking about him in broad daylight with no immediate reward attached. In one, Shane is reaching for him in ordinary life, not just in bed or in secrecy or in the guilty aftermath of panic. In one, Shane is making himself present in a way that feels so dangerously close to something bigger that Ilya has to keep checking the edges of it for the knife.

And in the other story—the safer one, the one Ilya trusts because it hurts in a familiar way—this is all just preparation.

That is what kind men do, after all. He has not known many of them, but he knows Shane Hollander is *good*. Good and kind and raised right, and everything Ilya isn't, so he *knows* Shane is just trying to soften the blow. So when he lets him down, it will be gentle, he will tell him 'Hey, let's just be friends. We know how to do that, see?'

That's why the texts do not reassure him, because they only give him so much more to lose. And yet—

And yet, against all survival instinct, he keeps answering. Because the worst, *stupidest* truth of it is that some part of him has already chosen: if this is temporary, he will still take it; if this is a trap, he will still step farther in.

If Shane Hollander is setting him up for some elegant emotional execution, then apparently Ilya is enough of a cliché to thank him and die holding his bloody heart out in his hands for him to refuse.

One night, lying in the dark with Boston wind worrying at the windows, Ilya stares at the ceiling with his phone on his chest and thinks with the calm misery of a man watching his own ruin arrive when it buzzes:

Well. This is bad.

He snatches it up so fast it nearly hits him in the mouth.

It's a link to an article from some medical site with titled:

What Happens to Your Body When You Quit Smoking

Ilya stares at it.

Then, underneath:

Jane: Before you get defensive, I am not saying this to annoy you

Jane: I saw this and thought you might actually find it interesting

Jane: There's a section about lung function and recovery timelines

Jane: Which seemed relevant, considering you are a professional athlete and committed to making terrible decisions

Ilya's first instinct is to laugh, which he does, into the dark, helplessly, and types back before caution can even clear its throat. His second is to put the phone facedown and never look at it again. His third, most humiliatingly, is to read the article immediately because Shane sent it.

Ilya: wow

Ilya: very sexy of you

Ilya: sending me medical grade peer pressure guilt in middle of the night

Jane: That's not what this is

Jane: Although if guilt works, I'm not opposed

Then drops the phone onto the mattress and puts both hands over his face.

Yes, he thinks. Exactly like this. He is going to be ruined by incremental acts of thoughtfulness.

Shane is not usually *summoned* to Hayden's house for tactical support, but, well, Jackie had texted him that morning and who was he to refuse.

Jackie: are you busy around four

Jackie: hayden is outnumbered and i have errands

Jackie: arthur asked for uncle shane specifically

Jackie: which makes me feel weirdly manipulative but ill take my wins where i can

So, Shane had, of course, found that almost impossible to refuse.

So now he is standing in Hayden Pike's kitchen at six-thirty on a Thursday, holding Arthur on one hip while Hayden tries to convince Ruby and Jade that two different colored bowls of the exact same strawberries is not, in fact, unfair.

Amber is in a high chair systematically destroying a rice cracker.

"This is your fault," Hayden says, pointing at Shane with a baby spoon.

Shane, who is doing nothing except existing with a toddler attached to him, looks up from Arthur's hair. "How?"

"You walk in and suddenly I'm chopped liver to Arthur."

Arthur, hearing his name, tightens both arms around Shane's neck and presses his face into Shane's shoulder with the boneless confidence of a child who has decided he lives here now.

Shane adjusts his grip automatically. Arthur smells like applesauce and laundry detergent and the sort of sticky sweetness no amount of wipes ever completely defeats. Normally, Shane would hate it, but he has nothing but a soft spot for the toddler in his arms.

Hayden glares at both of them.

"See! This," he says, "is what I'm talking about."

Shane feels his mouth twitch despite himself. "I'm sorry your son has standards."

"Traitor," Hayden mutters, but without any real heat behind it.

Ruby, who is seven and already carries herself with the serene disappointment of a woman who has seen too much, looks up from the table. "Daddy, you said we weren't allowed to call people traitors."

"That rule is for you, not me."

"That's not fair," Jade says at once.

"Nothing about this house is fair," Hayden says, finally surrendering and dumping both bowls of strawberries into one larger bowl. "Okay. Shared fruit. We all win."

Arthur makes a happy sound into Shane's shoulder.

"He likes you better," Hayden says darkly.

Shane shifts Arthur a little higher. "I think he just likes being carried."

"No," Ruby says, with the authority of a child who has already evaluated the social dynamics thoroughly. "He likes Uncle Shane best."

Hayden presses a hand to his chest. "Brutal."

Shane would feel worse about this if Hayden were not clearly performing for his children and having the time of his life doing it.

The house itself is warm in the particular way homes with children always are, full of noise and clutter and life. There is a stuffed giraffe under one chair. Art projects cover one side of the fridge with reckless confidence of people too young to fear judgment. The walls are crowded with photos—Hayden and Jackie on a beach somewhere, grinning into the sun; Jackie pregnant with the twins and looking radiant and furious at being photographed; the four kids at various stages of growth, cake-smudged and gap-toothed and sticky.

And in almost every picture, there is some version of the same thing underneath it: happiness that has settled in and stayed.

Shane notices this the way he notices systems in hockey or flaws in coverage or cracks in his own routines—quietly, immediately, all at once.

Hayden catches him looking at one of the framed photos near the hall.

"That one's from Muskoka," he says, scooping Amber up before she can launch the remains of her cracker onto the floor. "Last summer."

Shane glances over. It's Hayden on the dock with Ruby on his shoulders, Jackie laughing in the background while Jade runs straight toward the lake in a life jacket too big for her. Arthur is a blurry little shape near the edge of the frame, presumably on his way to doing something stupid and adorable.

"You go every year?" Shane asks.

"Try to." Hayden shrugs. "Jackie says if we miss a summer trip, the children will become feral."

That gets a small laugh out of Shane.

Arthur, who has begun absentmindedly playing with the collar of Shane's sweater, leans back just enough to look up at him. "Uncle Shane?"

"Yeah."

Arthur pats his chest with one small sticky hand. "Up."

"You are already up," Shane points out.

Arthur thinks about this. "More up."

Hayden barks a laugh. "That's my boy."

Shane shifts Arthur again, settling him higher with an ease that feels almost suspiciously natural.

Something in him catches then.

Not because of the kids, exactly. He's definitely not suddenly having some profound revelation about fatherhood while Jade argues passionately that purple is a breakfast color and Hayden tries to explain why that sentence means nothing.

It's the whole shape of it. The thoughtlessness of being wanted in a space and knowing where to stand in it. The photos on the walls. The summer lake picture. The cottage.

His cottage.

And because his brain is apparently determined to ruin his own life in increasingly specific ways, a traitorous little image slides into place before he can stop it:

The cottage in late summer, windows open to the lake air, someone else's shoes by the door, a laugh from the kitchen, Ilya standing on the dock with a towel around his neck complaining about Shane's insistence for sunblock and refusing to admit he's enjoying the fussi—

Shane goes very still. He looks away from the wall of photos and focuses on Arthur's warm little weight against him, on the noise of the kitchen, on the practical demands of the room. But it's too late. The thought is already there now, alive and bright and impossible to file back down into something harmless.

He doesn't want just sex and meetings in hidden apartments and strange half-nights and text threads that now carry more of his day than they should.

He wants something that belongs somewhere.

That realization lands in him with enough force that for a second he almost resents Hayden personally for having such aggressively visible domestic happiness.

"So," Hayden says, dragging him back into the room. "You going to help me or just stand there looking like you saw God in the backplash?"

Shane glances at him. "What?"

Hayden points with Amber's spoon again. "You've been weird for, like, ten full seconds."

Arthur, who has now decided Shane's hair is public property, tugs lightly at it.

Shane sighs. "You're all exhausting."

"Maybe," Hayden says. "But you're doing that constipated face where you're thinking really hard and refusing to let anyone in on that thoughts."

Shane shifts Arthur to his other side, then says, aiming for casual and landing somewhere near suspiciously stiff, "Can I ask you something?"

Hayden's face changes immediately.

"Sure," he says. "Is everything okay?"

Shane regrets it instantly.

He considers aborting the whole thing. Unfortunately, Hayden is already looking at him with the patient alertness of someone who has known him too long to be fooled by a false start.

"How did you know," Shane says carefully, "with Jackie?"

Hayden blinks. "Know what?"

"That she—" Shane stops. Starts again. "That she liked you back."

For one second, Hayden just stares at him.

Then a slow, dangerous grin spreads across his face.

"Oh my God."

Shane's shoulders tighten. "Don't."

"No, I'm not doing anything." Hayden absolutely is. "I'm just—wow. Okay."

Ruby looks between them. "Are you talking about love?"

"No," Shane says at once.

"Yes," Hayden says at the exact same time.

Jade gasps. "Dad!"

Amber drops her spoon.

Arthur says, with no context whatsoever, "*Love!*"

"This is a nightmare," Shane mutters.

Hayden is openly delighted now. "You asked me. You opened the door."

"I asked you a normal question."

Hayden laughs. "That was not a normal-question tone, man."

Shane feels heat creep up the back of his neck and hates himself for it. "Forget it."

"Nope." Hayden shifts Amber to his other hip and grins at him over her head. "Absolutely not. We are so far past 'forget it.'"

"Hayden."

"Shane."

Shane looks at the ceiling.

Hayden, somehow becoming even more obnoxiously pleased, says, "Okay. First of all, rude that you didn't come to me sooner, because I am extremely good at this."

Jackie's voice drifts in from the front hall at that exact moment.

"No, you aren't."

Shane turns.

Jackie is standing there with two shopping bags looped over one wrist and with the air of authority that says she had walked into a conversation just in time to prevent misinformation.

Hayden puts a hand to his chest. "Betrayed in my own home."

"You proposed with a speech you rehearsed in the bathroom mirror," Jackie says, stepping into the kitchen to kiss Ruby's head on the way past. "Sit down."

"It was romantic."

"It was... sweet."

Arthur immediately launches himself toward Jackie with the blind confidence of a child certain he is beloved everywhere. Shane passes him over, and Jackie takes him with a practiced ease that makes the whole maneuver look like choreography.

Then she looks back at Shane.

"What are we helping with?"

Shane considers lying.

Jackie raises one eyebrow.

He gives up immediately.

"Nothing," he says.

"Okay," Jackie says. "Then why do you look like you're about to have an anyuerm?"

Hayden points at him with Amber's hand. "He asked how I knew you liked me back."

Jackie goes still momentarily, then, slowly, she smiles.

"Oh," she says.

Shane would like, very much, to leave his own body.

Jackie leans against the counter. "Do you want the real answer?"

Shane hesitates, but he's already done incorrigible damage to his own dignity anyway, so he nods.

Jackie shrugs one shoulder. "I didn't know at first."

Hayden looks scandalized. "Excuse me?"

She ignores him. "But once I liked him, really liked him, it got obvious pretty fast that he was trying."

Hayden's expression softens, the grin going less ridiculous around the edges.

Shane says, "Trying how?"

Jackie smiles. "In all the ways he thought he was hiding."

Hayden points at her. "Oooh, that's good. That's better than what I was gonna say."

"What were you going to say?"

"Flowers."

Jackie closes her eyes. Shane, despite himself, laughs.

"See?" Hayden says. "Women like flowers."

Jackie opens her eyes again. "Some women like flowers."

Hayden waves this away. "Details."

"No," Jackie says. "Those are not details."

Then she looks back at Shane, sharper now in the useful way. "Whoever this is—"

Hayden visibly brightens.

"—if you are trying to make something clear," Jackie continues before he can interrupt, "the gesture matters less than whether it feels like *you*. Anyone can do generic romantic stuff. The important part is that the other person feels seen."

And just like that, the image of the cottage comes back—too fast, too bright, too dangerous to be accidental. Lake water. Open windows. Ilya in his space, in his life, not hidden or borrowed or temporary. Not secrecy, but belonging. The thought of it hits so cleanly it almost feels like missing a stair.

Hayden, who unfortunately notices nothing when it matters and everything when it doesn't, squints at him. "Oh my God."

"What?"

Hayden points at him. "That face again."

"What face?"

"The one where you've just had some weirdly intense internal breakthrough and are pretending you didn't."

Jackie watches him for another second, then smiles, small and knowing.

Shane looks between them, annoyed by how seen he suddenly feels in a kitchen full of children and fruit and family pictures.

"I have to go," he says.

Hayden bursts out laughing. "Absolutely incredible."

"Shane," Jackie says, still smiling.

He pauses, hand already on the back of a chair.

"What?"

She tilts her head. "Don't do something huge just because you're panicking."

He exhales. "I'm not panicking."

Jackie and Hayden both look at him.

From the table, Ruby says, "You are."

Shane points at her. "You're seven."

"And right," she says.

Hayden actually has to set Amber down in her high chair because he's laughing too hard to hold her safely.

Jackie, with considerably more mercy, says, "Do something thoughtful. Nothing huge. Just thoughtful."

Shane nods once. That, at least, he can work with.

When he leaves twenty minutes later, Arthur waves goodbye from Jackie's arms. Ruby reminds him he still owes her a rematch at air hockey. Jade asks whether he's in love now, which causes Hayden to choke on his own spit so badly Jackie has to hit him between the shoulders.

Shane gets into his car and shuts the door.

Then he sits there for a minute with both hands on the wheel, staring out at the darkening street.

The warmth of the house still clings to him somehow. The unbearable clarity of wanting Ilya not just in pieces, not just in stolen time, but somewhere real enough to leave traces behind.

Shane exhales slowly.

Then he reaches for his phone.

He opens his notes app instead and types, under a heading that already contains more nonsense than he cares to examine.

- flowers?

He stares at it then adds:

- not generic flowers

And under that, before he can stop himself even though he trusts Jackie Pike infinitely more than he trusts Hayden Pike:

- ask Rose?

He locks the phone, starts the car, and pulls away from the curb thinking, against all reason and with the first real spark of dangerous confidence he has felt in weeks:

Shane Hollander works best with a plan.

He can do this.

Easy.

Hat tricks are, in theory, fun.

Ilya would even go so far as to say this one had been fun in practice. Boston wins again, which is becoming a nice little habit. He scores three, gets pelted with hats, gets a suffocating hug in the room afterward because one of the defensemen has decided this is a morale thing now, and spends a solid twenty minutes being shoved around by grinning idiots who smell like sweat and victory.

Cliff nearly dislocates his shoulder hugging him.

"Three!" he yells, as if Ilya had somehow not noticed.

"Yes," Ilya says. "Thank you, Marly. I can count."

"You were disgusting tonight."

Ilya accepts this as the compliment it is meant to be.

There is media after, obviously. There is always media. A woman with perfect teeth asks him if he "felt in the zone out there tonight," which is the sort of phrase people only use if they have never been in any zone worth discussing. A man in a bad tie asks whether the team's current streak feels sustainable. Someone else wants to know if he has ever had a better second period in his career. Ilya lies to all of them with charm and a towel around his shoulders.

He is still buzzing when he leaves the arena.

That is the problem with nights like this. They do not end cleanly. Your body keeps humming for hours after, full of adrenaline and noise and the bright private satisfaction of having been exactly as good as you wanted to be in front of thousands of people who would have forgiven less.

His phone buzzes while he's waiting at a traffic light.

Marly: tell me ur not going home

Marly: cmon roz

Marly: u can't score 3 and then vanish like some kind of russian batman

Marly: u sure u dont wanna come celebrate?

Ilya smiles despite himself.

Ilya: touching nickname

Ilya: but no i have other plans ;)

Marly replies immediately.

Marly: liar

Marly: u just hate us

Ilya: true

Then he puts the phone away and leans his head back against the seat as he waits. Ilya watches people in dark coats hurry past restaurant windows full of warmth and light and thinks, briefly and not for the first time tonight, of texting Shane.

He doesn't.

This is a victory he is willing to grant himself.

By the time he gets back to his building, his suit jacket is slung over one shoulder. His tie is in his pocket. He smells like postgame skin and locker room shower soap and the stale ghost of hardwon game. He is tired now, finally, but still in that weird elevated state where the world feels one degree brighter than usual.

The lobby is quiet. The elevator is slow. By the time it opens on his floor, he has reached the pleasant stage of postgame exhaustion where he can almost feel sleep waiting at the edges.

Then he sees the thing outside his door.

Ilya stops dead in the middle of the hallway.

He stops.

At first it is just color. White and green and something darker tucked into it. Then the shape resolves into a florist's arrangement large enough to qualify as a public statement.

Ilya goes slowly the rest of the way down the hall.

The bouquet is absurd. (It's beautiful.)

White lilies and magnolia branches, all winter-clean lines and pale petals and expensive restraint. The flowers are fresh enough that the scent has barely opened yet, but it is there already, faint and sweet under the stale apartment-hall air. Tucked into the center of it, like the world's most deranged garnish, is a small teddy bear wearing a tiny hockey jersey.

A tiny **Hollander** jersey.

Ilya stops dead again.

"No," he says softly.

The bear smiles up at him from the flowers with blank plush serenity.

There is a card tucked into the arrangement.

He stares at it for another second first, as if proximity might somehow make it less dangerous then pulls it free.

On the florist envelope, in elegant script:

For Lily

Ilya closes his eyes.

Of course this is happening to him.

He opens the card.

Inside:

The flowers are for the hat trick.

The bear is to remind you who's the better player.

—Jane

Ilya makes a strangled sound.

Then laughs.

Once, sharply, there in the hallway outside his apartment like a man finally being punished by God in a way that shows real creativity.

Because what, really, is left at this point except to accept that Shane Hollander, once committed to a course of action, becomes the sort of man who is both thoughtful and psychotic at the same time.

He unlocks the door and carries the arrangement inside.

The apartment is dark when he enters. Quiet. The only sound is the soft thud of the door closing behind him and his own breathing, which has gone annoyingly shallow. He sets the bouquet down on the kitchen island and just stands there for a moment with both hands braced on the counter.

The bear is still smiling and its jersey is navy blue.

He hates it so much he briefly thinks he may have to sit down.

No. That is a lie.

He loves it so much he feels faintly sick.

Because flowers would already have been too much. Flowers after a hat trick, after weeks of dog photos and stupid articles and daylight thoughts and that relentless, impossible thread of ordinary contact, would already be enough to destabilize him for a week.

But this?

It is not even abstractly clever. It is specifically, personally funny. It means Shane not only watched the game, not only thought about the stupid Boston Bears teddy-bear thing, not only decided to send something, but also sent something tailored so precisely to their particular insanity that there is no way to misread the care inside it.

Unless, of course, you are Ilya Rozanov, in which case misreading is your finest and most well-developed skill.

His phone starts ringing.

He startles so hard he nearly drops the card.

The screen lights up in his hand.

Jane

He stares at the name while the phone rings in his hand.

No sane option presents itself.

He answers.

"Are you trying to kill me?" he says by way of greeting.

There is a beat of silence on the other end.

Then Shane says, "Hi," in a voice so careful it could be carrying glass.

Ilya sits down slowly at the kitchen table because his knees have, without consulting him, decided to become decorative.

"Hello," he says.

There is another pause. Ilya can hear the smile Shane is trying not to have through the line, which feels unfair and maybe medically concerning.

Then Shane says, a little too fast, "Did they get there okay?"

"No," he says. "I am describing them from imagination."

Shane exhales.

It sounds like he'd been braced for something worse.

"I just—" Shane starts, then stops. Starts again. "The florist had lilies and also the other ones are actually Jane magnolias, which I didn't know before, but apparently that's what they're called, and I thought that was—obviously you know that, but—"

Ilya blinks and laughs from somewhere deep inside. It's not even funny, but something about Shane Hollander, who can normally go entire periods of a hockey game without wasting a syllable, rambling like a man one mild inconvenience away from a visible stress fracture because he is trying to explain his floral choices does something warm to his insides.

"Shane," Ilya says.

That gets him silence.

"You are having a panic attack."

"I am not."

"You are talking about flowers like someone has gun to your head."

A pause.

Then, reluctantly: "Maybe a little."

Ilya presses the heel of his hand against his forehead and smiles helplessly into the dark kitchen.

Shane clears his throat. "It seemed funny."

Ilya closes his eyes.

That is the worst possible answer, because it is true.

"Funny," he repeats.

"Yes."

"Interesting."

On the other end of the line, Shane is quiet for a second. Then, cautiously: "Do you hate them?"

Something in Ilya's chest twists hard enough to make him grip the phone tighter.

Because there it is. Under all the strange confidence required to send a gesture like this, under the coded flowers and the joke and the note signed Jane, there is still Shane being Shane—wanting to know, in that low careful way of his, whether he got it wrong.

Ilya looks at the bouquet.

"I hate," he says slowly, "that I like it very much."

That gets him a real laugh that's small and warm and more open than most people ever hear Shane Hollander sound.

It goes through Ilya like a knife.

Then there is a little silence, not awkward exactly, but charged. The kind that has started showing up between them more often lately, full of things neither of them is saying and both of them can feel.

Ilya breaks first, because apparently he has no self-preservation left at all, and picks up the offensively soft bear.

"This thing is hideous."

"I know."

"And it's wearing your jersey."

"Also yes."

"Arrogant."

"I scored twice in Montreal."

"You are bringing up a completely irrelevant game."

"I don't think it's irrelevant."

Ilya presses his lips together to stop the stupid smile that tries to happen anyway.

He can hear Shane shift on the other end of the line. "You were good tonight."

There are, at this point, many things Ilya should say.

Something light. Something mocking. Something that does not feel like his soul is being touched barehanded.

Instead all that comes out is, "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Ilya has to look away from the flowers.

The conversation goes on. Longer than it should, probably. Shorter than Ilya wants. They talk a little about the Shane's game and Ilya's goals. And then it reaches that strange edge they have been finding more often lately, where it could tip into something real if either of them made one wrong movement.

At some point, on the other end, Shane says nothing for a second.

Then, softer: "You really liked it?"

And because Ilya has apparently become the kind of person who loses all strategic capacity after midnight while surrounded by floral evidence, he answers honestly.

"I really liked it," he says.

The silence after that is different.

Eventually, Shane says, "We should sleep."

Ilya looks at the flowers again.

"Yes, probably."

Another pause.

Then Shane says, "Goodnight, Lily."

That sits squarely in the center of him.

"Goodnight, Jane," he says quietly.

When the line goes dead, Ilya stays where he is for a long moment, phone still in his hand, apartment still dark around the absurd bright fact of the bouquet on the island.

Then, because he is a weak man with no instincts for self-preservation, he gets up and finds a vase.

It takes two, actually.

The magnolias are taller than he thought. The bear ends up sitting between them on the counter, still smiling in its little jersey like a threat.

Ilya steps back and looks at the arrangement. He stands there with his hands on his hips and stares at the evidence of his own impending doom.

Then he picks up his phone again.

There are, at this point, only two possible explanations:

one, Shane is trying to kill him in the gentlest way possible

two, Ilya is not actually crazy

Neither option feels safe enough to navigate alone.

So he scrolls to Svetlana's name.

The time stops him.

1:24 a.m.

He stares at the screen for a second, then locks the phone again.

No. Morning.

Morning, when he can explain this with some dignity.

Morning, when maybe the bouquet will look less like proof and more like a psychotic floral-induced break.

Morning, when maybe he will have stopped feeling like the floor under his life has shifted by an inch and that inch has changed everything.

He looks back at the flowers.

The bear smiles.

"No," Ilya tells it.

He goes to bed with the scent of the flowers already beginning to thread through the apartment air and a teddy bear tucked at his side, and dreams vaguely and irritably of white petals and navy blue jersey fabric and Shane's voice saying *you were good tonight* in a way no person should be allowed to say to him without consequence.

In the morning, the consequences are still there.

So is the bouquet.

So, apparently, is the need for reinforcements.

He picks up his phone and texts Svetlana.

Ilya: hypothetically

Ilya: if someone sent you flowers after a game

Ilya: not random flowers. very specific flowers. plus a bear. in a jersey.

Ilya: how concerned would you be

Her reply arrives thirty seconds later.

Sveta: i would be concerned that you are awake before noon after that game

Sveta: what do you mean hypothetically

Sveta: and why does this already sound stupid

Ilya stares at the screen.

Then, despite himself, he smiles.

Yes, he thinks. Exactly who he needs.

Ilya: i need your help

Svetlana does not call back.

This is, in itself, ominous.

She texts once, twenty minutes after his last message.

Sveta: don't do anything stupid

Sveta: i'm serious

Ilya, who is standing in his kitchen staring at the flowers like a man trying to determine whether he is being haunted decoratively, types back:

Ilya: define stupid

She does not answer, which should have warned him.

An hour and a half later, there is a knock at his door.

Ilya, who has spent those ninety minutes accomplishing nothing except moving the bouquet twice and hiding the bear under his duvet, opens it to find Svetlana standing there in a camel coat and perfect boots, holding a coffee tray and a white paper bag with darkening grease spots at the bottom.

He blinks.

"Don't you work until six?"

"Yes," she says, brushing past him without waiting to be invited in. *"And?"*

Ilya closes the door slowly behind her.

"Did you come here straight from the dealership?"

"Obviously." She sets the coffee tray down on the kitchen island, followed by the bag. *"I brought donuts. You need to eat before you become even more dramatic."*

Ilya looks at the bag.

"That almost sounded kind."

"Tch, don't be stupid."

Svetlana takes one sweeping look around, and stops at where the flowers are laid out in all their expensive, incriminating glory.

The lilies have opened a little more since morning. The magnolia branches throw spare elegant shadows across the counter. In daylight, the whole arrangement somehow looks even more deliberate.

Svetlana looks at the bouquet.

Then at him.

Then back at the bouquet.

"Oh," she says.

It is not loud, which means it's, unfortunately, much worse than he had thought.

Ilya leans one hip against the counter and folds his arms.

"That is not useful."

Svetlana ignores him.

She steps closer, sets down her own coffee, and touches one of the magnolia branches lightly with two fingers, careful not to disturb anything. Then her gaze drops to the card where he had, in a moment of terrible judgment, left it beside the vase instead of burning it immediately.

Ilya sees her eyes drop to the card and reaches for it on instinct.

Too late.

She catches his wrist lightly before he can snatch it away.

"Oh, no," she says. *"Don't do that. Now I definitely want to read it."*

"Sveta."

"Lulya."

He tries for the card anyway, which is undignified and, *worse*, ineffective. Svetlana is wearing heels and still somehow moves faster than him, plucking it up and taking one neat step back.

"Give me that."

"Why?"

"Because it's mine."

"Mm." She glances down at the envelope. *"Actually it's Lily's."*

Ilya stills then folds his arms like he is definitely unaffected by her words.

She looks up at him and there's no triumph in her face, just that familiar, awful expression she gets when he is being embarrassing and she has known it for a while.

"You thought I didn't know?" she asks.

"Know what."

She gives him a look.

"Please."

He looks away first, which is answer enough.

Svetlana snorts softly.

"Lulya, you haven't picked anyone up in weeks."

"That is not evidence of anything except taste."

"You check your phone every five seconds when we go out."

"I have friends."

"No," she says. *"You have a problem."* Then, she keeps going, merciless now because of course she does. *"Every time his team is on, you get that face, where your mouth goes all thin and weird and suddenly you care very much about defensemen letting their centers get checked into boards."*

"It's important."

She narrows her eyes and barrels on. *"And don't even try to deny the documentary."*

He blinks. *"What documentary?"*

Svetlana laughs.

"Oh my God. That stupid documentary about his "safe haven" or whatever. You talked about him for ten minutes straight."

"I was making fun of him."

"No." She points at him with the envelope. *"You sounded like a little boy teasing his crush."*

A laugh almost gets out of him just from the violence of the accusation.

"That is disgusting."

"Yes."

"I hate you."

"I know." She lowers the card slightly. *"My point is, I didn't figure this out from the flowers or whatever. I figured it out because you've been humiliatingly obvious for years, and I am very smart."*

Ilya presses a hand over his eyes.

"Please leave."

"No."

Then she opens the card and reads.

There's a beat.

Then another.

And *another*.

When she looks up, her face isn't amused. Ilya drops his hand.

Svetlana looks from the note to the bouquet, then back to him, and whatever she sees on his face seems to settle something in her.

Very gently, she sets the card back down on the island.

Then she crosses the space between them, takes his coffee out of his hand before he can protest, and catches his fingers.

"Come here," she says softly.

He goes, because it's Sveta and he trusts her with his life.

She leads him to the couch the way she might have years ago, when they were both younger and angrier and less practiced at pretending not to need each other. Ilya sits because she

presses him down by the shoulder, and then she sits beside him and turns a little toward him, one knee tucked up under herself.

For a second she just looks at him.

Then she reaches up and brushes his curls back from his forehead with a tenderness so familiar it nearly undoes him on impact.

"Start from the beginning, Ilyusha," she says.

So he does. Or enough of it, anyway.

The stupid CCM shoot the summer before rookie season, and how Hollander had looked so annoyingly clean and serious and easy to needle, how Ilya had walked away from it already interested in ways he had no intention of examining. The years after, all rivalry and wanting disguised as annoyance so successfully that only an idiot or Svetlana would have clocked it for what it was. The meetings, the hotel rooms, the apartment in Montreal. All of it built on that private lie they had both agreed to live inside.

And then October.

He slows there. Hesitates. Because even now the memory of it still has teeth: the awful bright split second when he says *Shane* without meaning to, and Hollander says *Ilya* back like its the sweetest word, and then stands up anyway. Leaves anyway. Decides, apparently, that whatever this was, whatever Ilya was, it wasn't worth staying for.

So Ilya tells her that too, more quietly.

The silence after. The weeks of nothing. The spiral he definitely did *not* have.

Then the shift, sudden and impossible: the apology, the softness, the texting, Rose Landry hanging around the edges of it all like proof that there is still a normal ending waiting for Hollander if he wants one. And Ilya, idiot, keeps going back. Keeps answering. Keeps letting this thing wind tighter around his ribs even though he knows how stories like this end. Not with miracles. With kindness, maybe. Regret, probably. But ending all the same.

When he finishes, Sveta's hand is still in his hair. She leaves it there for a second longer, fingers light against his temple, then lets it fall.

"Well," she says.

Ilya laughs once under his breath. *"That sounds promising."*

"I'm deciding whether to slap you or hug you."

"Violence feels more in character."

"Yes." She studies him. *"But unfortunately, you look terrible."*

He leans back into the couch cushions and stares at the ceiling. *"Wow. Thank you."*

"No, I'm serious." She nudges his knee with hers. "You look like you haven't slept."

"I slept."

"Badly."

He shrugs.

Svetlana makes a small sound through her nose that means *exactly*.

"So," she says. "First of all: yes, you are being dramatic."

"I know."

"No, let me finish." She holds up a hand. "You are being dramatic, but you are also not imagining this. This is not nothing, Lulya."

He looks down at his hands. *"That is not the same as saying I'm right."*

"No." She is quiet for a second. "Because I don't think you are."

He laughs, soft and humorless. *"Of course."*

"Don't do that."

He looks up.

Svetlana's expression has sharpened again.

"Don't do that thing where you decide I'm saying the cruelest possible version before I finish the sentence."

"Fine," he mutters.

"Fine." She folds one leg up under herself. "I don't think you're right that this is some long delicate lead-up to him ending things."

He opens his mouth to argue but she keeps going before he gets the chance.

"I think that is the saddest version available, and therefore your favorite."

"It is not my favorite."

"No?" Her brow lifts. "You nurture it like a houseplant."

That gets him, annoyingly. His mouth twitches despite himself.

Svetlana sees it and presses in.

"You know what this looks like from the outside?"

He exhales through his nose. *"Do I want to?"*

"No."

She gestures toward the bouquet.

"It looks like someone trying."

Ilya looks away. *"That's worse."*

Svetlana laughs softly.

"Yes," she says. *"I know."*

He leans forward, elbows on his knees.

"If I think that," he says slowly, *"if I let myself think that, and I'm wrong—"*

"I know," she says.

That is somehow worse too. He rubs a hand over his mouth.

"He still hasn't said anything."

"He sent flowers."

"That is not the same thing."

"No," she says. *"It's harder, actually. Saying things is easy. He is doing things."*

Well... yes. That is part of what has felt so destabilizing about all of this. The texts. Dinner. The front door. The flowers. The bear and the little Hollander jersey.

He closes his eyes.

"Jesus Christ."

"Mmm." Then Svetlana says, much drier, *"Also, for the record, if a man is guilty, he sends one ugly apology bouquet from the first florist he finds. He does not send flowers and a little hockey bear with a cute message and then have a panic attack on the phone about his choices."*

A laugh escapes him before he can stop it.

"It was not a panic attack."

She looks at him incredulously.

He concedes with one hand.

"Fine. Mild distress."

"Thank you."

Svetlana sits back.

"Did he really start rambling about the flowers?"

Ilya feels warmth climb unexpectedly into his face.

"A little."

"Say exactly."

She waits.

He caves.

"He said the florist had lilies and that the others were actually Jane magnolias, and apparently that's what they're called, and then he assumed I already knew that, and—"

Svetlana's hand flies up to cover her mouth to stop from laughing.

"You are not laughing," he says flatly.

This only makes it worse because she laughs anyway, dropping her head briefly against the back of the couch.

"I hate you," he mutters.

"No, no, I'm sorry." She is very much not sorry. *"That's just... Jesus. He really has no game."*

"He has enough."

The words are petulant and out before he can stop them.

She turns her head slowly and looks at him with the widest grin he has seen from her in a while.

Ilya closes his eyes.

Excellent. Wonderful. Very controlled. *Fuck.*

"Interesting," she says.

"Don't."

"No, I think I will. He has enough?"

He opens one eye at her.

"You are a terrible person."

"Yes."

"I regret calling you."

"No, you don't."

That, too, is true.

Svetlana looks at him for another second, then lets him off the hook with a sigh that is almost kind.

"You know what I think?"

"That I'm embarrassing."

"That too." She reaches for her coffee. "But mostly I think you have spent so long assuming you know how this ends that you are refusing to look at what is actually happening."

He looks at the flowers again. At the note on the table. At the bright stupid evidence of thought.

"And what is actually happening?" he asks.

Svetlana shrugs one shoulder.

"That man is trying. You are in denial. Everybody is staying on brand."

That gets a real laugh out of him, and he hates how grateful he is for it.

Then, because she cannot leave anything soft unsupported for too long, she says, *"I still want to see the bear."*

"Absolutely not."

"You'd do this to me, Illyusha?"

"Yes."

"Ooooooh, did you sleep beside it?"

He says nothing.

Svetlana gasps.

"Ilya."

"Do not."

"You put it in the bed!"

"I did not put it in the bed," he says, offended. "I only hid it under the duvet because I know you're nosy."

She laughs so hard she snorts and knees his thigh.

Which is, offensively, how the tension finally breaks.

They sit there after that with donuts and coffee and too much old history to need careful wording. She makes him tell her the phone conversation again. He refuses to let her into the bedroom. She judges his fridge's contents. He tells her she should go sell a car and leave him alone. She says nobody buys anything sensible after four p.m. anyway.

By the time she gets up to leave, the panic has not gone away, exactly.

It has just changed shape into something that's less freefall, more edge. Something he can stand on for now.

At the door, she turns and fixes him with one last look.

"Don't run ahead of the story."

Ilya exhales. *"I hate when you say things like that."*

"I know." She kisses his cheek. *"Call me if he starts to send jewelry."*

"Get out."

She grins and goes.

When the door closes behind her, the apartment is quiet again.

Ilya stands there for a moment, listening to the silence then he goes back to the kitchen.

The flowers are still beautiful. The note is still folded beside the vase. The room still smells faintly of lilies.

Ilya stares at it.

Then, despite everything, he smiles.

Trying, he thinks, and immediately hates the word.

Oh, he is so fucked.

The All-Star Game is supposed to be fun.

This is the official line, anyway. Loose, fast, barely defended. A weekend for the league to congratulate itself in tropical weather while players grin for cameras and pretend not to be hungover.

Shane has done enough of them by now to know the rhythm. Sponsor nonsense. Media. Warmups with too much music. Defensive structure held together by prayer and vibes. The whole thing conducted at a pitch of cheerful unreality that would make actual playoff hockey games file a formal complaint.

So yes. *Fun*.

It is less fun when Ilya is there. No, that is not true. It is more fun, which is the problem.

It starts in the hotel that morning.

Shane walks down toward the reception level a little earlier than he needs to, mostly because he has been awake since six and lying in bed pretending not to be awake since five-thirty. He is wearing clothes he would not usually have packed for All-Star weekend. Better cut. Better fit. Significantly less for the gym.

Rose had, after one disastrous FaceTime in which she took in his hoodie and went silent for a full three seconds, texted him the number of a stylist in Montreal.

Shane had objected to that on principle, but hired the stylist anyway.

So now he is in cream shorts and a blue linen shirt that fits him properly in the shoulders, and loafers that make him feel faintly like he should be cheating on someone in a European film he'd seen once on a flight.

He reaches the bar and sees Ilya immediately, like his eyes hone in on him in every room without Shane's permission.

Ilya is sitting sideways on one of the stools with one ankle hooked on the rung, drinking a beer at eleven in the morning like this is a reasonable thing for a professional athlete to be doing before a game. He is wearing a stupid red Hawaiian shirt with cream flowers on it, open at the throat, and looks like he is auditioning for the role of trouble in that same film.

It should look absurd. It *does* look absurd.

It also looks, Shane thinks with instant irritation, unfairly good.

Ilya glances up from his bottle and catches him looking.

His mouth curves slowly—dangerously.

"Captain," he says, dragging his gaze down and back up again with absolutely no shame, "you've made an effort."

Shane keeps walking until he reaches the bar, because stopping in the middle of the hotel lobby to die would draw attention.

"I could say the same to you," he says.

Ilya glances down at his own shirt. "You could. You'd sound jealous."

"I'd sound concerned."

"Hm."

Ilya takes another drink of his beer and keeps looking at him in that lazy sharpened way that has never once meant anything good for Shane's self-control.

The stylist had, in retrospect, not prepared him for being perceived by Ilya Rozanov in daylight.

Shane says, "You're drinking?"

"It's one beer."

"It's before noon."

"It's also Florida."

Shane has no answer to that.

Ilya smiles wider, pleased with himself, and tips his bottle toward Shane's button up. "Very elegant, Hollander. Very tasteful. Who dressed you?"

"Me."

"Liar."

Shane does not rise to that. Mostly because lying would be pointless and telling the truth would somehow be worse.

Instead he says, "You look ridiculous."

"And yet."

And yet.

Yes.

That is, unfortunately, the problem with Ilya in all contexts.

Before Shane can respond, Scott Hunter appears at his shoulder with a coffee in one hand and sunglasses tucked into the neck of his shirt. He looks from Shane to Ilya and raises his eyebrows.

"Well," he says. "This should be fun."

Shane frowns. "What?"

Hunter lifts one shoulder. "You two. All weekend." He gestures lazily with the coffee cup. "Gotta be weird, right? Putting your shit aside long enough to play nice for the game."

The silence that follows is brief, but medically significant.

Shane does not move. Ilya, to his credit, does not choke on his beer.

Hunter sees it. And because, unlike half the league, he is not actually an idiot, his expression shifts almost immediately—from amused to *oh, okay, maybe not that joke, then*.

He lifts a hand.

"I mean hockey shit," he says easily. "Not being at each other's throats for a game, hm?"

Shane exhales through his nose.

Ilya, without missing a beat, leans back on his stool and says, "Hunter, how are they still inviting you to these things? Aren't you, like, seventy?"

Hunter closes his eyes for one second like he is asking God for patience. "You make this exact joke every year."

"Because every year it gets funnier."

"It never gets funnier."

"No?" Ilya looks him up and down with deliberate skepticism. "Do they wheel you in for veteran presence? Is there a little senior discount at All-Star now?"

Hunter sighs like a man burdened by the stupidity of youth, but the moment has done its job. The edge goes out of it. Whatever he thought he might have been poking at gets folded back into the usual Rozanov nonsense where it belongs.

He looks at Shane instead and says, easier now, "Anyway. Try not to kill each other before warmups."

Then he walks off before Ilya can insult him again.

The rest of the morning is an exercise in pretending to be normal.

Media, mostly. Group photos. A panel moderated by a former player who keeps asking Shane how it feels to be playing with his biggest rival. Through all of it, Ilya remains somewhere at the edge of his awareness, never far and impossible to ignore.

It gets worse in warmups.

Everything about warmups is worse, actually.

The building is loud in that bright artificial All-Star way—less edge than playoff noise, more delight, more children, more people here to be entertained. The ice feels quick. The air feels overcooled. The music is bad. The jerseys are ugly enough that even he wrinkles his nose at them.

And then there is Ilya, skating by in motion and color and infuriating ease, the Hawaiian shirt gone now, replaced by the ugly All-Star gear that somehow still cannot make him look like less of a problem.

Shane is at the blue line when Ilya curls past him and says, low enough that no one else hears, "If you play badly after dressing like that, it'll be embarrassing for both of us."

Shane turns his head just enough. "You seem very invested in my appearance today."

Ilya grins. "I have eyes."

Then he is gone again, and Shane has to spend the rest of warmups pretending that did not do anything dangerous to his pulse.

By puck drop, he is wound so tight he feels almost calm.

The game begins the way these games always do: too fast, too open, too full of players trying one move too many because why not. Nobody hits properly. Nobody defends properly. Goalies are abandoned to experience despair in cheerful lighting.

And then, somewhere in the first period, Shane and Ilya end up on the same shift and the whole thing changes shape.

For everyone else, maybe, because they're absolute beasts together. But for Shane it is suddenly, blindingly obvious that he knows where Ilya is without looking. That he always does. That Ilya, apparently, knows where Shane is too.

The puck comes up the wall. Ilya touches it once, barely, just enough to change the angle and send it into open space where no one should be yet.

Except Shane is there.

He takes it cleanly and cuts through the middle, two quick strides, one defender drifting wrong because this whole game is organized around *fun* rather than structure. He snaps the pass back across without fully seeing the lane.

He doesn't need to. Ilya is there too.

The shot misses high, but not by much.

On the bench, one of the defensemen whistles.

"Okay," he says. "There's no way we aren't winning this thing."

Shane drinks water and says nothing.

He can still feel it, though. The ease of that exchange. The speed. The total lack of thought between seeing and knowing.

It happens again in the second.

And again.

By the time they get a power-play unit together, it has become impossible to ignore.

Ilya drifts lower on the half wall than he usually would. Shane sees it the same second it happens and slides into the space like the move had been prearranged instead of made out of air and instinct.

The puck lands on Ilya's tape.

He doesn't even look at Shane. He just sends it.

Right place. Right speed. Right now.

Shane catches and fires before the goalie has fully committed.

Goal.

The building explodes in that easy delighted way, louder than it should be for a game this unserious, all spectacle and noise and fans losing their minds in the stands. Shane turns out of the slot just in time to see Ilya coming at him with that bright wild look he gets on the ice when something has gone exactly the way he wanted.

Then Ilya reaches him and smacks a loud kiss right to the side of Shane's helmet.

The crowd roars louder. And for everyone else, this is probably just Rozanov being Rozanov. Obnoxious. Theatrical. A menace in skates.

For Shane, it is immediate catastrophic failure because he grins. A full stupid helpless grin that cracks across his mouth before he can stop it.

Ilya sees it and his own expression goes sharp with satisfaction for one lethal second before he peels away toward the bench, all swagger again.

Shane gets there a few seconds later, sits down, and keeps his eyes on the ice because looking at anyone feels dangerous.

A winger two seats down knocks his shoulder lightly with a glove.

"You guys been practicing in secret?"

Ilya answers before Shane can.

"Maybe."

That gets a laugh.

Shane keeps staring straight ahead.

Ilya drops down beside him and knocks his knee once, lightly, against Shane's like it means nothing.

Then, without looking at him, he says, "You're welcome."

Shane says, "For what?"

"The goal."

"I'm the one who scored."

"Not without my assist." Ilya sounds pleased with himself. "So say *thank you Rozy*."

Shane risks one glance sideways, lips twitching.

Ilya is watching the next line go over the boards, face all innocence. But there is a smile at one corner of his mouth that says he knows exactly what he did, and exactly what that kiss did, and might do it again purely for sport.

Shane says, "Fuck you, *Rozy*."

Ilya finally looks over, and leans a fraction closer and adds, low enough that no one else can hear, "Score again and maybe I will."

Shane chokes on his own water.

Ilya sits back, perfectly composed.

The rest of the bench is occupied with their own nonsense. No one notices. Or if they do, they're blessedly tactful enough not to say so.

The rest of the game should be a blur.

In a sense, it is. There are other goals, other shifts, too much open ice, too many cameras, the whole absurd machine of it churning along around them. But beneath all of it is the constant live wire of Ilya's presence. The way they keep finding each other. The way every touch on the puck between them feels half like hockey and half like something private wearing hockey's face.

It is not just that they are good together.

Shane already knows that.

It is that they are *easy* together in a way that should make the league enstate a rule against them ever playing for the same team again.

Every setup feels natural. Every lane opens at the right second. Every glance lands where it should. Ilya reads him so quickly that it's somehow more intimate than anything that has happened in a hotel room between them.

Late in the third, after another ridiculous sequence that ends with Ilya slipping him the puck through the slot and Shane ringing one off the post, one of the commentators says something over the arena feed about chemistry.

The bench hears enough of it to start chirping.

"Aw," someone says. "Chemistry."

"Shut up," Shane mutters.

Ilya, naturally, looks delighted.

They win, eventually, though nobody will remember the score for long because that isn't what the game is for. What people will remember is the pace, the noise, the ridiculousness of it, the easy show of skill. What Shane will remember is Ilya's mouth against his helmet, the pass on the power play, the filthy line on the bench, the way it had all felt at once impossible and inevitable.

In the tunnel after, still sweating, still buzzing, still trying to move through the postgame crush of people and sound and adrenaline like a sane man, Shane catches sight of Ilya ahead of him.

Ilya glances back.

Their eyes meet.

That same look from the bar is there again, but sharper now, warmer and satisfied.

He slows just enough for Shane to draw level.

"Well done, Hollander," he says.

Shane huffs a quiet breath, but his lips twitch into a smile. "You too."

Ilya's mouth curves too. Then, because he *is* Ilya and therefore cannot leave anything survivable, he says, "Come by later."

Then he moves on down the tunnel and leaves Shane standing there in ugly All-Star gear with his pulse suddenly in the wrong part of his body.

Shane watches him disappear around the corner and thinks, giddy with anticipation that he absolutely cannot wait for later to come.

By the time Shane knocks, it is late enough that the hotel hallway has gone muffled and expensive, all thick carpet and chilled air and the faint distant hum of elevators carrying other people to other kinds of bad decisions.

First: that he should not let him in.

Second: that he is going to let him in.

And third: that whatever happens after that is, from a moral standpoint, no longer his fault.

Ilya opens the door.

Shane takes one step inside, and then they are kissing.

There is no greeting. No joke. Not even the usual half-second of posturing where they pretend they are still capable of choice.

The door barely shuts before Shane has him backed into it, one hand fisted in the front of Ilya's shirt, the other cupping the side of his neck, kissing him like he has spent the last four hours of All-Star formalities wanting to do exactly this and getting more pissed off by the minute that he couldn't.

Which, to be fair, is probably true.

Ilya makes a low sound into his mouth and drags Shane in harder by the hips. He can still feel the game in both of them. It is there in the speed of it, in the heat. In the way Shane kisses now—not careful, not even particularly neat, just hungry and keyed-up and a little rough around the edges like he has not fully come down from the ice yet.

God, Ilya loves him in all his ways, but he loves him like this.

"*Jesus*," Shane mutters against his mouth.

Ilya laughs softly, wrecked around the edges already. "You're the one who came here like you were on fire."

Shane's answer to that is to kiss him harder.

It goes filthy almost immediately.

Hands under shirts. Teeth. The sharp little breath Shane takes when Ilya gets a hand between them and palms him through his slacks. The way he presses in with his whole body like there is no point now in pretending any of this is not urgent.

But then Shane had spent the game skating like a man possessed, taking passes from Ilya like they had been built in the same factory, grinning like that after the helmet kiss, and now he is here in Ilya's room after midnight, all expensive effort and bright appetite and that impossible steadiness fraying into want.

So yes. Ilya enjoys it.

He enjoys it enough to walk Shane backward toward the bed with his mouth at his jaw and his hands already making impatient work of buttons.

Shane lets him.

That may be the most intoxicating part.

By the time the backs of Shane's knees hit the mattress, his hoodie is tossed somewhere in the room Ilya cares very little about and his hair is a mess from Ilya's hands and there is a flush

high across his cheekbones that has very little to do with Florida weather and a lot to do with Ilya Rozanov.

Ilya gets him sitting and then down and then stretched long against the sheets, and for one second he just looks at him.

Shane, gorgeous and impatient and already starting to lose whatever clean careful self-command he had entered the room with.

A terrible tenderness moves through Ilya like a wound.

And because he is not stupid but is unfortunately committed to making bad choices with style, he decides he is going to give Shane exactly what he wants.

Or everything he can.

He drops to his knees between Shane's legs and feels the immediate jolt that goes through him at the sight alone.

Shane props himself up on his elbows.

"Ilya—"

"Shh."

That gets him a look.

"Did you just shush me?"

"Yes."

Shane's mouth twitches despite the tension burning in him. "Bold."

"Be grateful," Ilya murmurs, kissing the inside of his thigh. "I am in a very generous mood."

"Should I be worried?"

"Maybe."

That goes exactly the way he wants it to. Shane's breath catches, his hand sliding automatically into Ilya's hair as Ilya mouths lower, kisses lower, drags it out on purpose because he can and because Shane is already too wound up from the game to survive teasing well.

And God, but he does not survive it well.

That is one of Ilya's favorite things about him, maybe. Shane is never clumsy about pleasure. Even wrecked, he has a kind of focus to him. A concentration. The same exact seriousness he brings to hockey, to routine, to every overmanaged part of his life. Which means that when he finally starts losing the thread, it happens visibly. Beautifully.

Ilya takes his time with his mouth.

He wants him spread open under all of it, stripped down to the part of himself that can't calculate or contain or leave. He wants him flushed and shaking and helpless in all the places he only ever is here. Wants to make him feel so good that when this ends—and it will end, because of course it will, because that is how stories like this work, no matter what Sveta says—Shane won't ever get all the way clear of it.

Won't ever get all the way clear of him.

The thought is ugly. (Tender.) (Humiliating.) (It does nothing to slow him down.)

By the time Ilya starts working him open with his hands, Shane is already half-gone. His thighs keep tightening. His hips keep wanting to lift. He keeps catching himself at the last second and failing to disguise it as anything but need.

"Fuck," Shane says, low and wrecked.

Ilya hums around him just to feel it.

That tears a harsher sound out of Shane and makes his grip go helpless in Ilya's hair.

Ilya keeps him there for a while—hovering, straining, wanting—drawing it out with all the patience of a man making a shrine out of his own doom. He watches Shane come apart in fractions. Watches the way pleasure changes his face. Watches the way all the pretty sharp lines of him blur a little at the edges once he stops being able to hide how much he feels.

He could live on this, probably.

Some of that must slip, because at one point, with Shane flushed and breathing hard beneath him and the room hot and close around them, the thought comes loose and escapes under his breath in Russian.

"Fuck. This'll kill me."

Shane's fingers tighten in his hair. "What?"

Ilya shakes his head and kisses his thigh instead, but the softness has already entered the room, that dangerous little seep of feeling he can usually keep under better control than this. He pauses just long enough for Shane to notice.

That is his mistake.

Shane reaches down, gets his fingers under Ilya's jaw, and says, rough and low, "Hey. Come here."

Regrettably, and entirely too willingly, he lets himself be pulled up.

Shane kisses him hard enough to make him forget the shape of the room for a second. Then again, slower. One hand still at his jaw, the other sliding over his side and up his back like he

is trying to read him by touch.

"Ilya," he says against his mouth, and there is something too direct in it now, too awake.

He's messing this up. He's messing this all u—

Shane kisses him again before the thought can curdle fully.

Then again.

And again. And again. And again again again again. It's like he's trying to say something with his mouth because language is too slow, and maybe not enough, but Ilya's not sure how to translate what Shane's saying. So he kisses back because the alternative is breaking apart.

"Shane," he says, and the name comes out wrong. Too soft.

Shane's eyes flick over his face.

Then he says, in that plain, infuriating way of his that always sounds more sincere than it should, "You were incredible tonight."

"I know," Ilya says, because he cannot survive this if he does not joke at it a little.

Shane's mouth twitches.

"I'm serious."

"That is your first mistake."

"And this," Shane says, one hand sliding down between them, nudging Ilya back toward the bed with a steadiness that makes his whole body tighten in anticipation, "is yours."

He shifts them with the quiet confidence of a man who has already decided what he wants and sees no reason to ask permission for something that clearly belongs to both of them. One second Ilya is half-kneeling, half-hovering over him, and the next Shane has him on his back with the sheets cool under his shoulders and that concentrated look on his face that always means somebody is about to lose.

"Shane," he says, more warning than question.

Shane looks down at him, hair wrecked, mouth red, eyes gone dark and steady in a way that makes Ilya's stomach drop.

"Shhh."

"You canno—"

Shane leans down and kisses the argument out of him.

Thoroughly.

By the time Ilya gets his breath back, Shane is lower, mouth at his throat, then his chest, then lower still, kissing him like he has all the time in the world and every intention of using it. That is what makes it impossible, this strange worshipping, almost, in that Shane way where the devotion hides itself inside focus until it is too late to call it anything else.

"Shane," Ilya says again, because this is not how tonight was supposed to go, because he had plans, because he was halfway through making a very elegant martyr out of himself and now Shane is undoing it with his mouth.

Shane looks up once, from somewhere around the line of his hip, and says, "Ilya."

Then goes back to work.

Shane takes him apart with his hands and his mouth and the same calm, intent concentration he brings to everything that matters to him. As if this, too, is a thing worth doing properly. As if Ilya deserves time. Care. Precision.

That is what breaks him, maybe. It's not the pleasure itself, though there is plenty of that and no mercy in it. It's not even the sight of Shane between his thighs, flushed and focused and plainly enjoying this too much.

It is the feeling underneath it. The unbearable possibility that this is not consolation at all, not pity, not some last sweetness before the inevitable. That Shane is here, now, on top of him, because he wants to be.

The thought is so dangerous Ilya almost rolls them again on instinct. In fact, he actually gets a hand on Shane's shoulder and starts to do it.

Shane stops him. His hand catches Ilya's wrist and pins it to the sheet over his head with a strength that goes straight through him and right to his aching dick. The other settles on his hip, keeping him exactly where he is.

Ilya goes still.

Shane looks at him.

"No," he says quietly, and then, because apparently that one word was not enough to rearrange Ilya's entire world, he adds, "Let me."

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

Ilya's head falls back against the pillow.

There are, he thinks distantly, many reasons this is a terrible development.

Shane, who has no respect for his survival instincts whatsoever, shifts higher, settles over him, and lowers himself with one hand still around Ilya's wrist and the other braced beside his shoulder, and sinks onto his cock slowly.

Then he starts moving.

Ilya's entire body arches off the bed.

This—this is something else. This is Shane taking the shape of control anyway, like this belongs to him, like *he* belongs to him, like the distinction between topping and being in charge has ceased to matter under the force of his own intent.

And Shane is so good at it, which is the real obscenity.

Too good, too competent, too deliberate that Ilya is painfully reminded of how long they've been doing this. Of how much Shane knows his body inside out too.

He moves like he knows exactly what he is doing and exactly what it is doing to Ilya, steady and ruthless and beautiful with effort. Every roll of his hips measured for maximum effect. Every little adjustment surgical. All that hockey balance and core strength and stubborn focus put to the most morally compromising possible use.

Ilya is going to die.

"*Jesus Christ*," he hears himself say.

Shane's mouth curves.

"That bad?"

"You are so smug for someone in this position."

Shane leans down, close enough that his breath ghosts warm over Ilya's mouth. "This position?"

Then he proves his point with one slow devastating roll that strips every thought out of Ilya's head and leaves only white heat and the humiliating fact of his own open mouth.

"Fuck you," he breathes.

Shane kisses him, and it can't be described as anything but filthy because everything about this has gone past the point of decency now. Filthy and slow and somehow still intimate in the way Shane always is when he stops trying to protect either of them from himself. One hand lets go of Ilya's wrist only to slide down and lace briefly with his fingers before bracing beside his head again.

It's too much.

The room narrows.

The game still lives in both of them somehow—in the adrenaline not fully burned off, in the sharpness of Shane's body over his, in the memory of that power play, of the way they had moved together all night like the ice belonged to them.

He reaches for Shane's hips again, just to have something to hold onto before he floats away.

Shane rewards that by going harder.

Ilya bites down on a sound that gets out anyway.

"Look at me," Shane says.

That will not be survivable. Ilya opens his eyes.

Shane is flushed and intent and absolutely wrecked in his own right, hair falling into his face, mouth parted, all that control narrowed down into one impossible point. He is not detached from this. Not managing it from some safe distance. He is in it. Incredibly, visibly in it, wanting.

There is nothing kind about the force of that realization, only ruin.

Ilya says, because he is too far gone to lie well, "You're killing me."

Shane's expression changes. It doesn't go softer, but stranger, almost startled, like he thinks Ilya means it differently than he does.

Then he bends, mouths once at Ilya's throat, and says against his skin, "No."

And for one wild stupid instant, Ilya believes him.

After that there is no rescuing the scene back into irony or distance or any of the other safer things he might have preferred. It turns into something bigger than either of them probably intended. Shane keeps him there with his body and his hands and that awful determined focus. Ilya gives up whatever scraps of strategy he still had left and just takes it, shamelessly now, with both hands on Shane and his mouth open on every broken sound he can't keep in.

When Shane finally comes apart above him, it happens with his forehead pressed to Ilya's throat and one hand tight on his hip and a low rough sound that feels less like sex and more like some private form of surrender.

That does Ilya in almost immediately.

He follows with Shane's name in his mouth and his hands full of him and the ugly, unbearable thought that if this really is temporary then at least it has been beautiful enough to ruin him properly.

For a while afterward neither of them moves.

Shane is still half on top of him, warm and heavy and breathing hard into the side of his neck. Ilya stares at the ceiling and waits for his soul to re-enter his body or formally resign.

Eventually Shane lifts his head and looks at him, still that same intent strange steadiness in his face, even softened now by sweat and exhaustion and whatever else is threading through the room after all that.

Ilya should say something filthy.

He really should.

Instead what comes out is, "You're enjoying this too much."

Shane's mouth twitches. "Yes."

And because apparently he has not done enough damage for one night, he brushes Ilya's hair back from his forehead with such absent tenderness that Ilya nearly has to bite him on principle.

He settles for: "You are still a terrible winner."

"We both won."

That should not be enough to melt him further and yet it does.

And this, he thinks with the last coherent corner of his mind before Shane starts kissing down his chest again in a way that suggests they are nowhere near done, is exactly how a person ends up ruined beyond recovery.

After wringing two more orgasms out of each other, neither of them moves for a while.

This is, Shane thinks, a very good sign.

He's not sure when exactly he became the sort of person who assesses post-sex body language like it's game tape, but here he is anyway: half-sprawled over Ilya in a hotel bed, still breathing hard, with Ilya's hand loose on his back and no immediate indication that either of them intends to ruin the moment.

Which is excellent and promising. Potentially even ideal.

Shane keeps his head tucked for a few seconds longer against the side of Ilya's neck, mostly because moving would require acknowledging that his entire body currently feels wrung out in the best possible way and also because Ilya is warm and smells like skin and sex and hotel soap and something underneath all of that that is just Ilya.

His pulse has not fully come down. He suspects it may never come down again.

Under him, Ilya lets out a long breath that shifts almost into a laugh.

"You," he says, voice rough and a little muzzy, "have killed me, Shane."

Shane lifts his head just enough to look at him.

Ilya's hair is everywhere. His mouth is still red from kissing. There is a flush across his chest and throat that Shane has, with some satisfaction, personally earned.

"That makes two of us," Shane says.

That gets him a look. Ilya's eyes flick up to his face and stay there for a second longer than necessary then he closes his eyes as if Shane has become exhausting in some new and specific way.

But he is smiling.

Only a little. Barely there at one corner of his mouth.

Still, Shane notices. Because he notices everything now. Or rather, he'd always noticed everything about Ilya but he now lets himself acknowledge that he does.

And right now the important thing is this: Ilya is still here. Still under him.

Another excellent sign.

Shane shifts, finally, enough to take some of his weight off, but not enough to leave. He rolls halfway to the side and keeps one arm over Ilya's middle because apparently he has decided to braver than he thought.

Ilya glances down at the arm, then back at him.

Shane waits.

Ilya says, "Bossy *and* possessive tonight?"

"Like you didn't enjoy it, asshole."

That startles a laugh out of him, enough to make his chest move under Shane's hand.

Shane would like, very much, to keep causing that.

So he kisses him again, slow and warm because Ilya is there and Shane can. Because he wants to. Because tonight has gone so much better than he let himself hope, and suddenly kissing him after feels as necessary as breathing.

Ilya kisses back with the lazy generosity of a man not yet interested in returning fully to the world.

Also a good sign.

Shane is beginning to think, with some vindication, that he may actually be getting this right.

Rose had said: *be consistent*.

Rose had said: *say what you mean*.

Rose had said: *talk to him like he exists outside the bed*.

Shane has done all of those things.

And now Ilya has sent him flowers-level signals back, even if those signals are mostly in the form of filthy threats on the bench and dragging him into hotel rooms after All-Star games.

Still counts. Possibly counts more? He'll have to analyze it later. Maybe update his spreadsheet.

He lies there another minute, then another. The hotel room has gone quiet around them, the leftover hum of the air conditioning the only sound apart from breathing.

Ilya reaches one hand blindly toward the nightstand, misses, and lets it fall back onto Shane's shoulder.

Shane says, "What are you doing?"

"Hydration."

"You're not near the water."

"Clearly," Ilya says.

Shane leans over, catches the bottle himself, and hands it to him.

Ilya takes it without comment, and Shane watches him drink, and suddenly he's reminded of a gym years ago and stationary bikes, and he can't help the smile he knows is taking over his face.

Shane feels absurdly pleased by it all.

This, he thinks, is going well. Not just the sex, though obviously the sex had gone extremely, memorably, almost alarmingly well. The whole thing. The fact that they are now lying here in a warm tangle of limbs with no immediate sign that Ilya plans to make some cutting remark and disappear into emotional fog.

Shane knows better than to overstate his position. He is not stupid, but he's also not blind.

Ilya had asked him to come by. Ilya is still letting him stay in bed.

These are facts. Useful facts. Encouraging facts, even.

He is, Shane thinks with a quiet bloom of satisfaction, making progress.

The thought is so pleasant it almost makes him miss the fact that he is now sticking slightly to the sheets.

He becomes aware of this all at once: the sweat, the cooling skin, the general post-sex unpleasantness of being an organism.

He tries to ignore it for a little longer.

Then Ilya shifts his leg against Shane's and makes a face.

"Okay," he says. "Now I feel disgusting."

Shane exhales through his nose in relief so immediate Ilya notices.

"Oh my God," he says. "You were waiting for me to say it."

"I wasn't waiting."

"You absolutely were."

Shane rolls onto his back and looks at the ceiling. "I was being polite."

"That is worse."

"It's not worse."

"It is when I can feel you thinking about hygiene from six inches away."

Shane turns his head. "I was not *projecting* hygiene."

Ilya props himself up on one elbow and looks down at him with open disbelief. "Hollander. Shane. The first time I fucked you, you complained about the sheets being dirty."

Shane laughs despite himself. "They were!"

That seems to delight Ilya, who grins and drops back onto the pillow.

"There he is."

Shane says, "You also said you felt disgusting."

"Yes, but I'm allowed. I have range."

"That's not what range means."

"Sure it is."

They lie there for another ten seconds proving, mostly to themselves, that they are not in a hurry.

Then Ilya sits up abruptly, runs both hands through his hair, and says, "Come on."

Shane looks up at him. Ilya is already turning toward the bathroom.

"We are showering," he says over his shoulder, like this has been mutually decided and only an idiot would require further clarification. "If I have to hear you pretend not to care about being sticky for one more second, I'll throw you out."

Shane gets out of bed immediately.

This, too, feels promising.

The shower in the suite is large enough to suggest someone in hotel design had recently gone through a divorce and wanted revenge on smaller spaces, or decided that shower sex is... well sexier than it is, or maybe both. Steam blooms fast, turning the mirrors soft and useless. Shane steps in behind Ilya and for a second all they do is stand there under the water, letting it run over them, the heat needling life back into overworked muscles.

Ilya tips his face up into the spray and sighs contentedly. Shane watches water run down the back of his neck, over his shoulders, lower.

He is, he thinks, not built for moderation where this man is concerned.

Ilya glances back at him through wet lashes.

"Like what you see?"

"I am *not* answering that. You already have a big head."

"Head, huh?" Ilya wags his brows, but there is no real heat in it. They're both spent.

Then, after a beat, Shane picks up the hotel soap and turns it over in his hands.

"Let me get your back?"

Ilya's eyebrows rise fractionally before he nods.

It's another sign. A very small sign, maybe. But a sign all the same.

Because it means trust, at least a little. Means Ilya turning his back and letting Shane wash him without making a joke.

So Shane does, carefully and thoroughly, and with way more attention than the task strictly requires.

The skin over Ilya's shoulders is warm under his hands. There's still a faint flush across the back of his neck. A mark near his shoulder Shane had put there earlier with his nails catches his eye and something warm and proprietary moves through him before he can stop it.

Ilya goes quieter as Shane works, calmer, gentler. Shane finds that he likes that too much.

He rinses the soap away slowly. Lets his hands drag once, lightly, down Ilya's sides.

Ilya says, without turning around, "You're good at that."

Shane's heart does something embarrassing and permanent.

"I'm good at many things," he says.

Ilya snorts.

Shane is now almost certain his plan is working.

He is being consistent. Attentive. Direct when he can be. He is showing up. And Ilya, in return, keeps giving him these strange quiet permissions. Stay in bed. Shower with me. Touch me here. Still be here when the fun part is over.

They are not small things.

Shane knows the difference between politeness and invitation.

He slides one arm around Ilya's middle and kisses the wet skin at the back of his neck. Ilya leans back into him, just slightly.

"You say I have big head," Ilya says after a second, voice low and half-amused.

Shane smiles against his skin. "Shut up, asshole."

When they get out of the shower, neither of them makes any real move to end the night, and Shane, trying not to overinterpret that, still counts it as a very good sign. They drift around the room in towels and damp hair and the kind of post-sex quiet that ought to feel awkward and somehow doesn't.

Shane catches himself looking at the clock once, then at the door, already preparing to be sensible, and Ilya cuts him off with a casual, *Stay. We should order room service. Tell them to leave it outside*, like it is nothing, like inviting him to remain in the room and then in the night and then in bed with him a little longer is the most ordinary thing in the world.

Shane says yes too fast, probably, and Ilya gives him that sharp half-amused look that means he noticed, but then they're ordering food and Ilya is complaining about Shane's *boring* and the television is on low and neither of them are watching it and—

and because apparently his brain has chosen tonight to become completely unmanageable, somewhere between Ilya trying to shove a bite of fries at him with the command to *try it*, Shane has the bright, treacherous thought that Ilya *would* like the cottage.

It stays with him until they're done with the food.

It stays with him until he looks forlornly at the door, and says he should probably head back. Until Ilya kisses him soft and slow at the door, smile beyond any Shane had ever seen before.

That may be the best sign of all.

Chapter End Notes

ah, you may also have noticed that the chapter count went up by one. oops.

(bonus points to u if u cant figure out where life took over and i had to pause working on this chapter bc i feel like i was two different people during this)

thanks for reading!!! i'll see you in the next one :)

Chapter 3: hope, and other terrible ideas

Chapter Notes

okay. a few things. first and foremost, *thank you so, so much* to everyone who left such heartwarming, kind, sweet comments. to be so honest, i didn't really expect this kind of response to this fic. it really all evolved from a stray thought that if shane had tried to come on strong, ilya would definitely think he's a dog about to be put to pasture, and this is his one last good day. i read every single comment, and i appreciate each one. i do mean to get to replying to them, i promise, but i just need to get a solid chunk of time to do that (but hopefully soon!)

second of all, you maaaay have noticed that the chapter count jumped again. that's because this one was going to be much longer than it is, but once i actually got to writing, i realized this is probably a better ending point than what my outline had initially. sorry! bear with me?

and last thing, this is purely indulgent, but this song ([inventing by matilda mann](#)) is what shane's pov has been so far, meanwhile, ilya's whole heartedly this one ([three oh nine by fenne lily](#)).

ps. if you see any typos, just know that i really tried to proofread, but at some point i think my brain started just not processing the text anymore.

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

Shane does not mean to go *there* after practice.

(That's his first lie to himself.)

The second is that he's only stopping by because it's been a while and he should probably make sure nothing in the fridge has achieved sentience (as if he doesn't thoroughly clean it out after each time they meet there). The third is that it just happens to be on the way, which is *technically* true if a person is willing to abuse the concept of "on the way" beyond all reasonable interpretation.

What is actually true is simpler and much more embarrassing: he misses Ilya.

Not in some abstract philosophical sense. In a very immediate, stupidly physical one. He misses the sound of him in rooms. The way he leaves glasses half-finished on counters and trails of clothes everywhere. The way this apartment stops feeling like a real estate investment and starts feeling like his favorite home the second Ilya is in it.

So yes. Shane goes there after practice.

The building lobby is quiet at this hour, the elevator too slow, the apartment too still when he unlocks it and steps inside. He sets his keys down on the kitchen island and just stands there for a second, taking in the silence like maybe it will rearrange itself into something less accusing if he waits long enough.

It doesn't.

The place is clean, because of course it is. The couch is neat. The bed is made. The kitchen looks barely touched. And yet the whole apartment has acquired, over the past few months, the unnerving habit of feeling wrong when Ilya isn't in it. Not empty, exactly. More like paused.

Shane opens the fridge.

There are a dozen bottles of sparkling water, and exactly three Diet Cokes.

He stares at them, then closes the fridge again and thinks of texting Ilya to see what he's up to, even if the thought makes him feel a little insane.

His phone rings and for one hopeful, fleeting, squeeze of his heart he thinks it's Ilya.

Rose.

Shane answers on the second ring, because there is no point pretending he is too busy for this and because if he lets it go to voicemail she will only become more powerful.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi. Oh my God, sorry, I meant to call you yesterday and then my day got stupid."

"What happened?"

"Wardrobe happened. They held me hostage for like two hours, as if I don't get kidnapped enough in these movies. Then one of the producers cornered me to ask if I'd be willing to 'lean more into relatability,' which I'm pretty sure is not a real sentence."

Shane huffs a laugh and leans back against the counter. "Sounds awful."

"It was bleak." He hears a door shut on her end, then a softer muffled shift in sound.

"Anyway. How are you?"

"Fine."

"Okay, bad start. Try again."

He smiles despite himself. "I'm okay."

"That's better." A beat. "How was practice?"

"Normal."

Rose snorts. "You know, one day I'm gonna get a full answer out of you and I honestly think it'll scare us both."

Shane smiles a little. "It was fine. Sloppy. We were bad in transition."

"There he is." He can hear her smile now too. "See? That's a real answer. Growth."

He shakes his head.

"What about you?" he asks.

"Oh, awful. I was in fake blood for like half the day, and then somebody brought me a coffee with a very interesting milk substitute that I still have no idea what it actually was made of."

"Oh." He's pretty sure she can hear the grimace in his voice so he adds: "How brave of you to drink it."

"Thank you." She pauses. "Anyway. Enough about my suffering."

That tone makes him suspicious immediately.

Rose goes, much too casually, "*So!* How did the weekend go?"

Shane laughs under his breath. "Knew that was coming."

"Obviously it was coming. I've been being chill about it for days."

"No, you haven't."

"I absolutely have." A beat. "Shane."

"There isn't that much to tell."

"*Shaaaaaane.*"

He says nothing.

Rose makes a tiny triumphant noise. "Oh, wow. There is absolutely stuff to tell."

He walks toward the window and looks out at the late-afternoon gray of Montreal.

"It was good," he says, and immediately hates how inadequate that sounds.

Rose goes quiet for half a second.

Then, much softer: "Good good?"

He smiles before he can stop himself. "Yeah."

"Oh my God." She sounds delighted. "Wait, are you smiling right now?"

"No."

"You are."

"I'm not."

"You so are." He can practically hear her pointing. "That's crazy. Wow. Okay."

Shane rubs at the back of his neck. "Don't make it weird."

"I'm not making it weird, you're making it weird by sounding like that."

"Like what."

"Like..." She trails off. "I don't know. Happy. Kind of smug, actually, which is gross."

That gets a real laugh out of him.

"There he is," Rose says. "Hi. Nice to meet this version of you."

He walks into the living room and sits down on the couch.

Rose keeps going, lighter now, less pushing and more curious. "So what, things are just... good?"

"I think so."

"That's nice."

"Yeah."

"What are you doing right now?" she asks.

"At home." Shane looks around the apartment and exhales softly through his nose.

"Mm." Her tone goes lighter again. "Are you sitting there being weird by yourself?"

"Yes."

"I knew it."

He laughs.

"So what's going on in your head?" Rose's voice softens a little. "You missing him?"

Shane says nothing.

She makes a tiny, sympathetic sound, fond.

"Oh, honey."

And because it's Rose, and because she has somehow become the person he says these things to before he's fully ready to hear them himself, it just comes out.

"I was thinking about inviting him to spend time with me this summer."

There's a beat.

Then Rose says, "Wait. What?"

Shane rubs a hand over the back of his neck. "I don't know. I just—" He exhales. "I was thinking about it."

"No, no, go back." She sounds fully awake now. "Like a trip?"

"Maybe."

"Where?"

He hesitates. "Well. It would have to be private."

Rose is quiet.

Shane looks down at his hand on the couch cushion.

"So maybe up at the cottage," he says.

Rose whistles long and low and extremely rude.

Shane closes his eyes. "Don't."

"No, I'm sorry, I just—wow." She laughs, all warmth and delighted disbelief. "This must be true love if you're willing to share coveted cottage time."

"That is not what I said."

"It's what I heard."

He's smiling again, helplessly now.

Rose keeps going, because of course she does. "Seriously, though. The cottage? Shane."

"I know."

"No, you don't. You talk about that place like it's Narnia."

He laughs.

"That's not true."

"It kind of is." Her voice softens a little. "That's big."

And it is. That's the problem. It's not even a grand declaration or some huge irreversible thing. But once the thought came so easily, so immediately, and once it was there he couldn't make it sound casual even in his own head.

And besides, anyone who knew Shane (and Ilya definitely did) had to know that Shane never did anything casually, evidently.

He looks back out toward the kitchen.

"Yeah," he says. "I know."

Rose lets that breathe for a moment then because she is good at not leaving him stranded inside sincerity for too long, she says, "Well. I support this deeply. Mostly because I think you deserve to watch him get eaten alive by mosquitoes."

"That's not going to happen."

"Oh, it absolutely is."

"He'll complain."

"He'll complain immediately."

Shane smiles. "Yes."

"And you'll love it."

He doesn't answer.

Rose laughs softly. "Wow. You're really gone."

"Maybe," he says.

Rose hums. "Are you going to ask him?"

He thinks of the lake. The dock and the screen door and summer light through the kitchen windows. And Ilya there.

"Yes," he says, before he can retreat from it.

Rose makes a pleased little sound. "Okay. Good."

Then, after a beat: "And for the record? I'm very proud of you for becoming just emotionally compromised enough to be interesting."

That gets a real laugh out of him.

"Thanks, Rose."

"You're welcome."

Hope, Ilya is discovering, is somehow worse than despair.

Despair, at least, has manners. It arrives, states its case clearly, and lets a person begin arranging his life around the damage. Hope is cruder. Hope waits until you are already limping along more or less successfully and then reaches down into the mess and sets it all on fire.

This, frankly, feels unnecessary.

Practice ends late and ugly, which at least gives him something external to be annoyed about for an hour. Boston's been on a good stretch lately, good enough that everyone is skating a little faster and chirping a little more and generally acting like a team that remembers that winning can be fun. The room afterward is loud in the usual way, with loud indescribable music, towels snapping, somebody yelling about food, the smell of sweat and soap and damp gear thick in the air.

Ilya sits at his stall peeling tape off one wrist and trying *really hard* not to think (about Shane Hollander).

(It doesn't really work.)

Across the room, Smitty is litigating a case whether soup counts as a meal. Carmichael is talking to everyone at once. Marly is toweling off his hair like he's trying to start a fire with friction. Normal room. Normal day. Normal life.

Ilya has become increasingly suspicious of normal life.

He drops the tape in the trash and reaches for his shirt.

Marly appears in front of him before he can pull it on.

That, on its own, is not alarming. Marly is always appearing places. He has the spiritual energy of a labrador in a dog park. What is alarming is that he is not smiling.

Not much, anyway.

He leans one shoulder against the next stall and says, "Hey."

Ilya looks up. "What."

Marly shrugs. "Nothing. Just..." He rubs at the back of his neck. "You're good, right?"

Ilya squints at him. "What kind of stupid question is that?"

"The kind where I'm asking if you're good."

"I understood the words."

Marly rolls his eyes. "Yeah, okay, great. Then answer."

There are moments—rare and entirely unwelcome moments—when Cliff Marleau accidentally becomes observant enough to be dangerous.

This appears to be one of them.

Ilya reaches for his water bottle mostly to buy time. "I'm fine."

Marly makes a face. "Terrible answer."

"Then stop asking terrible questions."

Marly studies him for a second with the kind of uncomplicated concern Ilya has never entirely learned how to deal with in men his life. Cruelty is easy. Competition, easier. Concern offered plain and unadorned, like it costs nothing and expects nothing, remains deeply suspicious.

"You're doing better," Marly says.

Ilya shortcircuits, and unfortunately for him, it happens before he can stop it.

Marly sees it, because of course he does, now that it matters.

He shrugs one shoulder, already looking faintly awkward about having wandered this close to sincerity. "I just mean... for a while there, you were kind of..." He makes a vague circling motion near his own temple. "Not great."

Ilya laughs once under his breath. That's certainly one way to describe it.

As if October had simply been a rough patch. As if Shane hadn't walked out of his house and taken Ilya's equilibrium with him. As if the weeks after hadn't felt like living underwater. As if the whole team hadn't, in their own awkward male way, clearly noticed something had gone wrong with Rozanov and quietly begun hovering at the edges of him with increasingly obvious concern.

No one ever said anything, but the evidence was damning in hindsight.

More invitations out. More random appearances at his stall. Carmichael handing him sweet protein shakes after games like the sugar might repair psychic damage. Marly once taking his phone away at a club and telling him to "live in the moment" whatever the fuck that meant.

So yes. They had noticed.

He had just hoped they were all too stupid to identify the shape of what they were noticing.

Apparently, he wasn't so lucky.

Marly is still standing there, waiting him out with stubborn optimism.

"I'm fine," Ilya says again, quieter now.

Marly nods, then, surprisingly, lets that stand.

"Okay," he says. "Good."

Ilya looks at him.

Marly shrugs. "I'm just saying. I'm happy you're doing better again."

In a way, that's the problem. Because, well, yes. Ilya is doing better.

He's sleeping more. Smoking less, mostly. Scoring. Laughing at the right moments instead of performing laughter like a trick he remembers from childhood. The team has stopped hovering quite so visibly. Even he has had to admit, privately and with tremendous resentment, that the world no longer feels quite as gray as it did in November.

Marly smiles then, quick and crooked, relieved by the lack of visible disaster, and ruins the sincerity immediately the way only a man like Cliff Marleau can.

"Don't fuck it up this time, Rozy," he says, winks, and claps him once on the shoulder before wandering off toward his stall like he hasn't just detonated something in the middle of Ilya's chest.

Ilya sits very still.

Around him, the room goes on being a room. Someone laughs. Someone swears. A stick hits the floor. Smitty is apparently still not done with soup.

None of it touches him.

Don't fuck it up this time.

The fact of the matter is, Ilya Rozanov is absolutely going to fuck it up at some point. It's who he is. It's wired in his DNA. He is his mother's son, and his father's soldier, and his brother's greatest disgrace.

The worst part is, that there is now a *this* to fuck up.

Because the old story had, if nothing else, the virtue of coherence. Shane was kind. Shane was guilty. Shane was trying to make the ending gentle. Ilya hated it, but he understood it. There was shape to the suffering. A direction. A final scene already waiting in the wings.

That story has become unusable.

This is Shane's fault, obviously.

Not because he has said anything clear. God forbid. Shane Hollander remains pathologically incapable of doing anything in the easy order. No, what he *has* done instead is worse. He has started behaving like a man with feelings and no self-protective instincts. Texting him daylight thoughts. Calling him late at night. Asking him to stay, then staying himself.

Looking at Ilya now and then with that brief naked warmth he never seems to realize he is showing.

And because of all that, hope has started turning up in places Ilya did not invite it. Worse, now that the old explanation has cracked, a new one has started trying to form in its place.

Because now, instead of thinking *this is ending*, Ilya finds himself thinking: *maybe not yet*.

Maybe Shane really does want him.

Maybe this is becoming something.

Maybe the terrible impossible thing has happened, and Shane Hollander has looked at him closely enough to know better and stayed anyway.

It *should* feel good, but it mostly just feels like standing on thin ice and knowing that you're only moments away from the cold plunge, because hope immediately drags its shadow behind it.

If Shane does feel something—really feels it, in the daylight, in the future, in whatever shape this is becoming—then one day he will also understand what that means.

And what does it mean, exactly, to tie yourself to Ilya Rozanov?

The moods. The damage. The habits he keeps quitting and not quitting. The sharpness that is fun in hotel rooms and less charming, probably, once it has to survive ordinary life. The family history. Russia looming behind him like a shadow he can never fully outrun. The fact that if things became real enough, serious enough, there are places he could not safely go back to, maybe ever. Does he want to go back? Not usually. That is not the point. The point is that the shape of his life is never simple, never clean, never detached from what it costs him.

A man like Shane Hollander could—*should*, if he had one inkling of self-preservation—choose easier.

A woman like Rose Landry, bright and public and uncomplicated in all the right ways, not a life that comes with ghosts.

And that's really the crux of the terror under all this, isn't it? Not that Shane doesn't care about him, but that he might care enough to stay for now, and then one day realize the cost.

"*Fuck*," Ilya mutters, and drops his shirt. He'd been planning on showering at home, but he gets up and heads to the showers.

Don't fuck it up.

As if this is just a matter of effort, like Ilya hasn't poured his soul into everything he loved only to have it leave him anyway.

As if wanting Shane correctly will somehow make Ilya easier to keep.

The thing is, he knows what Marly actually meant. Not all of it, obviously. Marly is not psychic. He meant: *whatever has made you seem alive again, hold onto it carefully.*

But *it* is Shane. Shane, with his stupid texts and his thoughtfulness and his steadiness and the way he keeps showing up in the ordinary hours, has coaxed color back into a world that had gone dimmer than Ilya wanted to admit.

No wonder hope has started walking around like it owns the place.

He shuts off the water, dresses fast, and gets out to the parking lot before his thoughts can get any nobler or more embarrassing. By the time he reaches his car, his phone is already in his hand.

God, he should be way cooler than this. Mysterious, playboy Ilya Rozanov. He should preserve the last surviving scraps of his dignity and go home and stare at the ceiling like a normal tragic Russian.

Instead he types:

Ilya: are you busy or are you pretending to work

He sends it before he can think better of it then drops his phone into the cupholder like it's burned him. He doesn't check the buzzing reply until he's driven all the way home.

At 1:13 in the morning, Ilya makes what is almost certainly a mistake.

He has been lying in bed for an hour and twelve minutes not sleeping, which is different from trying to sleep and, in his opinion, much more offensive. The apartment is dark. Boston wind keeps worrying half-heartedly at the windows. His phone has been face-down on the mattress beside him in a show of restraint so theatrical it should win him one of Rose Landry's awards.

It buzzes once with some app notification he doesn't care about. He flips it over anyway.

No new messages.

That should, in theory, settle things. Instead it makes him more awake, because now the thought is back, bright and stupid and impossible to kill: maybe Shane is awake too?

This is not, on its face, an especially dangerous thought. People are awake all the time. Humanity limps along largely because millions of idiots refuse to sleep. The dangerous part is what follows:

Ilya unlocking his phone.

Ilya staring at the thread for a full ten seconds.

Ilya typing and hitting send, with all his mental faculties intact.

Lily: awake?

For one second nothing happens. Then, almost immediately:

Jane: Yes

Ilya stares at the screen.

Well, that's bad. No, worse than bad, actually. Fast is way worse because it means Shane didn't have to think about answering. It means he saw Ilya's name and replied.

Ilya: its late

Ilya: thats very bad for you

Ilya: go to sleep

The typing bubble appears.

Disappears.

Appears again.

Then his screen lights up with an incoming FaceTime call.

Ilya bolts upright in bed so fast he nearly concusses himself on the headboard.

For one deranged second he considers rejecting it.

(This thought survives for less than a heartbeat.)

He answers.

Shane appears on screen in dim warm light, propped against what looks like a headboard, wearing a gray T-shirt and glasses.

Ilya stops breathing.

Oh. Oh, this is catastrophic.

Shane blinks at him. "Hey. Are you okay?"

Ilya, who has somehow managed to live this long while entirely unprepared for the sight of Shane Hollander looking soft and sleepy and bespectacled in bed, says nothing.

Shane's brow furrows faintly. "What?"

Ilya finds his voice with effort. "You have glasses."

Shane, who had clearly not expected this to be the lead issue on the call, reaches up automatically like he's going to take them off.

"They're just reading glasses."

"No!"

Shane's hand stays halfway to his face.

"What?"

"Don't take them off."

For one second Shane just looks at him. Then, unbelievably, he blushes.

It's somehow the worst thing anyone has ever done to Ilya personally.

He shifts deeper into his pillows and props the phone on his knee so Shane can't immediately see the extent of the damage.

"You're embarrassed," Ilya says, because he is still, at heart, a bully.

"I'm not embarrassed."

"You are."

"I'm not."

"You absolutely are." Ilya grins despite himself. "Why? They're cute."

Shane's whole face changes. A tiny startled softness, as if the word landed somewhere unprotected. Then it's gone again, filed back down into dry annoyance.

"They're for reading," he says.

Ilya smiles wider. "I know what glasses are."

Shane rolls his eyes, but he leaves them on, and it's a victory. A strange, specific, deeply humiliating victory.

For a second neither of them says anything. The line hums softly between them. Shane looks warm. A little tired. His hair is flatter on one side like he had actually been lying down before this call. The light behind him is dim enough to soften the whole frame of him until he looks less like Shane Hollander, hockey star, and more like someone Ilya has accidentally called in the middle of the night because he wanted to hear his voice and, disastrously, succeeded.

Shane says, "Why are you awake?"

There are many answers to that, yet none of them are acceptable.

So Ilya goes with, "Insomnia. Russian suffering. The usual."

Shane's mouth twitches. "And you texted me?"

"Yes, I'm aware."

"Just checking."

Ilya laughs under his breath, because yes, of course Shane would say it like that, putting the fact down between them with that maddeningly steady little care of his.

"Well, I did," Ilya says.

Shane shifts against the headboard, and when he does, Ilya catches sight of the book lying open against his chest.

He narrows his eyes. "What are you reading?"

Shane glances down. "Nothing interesting."

"That's true. You *are* the NHL's most boring player. What is it?"

Shane turns the cover a little toward the camera. Some old hockey memoir or history of a dynasty or tactical analysis of a season only Shane Hollander could possibly think counts as bedtime reading.

Ilya squints. "You are on FaceTime with me at one-thirty in the morning reading hockey nonfiction?"

"Yes."

"Shane, I take it back, you are not boring. You are insane."

That gets him a real laugh. Quiet. Sleep-rough. Enough to go right through Ilya's chest. He looks away from the screen and immediately back again, because that's worse.

When he does, he notices Shane's eyes flick to something over Ilya's shoulder. His expression changes, and it's not bad, but it immediately makes Ilya suspicious.

"What?"

Shane's mouth twitches. "Nothing."

"That is not true."

Shane shifts the phone a little, like he's trying not to smile. "What's behind you?"

Ilya frowns and glances back.

Nothing but pillows. The headboard. Blanket. One plush ear sticking out from under the duvet.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Slowly, he turns back to the screen.

"Is that the bear?"

Ilya closes his eyes. "No."

"That looked like the bear."

"It's not the bear."

"Hm."

"It could be any bear."

"Any bear in Metros colors?"

Ilya huffs. "You sent it to me. You are not allowed to be smug about the consequences of your own psychosis."

That earns him another laugh.

Shane pushes his glasses up a little on his nose. "So it sleeps in the bed now?"

"It does not sleep in the bed."

"It seems to."

"It was hidden there."

Shane looks at him over the top of those stupid glasses, mouth still curved faintly from laughing, and Ilya feels something warm and terrible turn over under his ribs.

God, he is so beautiful.

Like the coward he is, Ilya looks away before he says something he might regret. Instead he opens his mouth and says: "Since you look some sort of sexy librarian, read something to me."

"*What?*"

"It's probably so boring, it will cure my insomnia."

Shane laughs again, softer this time, and rubs a hand over his mouth. "Oh, fuck you."

"I wish, but we are too far apart."

Shane rolls his eyes, then turns his painfully undivided focus to the screen.

They look at each other for a second too long after that.

Ilya feels it first, the shift. The way all the silliness and teasing thins out around the edges and leaves something more dangerous sitting quietly underneath.

Shane says, after a moment, "You should try to sleep."

Ilya snorts. "Very sexy. That is what book says?"

"I'm serious."

"I know. Okay. I will listen to you."

That does something to Shane's face. Something quick and unreadable and too warm to look at directly.

Then Shane says, carefully casual, "Call me again if you can't."

Ilya's whole chest goes tight and he smiles a little despite himself.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He should joke. He should definitely ruin it a little, for safety.

Instead what comes out is, "Okay."

Shane smiles back, sleepy and gorgeous.

Catastrophic.

They hang up a minute later, not because either of them wants to but because one of them has to be the adult and, irritatingly, it is Shane Hollander even in this. The screen goes dark. The apartment is quiet again.

This, he thinks, is not ideal. I am in love with him.

Then, because the universe has abandoned all pretense of mercy, he smiles into the dark anyway.

The cottage invite slips out of Shane's mouth on a Thursday.

He had not, technically, planned to say it that night.

This is annoying, because Shane prefers to know in advance when he is about to rearrange the emotional architecture of his own life. But apparently all it takes is Ilya in one of Shane's T-shirts, barefoot in their—er, his—kitchen at nearly midnight, eating a cold cheese sandwich directly over the sink like a raccoon.

"That," Shane says, from where he's leaning against the island with a glass of water in his hand, "is not a meal."

Ilya looks over at him while taking another bite, entirely unashamed. Shane tries not to smile too obviously at the fact that Ilya is still here, damp from the shower they took, because they've become people who put clothes back on and continue existing around each other instead of fleeing the scene.

"It is the only thing in your fridge that can legally be called food."

"There's fruit."

Ilya grimaces.

"There's yogurt."

Ilya points the sandwich at him. "You keep dairy in your fridge that tastes like punishment."

Shane laughs despite himself.

That gets him a look. "What?"

"Nothing."

"You're laughing at me."

"Yes."

Ilya narrows his eyes, sets the plate down in the sink, and wipes his thumb over the corner of his mouth and takes two slow steps toward him.

Shane straightens a little.

"What?" he says again.

Ilya stops directly in front of him, close enough that Shane can smell soap and clean cotton and the faint sharpness of mustard from the sandwich.

"You're being annoying."

"That isn't a reason."

"It's enough of one."

Then Ilya puts both hands on the counter beside Shane's hips, caging him in with the easy confidence of a man who has never in his life doubted he'd be let exactly where he wanted. He leans in and kisses Shane once, slow and warm and entirely too deliberate to count as casual.

Shane's hand tightens around his glass.

Then Ilya kisses him again, harder this time, and Shane sets the water down blindly before he drops it.

There's still damp heat in both of them from the shower, a lingering looseness in Shane's body from earlier, but none of that matters once Ilya is there and kissing him like this, like laughter and hunger are made of the same thing, like one can become the other in a breath.

Shane gets a hand to Ilya's waist and pulls him in.

Ilya makes a pleased sound into his mouth.

That, more than anything, is what nearly undoes Shane. It's not the kiss itself, though it is doing an excellent job, nor is it the pressure of Ilya's body between him and the counter. Very simply, it's the fact of being here again, being reached for again, being the one Ilya comes to after a game and a shower and a terrible sandwich in Shane's kitchen.

He wants, suddenly and with humiliating force, to do this forever.

Not just the kissing. (Though the kissing, yes, absolutely, forever if possible.)

This. Being in Ilya's arms. Having him here in his space, in his night, leaning into him like he belongs there. Like Shane belongs there too, bracketed by Ilya's hands and held in the warm center of his attention.

Ilya bites lightly at his lower lip, then kisses the place better before drawing back just enough to look at him.

"There," he says, voice low and smug. "Much better."

Shane is still half catching up.

"What is."

"You not laughing at me anymore."

And because he is already off-balance, because Ilya is still right there, mouth red from kissing, one hand now loose at Shane's hip like he never had any intention of going far, the words come out before Shane can stop them:

"Come to the cottage."

Ilya blinks.

For one strange suspended second, nothing in the room seems to move. Not the city lights beyond the windows, not the hand at Shane's hip, not even Shane's own breath.

Then Ilya says, "What?"

Shane hears the words again as if from a short distance away. Too late now.

"This summer," he says, and makes himself keep going because stopping here would be worse. "Come to the cottage with me."

Ilya is very still.

Shane is suddenly, acutely aware of everything: the warmth of the kitchen, the damp edges of Ilya's hair, the taste of him still on his mouth, the fact that this is either the most natural thing in the world or completely insane and there is, at present, very little middle ground.

"It's quiet there," he says, which is not remotely the right follow-up, but it's what comes out. "And private."

Ilya's mouth twitches faintly.

"Romantic."

Shane exhales through his nose. "That's not what I meant."

"No?" Ilya's hand shifts at his hip, slow and absent, thumb brushing once over the fabric of Shane's shirt. "You ask men to remote properties all the time, Hollander?"

Shane should probably deny the premise. Instead he says, "No."

Ilya looks at him properly then, all the easy mockery thinning just a little around the edges. He still hasn't stepped back. If anything, he seems more there now, more focused, as if Shane has accidentally pulled them both into narrower air.

"What would we do there?" Ilya asks. The question is light on his face, but it sends Shane reeling with all the fantasies he'd think of before sleeping.

Dock. Lake. Late light on the water. Coffee in the morning. Ilya complaining about bugs. Ilya taking over the music. Ilya stretched out on the couch with bare feet up and acting like the whole place is somehow beneath him while visibly enjoying all of it. Ilya in his space, in his summer, in the part of Shane's life that has always been his most private and easiest place.

All of that is too much to say aloud.

So Shane goes with, "You'd probably complain a lot."

Ilya laughs, soft and immediate.

"True."

"And then," Shane says, because now that he's started he can't seem to stop, "you'd go swimming even if the water was freezing."

"It would not be freezing."

"It would absolutely be freezing."

"I'm Russian."

"That's not how weather works."

"It is for me."

Shane smiles despite himself.

Ilya watches the smile happen, and something in his own expression changes. It warms.

"There'd be hiking," Shane says, quieter now. "And the lake. We cook sometimes. Or we don't. It's..." He stops, then finishes more simply, "Nice there."

For a second, Ilya says nothing.

Then, with a casualness that feels a little too deliberate to be fully real, "I have to be in Russia this summer."

The words lance through him. It's not a no. Not even close, really. But something bigger than either of them all the same.

"Oh." Shane nods once. "Okay."

"There are things I have to do."

"Okay," he says again.

Ilya looks away for a second, toward the dark windows. When he looks back, there's a strange distance in his face, as if part of him has gone somewhere Shane can't follow. He hates that immediately. Hates even more that there is nothing useful to do with it in this kitchen, in this moment, with his hands still on Ilya and the offer already out between them.

Then Ilya says, "But maybe."

Maybe.

That one word lights up every nerve in him like a dropped wire. He tries, with real effort, not to look as pleased as he feels. It is not his best work.

Ilya sees it instantly.

"Oh, don't do that."

"You said maybe."

"Yes," Ilya says. "Which is not yes."

"No."

"But it is also," he adds, leaning in just slightly, "not no."

That gets him.

Shane feels it happen, the smile pulling at his mouth before he can stop it.

Ilya's eyes sharpen with satisfaction. "Again?"

"Shut up."

"No." Ilya slides his hand up, into the hair at the back of Shane's neck. "You invited me to your special Canadian cottage and now you're trying to act casual."

"It's not special."

Ilya just looks at him.

Shane gives up immediately. "Okay. It's special."

"Thought so."

For a second they just stand there, close enough that the rest of the apartment feels very far away.

Then Ilya says, softer now, "Maybe, okay?"

Shane looks at him.

And because maybe is not a promise but it is something, because Ilya is still here and hasn't laughed it off or stepped away or turned it into a joke sharp enough to cut them both loose, Shane nods once.

"Okay."

Ilya studies his face for another second, as if checking that Shane really understands the terms of this. Then he leans in and kisses him.

He kisses back without thinking, one hand sliding higher on Ilya's waist, the other braced behind him on the counter just to keep himself steady.

Ilya smiles into the kiss, and that, more than anything, nearly kills him.

When they finally part, Ilya rests his forehead briefly against Shane's and says, "You're very strange lately."

Shane huffs a quiet laugh. "That's rich."

"No, I'm serious." Ilya draws back just enough to look at him. "Flowers. FaceTime. Canadian wilderness invitations. Very suspicious."

"Maybe I'm trying."

The words are out before he can decide whether they're too much.

Ilya stills.

Shane feels it happen in real time, that tiny shift, as if the air itself has tightened.

Then Ilya's expression does something small and unreadable before settling into something lighter.

"Well," he says, voice a fraction lower than before, "that seems unwise."

Shane smiles despite the strange little kick his heart gives at that.

"Probably."

"Definitely."

Then Ilya kisses him again, harder this time, as if he's decided the safest possible response to sincerity is to ruin the room on purpose.

Shane lets him.

Later, after Ilya is gone and the condo is quiet again, Shane stands in the kitchen with a glass of water in his hand and looks around at the place differently.

Maybe.

He rolls the word around once more in his head.

It isn't much, but it is, unfortunately, enough.

Shane smiles down into his glass like an idiot and thinks that summer suddenly feels very far away.

A month after the cottage invitation, things are going *incredibly* well.

Shane does not say this out loud, because that feels like the sort of thing that invites immediate cosmic punishment, but he thinks it often enough that it probably still counts. A month ago, Ilya had looked at him in the kitchen and said *maybe* in that careful, unreadable way of his, and somehow the entire shape of things since then has tilted warmer.

Well, not in any way Shane could reasonably chart for an outside observer without sounding insane, but it has been *more*.

More texts. More first texts, which Shane notices and absolutely does not track in a new spreadsheet tab. More showing up. More of Ilya in his nights, in the ordinary hours between games and flights and practices. More of that private ease that still feels half stolen and all the better for it.

Enough that Shane, standing in his hotel room in Boston on the night of some extremely expensive charity gala he had briefly considered skipping, has to admit to himself that maybe the cottage invite changed something.

Or maybe they changed something?

Either way, the result is that Shane Hollander is buttoning a black jacket over a dark shirt and trying not to grin like an idiot because Ilya Rozanov has, over the last month, started feeling less like a beautiful ongoing emergency and more like someone Shane might actually get to keep.

His phone buzzes on the desk.

JJ: u better actually come tonight

JJ: if i have to suffer thru this rich people nonsense u do too

JJ: i can't believe hayden bailed

Shane snorts and puts his cufflink on properly before answering.

Shane: Bailed is a strong word for a man wanting to spend time with his family

JJ: see u there capitaine 🗡️

Shane sets the phone down, then picks it back up a second later and opens the thread he actually wants.

Lily.

He looks at the last few messages and feels that stupid private warmth move through him again. A dog photo from yesterday's run. Ilya sending a picture of a ridiculous lobster roll and getting back: *that is too much mayonnaise for your heart to carry.*

Yeah, things are good.

Shane: Are you going tonight?

He sends it, then immediately tells himself to be normal. If Ilya is going, he's going. If he isn't, he isn't. Adults survive this kind of uncertainty every day without needing to stare at their phones like they're waiting on biopsy results.

Shane, unfortunately, has never been especially interested in what other adults manage.

The reply comes a minute later.

Lily: maybe

Lily: not sure yet

Shane stares at the word *maybe* with more suspicion than it probably deserves. A month ago, that answer kept him buoyant for a week. Now, because apparently progress breeds entitlement, he finds it vaguely annoying.

Not because Ilya owes him certainty. He doesn't.

Just because Shane had, quietly and without admitting it to himself in a full sentence, wanted him there.

He types: **Okay**

Then deletes it because it looks weirdly clipped.

Tries again.

Jane: Let me know

That feels normal enough.

Probably?

He puts the phone down before he can improve it into something worse.

Hayden had opted out of the gala entirely, citing "precious freedom hours" and a determination to spend them with Jackie and the kids instead of trapped in formalwear making small talk. Shane's parents aren't coming either. And JJ, while technically a familiar face, has the social subtlety of a marching band and will almost certainly spend half the night introducing Shane to strangers which will definitely drain his already miniscule social battery.

So, ten minutes later, after staring at his own reflection and deciding the jacket does in fact fit correctly and Rose was right and the stylist had earned her money, Shane texts Rose.

Shane: Are you already there?

Her reply is immediate.

Rose: almost

Rose: why

Rose: omg are u lonely

Shane smiles despite himself.

Shane: No

Shane: I just thought if you wanted company we could go together

Rose: awwwww

Rose: that is the most formal way anyone has ever asked me to be their date without asking me to be their date

Rose: yes obviously

Shane: It's not a date

Rose: babe i know

Rose: but i am absolutely telling people it is if they annoy me

He's still smiling when she sends a mirror selfie from what looks like a hotel lobby bathroom, all sleek hair and dark green silk and gold earrings.

Rose: hurry up

Rose: i look too good to wait around for you forever

Shane: That seems unlikely

Rose: wow

Rose: rude

Rose: five minutes

He slips his phone into his pocket and reaches for his room key, feeling lighter now. It should not be this easy, maybe, to be friends with someone like Rose, but it is. She makes things simple in the nicest way. Easy to step into. Easy to enjoy.

And still, on the walk down to the lobby, Shane checks his phone one more time.

No new message from Ilya.

He tells himself not to read anything into that.

The elevator opens onto the lobby and Rose is already there, leaning against a marble pillar like she has been personally arranged by the hotel for maximum visual impact. She sees him and her whole face lights up.

"Oh, thank God," she says. "A normal person."

Shane walks toward her. "That feels optimistic."

"No, you're right." She takes him in, then points at his jacket. "Okay. Look at you."

"What? Is it bad?"

"You look good!"

He feels himself straighten a fraction. "I look the same."

"You absolutely do not." Rose loops her arm through his as if this has already been decided. "This is all very tasteful and effective."

Shane huffs a laugh. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She glances up at him. "Nervous?"

"No."

"Liar."

He smiles.

Rose squeezes his arm once. "It'll be fine."

And Shane, still carrying the small glow of the last month around in his chest like a banked light, believes her.

In hindsight, that is probably where things started to go wrong.

Ilya had not been going to go.

This is true at noon.

It's still true at three, at five, at seven, and even at seven-thirty, when he is standing in his bedroom in nothing but black trousers with one cufflink in and one cufflink missing, staring at his own reflection like it has personally betrayed him.

He had not been going to come because the gala is in Boston, which should already be enough to classify it as an act of aggression. Because he hates rooms full of donors and board members and men who clap too gently and men who remind him of his father.

All true.

Also true: Shane had asked if he was going in that deceptively neutral way of his that always feels more loaded than it should.

Ilya had said maybe then tried pretending that *maybe* was not, in fact, an answer that came with obligations.

Now here he is anyway, because apparently his body no longer responds to self-respect. He had told himself, while knotting his tie, that he was going because it was an event and he was invited and there was no reason not to go.

This is, of course, a lie.

He is going because Shane might be there.

He is going because the last month has turned him into a man who says *maybe* to cottages and smiles at his phone in elevators and wakes up wondering whether Shane saw any dogs worth sending.

He is going because hope has, against all better judgment, started moving furniture into his life.

He is going because after the All-Star Game and the flowers and the FaceTime and the cottage and the quiet dangerous sense that something has changed between them for real, there is a traitorous part of him that wants to see what Shane looks like when he spots him across a room full of other people.

How deeply pathetic of him.

He goes anyway.

The gala is being held in one of those Boston hotels that looks as though it had once been built specifically for old money to have affairs in and has since discovered philanthropy as a tax strategy. The lobby is all marble and soft gold light and fresh flowers big enough to qualify as statements. The ballroom beyond is crowded already, all dark suits and glassware and the low expensive hum of people networking politely.

Ilya pauses just inside the entrance and immediately wishes he had smoked before coming in because he is surrounded by people who say things like *foundation work* with earnest expressions.

Then he sees Shane and for one second everything else disappears.

He is near the far side of the room, one hand in his pocket, the other holding a drink he has almost certainly not touched. Black suit. Dark shirt. Hair neat. Face turned slightly toward the woman beside him as she says something that makes him smile.

Rose Landry.

The sight lands with enough force that Ilya actually stops walking.

It's not like he didn't know Rose might be here. He did. She exists. She attends things. She is glamorous and kind and all the other qualities the universe likes to assign to women who would make perfect sense beside Shane Hollander.

No, what hurts is not surprise.

It's coherence. The two of them together make immediate, brutal sense.

Rose in dark green silk, elegant and bright and easy in her own skin. Shane beside her, sharpened by the suit into something almost offensively handsome, one hand at the small of her back as a waiter passes behind them.

A normal pairing. A public pairing. The kind of thing that belongs in rooms like this.

Ilya stands very still in the doorway and thinks, with perfect miserable clarity: *oh*.

That voice arrives then, the one that sounds, irritatingly, a lot like Svetlana.

You don't know what this is.

True, he doesn't. And because he has, over the last month, become just foolish enough to try on optimism before it kills him, he makes himself keep walking.

He gets a drink first for the deeply medical reason that his body currently feels full of wasps, then he goes over.

Shane sees him before Rose does, and the exact second it happens is obvious.

His whole face changes in a way only Ilya can see, some bright private thing flashing through him before he smooths it into something social and reasonable and still very clearly not neutral.

Ilya hates how much that alone helps.

Rose turns when Shane says his name, and her smile is immediate and easy.

"Hi," she says. "Rose. I've heard terrible things."

Ilya blinks, then smiles despite himself. "All true, I'm sure."

Shane makes a quiet sound under his breath that is probably a laugh.

Rose's gaze flicks from Ilya to Shane and back again, quick as a match strike. Whatever she sees there, she keeps to herself. Her smile doesn't change. If anything, it gets smoother, warmer. Professional-grade composure, apparently.

Ilya, who has spent years reading rooms for danger, recognizes competence when he sees it.

That is almost more unsettling than if she'd looked surprised.

Rose glances between them and adds, "Mostly from sports media, to be fair, which feels legally unreliable."

This is unfortunate, because she is supposed to be easy to resent.

She is not.

She is lovely at once, in precisely the way that makes resentment difficult and self-pity much more efficient. She asks him about Boston like she actually cares about the answer. She compliments his tie in a way that somehow sounds both sincere and lightly conspiratorial. She tells a story about nearly being taken out by a camera rig on set that afternoon, and when Shane mutters, "That seems avoidable," she swats his arm without even looking at him.

They are easy together.

That hurts.

But then, annoyingly, so are Rose and Ilya.

Worse, it becomes obvious almost immediately that Rose is not trying to stake any claim. There is no sharpened edge to her, no little social claws tucked under the conversation. If anything, she seems to be making this easier on purpose, threading him into the exchange with the kind of effortless warmth that makes Ilya feel abruptly guilty for all the terrible things he had prepared to think about her on the drive over.

At one point she says, "Thank God, another person here who hates donor small talk," and Shane glances at Ilya with a look so brief and familiar it feels almost like being touched in public.

The room softens around the edges, a little.

And because hope is actually a bacterial infection with excellent timing, it starts again.

Maybe this is fine.

Maybe Rose really is just Rose.

Maybe she came with Shane because she likes him and he likes her and they are friends and nice normal people do things like that all the time without sleeping together.

Maybe Ilya has not, in fact, wandered into the middle of his own replacement ceremony.

Rose says something funny about one of the auction items and Shane laughs, and for one stupid second Ilya feels something dangerously close to happy.

You know what, that's on him. That's his mistake.

It happens maybe twenty minutes later.

Long enough for him to settle a little. Long enough for the three of them to break apart and reform around other conversations. Long enough for Ilya to think, in some soft unguarded corner of himself, that perhaps he had overdramatized the entire situation in a way that would, if anyone ever found out, be humiliating beyond repair. God, he can never let Sveta know.

He is at the bar then, waiting for another drink because the first one has disappeared without his conscious participation. Someone is talking to him about youth outreach in a tone that suggests they have never met an actual youth. Ilya nods at what feels like acceptable intervals and then glances back toward where he had last seen Shane.

This, too, is a habit now, a reflex.

He looks up and finds Shane across the room.

Rose is against him.

Shane's arm around her waist, drawing her in close.

That look on Shane's face—focused, intent, already turned entirely toward her in that awful immediate way of his. From across the room it does not look accidental. It looks natural. Easy. Like the simplest thing in the world for Shane to reach for her and keep reaching, to keep his hand steady at her side while he guides her carefully toward a chair at the edge of the room. Rose's fingers close over his wrist. Shane bends toward her again, close enough that from here it looks private, close enough that whatever he says is only for her.

Ilya's seen enough.

The rest of the ballroom drops away.

Ah. There it is.

The cold clarity of it is almost a relief.

Because the shape of it makes sense in a way Ilya never really could.

Rose in green silk under chandelier light, easy in the room, easy beside Shane, easy to imagine in every life he might want for himself. No hidden doors. No coded texts. No sharp edges dressed up as charm. No history waiting in the dark with its hand out.

In the end, the answer was always going to be someone who would not cost Shane anything he isn't willing to lose.

Svetlana's voice, hours too late now, says somewhere in the back of his head: *you are doing the saddest possible interpretation again.*

Sorry, Sveta, he thinks. *Turns out I was right after all.*

And because once the thought arrives it immediately begins pulling blood from every older wound it can reach, the rest follows fast.

What did you think this was?

That Shane Hollander was going to go from secret apartment and private texts to building a life around *you*?

That he was going to keep choosing the difficult thing when the world is full of easier ones?

That the cottage meant anything other than a passing bout of sentimentality in a man who has not yet had the time to come fully to his senses?

Humiliating, really.

Because this is what he does, apparently. Takes kindness and dresses it up as fate. Sees tenderness and mistakes it for permanence. Lets himself start believing just because a good man has looked at him warmly for a month and sent him flowers and made him feel alive again in ways that now, standing here at the bar with his drink sweating in his hand, seem almost unbearably naive.

The sponsor woman says, "—and of course visibility matters so much in these spaces," and Ilya realizes with a jolt she is still talking.

He smiles at her. Says something charming. Escapes at the first possible opening.

His body already knows what he is doing before the rest of him catches up.

He hands off his empty glass to a passing waiter. Nods at two men from management he vaguely recognizes. Slips through the ballroom doors and out into the quieter hall with the calm, detached competence of a man exiting a burning building without spilling his drink.

His coat takes too long.

The valet line is stupidly warm.

By the time he gets outside, the air hits him like punishment and he welcomes it.

He does not look at his phone in the car.

He does not check whether Shane noticed.

He does not, under any circumstances, allow himself to think about the fact that he had come here tonight because some part of him had wanted the evening to bend toward Shane afterward.

That is dead now. Actually, it's worse. It's alive enough to hurt.

By the time he gets home, the anger has burned off, leaving only that old familiar hollowed-out feeling underneath. He drops his keys on the counter and stands in the dark apartment without turning on any lights, coat still on, shoes still on, and thinks, with the bitter clarity of a man who has finally received exactly the confirmation he was afraid of:

You almost believed him.

No. Worse.

You almost believed in yourself.

That is the shame of it.

Not wanting Shane. That part is ancient. It's predictable, structural.

The shame is believing, for one bright stupid stretch of time, that Shane might really want him back in some way that survived ordinary life.

The phone buzzes in his pocket.

He goes still.

Does not move.

It buzzes again.

He takes it out.

Jane: Are you okay?

Ilya stares at it until the screen dims then locks the phone without answering.

Because he cannot do this right now.

Cannot read care into that message and start the whole machine up again. Cannot let one simple text soften the image still burned into him of Shane's hand at Rose's waist, his face bent toward hers, the ease of them together in a room built for exactly that kind of ease.

He tosses the phone onto the couch.

It lands face-down.

The apartment stays dark.

For a while he just stands there, listening to his own shallow breathing and the muted city beyond the windows, and what rises up in him is not really even humiliation anymore. It's something older and meaner and exhausted.

Mama, Irina Rozanova, had always told him he had a big heart.

She would say it when he got upset over stray dogs shivering under cars in winter, or furious when someone made Svetlana cry, or soft and careful with Sasha when the boy went quiet and brittle in ways too familiar to all of them.

Such a big heart, Ilyusha, she would say, smiling like it was both a blessing and a warning. A big heart meant he had more room to love people. It also meant there was more room to be hurt by them. But that, she told him, should never be a reason to close it. *Never, never, never*, she'd say, tapping him lightly over the chest like she could knock the lesson straight into his bones.

And then she killed herself.

Ilya is pretty sure the last time he cried properly was when he was twelve, at her burial—no, not burial either, not really, because Grigori Rozanov had apparently decided she had humiliated him enough in death that she did not deserve an audience in mourning black. Ilya had stood there sniffing helplessly beside Alexei, whose fingers kept digging into his shoulder every time their father turned away, hissing at him to stop, stop, stop.

That same night, sick of the tears, Grigori slapped him hard enough that Ilya pitched forward before he could catch himself and hit the floor face-first. His nose took most of it. Not broken, though it bled, and the sting of it brought fresh tears to his eyes, which only made everything worse. Later, when his father disappeared into his study with a bottle, Ilya lay awake and apologized silently to his mother, because already he was beginning to think this stupid heart of his might be more trouble than it was worth.

Years later, he *knows* she was right. It had always been there, whether he wanted it or not. A big heart. Too much room inside him for people. When he left Russia, he let himself see it for what it was. He loved Svetlana stupidly, fiercely. He loved his niece. His teammates. Boston, even, with its ugly winters and rude people and the way it had opened for him anyway. Despite everything, some ugly damaged part of him still loves his father. Even Alexei, probably.

And Shane Hollander—well.

That is the whole fucking problem, isn't it?

Ilya loves Shane Hollander.

But he had loved his mother too, with all the helpless animal devotion a child has, and still it had not been enough to keep her there. So now, standing in his dark apartment with the taste of humiliation sharp at the back of his throat and Shane's unanswered concern still burning from the phone screen, the old lesson rises up mean and familiar:

Ilya's love does not keep people.

It does not make them stay.

Sometimes all a big heart means is that there is more of you to break.

The phone buzzes again.

This time he does not pick it up at all.

Chapter End Notes

how are we feeling? >:)

i really didn't want ilya's "oh, no, no he doesn't like me" spiral to drag out, because i do think he's perceptive enough to realize things are changing, but, still, you can take the man out of russia, but you can't take the russian out of the man.

thank you all so much for reading so far!! ~~i promise, it'll get better!!!~~
see you in the next one :) <3

Chapter 4: break-up lunch

Chapter Notes

i so very desperately tried to get this out saturday, then on monday, but the ao3 curse and grad school curse had a baby and threw it at me, oh my god. i won't lie, this was not proofread too well. maybe in the morning!

anyway! y'all. i continue to be blown away by how kind everyone is. thank you so so much.

(also, i need you to listen to hypotheticals by lake street drive because *nothing* is more Shane-core in this AU. i mean, come on.

I've been playing out a lot of hypotheticals in my mind

I've been writing your name down next to mine

Been imagining all the things you and I could do oo oo

tell me that's not him)

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

By the time Shane notices Ilya is gone, he has already spent fifteen minutes assuming he'll turn back up.

The gala is big enough to lose people in for a while, all chandeliers and donor smiles and politely circulating trays. People drift. Conversations multiply. Doors keep opening into other rooms.

Ilya could be anywhere. At the bar. Cornered by some sponsor. Outside smoking and pretending not to. Shane has, in fact, spent the better part of the last month learning that if he gives Ilya ten minutes, Ilya usually comes back, like a stray cat if he thinks about it.

So yes, at first he assumes it's temporary.

Rose is talking to someone from a foundation whose name Shane immediately forgets, nodding at exactly the right intervals and somehow making earnest philanthropy sound almost interesting. Shane glances over her shoulder once. Then again.

No Ilya.

Bathroom maybe?

He waits another few minutes, lets himself get trapped in a conversation about youth hockey funding, escapes it with what he hopes is not a visible degree of relief, and looks around again to find nothing. No sign of broad shoulders he's intimately familiar with, no head of

blond curls he wants nothing more than to sink his fingers into, no quirked smirk, no blue eyes that definitely see too much.

Nothing.

The room, which had already been too bright, goes a little sharper around the edges. Rose must see something in his face because when she gets free of her conversation she comes over and says, low enough that no one else hears, "What's wrong?"

Shane looks past her, scanning the room one more time.

"I can't find him."

Rose follows his line of sight without making it obvious. Her expression stays smooth. "Maybe he stepped out?"

"Maybe."

But it doesn't sound right even to him.

Because Ilya had not looked like someone planning to leave. He had looked—Shane stops himself there, because this is not the place to start cataloguing looks, but still. The night had been *fine*. Better than fine. Easy, mostly. Rose had seemed to like him. Ilya had seemed to like Rose. Shane had let himself relax into that in a way that now feels, in hindsight, suspiciously careless.

Rose says, "Do you want me to—"

"No." Shane shakes his head once. "No, it's okay."

She studies him for half a second longer, then nods. "Okay. But if you need help, just shout for me."

That gets the smallest pull at one corner of his mouth.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." She touches his arm once, quick and warm. "Go."

At first it's still a search.

The bar. The hall outside the ballroom. The lobby. The hotel bathroom corridor, where one woman is crying and Shane feels his muscles seize awkwardly.

Then he sees Scott Hunter near the elevators talking to two men in tuxedos and goes over.

"Hey, have you seen Rozanov?"

Hunter looks at him. "A while ago, yeah."

Shane's stomach drops an inch. "Where?"

Hunter shrugs one shoulder. "Leaving, I think."

"Leaving?"

"Yeah." Hunter frowns. "You didn't know?"

"What does that mean?"

Hunter lifts both hands slightly around his drink. "Nothing. Just thought you would."

Shane stares at him for half a second, then says, "Right," because anything else would require a level of explanation that is not remotely survivable in this hallway.

He texts as soon as he steps away.

Shane: Are you okay?

The message delivers immediately but he doesn't get a reply.

He waits through one elevator ride and half the hotel lobby.

Still nothing.

Rose finds him near the entrance ten minutes later, coat over one arm now, earrings gone, looking like the polished public version of herself has started loosening around the edges.

"No sign?"

Shane shakes his head.

She frowns. "That's weird."

"Yes."

"You text him?"

"Yes."

"No answer?"

"No."

Rose slips her coat on. "That *is* weird."

The repetition should not help. It does, slightly, because hearing it from someone else confirms that Shane is not being ridiculous. Or not uniquely ridiculous, anyway.

"I'm going to go," he says.

Rose looks at him. "Back to your room?"

And because she is Rose and Shane is tired and annoyed and not interested in pretending to be especially opaque tonight, he says, "No."

Her eyebrows lift.

Then, with almost admirable restraint, she does not say anything smug at all. "Okay."

"Can I get you a car?"

She snorts. "I am an adult woman, Shane."

"I know."

"I'll be fine."

He hesitates.

Rose softens. "Go."

So he does.

Boston at night in a suit feels faintly absurd, like he is playacting adulthood in a new city. The car ride is short and takes too long anyway. He checks his phone three times in the back seat and gets nothing but a text from JJ that says:

JJ: where did u vanish??????

Shane ignores that.

He gets out in front of Ilya's building with the collar of his coat turned up against the wind and tells himself, firmly and pointlessly, that this is a reasonable thing to do.

He is not stalking anyone. He is absolutely *not* overreacting. He's just checking on someone who left abruptly and isn't answering his phone.

A perfectly normal thing.

The building is dark, so maybe Ilya isn't home, but Shane knocks anyway. When he doesn't get an answer, he winces and rings the doorbell, then again.

No answer.

He waits five minutes.

Then ten.

Then, because waiting in formalwear has begun to feel actively deranged, he steps back out into the cold and calls.

It rings.

And rings.

And then goes to voicemail.

Shane hangs up without leaving one.

Okay, now he's annoyed.

He calls again.

Straight to voicemail.

He stares at the phone, then at the dark windows him. The whole building looks sealed. Expensive. Untouched. Like no one inside it has ever once made a mess of his own life.

Shane texts: **Let me know you got home okay at least?**

And because that somehow still doesn't seem like enough, adds, after a second: **Or if you want me to go?**

Did something happen?

Did I do something?

He does not send.

That would be too much.

He stands there another few minutes anyway, hands in his coat pockets, staring at nothing useful while cars hiss by on wet pavement. The cold gets into his ears.

No reply. No light. No sign of movement.

Eventually, even Shane has to admit that there is no version of this where waiting longer on the sidewalk becomes less pathetic or more effective.

He gets back in the car and goes to hotel.

Sleep does not happen.

He lies in the dark with the tie finally off and the suit jacket over a chair and thinks through the evening in ugly little loops, looking for the point where it changed.

Nothing obvious presents itself.

Rose had been lovely. Ilya had seemed—Shane stops there again.

He had seemed fine, no?

At 2:17 a.m. he checks his phone again.

Nothing.

At 3:04, still nothing.

At 6:11, when the room has only just started to pale at the windows, his first clear thought is not anger at being ignored but something much less pleasant.

He sits up before he has fully decided to and reaches for the phone again.

Still nothing from Ilya.

The phone buzzes again.

Face-down on the couch, it sounds muffled and irritating, a trapped mechanical insect somewhere behind him.

Ilya doesn't move.

For one second, he lets himself pretend it's Shane again. Another text. Another small careful reach he is too raw and angry and ashamed to answer tonight.

The buzzing stops.

The apartment goes quiet.

Then it starts again.

He swears softly under his breath, crosses the room, and snatches the phone off the cushion, ready to snarl something mean and angry.

The screen lights his hand blue-white in the dark.

Alexei.

For one *stupid, really stupid*, suspended second, Ilya thinks: *Shane found another number?*

Then he answers, hears his brother breathe once on the other end of the line, and the whole shape of the night changes before a word is even said.

"*Ilya.*"

Alexei almost never sounds uncertain. Cold, yes. Irritated, often. Smug, by default. But uncertain is rare enough that Ilya goes very still before his brother has even gotten to the point.

"*What?*"

A pause, and then, flatly, as if saying it that way might somehow make it less absurd, less final, less like one more family disaster he had both been prepared and unprepared for:

"Father died an hour ago."

The words hit him without meaning anything at first.

It's not that he doesn't understand them. He understands them immediately. Too immediately. It's meaning that lags behind, stumbling uselessly several steps back while the rest of him has already gone cold.

He says nothing.

Alexei takes that for permission to keep going.

"He stopped breathing in his sleep. The nurse found him. The doctor signed the papers already."

Still, Ilya says nothing.

There should, probably, be some feeling recognizable enough to name. Relief. Guilt. Satisfaction. Grief. Some clean emotional response suitable for a son receiving news of his father's death after years of dementia had already been eating the man in pieces.

Instead there is only a kind of stunned internal silence, as if his body has gone into lockdown to stop anything larger from getting in.

"When?" he asks finally, and is almost startled by how normal his own voice sounds.

"I said. An hour ago." Then, clipped and practical: *"The burial is in three days. Book a flight tonight."*

Ilya closes his eyes.

The dark apartment presses in around him. Shane's unanswered text still sits in his chest like a lit wick. Somewhere inside that, the image of Rose in Shane's arms still burns, though dimmer now, abruptly overrun by something older and heavier and much less romantic.

"Alright," he says.

"There is paperwork. Do not make this more difficult than it already is. I already spoke with a priest. You need to pay him when you arrive."

The order of it all is so familiar it almost makes Ilya laugh.

Instead he says nothing.

Years of history pile up in the silence. Their mother. Their father. The long humiliating decline of a man who had once filled every room by force and then dwindled into confusion and rage and blankness. Everything they have never once discussed correctly and never will.

Alexei hangs up.

The apartment is quiet again.

Ilya stands in the middle of it with the phone still at his ear long enough for the screen to go dark, and then lower it slowly and look at nothing.

Father is dead.

He tries the sentence on internally. It still does not fit.

Grigori Rozanov is dead.

That gets a little closer. Not warmth, nor grief, but there's a shape—something real enough to scrape against.

His father is dead and Ilya is standing in a dark apartment in Boston in a suit he wore to a gala and he's heartbroken about Shane Hollander.

The thought is so grotesque it nearly tips over into laughter.

Instead he drops into the nearest chair as if somebody cut a wire in him and sits there bent forward, forearms on his knees, the phone hanging loose in one hand.

Nothing arrives.

There are no tears, no dramatic shattering, no cinematic flood of old hurt breaking open under the news. It's really just shock, and the shock itself is surprising.

And under it, obligation, already moving.

Flight.

Passport.

Bag.

Call Svetlana.

Call the team.

Tell someone something.

There is a practical cruelty to death in bad families. Even grief, if it ever arrives, has to wait its turn behind logistics.

His phone is still unlocked.

Shane's message is there, bright and patient and terrible.

Jane: Are you okay?

Ilya stares at it until the words blur slightly.

The answer is suddenly so obviously *no!* that the question feels almost funny.

He types nothing.

He does not have the strength, all at once, to answer Shane about Rose and the gala and humiliation and now this. He cannot open that door too. He can barely stand up.

Instead he swipes the notification away, and makes himself get to his feet.

The first call is to Svetlana.

She answers on the second ring with, "*If this is you bragging about your Jane at the gala—*"

"*Sveta.*"

Whatever she hears in his voice wipes the joke out of her instantly.

"*What happened?*"

He leans his free hand against the counter and says, "*My father died.*"

Silence, followed by a very soft, "*Oh.*"

He closes his eyes.

"*Alexei called.*"

"*When?*"

"*Just now.*" He swallows once. "*I have to go.*"

"*Alright.*" Her voice shifts fast, into that steelier register he has heard her use with salesmen and bad men and dismissive doctors. "*Okay. Tell me what you need.*"

The words nearly undo him, not because he knows the answer but because no one else would ask it that way. (Well, one person would, but he's not his anyway, so what does it matter?)

"*I don't know yet,*" he says.

"*That's fine. Do you have a flight?*"

"*No.*"

"*Book it while I'm on the phone.*"

So he does.

Opens his laptop. Navigates to the airline site. Pulls his passport from the drawer by the hall. His hands working with eerie steadiness while his mind lags several steps behind, unable to fully connect this ugly practical flurry to the blunt fact sitting at the center of it.

Moscow. There's a flight in four hours.

He books it.

"*Done*," he says.

"*Good*." Svetlana is quiet for a second. "*Do you want me to come over?*"

He looks around the dark apartment. At the couch. The shoes still on his feet. The jacket still on his body. The whole room still holding the stale aftermath of a night that now feels like it happened to someone else.

"*No*," he says.

"*You sure?*"

No.

"*Yes*."

She exhales and lets him keep the lie. "*Call me from the airport*."

"*Okay*."

"*Ilyusha?*"

He waits.

Her voice softens. "*You don't have to feel anything specific tonight*."

It's not comfort exactly. More like permission to stop trying to locate the correct response in a family that has never once offered him a correct way to feel.

"*Okay*," he says again, and this time it comes out rougher.

When he hangs up, the apartment is quiet for maybe ten seconds before it all starts again.

Team text first.

Short and impersonal: *Family death. Need to leave tonight*.

Another to management.

Then the suitcase.

He packs badly, which is how he knows somewhere in the back of his mind that this is serious. He usually packs with the economical precision of a man who has spent his whole adult life in hotels. Tonight he throws things in. Black sweater. Black shirt. Black coat. Toiletries. Chargers. The nice watch he hates and wears to funerals because that's what a summoned son does when returning to one's father's grave.

He changes out of the suit.

The tie comes off first, then the shirt, then the trousers in an ugly heap on the bedroom floor.

The sight of them there does something sharp and immediate to him, because suddenly the whole evening rushes back in around the edges of the death.

Rose in green silk.

Shane's arm around her waist.

His own idiotic hope, his own exit, his own silence.

And underneath that, quieter but somehow worse: *Shane had texted. Shane had noticed. Shane had cared enough to ask.*

Ilya kicks the heap away then sits down on the bed in a clean black T-shirt and stares at the phone now lying beside his passport.

He could answer.

He could type: *my father died.*

Three words. Three manageable words, objective, almost bloodless.

He picks the phone up.

Unlocks it.

Jane: Are you okay?

The cursor waits.

Ilya's thumbs hover over the keyboard then stop.

Because if he sends that, Shane becomes real again in tonight. Not just hurt and maybe misunderstanding and the convenient cruelty of the gala image, but Shane as he has actually been for the last month—trying, reaching, steady, bright-eyed over FaceTime, asking him to come to the cottage, texting him thoughts as if there might genuinely be a place for Ilya in the ordinary middle of his life.

And Ilya cannot bear that right now, not on top of this, not while the old country is already opening its mouth to swallow him whole and old wounds have ripped themselves open to bleed him dry.

So he locks the phone again and tosses it into the suitcase, even though that doesn't make sense but he suddenly cannot stand to keep seeing it.

A car takes him to the airport less than an hour later.

Boston is black and wet at this time of night, all ugly light and empty intersections and the ugly shine of city roads after midnight. He sits in the back seat with his coat on and his suitcase beside him and watches his reflection stutter in and out of the window glass.

Father is dead. Hm.

Still nothing, or... not nothing.

Something harder to sort. A knot of old fear and irritation and guilt and a child's useless primitive grief, not for the man Grigori Rozanov became or always was, but for the simple impossible fact that there will now never be any later version of the story. No repair. No final reckoning. No sudden miraculous scene of paternal recognition in which his father looks at him and, against every available piece of evidence, decides to love him properly after all.

Not that Ilya had believed in that. He's not *stupid*.

But death closes even the stupid doors.

The airport is too bright for this night. Everything in it happens by muscle memory: Check-in. Passport. Security. Gate.

He buys coffee he doesn't want, so he doesn't drink it.

His phone stays buried in the bag until he is seated on the plane and then it stays buried in his pocket until the overhead bins are closed and there is nowhere left to move.

Only then does he take it out again.

Three more messages.

One from his coach.

Three from Marly.

One from Svetlana.

One from Shane.

His pulse misfires.

He opens that one first.

Jane: Let me know you got home okay at least?

He stares at it until boarding static crackles overhead and someone two rows back argues about carry-on space in a voice bright with the conviction that their inconvenience matters.

Shane had been waiting for an answer to one disaster while another, much older one, was already crashing into this forsaken night.

For a second he thinks, absurdly: *what if I told him now?*

Here, thirty thousand feet from courage, buckled into place, beyond undoing. How much worse can it get, really?

But the engine whines louder, the plane shudders once as it starts to push back, and the moment passes.

Ilya types only one message before switching to airplane mode.

Not to Shane, to Sveta.

Ilya: boarding

Then he puts the phone in his pocket again and closes his eyes as the plane begins to move.

Below him, somewhere in Boston, Shane Hollander is still a problem he does not know how to solve.

Ahead of him, Russia waits with a coffin and a brother and all the old versions of himself he had been hoping, for one beautiful stupid month, that he might have finally outskated.

He presses his head back against the seat and thinks, not for the first time in his life, that timing is a particularly vicious form of fate.

By the time the plane lifts off, he still has not answered Shane, and the worst part is that some small exhausted piece of him already misses him.

By the time Shane gets back to Montreal, the silence has started to feel personal in ways he does not enjoy examining.

It's not an open wound quite yet. Shane is still capable of functioning. He gets off the plane. He goes home. He unpacks. He gets up the next morning. He does video review. He laces his skates. He lives, apparently, in a world still willing to proceed without first settling the matter of why Ilya Rozanov walked out of a gala and then disappeared off the face of the earth.

Ilya has not answered.

Not the text from the gala. Not the one after. Not the next morning. Not the stupidly careful, deliberately undemanding one Shane sent from the airport before boarding the team flight home.

It has him unmoored, and the problem is that Shane has, over the last month, gotten used to a certain shape of things. Nothing large enough that someone else might notice it with a naked eye, but he'd gotten used to the patterns; the routine.

A late-night text from some hotel room somewhere with a joke too stupid to be worth sending to anyone else. The particular quiet relief of seeing Lily at the top of his phone. The even more specific relief of watching Ilya come back after drifting off somewhere, as if the room reorients itself every time he does.

Shane had not realized how quickly a person could become accustomed to being found.

Now he does.

So, *now*, he also knows how unpleasant it feels when that particular pattern breaks.

The Metros room before morning skate is loud in the usual ugly way, full of velcro ripping and loud chirping that, frankly, should be saved for opposing teams. Shane sits at his stall retaping his stick slower than necessary and checks his phone once more before forcing himself to put it facedown beside him.

In theory, he should be angry by now, but in reality, he's starting to feel so worried in a way that's beginning to feel like an illness.

And it doesn't help that the room around him has suddenly found a new point of interest in the shape of all that's plaguing his mind.

Rozanov didn't fly out with Boston.

That fact moves through the Metros in waves, growing louder and dumber each time it changes mouths. A chirp from one side of the room becomes speculation from the other. Someone says maybe he finally got suspended for sleeping with a married woman. Someone else wonders whether he fucked a teammate's WAG and they're trying to keep it hush hush. There's laughter that's starting to grate on Shane, and he wants nothing more than to tell them all to *shut the fuck up* because Ilya is not like that.

He keeps his head down.

Usually, he lets this kind of thing burn itself out anyway. The room is the room. If he intervened every time one of his teammates said something stupid, he would never have time to do literally anything else.

JJ is halfway into his base layer when he says, louder than necessary, "No, seriously. I heard something."

That cuts through the noise in a different way that Shane looks up before he can stop himself.

JJ notices, because unfortunately JJ notices anything worth weaponizing for social use, and instantly looks more pleased to have an audience.

"One of the Bears guys knows someone on their staff," he says. "Apparently there was a death in the family."

The air in the room changes. Even here, even with men like these, death still has the power to drag the stupid out of the air for half a second.

Shane feels the whole internal shape of the last two days rearrange itself around the sentence.

A death in the family. *Oh. Fuck.*

"Shit," says one of the defensemen quietly.

"Yeah," JJ says, and his voice has gone flatter now. "So maybe don't be assholes about it."

That should have been enough. It would have been enough in a better room.

Comeau snorts from where he's lacing his skates and says, "Good. Hope he stays gone."

The sentence barely finishes existing before Shane says, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Somehow, a room of 23 men goes so silent, Shane can hear his own heartbeat.

Comeau looks up, more surprised than ashamed, which is somehow worse.

Shane is already on his feet.

He had not, consciously, decided to stand. His body got there first. Which is, in retrospect, maybe the most alarming part.

Comeau blinks at him. "What?"

Shane takes one step forward.

Someone's tape roll drops somewhere to his left and keeps rolling a little across the floor.

"You heard me," Shane says.

He doesn't raise his voice nor does he need to. That's the thing about being captain for years, about being the one who doesn't waste authority on nonsense: when he does spend it, everyone notices.

Comeau gives a short incredulous laugh, the kind men use when they are trying to figure out whether they're actually in trouble.

"I'm just saying—"

"No," Shane cuts in. "You're being a piece of shit."

Comeau straightens, skates half-done. "I didn't mean—"

"I don't care what you meant." Shane's voice stays flat, which is probably why it sounds angrier than if he'd snapped. "Someone in his family died."

Comeau glances around the room for backup, but everyone is shifting from one foot to the other, interested in anything else outwardly.

Shane keeps going.

"If you can't manage basic decency for five minutes, keep your mouth shut."

The silence after that is stunned.

Comeau mutters, "Fine, whatever," but the word lands weak and small and not remotely equal to the space he took up with the first one.

Shane holds his gaze for one more second, long enough to make it clear that fine is not remotely the point, then turns away before he says something worse.

His pulse is too high.

That annoys him too.

He sits back down and reaches for his stick again, though there is nothing left to tape.

The room stutters awkwardly back into motion around him. Someone changes the music. Someone asks about the new shower soap in a voice that sounds determinedly normal. Hockey rooms are, at heart, cowards when confronted with actual feeling.

Hayden crosses over and stops near Shane's stall.

"That was a lot," he says quietly.

Shane keeps his eyes on the tape in his hands. "He deserved it."

"Yeah," Hayden says. "He did."

Then, lower: "You okay?"

Shane almost laughs because apparently every question in his life has become that question, and he has yet to develop an answer that is either useful or true.

"No," he says before he can stop himself.

Hayden goes quiet while Shane stares at the blade of his stick and hears the word sitting between them with more honesty than he had intended to offer anyone in this room.

Then, because he cannot leave it there without feeling absurdly exposed, he adds, "Not really."

Hayden assesses him quietly, leaning one shoulder against the next stall.

"That sucks," he says.

Shane nods once.

It does, because now he knows enough for the worry to have shape but not enough to do anything useful with it. A death in the family. That means Ilya is in Russia, probably. Dealing with a funeral, wills, and somehow, all the ugly machinery of loss is suddenly explaining the silence and everything is worse for it because Shane has spent two days thinking the problem was him.

Now the problem is that something terrible happened and Ilya is gone and Shane has no place in that situation except the one he can make for himself from a distance.

Which is not enough.

Worse yet, Ilya hadn't even told him. Didn't think Shane should know, or would want to know. (Didn't think Shane could help?)

Shane reaches for his phone before he can think better of it.

Still nothing from Ilya, no sign that any of Shane's carefully measured messages have landed anywhere but the void.

He opens the thread anyway.

His own texts stare back at him in increasingly stripped-down order.

Ilya, just let me know you're safe.

Did something happen?

Call me when you see this

He doesn't remember sending the last one. Or rather, he remembers sending it; he does not remember deciding to.

His thumb hovers over the keyboard.

What do you write to someone whose father has just died when you don't know if they want you, or can stand you, or are even in a place to answer?

Nothing good presents itself.

That has not, traditionally, stopped him.

He types:

Shane: I heard about your father

Shane: I'm sorry

Shane: You don't have to answer

Shane: I'm here

He stares at it once.

Sends it.

And then, because apparently he is still enough of a romantic idiot to hope for impossible things inside fluorescent morning light and a room full of skates and tape and bad music, he waits half a second with the phone in his hand anyway.

"Five minutes!" one of the assistant coaches calls from the hall.

The room starts moving for real now. Helmets. Gloves. Bodies hauling themselves toward the day because that is what life does: it keeps asking for the next thing.

Shane leaves his phone in his stall and stands.

The bright stupid private lighness of the last month, and all the little impossible ways Ilya had begun to fit himself into the shape of Shane's life, has not vanished.

But it has changed. Became a little heavier, maybe. More real. A lot less like a secret pleasure and more like something the world can actually hurt.

Shane follows the team out toward the ice with that knowledge sitting in him like a stone.

For once, he is so grateful to how Moscow receives him without ceremony and very little fanfare, even if he's been hailed their team's pride and joy ~~had he not lost to fucking Latvia~~.

The airport is busy, the taxi line too long, the air outside sharp with cold and exhaust and that particular winter dampness that always makes the city smell faintly metallic, as if the whole place has been left too long and was beginning to oxidize. Ilya stands on the curb with his bag and his coat zipped to the throat and feels, with immediate bodily certainty, that he has made a mistake.

Not that coming back was ever optional, but being here definitely feels wrong in a way that makes his skin itch.

The driver does not talk. Thank God for small mercies. Moscow slides past the window in smeared gray ribbons of traffic and dirty snow and apartment blocks, familiar in the way fading bruises are familiar. Ilya had kept the apartment because of course he had. Rich men and damaged men are both very good at convincing themselves that maintaining a foothold somewhere means they still have choices.

When he lets himself in, the place smells closed-up and faintly stale, like air that has gone too long without being breathed by anyone who lives there on purpose. He drops his bag inside the door and stands for a second in the silence, looking at the neat furniture and the clean kitchen and the untouched surfaces.

His phone buzzes once in his pocket.

He doesn't take it out.

Instead he goes to the bathroom, washes his face in cold water, changes his shirt, and stares at himself in the mirror until his own reflection starts to look like a distant relative he was once warned about as a child.

Then he grabs his keys and goes back out.

The house he grew up in is still exactly where he left it, and it feels a lot smaller than the massive expanse that used to suffocate his lungs.

He lets himself in with the old key. That, more than anything, twists something unnamable in him. The fact that the key still works. That this place, which has spent years making itself less and less his, still opens to his hand on the first try like nothing has changed.

His first real thought is that it's too warm inside, like he's being embalmed. The hallway runner is the same. The umbrella stand is the same. A gilt-framed mirror still hangs crookedly near the front closet because his father had once slammed the door hard enough to rattle the wall and no one had ever bothered to fix it.

It's all intact, and he hates it, because his mother was *erased* here, layer by layer until she was gone altogether.

He closes the door softly behind him and stands in the hall listening—nothing.

No voices. No footsteps. No television muttering in another room. The house feels temporarily abandoned, paused between ownerships, and that makes it easier somehow. He had not wanted witnesses for this. Not Alexei. Certainly not Polina.

He takes off his gloves, slips them into his coat pocket, and walks slowly toward the back of the house.

The library is where he goes first. He doesn't expect anything, because he has learned, over years of losing things in increments, that expectation is a good way to make disappointment feel theatrical.

He is not here to be theatrical.

He is here because the man that used to sleep upstairs is dead and because he is not sure, with a clarity that feels almost physical, that he will ever willingly set foot in this house again.

If there is anything of hers left, he wants it now.

The library still smells like old paper and radiator heat and dust. Most of the room remains what his father had wanted it to be: polished shelves, handsome spines, the visual suggestion of seriousness. But a small part of it used to be hers. A chair by the window. A lamp too soft for Grigori's taste. Lower shelves where books had once gathered in crooked stacks because Irina had actually read them and never cared much about returning them properly.

The chair is gone.

So is the lamp.

The space where they should be is clean in the way absence is clean.

Ilya stands in the doorway with his hands in his pockets and feels the air thin a little in his chest, so he heaves a breath and goes in and starts looking.

At first he looks badly. Too fast, too angry, fingers skimming over spines, pulling books free and shoving them back, checking low shelves and side tables and drawers with a kind of contained urgency that would embarrass him if anyone were here to see it.

There is no reason there should be anything left.

Polina never liked traces of Irina in the house.
His father liked them even less.

But still, he would never forgive himself if he didn't check.

Behind two heavy volumes of military history, shoved almost sideways into the shelf as if hidden in haste and forgotten there, he finds a faded clothbound copy of *Anna Karenina*.

His hands are surprisingly steady as he pulls it free.

The cover is worn white at the corners. The spine is cracked. When he opens it, the pages give with that soft old-paper resistance that belongs to books actually handled by human hands. And there, in the margin halfway through the first chapter, in pencil gone pale with time, is his mother's handwriting.

Small, slanted, looping Cyrillic, so familiar that it knocks the breath out of him.

He stares at it until he can't anymore and turns the page.

There's another note. Then another a little later, drier, sharper, exactly like her voice at its most amused.

A laugh gets out of him before he can stop it. It sounds wrong in this room, this house. Or maybe it's just right; thin and startled and too close to breaking into something else.

He lowers himself into a crouch without meaning to, one hand braced on his knee, the book open in the other. For a moment the whole scene around him disappears—the house, the death, the city, the years—and all that remains is the shape of her mind on paper. She's not even saying anything important. Underlining some line about love or consequence or vanity and writing some merciless little note in the margin as if the book had been having a conversation with her.

He closes it carefully and tucks it under his arm.

After that, the search is a little less frantic.

He checks the sideboard in the sitting room. The drawers of the console near the stairs. The old cedar chest in the downstairs hall where winter things used to be kept. Most of it is junk now—table linens, mismatched gloves, batteries too corroded to save, a stack of holiday cards from people no one had liked even when they were alive.

Then, beneath a pile of old placemats, he finds the scarf.

Blue wool. Narrow. Soft from wear, one edge coming loose where the stitching had frayed.

He lifts it with both hands.

For one absurd second he brings it toward his face like something in him still believes scent might survive decades. It smells like cedar and drawer and old house.

He wraps it once around his neck before he can think better of it.

The wool settles there with immediate familiarity, a weight so light it nearly hurts. He remembers her wearing it rinkside during his practices, cheering him on with a wide smile. He remembers burying his face in it once as a child after falling asleep on the couch, half awake and warm and certain the world could still be organized into categories like mother and home and safe.

That certainty had not lasted. The scarf had, apparently, out of spite or maybe little mercy.

The photographs take longer.

He finds them not in any album but in an old linen closet upstairs, shoved into a storage box with more dead batteries, instruction manuals, spare cords, and one cracked picture frame. It is such a stupid place to put photographs that at first he thinks he has found the wrong box entirely. Then he lifts a stack of receipts and there they are beneath, loose and bent and stuck together at the edges with age.

His knees give out in the hallway. The box settles between them. The scarf is still around his neck. The book rests under his arm like something rescued from a fire.

For a while he just looks.

His mother on the dacha steps with both boys, Alexei already trying to look older than he was, Ilya red-faced and furious about something outside the frame. Irina in a winter coat, laughing at whoever stood behind the camera, eyes squeezed half shut against snowlight. The three of them at a New Year's table before Polina, before the slow collapse, before Grigori's rages became something the whole house learned to live under.

Younger Ilya looks softer than he remembers. Open in a way that feels almost embarrassing now. All big eyes and sunburn and badly hidden feeling, the kind of child who had not yet learned that softness came with a cost.

He smiles a little despite himself.

Shane would have a field day with these.

That thought arrives so naturally it startles him.

Shane squinting at the picture in that concentrated way of his, examining it like evidence. Saying something dry and devastatingly specific in that way of his that makes Ilya's heart lurch. Asking, maybe, to keep one. Or wanting to see another. Wanting proof that Ilya had once been small enough to stand in his mother's shadow and make faces at cameras and burn in summer sun like any other child. Wanting more of Ilya, sharp edges and all.

Ilya wonders, briefly and with a softness he does not trust, whether Shane would show him pictures of himself in return.

A smaller Shane. Awkward maybe. Freckled, definitely. Some Canadian lake somewhere behind him. Shane in a life jacket too big for him and already somehow taking responsibility for everyone else on the dock.

The thought is so gentle it nearly does him more damage than anything else in the house.

He blinks hard and looks back down at the photographs.

There are more here than he can reasonably take. For one hot irrational second he wants all of them. Wants to strip the house clean. Wants to carry every surviving piece of his mother out in his arms and leave the rooms blank behind him.

Then the feeling passes, because he knows, with the same old reluctant generosity that keeps ruining his life in multiple countries, that Alexei was her son too even if he would never come looking.

So Ilya chooses his favorites in rush of selfishness. He slides them carefully into the inside pocket of his coat.

Then, at the bottom of the box, he finds the album.

It is falling apart. The spine is half detached. The plastic sleeves have clouded with age, and one whole corner is held together by tape that has browned into uselessness. It is ridiculous, really, that something this fragile has outlived both marriages and one suicide and one long degrading death.

He lifts it anyway and a few pages come loose in his hands.

"Christ," he mutters softly, and sits there with the album open across his lap, turning pages more carefully now.

Birthday candles. School uniforms. A summer at the sea he had not thought about in years. Irina with both boys asleep on her, head thrown back against the couch cushions, mouth open in exhausted laughter at whoever had the camera. That one hurts so suddenly he has to stop.

Fuck Alexei. He takes the album.

The book and album tucked under one arm. The scarf around his neck. The photos against his chest. It would all be absurd if it didn't feel so much like theft from the dead.

He stands and takes one last look down the hallway, but the house gives nothing back.

No revelation. No blessing. No sign that he has done the right thing. Only overheated air and the old wallpaper and silence.

Fine. He leaves anyway.

He stands on the front steps for a second longer than necessary, key still in his hand, scarf tucked close against his throat, and feels the small strange comfort of having taken something with him that that house can no longer swallow back.

His phone buzzes in his pocket.

He already knows who it is before he looks.

Jane: I heard about your father

Jane: I'm sorry

Jane: You don't have to answer

Jane: I'm here

The universe has a truly mean sense of timing. He wants, suddenly and with humiliating force, to show him all the pieces of Ilya. The proof that once, before all the damage settled in for good, he had simply been somebody's difficult beloved little boy.

He locks the phone without answering, even though he really wants to. Too much, even. But he's in the wrong city, at the wrong time, standing outside the house where every soft thing had eventually been used against someone.

He puts the phone back in his pocket and walks down the steps with the album beginning to shed little flakes of old glue against his coat.

Ahead of him, somewhere across the city, waits a burial and his brother and all the ugliness that follows a death in a family like this one.

But for one brief cold block of Moscow afternoon, Ilya carries his mother home in pieces and lets himself imagine, just for a second, what it might feel like to place those pieces in Shane Hollander's hands and have them held carefully there.

Shane Hollander is a master at compartmentalizing. He makes dinner because he does not know what else to do with his hands.

It's not even an interesting dinner, but it's just fuel for his body anyway. He doesn't need to enjoy it. Salmon, brown rice, broccoli. A little olive oil. Lemon. Salt measured with the same tired precision he uses for everything when his head gets too loud and he needs the world to return to units and times and surfaces he can control.

It would be almost funny, if anyone were here to laugh at him. Him, standing in his kitchen at eight-thirty on a Thursday, checking the oven timer and his phone both with equal intensity like either one might save him from himself.

The phone remains useless. He sets the knife down beside the cutting board and picks it up again anyway.

Still nothing.

That should not hurt as much as it does. They're not teens. Shane is not sixteen. He is a grown man, a captain, an adult with a life plan and a very respectable fish fillet in the oven.

Still, there's a humiliatingly specific kind of silence that only comes from one person not texting you back.

He puts the phone face-down on the counter and forces himself to plate the food.

His own place has never felt large, exactly, but tonight it feels arranged around absence. Too much space where there should, irrationally, maybe be someone leaning against the fridge saying something terrible about steamed broccoli.

He thinks of Ilya in Russia and has to stop moving for a second. It makes him frown though he can't name why. He stabs the broccoli harder than necessary and sits down.

The first bite tastes like duty. He eats three more before giving up and setting the fork down.

The phone sits on the table now, within reach but facedown still, as if keeping the screen hidden counts as restraint. Shane stares at it.

Calling would be too much, right?

No—maybe not too much exactly. Just intrusive, selfish. Calling would satisfy Shane's need to hear him, not necessarily help Ilya. And the whole point, Shane reminds himself for what feels like the thousandth time in the last two days, is that this is not about Shane.

He still picks the phone up.

Puts it down again.

Picks it up.

Opens the message thread.

Nothing.

His thumb hovers over Ilya's name.

He could call and say nothing complicated. Just check in. Just hear his voice. Just—

The screen lights up in his hand.

Lily calling.

For one wild second Shane just stares at it.

Then he answers so fast he nearly drops the phone.

"Ilya?" His heart is pounding way too hard for an athlete of his aptitude.

"Hi."

The voice on the other end is low and rough and wrong in a way that goes straight through Shane's ribs. It doesn't sound like he'd been crying—not even close. But the timbre of it is scraped down to something thin and exhausted, as if every unnecessary word has already been used up somewhere else.

Shane stands so quickly his chair legs drag against the floor.

"Hey," he says, already softer. "Hey."

He can hear Ilya breathing. Something in the background too—traffic, maybe, muted through glass.

Shane leaves the kitchen table where it is and walks, without deciding to, into the living room. He sits on the edge of the couch because standing suddenly feels too exposed.

"I wasn't sure you'd answer if I called," he says, and immediately wishes he hadn't made it about himself even that much.

But Ilya doesn't seem to mind.

"I am not sure I would have either."

"Are you alone?"

"Of course."

"At your place there?"

A pause. "Mm."

Good. Or not good. Better than not knowing.

"Have you eaten?"

That gets him the faintest huff of breath that might once have become a laugh.

"You sound like a grandmother."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

Shane closes his eyes briefly.

"So, have you?" he asks again.

"A little."

That is not an answer Shane loves, but it is enough to tell him Ilya heard the question the way it was meant.

"Did you sleep?"

"Not really."

The word lands closed-off, and Shane can hear immediately that whatever happened there still has too much blood in it to touch directly. Shane rubs a hand over the back of his neck and stares at the dark windows across the room. His own reflection looks strange there—too tense, too careful, like a man trying not to spook something already wounded.

He opens his mouth anyway. "How are you holding up?"

The silence that follows is immediate and bleak enough that Shane winces.

"Sorry," he says. "That's a stupid question."

"No, is okay," Ilya says after a second, voice low and tired. "Just not one with a good answer."

Shane leans forward, elbows on his knees, phone pressed a little closer to his ear like that could somehow bridge any part of the distance, and he thinks, very suddenly and with an amount of force that startles him, that he wants Ilya back. It's not even just because he misses him, though he does, so much more than is reasonable.

But he wants him within reach, somewhere Shane can put his hands on him and make him sit down and eat something and maybe, impossibly, hold some of the hurt away from him for a while.

Oh, fuck.

Because Shane had known he loved Ilya. He had known that for a while now, in the quiet stubborn way he knows things once they settle in him. What he had not realized, apparently, was how deep it went. How much of it lived in his body now as want and protectiveness and that terrible impossible urge to bring Ilya home to a place where none of this could touch him.

He swallows once.

"When do you come back?" he asks.

The silence that follows is softer this time and yet no less easy.

"A few days," Ilya says finally.

Shane nods even though he can't see it.

"Okay."

Then, Ilya says: "I found photos."

"Yeah?"

"Of when I was little."

Something in the way Ilya says it, not embarrassed exactly, but exposed in a way makes Shane's chest tighten.

"I'd like to see them," he says.

There is a beat of silence then Ilya lets out the faintest breath.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Shane says, lower now. "If you want."

Another pause.

"I thought about that," Ilya says.

Shane goes still.

"At the house," Ilya adds, voice roughening around the edges. "I found them and I—" He stops. Starts again. "I thought maybe you'd want to see."

Shane's whole chest feels suddenly too full. He does not know what to do with that except hold it very carefully and answer it like it deserves.

"I do," he says.

Ilya makes a sound that isn't quite a laugh and isn't anything else Shane can name without wanting too much from it.

There's a minute of silence that would make Shane wonder if Ilya had hung up had he not been able to hear his breath on the other end.

"*Blyat. Vse vremya malo.*"

"What does that mean?" Shane prods gently.

Silence stretches long enough that Shane almost backtracks, but then Ilya says, "It means..." He exhales. "It means it is never enough."

Something cold moves through Shane.

"For all of them." Ilya's voice has gone very low now, the words slipping out as if he's too tired to stop them. "More money. More everything. More forgiveness. More understanding. More son than I know how to be. More brother. More of me, and *bloshe, bloshe, bloshe, more, more, Ilya.*"

All at once the whole vista of it plays out across Shane's mind: Ilya, halfway across the world, being pulled at from every side by people who only know how to take, while Shane sits here with salmon and broccoli and a clean kitchen and nothing useful to offer but his own voice.

"Ilya," is all he says.

On the other end of the line, Ilya makes a small sound that might be acknowledgment, might be apology, might just be exhaustion.

"I'm tired."

"Yeah," he says softly. "I know."

For a while after that, neither of them says much. Shane asks smaller questions. Maybe it's selfish, but he wants to keep Ilya on the line a little longer, so he asks about the time there. Whether Ilya has to be anywhere tomorrow. Whether he has someone bringing food, which gets him called insane in a tone so drained it has to qualify as affectionate. Ilya answers more than he usually would, even though it's in short sentences but it's like whatever is holding him together tonight has decided Shane can help carry one side of it.

And Shane, because this is the sort of love he has to offer, lets himself become practical.

"Did you unpack?"

"No."

"Okay."

"That sounded like a judgmental okay."

"It was neutral."

"*Right*, okay."

"Put your charger where you can find it later."

"*Jesus Christ*, Hollander."

"I'm serious. You'll thank me later!"

It makes Ilya huff out what can only be described as a laugh and Shane's heart soars.

"Shane."

That gets unravels him all at once: the way Ilya says it like he has come all the way across the world just to set it down in Shane's hands.

"Yeah?"

"That night—"

Shane straightens.

"Ilya—"

"No, just—" He stops. The breath on the other end shakes a little. "At the gala, I thought—"

Shane cuts in gently.

"Hey."

Silence.

"Not now," Shane says.

He keeps his voice as steady as he can. "We'll talk about it when you get back."

On the other end, Ilya breathes once.

"I don't—"

"I know."

Another breath.

"I want to do that in person," Shane says. "Okay?"

The silence that follows is long enough that Shane feels every second of it in his hands, and after a long enough pause to hurt, Ilya says, "Okay."

The word goes right through him, because it is agreement, yes, but more than that it's trust. It's Ilya not forcing himself to solve the wrong problem in the wrong city on the wrong night. It is Shane being allowed, somehow, to hold the line of this until they can meet on the other side of it.

He lowers his head and presses his free hand against his mouth for a second before saying, "Okay."

After that, neither of them hangs up.

That, more than anything else, is the romance of it.

Shane moves back to the kitchen eventually, phone at his ear, and reheats the salmon while Ilya says nothing for long stretches of time and then, suddenly, small things. About the heating in Moscow and the cold in Boston. About nothing and everything.

Shane listens.

Sometimes he answers.

Sometimes he just stays.

At one point he says, "Eat something before you sleep."

And Ilya, sounding half-asleep now and very far away, murmurs, "You are very bossy, captain."

"Yes."

"Terrible quality in a man."

"Well, you love it."

The words are out before Shane can stop them. The silence after is so immediate and total he actually squeezes his eyes shut.

Well.

Excellent work.

Then Ilya makes the softest sound Shane has ever heard from him that's not quite a laugh nor quite pain. Worse: something warmer.

"*Da*," he says.

Shane leans his hip against the kitchen counter and stares at the dark window over the sink, his own reflection faint and strange in the glass. He doesn't need to know Russian to know that one.

"Yeah," he says softly.

He doesn't trust himself with anything bigger than that.

For a second neither of them speaks.

Then Ilya sighs, low and frayed at the edges, and Shane can hear the smile in it even from here.

By the time the call finally ends, it's late enough that the buzzing in his mind softened around the edges. Shane does not remember half his dinner. He only knows he ate it because the plate is empty when he sets it in the sink.

He looks at his phone once more before bed.

No new messages, obviously. The call is enough. More than enough.

Still.

His thumb hovers over the screen, then drops.

When he lies down in the dark, the first real ease he has felt in days moves through him, thin and fragile and not remotely the same thing as peace.

Ilya called him. Ilya called *him*.

And, sure, maybe that is not enough to build a future on, but it's enough, tonight, to sleep with.

It turns out that a week is actually an ample amount of time to become clinically unwell about a handful of text messages. How does Ilya know that?

Well, the messages were offensively simple.

Jane: I'm in Providence tomorrow for a shoot

Jane: Can you meet me after?

Jane: We should talk in person

Ilya had agreed at 11:14 p.m. and regretted it by 11:15.

That, at least, feels like a manageable emotional rhythm. It's familiar and safe in its own stupid way. He knows how to regret things. He has built half a life out of regretting things while continuing to do them anyway.

He's back in Boston. He's still on bereavement leave, though he's not exactly sure what he's bereaving. It would be a great time to meet Shane Hollander. He *knows* what messages like "meet me in this hotel room" means.

But it's that last text that's throwing him off. *We should talk in person.*

Obviously, from Shane's side, all of this is straightforward now. They had the phone call. Ilya called him, half-dead from grief and exhaustion, and Shane had done what he always does because he's a *good* person: listened, steadied, stayed. Since then he has texted exactly the way he always texts, which means, presumably, that in Shane's mind nothing requires saying. Even if Ilya did lay himself bare (emotionally this time) and all but professed his undying love.

He had stared at the messages for almost a full minute before typing back:

Ilya: okay

Shane's reply comes quickly, which is somehow worse.

Shane: 3 p.m.

Shane: I'll text you the hotel

It was all very ominous.

Ilya throws the phone face-down onto his bed and lies there staring at the ceiling of his Boston apartment trying to determine whether he can fake his own death on short notice.

The answer is probably yes in theory, but too much paperwork in practice. Sveta might be down to help, provided he doesn't tell her *why* he wants to do that, because she'll just jab him in the ribs with those pointy elbows if he does and say he's being *so dramatic*.

By morning, he has built and discarded at least six different interpretations of what tomorrow means, all of them bad.

Possibility one: Shane is going to clear up the misunderstanding about Rose, which would be nice, except only in the way a doctor clarifying that the saw is sterile is nice before amputation.

Possibility two: Shane is going to say he cares about Ilya very much but has realized that whatever this is cannot continue in its current form, which is such a specifically Hollander sentence that Ilya almost has to sit down while imagining it.

Possibility three: Shane is going to be kind.

This is, by far, the worst possibility.

Cruelty Ilya can manage, but kindness? Kindness is how the knife gets all the way in.

He sleeps badly, which is unsurprising. He wakes too early, which is awful. He spends an hour standing in front of his closet in a towel having what can only be described as a private hostage negotiation with himself about what to wear.

Too polished suggests vanity.

Too casual suggests false confidence.

Too bleak suggests he expects to be dumped, which unfortunately he does.

In the end he settles on dark jeans, a navy sweater, and a coat that makes him look expensive enough to preserve some dignity if he dies in public.

He drives out just after noon because Boston traffic is awful and because arriving exactly on time would imply he cares too much (which he does, but Shane doesn't need to know *more* of that).

Early spring New England looks exhausted. The sky is low and gray, the trees still stripped down to their meanest lines, the snow at the side of the road old and dirty and reluctant to leave. Every single thing he passes seems built from the same collection of chain pharmacies, gas stations, and little pockets of dead grass waiting for spring to do the impossible.

It suits his mood perfectly.

Even worse, traffic is manageable, which is so insulting. He would prefer external obstacles. A pileup. An omen. Divine intervention. Something with enough force to keep him from doing what he is, against all instinct for self-preservation, continuing to do: drive towards his execution.

If they had met the next day, Ilya could have blamed momentum. Grief. Adrenaline. Lack of sleep. But a week gives a decent man time to think. Time to choose his words. Time to decide exactly how much mercy to apply.

He had basically confessed.

That's the issue here. He had, during a late-night phone call from Russia while wrapped in his mother's scarf and half-feral from grief and unresolved *everything*, effectively admitted that yes, in fact, he does love Shane's bossy, beautiful, terrifyingly competent ass.

And Shane had not said it back.

This, Ilya thinks as he changes lanes with all the restraint he has not to just crash his car to get out of this, seems important.

Not conclusive, maybe. But important.

Because yes, Shane had been warm. Shane had been steady. Shane had been better than Ilya had any right to expect. He was there in that awful beautiful Hollander way that makes care seemed like something Ilya deserves. He had stayed on the line. He had said *I'm here* and meant it in the dangerous way he means everything once he stops pretending he doesn't.

But he had not said it back.

No *me too*.

No *same here*.

Not even a panicked Canadian variation on the theme.

Which, to be fair, could more or less be Shane's love language even when he is in love. Unfortunately, it's probably also Shane's decent-person language, his leadership language, his general-purpose caretaking dialect. The difference between *I am in love with you* and *I am a fundamentally responsible man with a pathological inability to ignore another person's suffering* can become depressingly subtle if one is Russian and prone to despair.

He exits too early once because he is busy imagining three different versions of Shane ending things and misses the sign. At least he won't be early.

That improves nothing.

When the hotel text comes in, he is stopped at a light behind a truck advertising industrial solvents.

Shane: Room 3081

Shane: Text me when you get in

That's it.

Ilya laughs once in the car, a short ugly sound that startles even him.

"How did I fall in love with someone who texts like a bank manager? What the fuck, Rozanov?" he says to the windshield.

The light changes.

He keeps driving.

By the time he reaches Providence, his stomach has become a separate hostile entity. He parks in the hotel garage and sits there with both hands on the steering wheel and the engine off, staring at the concrete wall in front of him.

This is where, if he had any respect for his dignity, he would turn around.

He would look at the message, laugh bitterly, throw the phone onto the passenger seat, and drive back to Boston with the radio too loud and the windows cracked and whatever remains of his pride intact.

Instead he puts the car in park properly, checks his face in the mirror, hates what he sees there, checks it again, and gets out.

The hotel lobby is polished and anonymous in the way all expensive hotels are, trying very hard to have no personality that might offend money. Soft lighting. Too much marble. At the desk, a woman in an immaculate blazer smiles at him with the flat-eyed efficiency, but he only nods, projects confidence, and walks past to the elevators then takes the stairs because he would prefer to arrive marginally out of breath and therefore justified in looking a little unwell.

By the time he reaches the thirtieth floor, his mission has definitely been accomplished.

Room 3081 sits near the end of the hall behind a tasteful arrangement of modern lighting and silence expensive enough to be oppressive. Ilya stands there for one second too long, staring at the number on the door like it might rearrange itself into something less ominous if given the chance, but because he is weak, because he is in love, because hope is a disease and he has never developed immunity, he knocks and waits like a man at the site of his own execution and still, somehow, wanting to be kissed first.

For one terrible second, nothing happens.

Then the latch clicks, the door opens, and there is Shane.

Shane Hollander in dark sweats and a black sweater, sleeves shoved up to his forearms, hair a little messed like he's been pushing a hand through it too often. He looks tired. He also looks so absurdly, painfully good that Ilya almost resents him on principle.

So of course the first thing out of his mouth is, "Wow. Your real estate fetish extends to hotel rooms too?"

Shane does not laugh.

He does, however, look at Ilya.

One fast, searching sweep over his face, his coat, the shadows under his eyes, the set of his mouth. As if Shane has been holding some awful private tension in his body for a week and has only now gotten visual proof that Ilya is upright, breathing, physically here.

The joke dies quietly in the space between them.

And then, before Ilya can prepare for whatever careful terrible thing comes next, Shane steps back, catches him lightly by the sleeve, and pulls him inside.

The door shuts behind them with a soft decisive click.

Only then does Shane put his arms around him.

One second Ilya is standing just inside the suite, trying to bluff his way through his own demise, and the next Shane is there—warm and solid and real, one arm around his back, the other high across his shoulders, pulling him in with the kind of certainty Ilya has spent the whole drive trying not to hope for.

The force of it knocks all the air out of him.

Shane hugs like he does most things: completely. All that contained, disciplined steadiness turned physical. He smells like clean skin and expensive soap and something faintly warm and familiar underneath that is just Shane, and Ilya, who had spent the last week preparing himself for kindness in the shape of a knife, feels unbidden tears spring so fast to his eyes it actually embarrasses him.

Oh.

Oh, this is worse. Fuck you, Hollander.

Ilya goes rigid for one stupid startled second, then melts anyway, because apparently his dignity has finally packed up and gone back to Boston without him.

His hands, traitorous things, come up on their own. One catches briefly in the fabric at Shane's side. The other presses against his back. Not holding hard, exactly. Just enough to admit that this is happening. That he is here. That Shane is, impossibly, here too.

When Shane finally speaks, his voice is low and rougher than usual.

"Hi."

Which is such an absurd thing to say when they are already standing wrapped around each other just beyond the door of a hotel suite in Providence that Ilya almost wants to bite him.

Instead he says, because he has to say something before the tears become a situation, "That's new."

Shane huffs a breath that might once have been the beginning of a laugh, but he doesn't let go immediately. His hand shifts once at the back of Ilya's neck, not soothing exactly, just there, like he had been wanting to touch him for days and had finally run out of patience with not doing it.

When he finally draws back, it is only far enough to look at him properly.

"You look tired," Shane says.

Ilya shrugs and looks past him. The suite opens onto a tidy little entryway, then a living area with absurdly large windows and a dining table already set with room service under silver covers. It almost makes him laugh with how *Shane* it all is.

"You set up lunch?"

Shane's mouth tightens slightly, as if bracing for mockery. "I thought you might not have eaten."

"You are going soft on me, Hollander."

Something in Shane's face softens then, but only for a second. "Come sit down."

And because apparently hope is still alive enough to be annoying, Ilya follows him farther into the room with his pulse still in the wrong place.

The first thing Shane notices, once he makes himself let go, is that Ilya is thinner.

Shane knows the exact line of his body by now, knows where his coat sits on his shoulders, how his sweater ought to pull across his chest, what tired looks like on him versus what not-eating looks like. This is the second one.

The second thing he notices is that Ilya is trying very hard to be funny.

That, in itself, would not usually mean anything. Ilya is funny the way other people breathe. But this is a particular kind of funny: overbright, a little too quick, all edges and no ease. Every joke arriving half a second too fast, like it's being thrown into the room ahead of something worse.

Shane has also seen enough of that version of him to know it means trouble.

He leads him farther into the suite anyway, not touching him now only because he is fairly sure if he puts a hand on him again too soon, he may not stop. The room service cart waits by the table between the windows, silver domes in place, a breadbasket covered with linen, water already poured. Overkill, probably, but Shane had not known what Ilya would eat if anything and had decided, when in doubt, to order a range.

Ilya slips his coat off, draping it over the back of a chair with the exact careless precision of someone too tightly wound to be actually careless. Shane takes his own seat slowly, watching him over the table.

Up close, in full light, the exhaustion is worse.

There are shadows under Ilya's eyes Shane doesn't like. Something off in the set of his shoulders. He looks like he is holding himself together at the seams and resenting the need.

"Sit down," Shane says.

Ilya does, though not in any relaxed way.

That should have tipped Shane off sooner than it does.

He uncovers the plates. Grilled chicken for himself. Steak smothered in butter for Ilya. Potatoes. Green beans. Bread. Soup he had ordered mostly because he wondered if Ilya would eat more if there is something warm in front of him.

Ilya looks from the food to Shane.

"This is too much."

"No, it isn't."

"For lunch in a hotel room? It's absolutely too much."

"You haven't eaten properly."

"That's not true."

Shane raises a brow.

Ilya sighs. "That's not mostly true."

Better.

Shane pushes the breadbasket toward him.

"Eat something."

Ilya looks at the basket, then at Shane. "You really are leaning into the dictatorship thing."

"You can leave if you want."

The words are meant lightly enough, or at least neutrally, but something in Ilya's face changes so fast Shane feels it like a physical jolt. Actual fear, there and gone so quickly Shane might have doubted it if he hadn't been staring straight at him.

Ilya reaches for the bread too fast, like movement can cover what just happened.

"Okey," he says. "I came all this way. Let me at least help you with some of this before you get rid of me."

Shane goes still.

For one second, the whole room narrows around that sentence.

Ilya, meanwhile, appears not to notice what he has just handed over. He tears off a piece of bread and looks out the window as if the outside has suddenly become a source of fascination.

Shane sets his fork down.

"What?"

Ilya glances back at him. "What what?"

"You think I asked you here to... get rid you?"

Ilya's eyes flick away first.

Then back.

Then away again.

"Well," he says, with a careful offhand tone, "we should talk in person is not traditionally a phrase associated with wonderful new beginnings."

Shane stares at him.

Something has gone wrong here in a way so specific and so absurd that for a second his brain refuses to process it cleanly.

He had known Ilya was wound tight. He had known the week had been bad, that Russia had been bad, that grief had probably rearranged every internal surface into something sharp. He had expected fragility, maybe anger, maybe exhaustion, maybe one of those strangely calm conversations that are really just collapse in disguise.

He had not expected this? He had not expected Ilya to come all the way to Providence thinking Shane was about to end things.

And underneath that realization, colder and stranger, comes the next one:

Ilya still doesn't know. Not in the plain irreversible way Shane has apparently failed to communicate, despite months of what had seemed to him like increasingly blatant evidence.

Shane hears himself say, slowly, "You think that's what this is."

It is not a question either.

Ilya laughs once, softly. It sounds awful.

"Shane."

Again, like the name ought to explain everything. Maybe it does.

Because Shane can see it now, suddenly, all of it laid out in miserable neat lines: every single place where Ilya's brain would have taken Shane's care and translated it downward. Every time Shane had assumed his actions were obvious. Every time he had thought, *well, of course he knows*. Every time he had let practicality stand in for clarity because practicality is safer and easier and comes more naturally to him than the terrible nakedness of saying things outright.

Jesus Christ.

Ilya tears off another piece of bread with exact, tidy violence.

"You don't have to do it gently," he says.

Shane blinks. "Do what?"

Ilya looks up then, really looks at him, and the expression on his face is so tired and defensive and resigned all at once that Shane feels something in his own chest go hot with dismay.

"This," Ilya says, gesturing vaguely between them with the piece of bread like it is Exhibit A in the case against hope. "Whatever this is. The conversation. You are acting like you are about to tell me someone has six months to live."

"Stop."

The word comes out sharper than Shane intends.

Ilya's mouth closes.

Shane exhales once through his nose and drags a hand over his face, not because he is annoyed, exactly, but because the sheer scale of the misunderstanding is making it difficult not to stand up and pace.

He settles for leaning back in his chair and looking at Ilya as steadily as he can.

"I asked you here," he says, "because we needed to talk in person."

"Yes," Ilya says, with bleak patience.

Shane actually laughs then, once, out of pure disbelief.

That startles Ilya more visibly than anything else has so far.

"You think I— what? Agreed to a shoot in Providence of all places, asked you join me, set up lunch to... get rid of you?"

Ilya's eyes narrow.

"When you put it like that, you sound insane."

"I am not the one who thought this was a break-up lunch."

Then, despite everything, one corner of Ilya's mouth twitches, only a little. Really, barely even there. But still, it's enough to keep Shane from climbing over the table and shaking him.

Instead he says, more quietly now, "I asked you here because I wanted to see you."

Ilya looks at him and says nothing.

So Shane keeps going, because apparently they are here now, apparently the universe has finally cornered him into plain speech, and apparently this idiot across from him has been prepared to walk into a hotel suite for his own heartbreak rather than simply ask one clarifying question.

"I wanted to see you," Shane repeats. "Because you were in Russia and your father died and you sounded exhausted and I couldn't do anything from Montreal except text you and wait. And because I missed you."

Ilya freezes, and still says nothing. The air in the room feels different all at once. He is staring down at the torn piece of bread in his hand as if it contains classified information.

Shane watches him for another second, then says, more carefully, "What exactly did you think was happening?"

A humorless little laugh escapes Ilya before he can stop it.

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

Ilya sets the bread down.

For a second he seems to search the tablecloth for the least humiliating version available and fail to find one.

He looks up and says, all exhausted abrupt honesty, "I thought you were going to tell me you were with Rose and then be kind to me about the rest."

Shane stares at him.

Then, because apparently his life is absurd and because some part of him remains capable of functioning only through incredulous specificity, he says, "The rest."

Ilya gives him a pleading, flat look. "Don't make me say it."

Now Shane does understand.

Not every piece of it, maybe, not yet, but enough. Enough to know that Ilya saw him with Rose and built an ending out of it. Enough to know that the call from Russia and the yes and the week of silence have all been sitting on top of that wrong foundation. Enough to know, most disastrously of all, that despite everything Shane has done lately, despite texts and flowers and calls and asking him to the cottage and every other act of devotion Shane had apparently considered self-evident, Ilya still thinks there is a realistic possibility that Shane is about to... let him down gently?

Something fierce and unhappy moves through Shane at that.

Not anger at Ilya.

At himself, maybe.

At the whole stupid architecture of their lives.

At every time he has chosen implication because saying things out loud felt too exposing and too late and maybe unnecessary.

Apparently not unnecessary.

Apparently desperately necessary.

Ilya misreads Shane's silence instantly, because of course he does.

His face shutters a little. The humor goes. He looks suddenly much older than he should.

Then he says, wanting it over with now, voice low and frayed at the edges, "Just do it already, Shane, yes?"

Shane blinks. "Huh?"

Ilya exhales, and when he looks back up there is something almost pleading in the exhaustion on his face.

"You're done," he says. "So be done."

And there it is: the confirmation, bright and awful and undeniable.

He really doesn't know.

Shane sits there looking at him across the white tablecloth and silver room service covers and feels the whole shape of the next ten minutes rearrange itself in his head.

This is not a misunderstanding he can solve with steadiness or implication or by being near him long enough for the truth to become obvious.

This requires language.

Actual language.

Which, frankly, feels unfair.

He leans forward slowly, forearms on the table, and says, very clearly, "Ilya. I am not done. I —*Jesus*—I don't ever want to to be done."

Ilya blinks. "What about Rose?"

Shane feels like he's going insane, so he's definitely a little hysterical when he says, "What *about* Rose?"

"You... you were holding each other. At the gala."

"She tripped."

A beat.

"What?"

"She tripped," Shane repeats, already irritated by the memory. "On the carpet. I caught her before she fell."

Ilya stares at him.

"Shane."

"I'm serious."

"You had your arm around her waist."

"Yes." Shane can hear his own voice getting flatter with emphasis. "Because she was falling."

"You were bending over her."

"She nearly ate the floor in heels."

Rose's hand at his wrist. Shane bending over her. The whole stupid image flashes back through him now with fresh absurdity. He can see exactly how it looked from a distance and hates that it took him this long to understand why Ilya had vanished so completely after.

"I was asking if she was okay," Shane says. "Then I sat her down."

Ilya looks away first.

Color rises slowly, faintly, up the side of his neck.

"Oh," he says.

That one word contains enough mortification to feed a village.

Shane should probably feel bad for him. Instead what he feels, mostly, is relief so sharp it comes out sounding like annoyance.

"I cannot believe you really thought," he says, "that I asked you to come to here so I could explain that I'm secretly in love with Rose Landry."

Ilya's eyes cut back to him.

"When you say it like that, you sound ridiculous."

"I'm not the ridiculous one here."

"That feels up for debate."

Shane actually laughs.

He doesn't mean to. It just gets out of him, short and disbelieving and full of a tension he has apparently been holding in his shoulders for over a week. Across from him, Ilya visibly flinches at the sound, then looks offended by the fact that Shane is laughing at all.

And then, because the universe is not content to let him suffer alone, one corner of Ilya's mouth twitches too. Shane had missed that face so badly it almost hurts.

Ilya picks up his water glass. Does not drink from it. Sets it back down. Fatigue clings to him like rain. There are shadows under his eyes, the week in Russia still visible in the set of his mouth. Despite the absurdity of the misunderstanding, despite how almost funny it is in pieces, he had still lived inside it while grieving and flying and burying his father and coming back to Boston and agreeing to drive here anyway.

"You should have asked me," he says quietly.

Ilya's gaze drops to the table.

"Yes," he says after a second.

"I would have told you."

"I know."

The reply comes too fast, in the way people say when they truly did not know.

"You know," he repeats.

Ilya presses his lips together.

Shane watches him for another second, then another, and says, more quietly now, "Then what?"

When Ilya finally answers, his voice has dropped low and gone thin around the edges, as if every word now is being paid for individually.

"You are kind, Shane," he says. "You are good. You feel responsible for people. You show up. You take care of things." His mouth twists slightly. "And then Russia happened. And you called. And you were..." He stops, searching for the word and seeming to hate all the available ones. "You."

Shane says nothing, because what can he say to that except yes, unfortunately, he had been himself.

"And I said too much," Ilya says.

"No."

That gets his eyes up.

"You didn't."

For one second neither of them looks away.

Then Ilya says, quieter still, "You didn't say it back."

Shane feels the full, ridiculous, terrible scope of the problem become visible all at once.

"I thought," Ilya says, the words rougher now, harder to get out, "that if you wanted to, you would have."

Shane takes a deep breath and closes his eyes for one second. Then opens them again and says, with careful disbelief, "Ilya. I asked you to the cottage."

"I know."

"I sent you flowers."

"Yes."

"I called you in Russia."

"Yes."

"I have been trying to see you since before you left."

Ilya's face changes, only a little.

"I know," he says again, but weaker now, like the word is finally beginning to fail him.

Shane leans forward.

"No," he says. "You clearly don't." Then Shane says, with more calm than he feels, "I didn't say it on the phone because your father had just died."

Ilya blinks.

Shane keeps going before he can get lost in that expression.

"You were exhausted. You were in Russia. You were grieving, whether you wanted to call it that or not. You sounded..." He stops, jaw tightening briefly. "You sounded wrecked. And I wasn't going to make that call about me."

Ilya is staring at him now with a kind of stunned concentration that would almost be funny if Shane's heart were not trying to beat its way out through his ribs.

"So no," Shane says, quieter now. "I didn't say it then."

A beat.

"But, *fuck*, I'm saying it now."

Nothing in the room moves. (Nothing in the whole world, probably.)

Ilya goes absolutely still.

And Shane, because apparently he has now committed to the most unbearable emotional honesty of his life and would like very much not to die halfway through it, says the thing plain.

"I love you."

There. It's out.

Across the table, Ilya just looks at him. He doesn't joke. He doesn't do anything, actually. He's not even visibly breathing, which Shane does not love.

So he keeps going, because if he stops now he may never recover.

"I have for a while," he says. "And I thought—"

His mouth twists.

"Apparently I thought I was being obvious."

That finally does it. Something breaks across Ilya's face—not laughter, not tears, a third stranger thing and less guarded than either. His eyes go bright so fast Shane feels it like a blow.

"Oh," Ilya says. Then, more wrecked now, "Oh, you idiot."

Shane exhales a laugh he did not know he was holding in.

"That seems unfair."

"You are unbelievable."

"So are you."

Ilya stands up too quickly, chair scraping back across the carpet with a harsh little sound, and for one idiotic second Shane thinks he might leave. That all this has somehow gone wrong again in a new and more spectacular way.

Instead Ilya comes around the table fast.

By the time Shane gets halfway to his feet, Ilya is there, one hand fisting in the shoulder of his sweater, the other catching his jaw, and then he is being kissed.

Shane makes a sound against his mouth he would deny under oath.

He gets one hand to Ilya's waist and the other around his back and stands fully, knocking his own chair crooked in the process, because if this is happening he is not doing it halfway.

Ilya kisses like he is both furious and relieved, which feels correct. Shane kisses him back with all the restraint he has been hoarding for months finally giving up and going somewhere more useful.

When they break apart, it is only because breathing has once again become a practical concern.

Ilya stays close, too close for doubt now. Close enough that Shane can see the wet brightness still clinging at the corners of his eyes, the flush high in his cheeks, the disbelief not fully gone from his face.

"You love me," Ilya says.

"Yes."

Shane means to say more. Something reassuring. Something about how obviously, how for a while now, how he is sorry if—

Ilya kisses him again before he can, softer this time, and when he pulls back his forehead rests briefly against Shane's.

"Jesus Christ," he mutters.

"Yeah, I know."

"No." A breath that might once have been a laugh leaves Ilya. "I really thought you were going to end this. That you never wanted to see me again."

Shane's hand tightens reflexively at his waist. He knows, in the same brutal instant, how much damage they have both done by trying to communicate around the thing instead of through it.

Something in Shane tightens hard at that. He slides his hand higher against Ilya's back and says, with all the steadiness he has, "I'm not done."

"Okay," Ilya says, and nods once. "Me neither."

They stand there for another second, maybe two, close enough that Shane can still feel the last of Ilya's tension slowly unwinding under his hands. The room service is cooling on the table behind them. Somewhere down the hall, a door shuts.

Then Ilya draws back just enough to look at him, mouth still close, eyes tired and bright and a little wrecked.

There's a hesitation there Shane doesn't like.

"What?" he says.

Ilya's mouth twitches.

"So," he says, trying for casual and not quite getting there, "am I still invited to the cottage?"

Oh, this man is going to be the death of him. Shane looks at him for one beat, incredulous, then he slaps a hand lightly against Ilya's shoulder.

"Obviously."

Ilya blinks.

"Obviously?" he repeats.

"Yes." Shane gives his shoulder another small shove. "Jesus Christ, Ilya."

That gets a real laugh out of him at last—tired and frayed at the edges, but real. It does something dangerous and lovely to Shane's insides.

"Yes," Shane says, quieter now. "You're still invited."

Ilya's expression shifts at that, softens enough to make him look suddenly younger, and so openly relieved that Shane has to fight the urge to pull him back in and not let go for a while.

"Okay," Ilya says.

This time the word is small and certain and warm.

And before he can say anything else, before he can second-guess the look on Ilya's face or the week that led them here or any of the stupid careful instincts that have already made this harder than it needed to be, Shane reaches up, cups the side of his jaw, and kisses him.

Ilya makes a small sound against his mouth and leans into it immediately, like this was what he had been braced for all along without letting himself hope it would actually happen. Shane keeps one hand at his jaw and the other warm at his waist and kisses him the way he has wanted to for days now—like he has time, like he is allowed, like this is no longer something they have to snatch in pieces.

When he pulls back, it is only far enough to look at him.

Ilya's eyes are bright. His mouth is a little swollen. He looks tired and kissed and, for the first time since he walked through the door, not like a man waiting for the floor to open under him.

Shane brushes his thumb once across his cheekbone.

Then Ilya smiles at him—small, a little shaky, completely unguarded—and Shane thinks, with sudden painful certainty, that he would drive twice as far for that smile.

Chapter End Notes

eeeeeee can i ask how we feeling this time!!!!

i really hope i pulled off ilya's tragedy bleeding into shane's povs this chapter (because

👹 next chapter is so indulgent, you guys... you guys.... the genre mix is coming)

Chapter 5: the long run

Chapter Notes

thank you all so so so much for making it this far with me. i cannot begin to explain how much fun i had with this little idea, and how grateful i am to all the kind words everyone has left.

(shoutout to that one post i saw where someone said shane realized he was gay and locked in, because it partially inspired this)

i hope you enjoyed it, and enjoy this final installation!!

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

The buzzing under Shane's skin only settles when he makes Ilya send him his flight details two weeks in advance.

He's trying to reason that this is very normal, and has absolutely nothing with the way his insides go molten at the *thought* of having Ilya all to himself for two weeks—three, now that they're both out of the playoffs.

Under normal circumstances, getting knocked out as early as he had would have ruined the first stretch of his summer. Shane knows himself. He'd be in a mood for at least ten days. Two weeks, if anyone asked him to discuss it. He'd go quieter, meaner around the edges, overly disciplined in the way he *knows* he gets when disappointment has nowhere useful to go.

Instead he'd done that for maybe four days before Ilya started texting him too regularly for misery to get any real traction. Then there had been the call from his hotel room in Detroit, where the Bears lost in OT and went home.

They agreed to start their summer together a little earlier.

So, Shane is now parked in short-term with the air conditioning on low, sunglasses on, and the arrivals lane visible through the windshield, tracking the flight.

He scrolls to **Lily** and then scrolls some more to find the ticket attachment sent weeks ago.

Lily: you are insane

Lily: but fine

Lily: ticket1298749.pdf

Lily: feel better?

The answer had been yes, obviously, but Shane had not dignified the question with a response other than a middle finger reaction.

He likes to be prepared, sue him! It has nothing with how he felt comfort each time he reloaded the airline page and saw little updates signalling Ilya's inching a little closer to him.

Flights get delayed. Baggage gets lost. Summer travel is chaos for reasons no one has ever adequately explained. If Shane is driving all the way to the airport from the cottage, he needs accurate information.

He reloads it again.

Flight A217: Landed → Taxiing → At gate

He tries so hard not to smile at nothing.

The terminal doors slide open and people spill out in clumps. Shane's body goes alert all at once, that strange athletic hyperfocus narrowing his whole field of attention down to the curb.

Then there he is.

Muscle tank that he should definitely be banned from wearing around people who aren't Shane. Dark shorts. Sunglasses. Carry-on rolling behind him. Hair flattened a little from the flight but refusing to stay that way.

Shane's whole chest goes light and hot in one stupid sweep, and it gets concerningly worse as he watches Ilya scan the line of waiting cars once, spots Shane's, and smiles.

Then he heads the car, dumps his bag in the back and goes for the passenger side like he belongs there.

Shane reaches over unlocks the door before he can reach for the handle.

By the time Ilya slides into the seat, bringing hot air and airport smell and sunlight in with him, Shane has already had to remind himself that they could be seen thrice before he did something insane, like climb over the console and kiss him senseless. (He would love to kiss him senseless, but it's okay. In a few hours he can get lost in all that is Ilya Rozanov.)

"So, you tracked the flight the whole time?"

"It was delayed."

"That is not denial."

Shane shifts the car into drive. "Yeah, well, you sent me the details."

"Because you asked. Like a psycho."

"I maybe mentioned it once."

Ilya gives him a look.

Shane pulls away from the curb. "Okay, asked twice. Happy?"

That gets a laugh out of him. He pushes his sunglasses further up his face and stretches his legs out a little in the seat like he's been there a hundred times already. He looks travel tired, a little ruffled, pleased, and so immediately right in Shane's passenger seat that something in Shane unclenches before he can stop it.

"How was the flight?" Shane asks.

"Terrible. There was a child behind me who spent two hours trying to break my spine."

"That's tough."

"I showed real character not grumbling about it."

"You're so brave." Shane rolls his eyes, but something about his reply has Ilya's face twisted into delight so clear that the corners of his own lips twitch up too.

They make their way out of the airport in a stretch of easy quiet. Summer light flashes across the dash. The roads unwind in loops of signage and concrete. Shane keeps both hands on the wheel and tries not to be too aware of the fact that Ilya is here. In his car. *With him.*

Beside him, Ilya says, "So, did Rose Landry text you while you were waiting?"

Shane laughs under his breath. "Yes."

"How many times?"

"Three."

Ilya clicks his tongue. "She's very invested in me."

"She was more making fun of me."

Then, like a man making a confession under duress, Ilya adds, "Even if I think she should not wear heels if she doesn't know how to walk in them, I liked her."

Shane glances over. Ilya is looking out the window like this conversation means nothing at all.

"Don't be an asshole. The carpets were frayed," Shane says but then adds: "That's good. I'm glad you liked her. She's a really good friend."

"It's inconvenient."

"Why?"

Ilya looks at him then, one eyebrow lifting just slightly. "Use your imagination, Hollander."

Heat climbs the back of Shane's neck, so he looks back at the road.

Beside him, Ilya makes a quiet pleased sound, like this reaction was exactly what he wanted.

They hit the highway a few minutes later, the traffic thinning, the city finally starting to loosen behind them.

Shane settles a little deeper into his seat.

He has, over the last day and a half, built a rough private framework for how he wants this to go. It's not quite a plan, because look how those worked out for him.

(Well, they weren't all that bad. So maybe he had an additional spreadsheet titled *cottage*. Just to list out the necessities.)

But he did have... a mental checklist of things he wanted to get right:

- Get Ilya snacks — (*link to Bears interview about their favourite foods*)
 - Diet Coke
- Make it obvious this isn't casual
 - Say it out loud?
- Don't be boring
 - Have board games prepared (find out if Ilya likes board games)
 - Jet skis
 - Canoes
 - Movies
- Do Not Be Weird

"You are thinking too hard," Ilya pipes up beside him. Then, without saying anything else, he reaches over and rests his hand lightly on the back of Shane's neck.

Shane's mind blanks for a moment, and it's a good thing he can do this drive with his eyes closed.

"You are not allowed to do that while I'm driving," he says, though it doesn't sound like he minds one bit.

"Ah." Ilya's mouth curves. "I think you like it."

Shane keeps his eyes on the road because looking over would be a mistake that will melt his muscles and tendons out of his body until he's just a heap of *want* in the driver's seat.

A minute passes.

Then, because apparently honesty is easier now or maybe he's just tired of fighting it, he says, "I missed you."

When Ilya answers, his voice is softer than it had been all afternoon. "Missed you too. Very much."

And Shane, driving home with summer stretched bright ahead of them, thinks that under normal circumstances he would still be furious about the playoffs.

Instead, he can't seem to find it in himself to care very much at all.

By the time they pull into the driveway, the sun is starting its slow descent toward the lake, turning everything gold at the edges.

He understands all the landscape paintings artists make, every time he's back here. The cottage always looks a little unreal in this light. The dock washed pale and bright. The trees standing thick and still in the heat. Even the water looks staged somehow, too blue where it catches the sky and too glittering where the sun hits it.

Ilya being here makes him want to paint the scene himself.

Shane kills the engine and immediately feels his pulse pick up again for an entirely different reason than airport arrivals and Ilya's hand at the back of his neck and the fact of him being here in Shane's car.

This is the part where Shane has to get it right.

It's not that it's fragile, exactly, the way things used to be. But he can't afford to get this wrong. He loves Ilya so much he feels like it'll burst out of him sometimes. Like, he'll be checking out at the store and his mouth will move before his brain and he'll tell the cashier, "I am so in love with Ilya Rozanov, and this is his favorite brand of chewing gum." (Which might be partially why he just uses self-check out these days.)

But still. This place matters to him. He brought Ilya here on purpose. He wants him to feel that. But also, he doesn't want to come on so strong that Ilya thinks Shane is actually insane, and he should get far, far away from him.

So. Bullet point number four: Be Normal.

He gets out of the car and goes for Ilya's bag before Ilya can.

"I do still have arms," Ilya says, shutting the passenger door behind him.

"Yes," Shane says. "I also have arms."

Ilya snorts, and Shane takes the bag anyway, because he was raised to be a gentleman.

The gravel crunches underfoot as they make their way up to the front door. The air smells like warm pine and water and the faint ghost of *Ilya* as the breeze rushes past them.

Shane unlocks the door.

The cottage is warm inside, holding the day in its walls. It smells like lake air and cleaning solution and the coffee he made this morning and then barely drank because he was too busy checking the time every four minutes.

He steps in first, drops the bag by the entry bench, and turns automatically into orientation mode.

"Okay. Kitchen's there," he says, pointing. "Bathroom's down the hall. Bedrooms are upstairs. Towels are in the—"

"So this is it."

Shane stops.

Ilya has only gone a few steps in. He's standing in the middle of the room with his hands in his pockets, looking around in that slow, measuring way that always makes Shane feel like he's being observed more closely than is probably survivable.

"What?"

Ilya's gaze moves from the open living room to the windows overlooking the lake, then to the shelves, the couch with its endless cushions, and finally back to Shane.

"This is the favorite place on earth."

Shane squints at him.

"You watched that?"

One corner of Ilya's mouth lifts. "Watched what?"

"The documentary."

Ilya shrugs one shoulder, already too casual. "Maybe it was on once."

"You had to have watched the whole thing to get to that part."

"Insomnia is dangerous, Shane. There are limits to human endurance. I needed something to bore me to sleep."

"Asshole."

Heat starts to climb up the back of Shane's neck.

He remembers that stupid off-season segment with painful clarity now. The one where they'd come up and filmed him on the dock and in the kitchen and sitting in the stupid adirondack chair by the water while some producer asked increasingly intrusive questions about rest and routine and "what home means to you."

It had been humiliating enough at the time.

Finding out Ilya had watched it is worse.

"You said," Ilya goes on, "'It's my favorite place in the world.'"

"I did not sound like that."

"No?" Ilya glances around again, mouth twitching. "No, I am sure. In my memory, you sounded exactly like that."

Shane drops his keys onto the counter harder than necessary, absolutely not pouting.

"You're annoying."

"Yes, *kotenok*," Ilya says. "But now I understand your emotional attachment to this dock."

That gets a laugh out of him before he can stop it. Ilya hears it and smiles, small and immediately smug.

Shane shakes his head and tries again.

"Anyway. Bedrooms are upstairs."

That gets him a look. One eyebrow lifting slowly enough that Shane feels the mistake before he's even fully processed it.

"What's wrong?"

"Bedrooms," Ilya repeats.

"Yes."

"Plural."

"Because there's more than one."

"Mm, yes, I speak english. I did gather that from the word."

"Okay. So, what's wrong?"

Ilya takes another step closer. "Just interesting that you felt the need to mention options."

"We're not discussing options. I was just giving you the rundown."

"Good," Ilya says mildly. "Because that would be weird."

Shane narrows his eyes. "What, why?"

Ilya looks at him for a second, then lets his gaze drift past Shane and up the stairs.

"Well," he says, "this is obviously a sex vacation."

Shane actually sputters. "It is *not* a sex vacation."

Ilya's smile widens. "No?"

"No."

"You picked me up from the airport yourself."

"Yes."

"You tracked my flight obsessively."

How the fuck did he know that? "That's not relevant."

"You drove me to your cottage."

"It's not a—"

"Shane." Ilya's voice goes a little lower, still amused but warmer now too. "You brought me to your favorite place in the world in the middle of summer. That is at least a little bit of a sex vacation."

"It's not."

"It is."

"It's not."

Ilya studies him for a second, clearly enjoying this far too much.

Then he says, "Fine. It is what? Romantic retreat with sexual undertones?"

Shane smiles despite himself, which is the wrong move because it only makes Ilya look more pleased.

"Asshole."

"Ah," Ilya says, taking one more step until he's properly in Shane's space now, close enough that Shane can smell his soap and stale plane air still clinging to him. "No. Only if you ask nicely."

That does it. Or maybe it's not just that line. Maybe it's the whole afternoon and the fact that Ilya is standing in the middle of Shane's cottage like he belongs there, because he does. He does and Shane wants to keep him forever.

Whatever the reason, Shane reaches out, hooks two fingers in the waistband of Ilya's shorts, and pulls him the last inch closer.

His hands stay loose in his pockets for another second, just long enough to make Shane feel like *he* is very much choosing this, then he draws one hand out and settles it at Shane's hip.

Ilya's mouth tilts into a sly grin. "Not a sexcation, still?"

Shane looks at him. "No."

"That doesn't seem to be stopping you."

Instead of replying to that, Shane whispers, because apparently his body is once again making decisions ahead of the rest of him, "Why are you still talking?"

Ilya looks down briefly at Shane's hand in his waistband, then back up again.

"So are you."

And that's the final death of anything resembling a plan.

Shane catches him by the hips and kisses him. Ilya makes a low sound into his mouth, half laugh, half something else, and then his hand slides up Shane's side and around to the back of his neck as he pushes into his mouth.

The entire world seems to narrow down to that point of contact, really.

And Shane has been thinking about this since he saw him walk out of that terminal. Maybe longer. So he kisses him like it.

When they break for air, only briefly, Ilya's mouth is red and his hair's already worse from Shane's fingers in it.

"I think this is the best welcome you have given me, Hollander," he says.

And from the way he says it, from the way he's looking at Shane now—pleased, wanted, wanting, very much here—Shane gets the sudden, dizzying sense that maybe for once he doesn't have to work quite so hard to prove the point.

Ilya already knows he's wanted.

It doesn't make Shane want to show him any less.

He gets both hands under the hem of Ilya's tank and drags it up and off in one impatient movement, tossing it somewhere behind him without looking. Ilya laughs again, breathless this time, and reaches for Shane's shirt in return, shoving it up over his ribs with all of the same intent.

They keep kissing through it, all clumsy greed and teeth and heat.

Shane gets him back against the wall by the stairs and crowds in, one hand flat on his stomach, the other sliding down to his hip. Ilya's skin is warm, warm, warm from the drive and from the sun, and his body answering immediately under Shane's hands, and that simple fact nearly strips the last of Shane's restraint out of him.

He has him. He has him here. It feels almost too good for the body to hold.

Ilya catches his lower lip lightly between his teeth, then lets it go.

"You're all over the place," he murmurs.

Shane's only reply is a needy whine he would never, ever, admit to, and kisses him lower this time, mouth at his throat, his collarbone, the place where his pulse jumps under the skin. One of Ilya's hands disappears into Shane's hair. The other slides down Shane's back and under the waistband of his shorts in a touch so casual and confident it makes Shane shudder.

"*Fuck*, Shane," he says softly.

Shane grabs at his waist and kisses him harder. Ilya makes that low sound that feels like reward, and then Shane is the one with his hand under the waistband of Ilya's shorts, palming him properly, feeling the exact moment Ilya's body tightens and opens under it.

"You are so pretty," Ilya says.

And Shane is a weak man, so all he does is kiss him again before he can keep talking and actually make him lose his mind, then grinds into him at the same time, enough to make them both lose the thread for a second. Ilya's head knocks lightly against the wall. His hands clutch at Shane's shoulders. Shane feels the shape of his own want going sharper by the second, less playful now, more urgent.

He wants him naked.

He wants—

Then Ilya gets a hand on his jaw and makes him stop. Shane blinks down at him, breathing hard.

Ilya looks back up with his mouth red and his curls a mess and says, very calmly, "Relax."

That should not go through Shane the way it does.

"Huh?"

"You're being... panicky."

"I'm not."

Ilya lifts one eyebrow.

Shane considers that and gives up immediately. "A little."

"A lot. But it's okay, yes? We have time." Ilya smiles, warm and maddeningly smug.

Then he catches Shane by the hips and turns them. One moment Shane has him pinned against the wall. The next Shane's back hits it instead, and Ilya is in his space, one hand on his stomach, the other curling around the back of his neck.

Fuck. Ilya is giving him that impossible look where hunger sharpens into focus and suddenly all the swagger in him becomes attention. Care. Deliberate ruin.

It goes straight through Shane and down to his dick.

Ilya kisses him once, slower now, and Shane feels himself answer it instantly, his whole body softening around the pressure of it before his brain can catch up. Ilya's hand stays warm at the back of his neck, keeping him there, and the other slides down Shane's chest, his stomach, lower.

"See?" he murmurs against Shane's mouth. "This is much better."

Shane lets his head fall back briefly against the wall and moans low and a little wrecked. Ilya kisses the corner of Shane's mouth, and taps his thighs until Shane has them wrapped around his hips.

He takes his time in a way that should be illegal, especially because Shane is already hard and flushed and nowhere near patient enough for this. But that's the whole point. Ilya knows exactly what he's doing to him. Every slow mouth-on-skin pause, every drag of his hand down Shane's body, every little shift of pressure that says: *yes, I know you're desperate. Yes, I'm doing it on purpose.*

Shane gets a hand in his hair and says, "Ilya, *please*."

"Hm."

"*Please*," he says again, because he slowly devolving into someone who is not above begging.

"Okay, *dorogóy*," Ilya says.

Then he kisses him again and starts walking him backward. Shane lets out a pleased sigh once into his mouth and chases his lips.

"*Ilya*, don't fucking tease me."

"Yeah, well, you love me."

The words drop between them with casual, devastating ease.

For one brief second Shane forgets to move, even as Ilya backs him into the couch and pushes him down.

Shane goes, because of course he does, half sitting and half sprawled before Ilya drops to his knees between his legs with the kind of immediate, matter-of-fact confidence that always makes Shane's body light up like a fault line.

"Ilya."

"What?"

"You just—"

"Yes."

That is not a fair answer.

Shane starts to sit up more fully, maybe to say something else, maybe just to get his hands on him again, because he knows, he knows, Ilya knows that Shane loves him, he's saying it, but Ilya catches one of his knees and pushes it wider.

Shane's breath catches.

Ilya looks up at him through his lashes, still kneeling, one hand on Shane's thigh, the other already working open the fly of his shorts.

"Be good, Shane," he says.

And the worst part is that Shane wants to, wants to see that look in Ilya's face go darker and hotter and more intent the more Shane gives him.

Ilya drags Shane's shorts and underwear down just enough, and the summer air on his skin should maybe feel cooler than it does. It doesn't. Everything in the room feels overheated now—sun through the windows, Shane's own pulse somewhere in the wrong part of his body.

Ilya looks at him.

Then down.

Then back up.

"*Gospodi*," he says softly.

Heat floods straight up Shane's chest. Before he can reply, Ilya puts a hand high on Shane's thigh, pushes it wider, and leans in. The first pass of his mouth knocks the air out of Shane. Ilya is infuriatingly deliberate about it. Slow, warm, thorough enough that Shane's hips twitch up before he can stop them.

Ilya just presses him back down with his free hand and does it again.

"Stay," he murmurs.

Shane drops his head back and laughs once, breathless already. "I need— Please—"

Ilya looks up, mouth wet, one hand still holding Shane open, and says, softer now, "You can do that for me."

And because he says it like that, like Shane already is, Shane's legs fall wider on their own.

Ilya smiles and that alone nearly finishes the job by itself.

He uses both hands for a second, thumbs pressing in and spreading him open while his mouth drags slow over the inside of Shane's thigh, and Shane makes a sound so wrecked he feels embarrassed by it even as it leaves him.

"Fuck."

Ilya hums, pleased.

The angle is obscene. Shane half spread, one leg pushed up and out, Ilya between them looking at him like this. The lake flashing in the windows. The whole bright afternoon still happening around them as if the world has any business continuing.

Ilya keeps him open with one hand and licks into him with slow, filthy precision, and Shane stops having any useful thoughts at all.

Everything gets hazy after that. Ilya's hand on his thigh. His mouth all over him. The way he keeps adjusting Shane with calm little touches whenever he squirms too far away. The way he murmurs things under his breath that are half praise and half instruction.

Shane grabs at the couch with one hand and then, when that does nothing useful, reaches for Ilya's hair instead.

Ilya makes a pleased sound against him that goes straight through his spine and to the base of his skull.

At one point he eases back just enough to suck slowly on the head of Shane's cock, mixing the spit from his mouth with the slickness already there, and Shane's whole body jerks off the cushions.

"Oh, fuck."

Ilya does it again, slower.

Then once more, tongue dragging through the wet mess of it until Shane is half shaking and no longer remotely capable of pretending he's got anything under control.

"You get so wet," Ilya says quietly, almost like he's admiring something.

"F-fuck off—"

Shane loses the sentence completely when Ilya's mouth goes back down, one hand spreading him again while his tongue works slow and devastatingly deep.

Every time Shane gets close enough to start losing it, Ilya seems to know. Seems to read it in his breathing, the tension in his thighs, the way his fingers tighten in Ilya's hair. He backs off just enough to make the next touch worse, then gives him exactly what he wants in a way that makes Shane feel painfully, helplessly known.

"Ilya."

"Yes, what do you need?"

Shane swallows once.

"You," he says, voice wrecked.

Ilya's face changes, then he kisses the inside of Shane's thigh once, almost tenderly, and says, "You have me."

It turns the whole last stretch of it unbearably sharp—every drag of Ilya's mouth too much, every press of his hand too deliberate, every breath Shane takes suddenly useless. He tries to warn him, gets as far as "Ilya—" and then loses the rest when Ilya gives him exactly what he needs with that patient, wicked mouth and one hand holding him open like he's got no intention of letting Shane hide from any of it.

Shane comes hard enough to go half blind for a second, bent open across the couch, Ilya's name dragged out of him like a confession.

Ilya starts touching himself somewhere in the middle of it, almost absently at first, then with less and less patience the closer Shane gets. The sight of him clearly does damage. Shane can feel it in the way Ilya's breathing changes, in the little broken sounds he starts making under his breath, in the way his composure slips just enough to make everything hotter until he comes all over Shane's stomach, and Shane doesn't even remember when he had taken his shorts off.

Only then does he climb back up over him.

Shane is still breathing too hard, boneless and bright around the edges, one knee still half fallen open. Ilya leans down and kisses him slow, deep, completely pleased with himself.

When he pulls back, his mouth is red and his curls are wrecked and his expression is pure indecent satisfaction.

"Now," he says softly, "it's a sex vacation."

Shane lets out something between a laugh and a groan.

"Asshole."

Ilya smiles against the corner of his mouth.

For a second, Ilya just stays where he is.

Half over Shane, one knee sunk into the couch cushion between his legs, one hand still warm against his stomach, the other braced beside his head. Shane is breathing like he's been forcibly removed from his body and returned with missing parts. His eyes are closed. His mouth is open a little. One thigh still twitches every now and then under Ilya's hand like the rest of him hasn't fully gotten the message that it's over.

He is the most beautiful thing Ilya has ever seen.

And Ilya has seen Shane Hollander in many states now. Angry. Controlled. Smug. Tired. Wet-haired and pink-cheeked and pretending he's not happy. Shane trying not to laugh. Shane laughing too hard. Shane trying not to worry. Shane very worried. Shane trying not to show how much he wants something.

This one might be his favorite.

This one—Shane sprawled on the couch in the middle of summer with his hair ruined and his chest flushed and his whole body still a little open from pleasure, looking like Ilya has just reached into him and pulled out every last useful thought—is very, very high on the list.

He kisses him again because he can.

Slowly, this time, because Shane's lips are still swollen and soft under his, and because there is no reason in the world not to.

Shane makes a low sound into the kiss and reaches for him at once, hand landing clumsy and warm at the back of Ilya's neck. When Ilya pulls back, Shane opens his eyes and looks at him, dazed and happy and not even pretending otherwise.

Shane blinks. "Hi."

"You're very pretty like this."

A laugh escapes him, low and rough around the edges. "Stop, that's embarrassing."

"No." Ilya brushes his thumb over Shane's cheek, burying the constellation of his freckles into memory. "Really, it's true."

Shane closes his eyes for a second like he can't quite handle that and then opens them again, smiling a little despite himself.

Ilya sits back enough to look down at the mess on Shane's stomach, then at the abandoned heap of clothes littering the way to the couch.

"Oh, fuck, it's so messy," Shane groans.

"It's okay, My generous host told me where the towels are. You stay here."

Shane smiles properly then, helpless and fond in a way that makes something in Ilya's chest go hot.

"You'll get me a towel."

It doesn't even cross his mind to tease him.

"Yeah," Ilya says, softer now. "One second."

He gets up, finds a towel in the kitchen, wets the corner under the tap, and stands there for half a beat with the sun on the counter and the lake bright beyond the window.

The whole place feels strange around the edges, too much like something that could become important very quickly.

He goes back.

Shane is where he left him, one arm over his eyes now, one knee still open, chest rising and falling a little too fast. He shifts the arm when Ilya comes close and peers up at him.

"Hi," Shane says.

The word is so stupidly sweet in context that Ilya almost laughs again.

"Hi."

He kneels back onto the couch and starts cleaning him up. More careful this time. Shane hisses once through his teeth, oversensitive still, and his hand catches briefly around Ilya's wrist.

"Sorry," Ilya says.

"It's okay."

Ilya finishes cleaning him up, tosses the towel aside, and before he can shift away Shane's hand lands at his waist and stays there.

Shane looks back up at him, hair a mess, cheeks still flushed, eyes heavy-lidded and openly affectionate in a way that makes it hard to breathe for a second.

Ilya smiles and settles back over him without being asked twice. Shane relaxes immediately, one hand sliding up his back in a slow absent stroke like he's doing it without thinking.

"You okay?" Shane asks after a minute.

Ilya huffs a laugh against his shoulder. "You just had my face between your legs for half an hour."

"That was *not* half an hour."

"How would you know? Time stopped for you. Mind blowing orgasm."

Shane laughs, but his fingers keep moving over Ilya's back.

"I'm serious," he says.

Ilya lifts his head enough to look at him.

Shane's face has softened all over. Whatever sharpness he came into the cottage carrying has dissolved for now, and what's left is just this—happy, a little stunned, very much in love, and

looking at Ilya like he still can't believe he gets to.

It catches Ilya off guard every time.

"I'm good," he says.

Shane searches his face for another second anyway, because of course he does.

Then: "Okay."

Ilya kisses the corner of his mouth.

"You're very easy to love like this," he says before he can stop himself.

Shane goes still.

For one terrible second, Ilya considers pretending he had a stroke.

Then Shane's expression changes—softens somehow even more—and he slides his hand up into Ilya's hair.

"Yeah?" he says quietly.

Ilya looks away first because he is still, unfortunately, himself.

"This," he says, gesturing vaguely with one hand at the couch, the room, both of them, all of it. "You. Me. Here. I like it."

Shane doesn't say anything right away. He just looks at him for a second, then pulls him down into another kiss.

When they part, Shane keeps their foreheads together and says, "Good."

That one word lands harder than it should.

Ilya lets out a breath and kisses him again before the whole thing can turn into an emotional incident.

After that, neither of them talks for a while.

Ilya stays stretched over him, half on top, half tucked in, and Shane lets him. Just keeps one hand moving lazily up and down his back. A breeze moves through the open windows. Water taps against the dock outside in slow, uneven rhythms.

It would be very easy to fall asleep here.

That thought is dangerous enough that Ilya says the first stupid thing that comes to mind.

"If you move, I am going to complain very loudly."

Shane's chest shifts under him with a laugh.

"I'm not moving."

"Okay."

Then Shane says, "But, you're kind of crushing me."

Ilya lifts his head. "Oh, you are not big strong hockey player?"

Shane rolls his eyes at him and threads his fingers back into his hair, pulling his head back over his chest. "Shut up."

And because apparently the afternoon is determined to finish him off one way or another, Ilya hears himself say, "Shane."

Shane's hand stills once at his back.

"Yeah?" he says.

"I love you."

"I love you too, Ilya."

Ilya just looks at him.

Then he leans down and kisses him one more time, slow and soft, and lets himself stay there long enough to feel Shane settle under him completely.

And for all that Ilya is greedy, for all that he wants, and wants, and wants, for all that he never wants to keep Shane in his arms forever or for however as long as he'll be allowed to keep him, this is enough.

By the time Ilya comes back in from the deck, dusk has started to settle over the lake. The sky is still holding light while the trees along the shore have gone darker and more secretive with the soft blue-gold thinning of the day. The air outside had been cooler than before, enough that standing there in a clean T-shirt and damp hair with his phone to his ear had felt almost sobering.

Sveta had answered on the second ring.

"Well?" she'd said immediately. *"Are you dead? Kidnapped? Has your Jane finally snapped and buried you in the woods?"*

And because he is weak and because she is, regrettably, one of the great loves of his life, Ilya had leaned against the glass railing and said, *"No. I got here okay."*

And because her silence had sounded too sharp and too listening and he knows her too well, he'd added, *"And yes, I'm at my Jane's."*

That had gotten him exactly what he wanted: a delighted shriek so loud he'd had to hold the phone away from his ear.

Now he pushes the screen door open and steps back into the cottage with the tail end of that still warm in him.

And there is Shane.

In the kitchen, back turned, moving around the stove in a washed-out gray T-shirt and soft dark sweats, hair still damp at the temples from their shower, one socked foot braced against the cabinet under the sink while he leans to check something in a pan.

It is, frankly, not fair.

There should be laws against anyone looking like that in domestic settings. Or at least regulations. Some kind of licensing requirement. A waiting period.

Anything to stop Ilya's heart from flipping in his chest like this.

The cottage smells like something garlicky Shane has apparently decided to do to potatoes, which is absolutely not something on his diet, Ilya is sure.

On the counter sits an open bag of chips, and, because apparently Shane Hollander has no instinct at all for subtlety, a cold Diet Coke already poured over ice in a glass sweating onto a coaster next to a Ginger Ale.

Ilya stops just inside the doorway.

The sight of it goes through him with embarrassing force.

Shane glances over his shoulder at the soft thud of the door and his whole face changes when he sees Ilya there, with the private shift Ilya is beginning to understand means *there you are*.

"You were gone a while," Shane says.

Ilya leans one shoulder against the doorframe. "I was reporting back to Moscow that I have not been murdered."

Shane turns back to the stove. "That's good."

"Sveta is disappointed about it."

"Mm."

Ilya watches him move through the kitchen for a second, easy in the space, one hand stirring something, the other reaching automatically for a dish towel slung over the oven handle.

"You cooked?" he says.

That gets him a sideways glance.

"Well, we have to eat something."

"Yes, but you are cooking for me." Ilya pushes off the frame and wanders farther in, drawn helplessly by the smell and the sight and the fact that Shane looks so infuriatingly warm. "This is different. This is nurturing."

Shane snorts softly. "It's dinner."

"It can be two things."

On the stove, something sizzles. Shane flips what looks like chicken in a skillet, then reaches for the potatoes in the oven mitts with the kind of unthinking competence that should not be hot and yet absolutely is.

Ilya comes to stand on the other side of the island and looks at the Diet Coke.

Then at Shane.

Then back at the Diet Coke.

Shane, still facing the stove, says, "Don't you dare."

Ilya smiles. "What?"

"I can feel you being annoying."

"Wow, you are a mind reader, now?" He wraps a hand around the cold glass and takes a sip, then closes his eyes briefly because it is exactly the right amount of ice and fizz and somehow also exactly what he wanted. "You poured it for me. Is this is a date?"

Shane shrugs one shoulder without turning around. "I know what you like."

The casualness of it nearly does more damage than the sex.

Ilya sets the glass down carefully.

"You stocked the cottage."

"No."

"You did."

"I only bought groceries."

"You bought *my* groceries."

Shane finally turns then, leaning one hip against the counter with the dish towel over one shoulder and the wooden spoon still in one hand, and gives him a look that is somehow both flat and a little pink around the ears.

"I was already going to the store."

"And while you were there, by complete coincidence, thought: yes, this man definitely needs the exact chips he once mentioned liking in a hotel room in Tampa."

Shane points the spoon at him. "You remember too much."

"Yes," Ilya says. "And you are in love with me."

That earns him the smallest eye roll, but not denial, though.

"Maybe," Shane says.

Ilya laughs, delighted. "Only maybe?"

"You've hit your quota for the day. I'm not saying it anymore."

"You stocked Diet Coke at your lake house and cooked me dinner in these very obscene shorts. You *love* me."

Shane shakes his head and turns back to the stove, but Ilya sees the smile now. Small and helpless. There and gone.

It does something very stupid to his insides.

So naturally he goes around the island and comes up behind him.

Enough to stand in Shane's space and feel the lingering heat from the stove and the cleaner scent of his soap underneath it.

Shane doesn't startle. "If you keep hovering, I might burn dinner."

"That would be bad."

"So maybe you should take a seat."

"Hm, no, I don't want to."

"How's Svetlana?"

"She's good." Then, quieter: "She says hi. She also said that if you break my heart, she'll hit you with a very expensive car."

Shane nods once, somehow earnestly. "That seems fair."

That gets a laugh out of him.

And because he is, despite all evidence to the contrary, a deeply affectionate person, he slides his arms around Shane's waist from behind and presses his mouth to the back of his shoulder through the T-shirt.

The way Shane eases back into him does awful, *awful* things to Ilya.

"You're going to get grease on yourself," he warns.

"I've survived worse."

"I'm serious."

"I know." Ilya kisses his shoulder again. "I'm helping."

"With what?"

"Morale."

Shane huffs a laugh and rests his free hand briefly over Ilya's forearm where it wraps across his stomach.

The gesture is so small it almost shouldn't count.

Ilya closes his eyes for a second and lets himself have the full, dangerous sweetness of it: Shane at the stove, dinner on, dusk at the windows, the lake outside turning dark and glossy, his own arms around him like this is something he can just do now without anyone bleeding afterward.

He could get used to this so fast it should frighten him more than it does. Ilya Rozanov doesn't get to keep the things he loves.

Instead he only tightens his hold a little and says, against Shane's shoulder, "Moy lyubimiy."

Shane turns his head just enough to say, "What does that mean?"

"Ah, you will have to learn Russian to find out."

"T'es trop con, des fois."

Ilya smiles into the fabric of his shirt.

"Ah, okay, I will have to learn French, but it's not fair. I already learned one of your languages."

"You did not learn English for me."

"No?" Ilya lifts his head. "Then being bilingual has all been for nothing?"

Because Shane cannot leave anything well enough alone, he asks again, "What did it mean?"

Ilya presses another kiss to his shoulder and decides, because he is merciful, "Maybe I will tell you later."

Shane sighs a little, though Ilya can tell it's fond, and turns back to the stove before the potatoes burn.

Ilya stays where he is anyway.

He likes this angle. Shane warm in front of him and the weight of his own arms around his waist. It feels indecent in a whole different way than anything they had ever done together ever was.

He says, after a minute, "You're very good at this."

"I'm just following the recipe."

"No, I mean," Ilya shrugs. "At this whole thing. Acting like I belong here."

Shane pauses then sets the spoon down, turns the heat lower, and twists carefully in Ilya's arms until they're facing each other properly in the narrow space between stove and counter. He looks unfairly soft in the kitchen light.

"Ilya, I'm not pretending."

"No, no, I know. I just mean—ah, never mind."

"No, tell me, what is it?"

"No, really. Is nothing. Get back to dinner because if you keep looking at me like this you will have to start over."

Shane studies him for a long time before he leans in, pressing a chaste kiss to his lips. "Tell me later? When you've figured it out?"

There is something almost unbearably intimate in being known like this, beyond his exterior, his body. That is the trouble with being loved by Shane Hollander: he notices.

It is like Shane knows that he himself has not reached the end of that thought yet. Knows it is still moving around inside Ilya, half-formed and dangerous, and that if he tries to force it into words too soon it will come out wrong. But he also knows him well enough not to let wrong become never.

So he just nods, and rests his chin on Shane's shoulder when he turns back around, satisfied with Ilya's response.

Later, he watches Shane meticulously plate dinner for a full five minutes. He manages to stay silent for almost ten full seconds.

Then: "Can I at least steal a potato?"

"No."

"One potato."

"You can wait thirty seconds."

"You are starving me, Shane."

Shane sighs and gives up, sliding the plate over to Ilya.

"I just wanted it to look nice." His cheeks are a little pink as he grumbles, rummaging for forks. He looks a lot like a sad kitten.

Ilya's heart melts in his chest. They'll have to find him a new one soon if he's to survive these three weeks.

"Okay, okay, no, wait. I am sorry. Please finish your masterpiece."

"No, it's fine. I was done anyway." He hands Ilya a fork, and gets onto the barstool beside him.

Ilya, despite all his moaning and groaning over how hungry he is, picks up his phone and take a photo of the meal, iced Diet Coke and all.

Shane shakes his head and goes back for the second plate, but he's smiling again.

The kitchen glows warm and gold and full of food and Shane and all the things Ilya has spent most of his life pretending not to need.

He takes a bite, then another, then another, before he makes an obscene sound.

"Fuck, is there anything you are not good at? This is so good. I am going to stay here forever."

Shane shakes his head again, still smiling, and nudges his knee once under the island.

It catches Ilya a little off guard. It's open, soft, totally unhidden, with all that feeling sitting plain as day in his stupid beautiful brown eyes. Fondness, ease. Love, probably, if Ilya is being reckless enough to call things by their names despite their mutual confessions. It's all right there, and Shane, apparently, doesn't even realize how visible he is like this.

And really, looking at him now, Ilya has no idea how he ever thought he stood a chance against Shane Hollander.

A week later, the lake has learned the shape of them.

At least, that is how it feels to Ilya, stretched out on the dock in the late afternoon heat with one leg hanging over the side and the other bent at the knee, drink sweating onto the wood beside him. The water below is clear and lazily moving. Somewhere across the shore a boat engine hums and fades. A loon (fucking weird ass wolf-bird that he is not entirely convinced isn't a predator out for blood) sounds off in the distance. The whole world smells like the sunscreen Shane insisted slathering all over them.

A week of this, and already the place has started to seem less like a miracle and more like a habit. A very dangerous habit. An addictive habit.

Shane is beside him in swim trunks and a damp Metros t-shirt. He had gone in the lake half an hour ago and come back up with his hair dripping and his mouth pink from the cold and his eyelashes clumped together, and Ilya had nearly drowned for reasons that had nothing to do with water.

Now he looks lazy in a way Ilya still does not entirely trust in him, all long limbs and summer heat and quiet contentment.

It is obscene.

Almost like he can hear the direction Ilya's thoughts are going he speaks up before Ilya can open his mouth.

"Not on the deck," Shane says from behind his forearm.

Ilya doesn't bother pretending ignorance. "Come on. You cannot look like this and expect me not to do anything about it."

Shane shifts the arm off his face and turns his head to look at him.

The sun is lower now, lighting his stupid face all soft and gold. Ilya, because his life is unbearable, feels his whole chest tighten at the sight of him.

"You're getting sunburned," Shane says.

"I am not."

"You are a little. Your face is getting red."

"This doesn't happen to Russians," Ilya says.

"That's not how skin works."

Shane gives him a look that says he knows this is bullshit, then reaches blindly for the sunscreen bottle by his knee and tosses it at Ilya's stomach.

"Put more on."

Ilya catches it one-handed. "Bossy."

"You'll complain later if you burn."

"That sounds like future Ilya's problem."

"Future Ilya is still you."

Ilya smiles despite himself and shakes the bottle. "Okay, but you have to put it on for me."

Shane laughs quietly. "Seriously?"

"Yes." Ilya rolls onto one elbow and offers him the bottle. "You're the one so worried. Be useful."

Shane exhales through his nose like this is a ridiculous burden being placed upon him, but he takes the bottle anyway.

"Sit up."

Ilya does, mostly because he wants to see the expression on Shane's face when he squeezes sunscreen into his palm like he's preparing for surgery. He always does everything with such inane intense focus.

"There is no reason for you to look that intense about it," Ilya says.

"You said that about bug spray too."

"And I was right then also."

Shane ignores him, already rubbing the sunscreen between his hands to warm it up first, which is such an absurdly thoughtful thing to do that Ilya has to look out at the lake for a second and regroup.

Then Shane leans in and starts at his shoulders.

He's thorough about it, of course. Too thorough. Hands firm and warm as he smooths sunscreen over Ilya's skin with the kind of concentration most people reserve for important objects.

"You missed this spot earlier," Shane mutters.

"Did I?"

"Yeah, let me know if it hurts."

Shane rubs more carefully at the top of his shoulder, then the side of his neck, then catches Ilya by the jaw with sunscreen-slick fingers and turns his face toward the light.

"Hold still."

Ilya laughs. "Usually that is my line."

Shane's mouth twitches, but he only says, "Close your eyes."

Ilya does, because he is not stupid.

For a second all he feels is Shane's thumb brushing carefully under one eye, then across the bridge of his nose, then over the other cheek. It's cool, and he's gentle, efficient, and completely unselfconscious in a way that makes the whole thing worse.

When Shane finally pulls back, he says, "Okay."

Ilya opens his eyes.

Shane is still close. Kneeling in front of him on the dock, one hand braced by Ilya's thigh, the other shining faintly with sunscreen. His expression is serious in that annoyingly heartwarming way it gets when he's just finished doing something and wants to make sure it's been done properly.

"All good?" Shane asks.

Ilya looks at him for a second, then he catches him by the waist and pulls him straight into his lap.

Shane lets out what can only be described as a startled *sqwack* that gets swallowed immediately when Ilya kisses him very, *very* thoroughly. If Shane had been thorough with his care, then Ilya is just as thorough with his gratitude.

The dock creaks under the shift of their weight. Shane makes a soft sound into his mouth and settles one hand at Ilya's side to steady them both, but he kisses him back without hesitation, warm and open and just surprised enough to make it even better.

Shane's lips are a little red when they pull apart and his eyes have gone soft in that way that makes Ilya willing to do things that would ruin his own life.

"What was that for?" Shane asks, voice lower now.

Ilya strokes the back of his neck once with his thumb.

"A thank you," he says. "To my protector. I am now safe from the evil sun."

Shane brushes some of Ilya's hair away from his forehead to put a small kiss there and that tiny contact goes through Ilya like a small private current.

He has been sleeping beside this man for a week. He's been waking up with one of Shane's giant limbs across him like a tranquilized sloth. He's been watching him cook and swim and read and insist on applying bug spray whenever they sit outside like he's conducting a campaign against mosquitoes.

And somehow his body still reacts to the smallest things as if none of that has happened. As if every touch is still the first one.

It is humiliating. *Oh, Rozanov, you have gone so so soft.*
It's also, he thinks, probably just what love is.

Shane had gone quiet, even though he's mostly on Ilya's lap. For a moment he says nothing, then with affected casualness goes, "I've been thinking."

Ilya snorts affectionately. "When are you not?"

"You're really not funny."

"I am a little funny."

Shane gives him a look, but there is no real force behind it. He's still somewhere inside his thoughts, turning them over carefully, trying to line the words up before he lets them out.

Ilya has seen that look before too.

It usually means Shane is about to say something either: one, deeply casual, or two, life-altering.

Sometimes, horrifyingly, both at the same time.

"So," Ilya says. "What kind of thinking?"

Shane's hand slides from his cheek to his shoulder, thumb moving once there before settling.

"About after."

Ilya stills. No. This can't be it.

"After what?"

Shane glances at him then, as if to say *seriously*?

Ilya lifts one shoulder. "You say ominous things. Clarify."

Shane looks back out at the lake. "After this. After summer. After..." He exhales quietly through his nose. "Us having... this, where it's all easy."

He's not wrong. Yes, the lake has learned the shape of them. The cottage has begun to feel a little less like a dream and a lot more like a place where they can belong together. A place where Shane reads on the bed in his adorable glasses and Ilya steals his disgusting green smoothies and makes faces because he knows they taste bad but it makes smile and roll his eyes and they end up in bed at two in the afternoon because one of them says something smug and the other is too in love to let it pass.

But it's still a bubble, isn't it? And time just keeps ticking down on it, but it's more than he could have asked for so how could he hope for more.

So, Ilya says nothing. Shane sits back, between Ilya's knees, and he suddenly feels too far, but then he places his hands on Ilya's sides. Strong and warm and steady.

"Well. I've been thinking about teams. And I've been trying to think about how this works long-term."

There is a strange, sharp little silence after that. He studies Shane's face, waiting for the pullback, the qualifier, the no of it.

It doesn't come.

Instead Shane says, quieter now, "I'm not interested in this only working when it's easy."

Ilya looks down at where Shane's hand rest against him.

"You're serious," he says.

Shane's brows pull together. "Of course I'm serious."

"Shane."

"Ilya." Shane shifts, coming a little closer. "I told you already. I'm in this for the long run."

He had. And Ilya had believed him, or wanted to, or maybe both.

But there is believing someone means it emotionally, and then there is hearing the gears of their mind turning over teams and contracts and years.

Shane keeps talking, because once he starts on something like this he apparently cannot stop.

"What if one of us moved somewhere closer," he says. "Eventually. Not immediately, obviously, but when it makes sense. My contract is up after yours but I can find a team somewhere that cuts the distance down. Somewhere we could actually..." He makes a small frustrated gesture with one hand. "Do this without having to see each other a few times a year in hotel rooms."

"You would leave the Metros."

It comes out flatter than Ilya means it to.

Shane looks at him, puzzled in that very Shane way, as if this is not the shocking part of the conversation.

"If it meant making this work? Yeah."

Ilya has to drop his face into Shane's neck for a second, because this man is apparently trying to kill him with sincerity. Shane goes quiet immediately. His hand comes up to the back of his head.

"You okay?"

That makes him laugh once, low and broken around the edges.

"No," he says into Shane's skin. "You are insane."

Shane's fingers move once through the damp hair at the nape of his neck. "Probably."

"You would do that for me."

It is still difficult to say out loud; still difficult to make the shape of the sentence without something inside him trembling around it.

Shane's answer is so soft it nearly undoes him anyway.

"Yes, Ilya."

There is something so simple and so impossible in the way he says it. Like this is not even a question. Like of course he would. Like of course he has been thinking that far ahead. Like Ilya is just something Shane has already started building into the shape of his future unthinkingly—that he is a given now.

It's not how most people love, but it is very much how Shane Hollander does.

Ilya lifts his head eventually, and Shane is starting to look a little worried.

Oh, sweet idiot. How can he not know what Ilya would do for him?

"My contract is up before yours," Ilya says.

Shane blinks. "What?"

Ilya shrugs one shoulder, because if he doesn't act at least a little casual about this he may humiliate himself permanently. "So maybe I move."

"You would move," Shane says.

"Yes."

"To Canada?"

"Please," Ilya says. "I already spend half my life in one terrible country. I can survive a little more in another."

That still doesn't seem to be the right response somehow, because Shane is looking at him like he has reached into the lake and pulled out a miracle with his bare hands; a lot like he doesn't quite believe this.

"You would," Shane says again.

"Yes, Shane." Ilya touches his jaw, because apparently one of them has to keep the conversation connected to reality. "I would."

Shane drags a hand through his damp hair.

Then, because he is incapable of leaving revelation at a reasonable level once it has started, he says, "Ottawa would make sense."

"You even thought about where?" But the moment he says it, he realises that, well, of course he did.

Shane has the grace to look briefly guilty.

"A little."

That startles a helpless laugh out of Ilya. "Ottawa," he repeats.

Shane nods, warming to it now despite himself. "The Centaurs have cap space. They need a star. And they're bad enough that somebody like you could actually change the room there, build something. It's close enough that—" He stops, glances at Ilya, and goes a little pinker. "It's two hours."

"Two hours," Ilya echoes.

Shane nods, and it all starts to feel a little less like a fantasy, less like a wall they're both hurtling to crash into, and a lot more like a road. A hard one, maybe. A stupid one. A very hockey-player, overcomplicated, long-range road.

But it's still a road.

He says, before he can lose his nerve, "*Ya tebya lyublyu*. Shane. Shane, *ya tebya lyublyu*."

"What's that one?"

"I love you."

Everything in Shane's face softens at once.

"I love you," he says again, quieter now. "I love that you think like this. I love that you worry too much. I love how boring you are. I love that you keep trying anyway. I love that you are sitting here planning out ideas and teams and years ahead like this is not the most terrifying thing anyone has ever done for me."

Shane lets out a sound that is half fond, half something rougher.

Ilya strokes his jaw with his thumb.

"And if you think I am letting you leave the Metros for me without fighting about it first, then you are out of your mind," he says. "But yes. I am serious too. About all of it. About you."

For a second Shane just looks at him, brown eyes wide and molten in the sunlight, every last feeling in plain sight. Then, he reaches for him, one hand at the back of his neck, and pulls him in.

Shane keeps their foreheads together and says, very softly, "I love you too."

Ilya smiles against his mouth.

"Yes," he says. "I know. You've been embarrassingly obvious."

"Not obvious enough."

It's a couple days later that Shane is discovering that loving Ilya Rozanov means being forced to watch absolute garbage under protest.

"This makes no sense," he says for what might be the seventeenth time in an hour.

Under him, Ilya makes an impatient sound and throws more popcorn into his mouth. "No, it makes perfect sense. You just hate fun."

On screen, a car is doing something that is *probably* illegal in most countries and *definitely* impossible in all of them.

Shane pauses the movie.

"Oh my God, Shane," Ilya says.

"No, seriously, explain to me how that works."

"It's a movie."

"Yes, I know it's a movie."

"Then why are you asking."

"Because that car would be in pieces."

Ilya throws his head back against the couch cushion and laughs. He reaches over and unpauses the movie. "Shane. It is *Fast and Furious*. Nobody cares."

"I care."

"That's your mistake."

Shane glares at the screen. They are halfway through *Hobbs & Shaw*, which Ilya had insisted he did not need any prior context for.

"You said I'd understand it."

"You do understand it."

"I absolutely do not understand it."

"It is two idiots being ridiculous and then becoming friends. It is about family. Not very hard to understand."

"That's not a plot."

"That is enough plot."

Shane looks over at him.

Ilya is sprawled across the couch, one leg tangled with Shane's, the bowl of popcorn balanced recklessly on his stomach, in another muscle tank, as if Shane's life were not hard enough.

A week and a half at the cottage has done terrible things to Shane's self-control.

(Not that he'd had much to begin with where Ilya is concerned.)

The windows are open to the warm dark. The cottage is lit only by the TV and the lamp by the bookshelf. Shane is half draped over Ilya already, one arm along the back of the couch behind him, his foot hooked under Ilya's calf. They've eaten too much. They've had sex twice today, once after breakfast and once because Ilya called him a coward over cards. The entire evening has gone soft around the edges.

And Ilya is sitting here telling him that a man can, apparently, redirect a helicopter with a chain and his bare hands.

"No," Shane says, still staring at the screen. "See, this is exactly the problem."

"There is no problem."

"There are several problems."

"Name one."

"Physics."

Ilya snorts. "You are so boring."

Shane turns to look at him properly. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Just have fun, *kotenok*." Ilya picks up another handful of popcorn. "It is a silly movie."

"And you love these?"

"They are very lovable. Like someone."

The words land with the easy carelessness of a man who has grown too comfortable saying things like that.

He reaches over and takes the bowl away from him just on principle.

"Hey."

"You're cut off."

"Abuse!"

"You can't defend this movie and eat my popcorn."

"It is our popcorn."

Shane sets the bowl on the coffee table. "Wrong."

Ilya watches him do it, then tilts his head slightly. "You are smiling. You like it."

"I'm not."

"You are. You do."

"I'm annoyed."

"Yes," Ilya says, and lifts one hand to catch lightly at the back of Shane's neck. "Very annoyed."

That touch has become one of Shane's favorite things in the world.

Which is pathetic, probably, but also true.

Ilya's thumb brushes once under his hairline, and Shane's whole body, traitorous thing, softens toward him automatically.

Shane leans down and kisses him before he can keep talking.

Ilya makes a sound into his mouth and shifts under him immediately, one hand sliding from Shane's neck to his jaw, the other catching at his T-shirt to tug him closer. Shane braces one hand on the couch by Ilya's head and kisses him deeper, not even pretending at restraint, because one of the side effects of prolonged exposure to this man is losing all interest in pretending he is not obsessed with him.

The movie keeps playing in the background, and Shane doesn't care at all. Something explodes, someone yells, a car is probably doing an impossible thing.

Shane kisses him until he loses track of the plot entirely, which is probably for the best.

Ilya's tank come off somewhere in the middle of it and get dropped blindly on the floor. Shane shifts more fully over him, half pinning him into the couch cushions. Ilya laughs softly against his mouth at the weight of him, then opens under it with that easy heat Shane still occasionally cannot believe belongs to him this freely now.

It is that, really, that ruins him. Because yes, the sex is good. The sex is obscene. The sex is, at this point, constant enough that Shane is beginning to suspect the cottage itself might be cursed.

But this—

this part—

he gets to have this part: bad movies and open windows and Ilya's bare foot tangled with his and a lazy make-out that could still turn filthy and probably will—

Shane slides a hand onto him and gets a warm palm full of stomach, then skin, and Ilya pulls him closer with a sound that goes straight down Shane's dick.

"Still think it makes sense?" Shane murmurs against his mouth.

Ilya smiles. "You are not watching."

"That's because you're distracting."

"That sounds like a you problem."

Shane kisses the corner of his mouth. "Everything about you is a me problem."

That gets him a laugh, softer now.

Then Ilya wraps a leg more firmly around Shane's and says, "Come here," like Shane is not already practically wearing him, and Shane, who has never once in his life had any real defense against that tone, obeys on instinct.

He's kissing down Ilya's throat by the time the front door opens.

He doesn't hear it at first.

Not with how loud the movie is, with how little attention he is paying to anything that is not Ilya stretched out under him in the lamplight.

What he does hear is a voice.

"Oh—"

They freeze.

The whole world snaps into jagged focus around him all at once: the TV still blaring from across the room, Ilya's hand still at the back of his neck, his own body sprawled over Ilya's, the open front door, and his father standing just inside the cottage and an expression of pure startled horror.

David Hollander blinks once.

Then, rapidly, "I'm so sorry. I didn't—your mother thought I left my charger here and I just—I'm sorry, Shane, I didn't mean to—"

He is already backing up.

Already turning.

"I'll just—sorry—"

The door shuts behind him.

The cottage goes silent except for the movie, which is still yelling about something.

For one full second Shane cannot move.

He's aware of everything with terrifying precision.

His pulse.

His skin.

The exact weight of Ilya under him.

The ringing in his ears.
The air going cold all over his body despite the heat.

Then he lurches upright so fast he nearly knees the coffee table.

"Shane—"

He grabs the remote and kills the TV.

"Oh my God," he says.

His voice sounds wrong.

"Shane."

"My dad."

"Yes."

"My dad just—"

"Yes."

He paces three steps toward the kitchen and back again before he even realizes what he's doing. Every nerve in his body feels hot and exposed, like the front of him has been peeled open.

His dad.

His dad saw them.

"Oh my God."

"Shane."

He keeps moving.

The room feels suddenly too small, too warm, too bright even with the lamp low. He can hear his heartbeat in his throat. He has a horrible, vivid image of his father getting into the car, driving home, saying something wrong to his mother, or saying nothing at all, or saying *everything*.

All the private architecture Shane has spent years building around this thing—the carefulness, the walls, the timing of it, the control—gone in the space of one unlocked front door.

He drags both hands through his hair.

"This is bad."

Ilya sits up slowly on the couch behind him. "Okay."

"No, this is really bad."

"Okay."

Shane turns to look at him.

Ilya is still a little mussed, shirtless, mouth pink from kissing, and altogether much too calm for the level of catastrophe currently occurring.

"My dad just walked in on us."

"He did, yes."

Shane stares at him.

"That's not—" He cuts himself off and presses the heel of one hand briefly to his forehead.
"Jesus Christ."

Ilya gets to his feet.

"Hey."

Shane looks up.

Ilya comes toward him slowly, like he's approaching a nervous animal or a man on the verge of climbing directly out a window, which he would consider except they're on the ground floor.

"Maybe he didn't notice," he says, trying to diffuse the sirens in Shane's brain.

"Ilya."

"No, it's okay," Ilya says. "Your parents are good, yes? You were going to tell them."

That is somehow worse. Because there's a difference between Shane telling them and them just finding out.

Shane starts pacing again anyway.

"He's going to go home."

"Yes."

"And tell my mom."

"Maybe."

"And then—"

"And then," Ilya says, voice sharper now, enough to cut through the spiral, "you can decide what happens next."

Shane stops.

Ilya is right there in front of him now, close enough to touch, though he isn't touching him yet. Just looking at him with that frustratingly steady expression he gets when he's chosen to be the calm one whether Shane likes it or not.

"My dad knows," Shane says, as if saying it out loud might somehow make it smaller.

"Yes."

Shane laughs once. It sounds awful. "Great."

"Not great."

"No?"

"No," Ilya says. "But not the end of the world either."

Shane looks away.

He can feel the first real edge of panic now, the one that lives lower than thought. The sick, electric helplessness of it. He hates this feeling. Hates the way it makes him want to move and hide and solve everything all at once when there is, obviously, no solving anything in the next thirty seconds.

He feels Ilya step in front of him fully.

Then there's a warm hand on his arm.

"Shane."

He lifts his head.

Ilya looks at him for a second and says, very plainly, "We go talk to them."

The simplicity of it startles him.

"What?"

"We go now. Before he has time to sit with it by himself. Before you invent twenty worse versions in your head." Ilya squeezes his arm once. "You talk to your father and your mother. And if it goes badly, I steal your car and we flee to Ottawa early."

That almost gets a laugh out of him—almost.

"You'd do that? You'd... come with me?"

"Yes, of course."

"That's insane."

Ilya shrugs. "I learned from you."

That one does get him, just enough. A weak, broken little laugh that leaves his chest too fast and doesn't fix anything, but at least proves he is still in his body.

Ilya steps closer then and finally puts both hands on him, one at his waist, one low at the back of his neck.

"You don't have to do the whole next ten years tonight," he says quietly. "Only the next hour."

Shane closes his eyes for one second.

Breathes in.

Out.

When he opens them again, Ilya is still there, looking at him like this is survivable.

Maybe it is. Maybe.

Shane lets out a slow breath and says, "Okay."

Ilya's thumb moves once at the back of his neck.

"Okay," he says back.

And that is also how Shane Hollander, half out of his mind with dread and still tasting movie-night kisses at the back of his throat, finds himself getting his keys to drive to his parents' house and tell them the truth.

By the time they pull into the Hollander driveway, the sky has gone summer dark. The kind that still holds warmth in it; trees black against a cobalt sky. The cottage is older than Shane's, of course. Homier in a way that is somehow both obvious and not.

Ilya sits for a second after Shane kills the engine.

The car ticks softly around them.

Shane has both hands still on the wheel.

He is not shaking, but there is something in the set of his shoulders Ilya has come to recognize over the years with unnerving precision: the point where control stops looking calm and starts looking like strain.

Ilya reaches over and places a hand over his.

Shane's fingers flex under it, but he doesn't pull away.

"You don't have to say everything at once," Ilya says.

Shane stares through the windshield. "I know."

Ilya looks at him in the dark car and thinks, not for the first time tonight, that there is probably no force on earth more dangerous than loving a man this decent.

Then he says, because one of them has to keep this from turning into tragedy too early, and Ilya will do it if it is for Shane, "If it helps, I can do most of the talking."

"That will not help."

"It should. I'm excellent under pressure. You should try me."

"You're excellent at making things worse."

"That is also true."

It earns him a tiny smile, tight, but real enough.

Ilya squeezes his hand once and lets go.

"Come on," he says. "Let's go meet my future in-laws."

Shane turns to look at him so fast you would think Ilya had fired a gun in the car.

"Ilya."

"What?"

"You cannot say that right now."

"Why? I heard a podcast say manifestation is important."

Shane laughs once through his nose with a sharp exhale and shakes his head. Then he takes the keys out of the ignition and opens the door before Ilya can keep going.

The night air is cooler here than it had been at their cottage, the smell of lake water sharper somehow. Ilya gets out and rounds the hood with Shane, and for one strange, suspended second he has the absurd urge to reach for his hand.

He doesn't, because he can feel how tightly Shane is holding himself together and knows that if he takes his hand now, it might break something open too soon.

So instead he walks close enough that their shoulders brush once on the way to the porch and Shane shoots him a grateful look.

The front door opens before Shane can knock.

David Hollander stands there in soft gray sweatpants and a navy quarter-zip, reading glasses still perched low on his nose like he had been in the middle of something and forgot to take them off when he heard the car.

His eyes go first to Shane.
Then to Ilya.
Then back to Shane.

There is no surprise there, not really. That had already happened, in the worst possible way, between an action movie and Shane's mouth on Ilya's throat.

What's left now is awkwardness.
And worry.
And, underneath both, a kind of careful waiting.

"Hey," David says.

Shane says, "Hi," at the exact same time Ilya says, "Good evening," and that in itself is awkward enough to nearly qualify as comedy.

David steps back from the door immediately. "Come in."

The cottage is cooler inside, lit warmly and smelling faintly of cedar and coffee and a candle that has probably had burning for the last six hours. Somewhere deeper in the house, footsteps cross wood floors.

Then Yuna appears in the doorway off the kitchen.

Ilya has seen her in person before, obviously. Games. Family sections. The one league dinner years ago where she had kissed Shane's cheek and told him he looked good and then looked right past Ilya like he was a decorative statue.

This feels different, without an arena between them.

Her gaze moves to Shane first, fast and sharp in the way of women who know their children too well.

"What happened?"

Beside him, Shane straightens visibly, like the question itself has pulled the truth up into line.

"Nothing happened," he says.

David closes the door behind them.

Yuna looks from him to Ilya and back again. "Shane?"

"Can we sit down?"

And just like that, the room changes, because it sounds like a story is about to be told.

Yuna nods once and leads them into the living room.

There is a big sectional facing the dark windows, a low table with coasters lined up too neatly to be accidental, two lamps throwing soft pools of light over the room. David takes the armchair. Yuna sits on one end of the couch. Shane, after the briefest hesitation, sits on the other.

Ilya takes the space beside him.

The silence that follows is long enough to get interesting.

Shane's knee is bouncing, barely, but it's enough that Ilya can see it from the corner of his eye.

So he does the only thing available to him and puts a hand lightly on Shane's thigh.

It stops immediately.

"This is Ilya. Rozanov. Uh, well, you know that— We—" He pauses, swallows around his nerves. "Ilya and I are together."

Ilya feels the words land in the room like something solid set down between all of them.

Yuna blinks once.

David's face does something complicated and human and immediate—shock, yes, but also a kind of painful sympathy for how impossible this moment must feel to Shane.

"Together?" she asks.

"Yes."

"How long?"

Shane swallows once.

"A while."

That is both technically true and so wildly insufficient that Ilya has to keep his face very still.

Yuna stares at him.

"A while," she repeats.

David says, gently, "Shane."

Shane lets out a breath through his nose. "A long while. Since rookie season."

Ilya could leave him to it. He absolutely should leave him to it.

Instead because self-preservation has never once been his best trait, the words come out of his mouth, "No, is not true. Since the summer before."

"Ilya," Shane says warningly.

"Sorry," he murmurs.

David leans forward slightly. "Shane."

And there it is again—that awful tightness climbing back up Shane's spine, the one Ilya had felt all the way from the car. He can practically hear the gears turning on their highest speed, so he presses his thumb lightly into Shane's thigh. Shane glances down for half a second.

Then says, slower this time, "We've been together for a long time. On and off, at first. Not because I didn't want—" He stops, frustrated. Starts again. "That's not the point. The point is, it's not new."

He drags a hand through his hair.

"We're in love," he says abruptly, like the sentence has finally shoved its way out past everything else. "This isn't—I'm not—this is serious."

Yuna looks at Shane for a long second.

Then at Ilya.

Then back again.

"I know this is probably not fair," she says slowly, "but Rozanov—"

"Ilya."

"—Ilya has a reputation for being a ladies' man."

Shane's whole body tightens beside him.

"Mom—"

"No, let me finish." Her gaze flicks to Ilya, then back to Shane. "You know what I mean. People talk. He's been—" She stops, clearly trying to find the least catastrophic version of the sentence. "He's not exactly known for being serious."

David says quietly, "We just don't want you hurt."

Ilya feels the change in Shane immediately, the way his leg goes rigid under Ilya's hand, the way he draws in one quick breath too many.

"No. Well, yes, he likes both, but," Shane says too fast. "That's not—he's not—this isn't—"

Yuna's mouth tightens a little. David looks down at his hands.

And some ugly, rotten part of Ilya thinks, *fair enough*.

Fair enough, because from where they are sitting it probably does look insane. Their son, their careful serious son, sitting beside a man whose entire public image for the last decade has been sex and swagger and tabloid garbage and enough women at his arm to fill a roster.

Shane Hollander, all steadiness and stubborn loyalty and that terrifyingly decent heart of his, sitting beside a man with a reputation like Ilya's and asking to be taken seriously about it.

Fair enough.

But then Shane's voice catches on itself again, and whatever private agreement Ilya might have had with their suspicion dies right there.

"Shane," he says quietly.

It doesn't cut through.

Shane is already too far inside it now, words tripping over each other, trying to explain six things at once and failing all of them.

"You don't know him. Not like I do. He's not—God, that sounds stupid. I just mean, that's not what this is, and it's not—he's not messing around, he's not—"

Ilya gets up.

The movement is instinct more than decision. One second he's beside Shane on the couch, and the next he's crouching in front of him, right there in the narrow space between Shane's knees and the coffee table.

That, at least, gets his attention.

Shane cuts off mid-sentence and blinks down at him, startled.

His face is too open, too flushed. His breathing is wrong and that wild, trapped look in his eyes that means he's about two bad seconds from losing the room completely.

Ilya puts both hands on his knees.

"Hey," he says.

Shane just stares at him.

"Come back," Ilya says, quieter.

For a second, nothing then Shane drags in another thin breath.

Ilya nods once. "Good. Again."

He does it with him this time, slow and obvious enough to follow.

In.
Out.

Shane's shoulders are still too tight. His hands are fists against his own thighs.

Ilya rubs his thumbs once, briefly, over the material at his knees.

"You're good here," he says.

Shane's eyes flicker.

"Okay?" Ilya keeps his voice low and even, like this is simple, like it is already true. "Your boyfriend is here. Your parents are here. Everybody in this room loves you. No one is dying. Nothing is on fire. It will be okay."

A breath shudders out of Shane that sounds almost like a laugh and almost like the opposite.

Ilya waits.

"Again," he says.

Shane breathes with him.

This time, better enough that the panic is no longer driving the car.

"There," Ilya murmurs. "That's it."

For one ridiculous second, kneeling there in front of him under the full horrified gaze of Shane Hollander's parents, Ilya wants to kiss him on the mouth and tell him he is making this very difficult by being so easy to love.

Instead he keeps his hands where they are and says, "You do not have to explain everything perfectly in one go."

For one second Shane just looks at him then his mouth closes around whatever next frantic explanation had been waiting there.

Good.

Ilya gives his knees one last squeeze and rises again, sitting back down beside him as if none of that had happened at all.

The room is very quiet.

Ilya does not look at David, does not look at Yuna. He does not actually want to know what they saw in that.

He keeps his hand on Shane's thigh and says, because there is no point being offended by people who are trying to protect their son, "You're fair to worry."

Shane turns his head sharply. "Ilya—"

"No." Ilya keeps his eyes on David instead, because David at least looks less intimidating. "You are."

Yuna says nothing so Ilya goes on.

"You know me from hockey," he says. "And from gossip. Mostly from gossip, probably, because that is what people like best." He shrugs one shoulder. "Fine. Fair. I would maybe worry too."

Beside him, Shane goes very still and Ilya feels it in the absolute absence of movement.

"But I'm not playing with him," he says.

This time he looks at Yuna.

"I love him. Very much. And I know that is easy to say in a living room after being caught on a couch like teenagers," Ilya adds, "but it's still true."

David's face changes first that Ilya looks away before he has to think too hard about it.

Yuna's expression is harder to read.

Maybe that is better.

Beside him, Shane is no longer spiraling which is the only thing that actually matters.

After a second, David leans back in his chair and says, "Okay. I think everyone needs a drink."

No one argues.

David disappears into the kitchen.

The room exhales with him gone.

Yuna looks at Shane for a long second. Then at Ilya. Then back again like she's still trying to wrap her head around this.

Shane's breathing is normal now or, at least, close enough.

He glances sideways at Ilya once, quick and private, and the look on his face is so raw with gratitude that Ilya has to look away before it gets dangerous.

When David comes back, he is carrying a tray. There's a can of Ginger Ale and three short glasses and bottle of vodka that makes him blink. *Good vodka.*

David pours him a glass without comment and hands it over. Then does the same for Yuna and himself.

For a second nobody says anything.

Then Yuna, holding her glass with both hands now, says, "All right."

It is the kind of *all right* that means the real conversation is only now beginning.

"How serious," she asks, looking at Shane, "is this?"

Shane glances once at Ilya's hand on his thigh, then back at her.

Ilya feels him breathe before he answers.

"Very." He takes a deep inhale. "We've been talking about later."

Yuna's brows knit. "Later how?"

"My contract ends first," Ilya says before Shane can drown in qualifiers again.

Now both of them are looking at him.

"After that," Ilya says, "we were thinking maybe I move."

"Move?"

"Yes, move teams. To Ottawa. It's closer."

"You would leave Boston?"

"For Shane, yes."

"You would leave the team that drafted you?"

"Mom," Shane cuts in.

"What, loyalty is important!"

"well, he's trying to be loyal to me! Sorry," Shane says, looking at Ilya. "My mom cares too much about hockey."

Ilya smiles, fond and entirely besotted. "Yes, I see where you get it from."

Yuna looks between them like she is trying to reconcile two incompatible facts at once: her son sitting there with his hand under Ilya's on his thigh, calm now in a way that has to mean something, and the actual words coming out of their mouths.

"Ottawa," she repeats.

Ilya nods. "Yes."

"The Centaurs."

"Yes."

She stares at him. "The Centaurs are terrible."

That gets him enough that a real laugh, quick and bright escapes, that even David's mouth twitches around the rim of his glass.

"Yes," Ilya says. "That is why they need me."

A moment later, after studying them both, Yuna sets her glass down carefully.

"Shane," she says, and something in her voice makes both of them look at her immediately. "Are you happy?"

Shane answers without hesitation. "Yes."

Yuna's face changes. She is still Yuna Hollander, still composed, still trying to holding emotional truths in her hands at once without dropping any of them. But something in her eyes goes softer, more wounded in a maternal way than suspicious.

"Okay," she says quietly.

David nods once, as if that settles it for him too. "Then okay."

She claps her hands together. "Then we need a plan."

Then David stands up, draining the rest of his drink.

"Well," he says, "since we've apparently reached the portion of the evening where your mom is about to break everything down, I think the least we can do is feed everybody."

They get back to the cottage carrying the strange loose silence that follows an evening too full to hold anything else. It's not quite tense, but more the wrung-out kind, where both of them have already done more feeling than is advisable and now have to let their nervous systems catch up.

Shane gets the door open and steps inside first. Kicks off his shoes and lines them. Drops the keys into the bowl by the door and misses slightly.

Ilya notices because of course he notices. Because Shane Hollander, who has spent most of his life moving through the world with controlled precision, is officially being clumsy.

This is either very serious or very funny. Probably both.

The cottage feels smaller after the Hollander house. Warmer, too. The lamp is still on. The bowl of popcorn is still on the coffee table.

Shane shuts the door and leans back against it for one second. Long enough for Ilya to catch the look on his face and feel something in his own chest go soft.

Because there it is again: that slightly dazed, wide-open expression Shane gets when the force of his own life catches up with him all at once. As if some part of him is still sitting in his parents' living room hearing *okay, then okay* and waiting for the real disaster to show up late and it doesn't.

That seems to be the theme of the week, actually. Catastrophes declining to happen. Doors opening and somehow not slamming shut.

Shane looks up at him.

"My dad gave you his good vodka."

And that is such a ridiculous place to start that Ilya laughs before he can stop himself.

"Yes," he says. "You really let me think your father was boring all this time."

Shane's mouth twitches. "He is boring."

"No. Boring men do not keep emergency Russian vodka in the house." Ilya steps closer, toeing off his own shoes by the door. "That was a very specific flex."

Shane lets his head tip back once against the wood. "I think he panicked."

"Mm." Ilya considers that. "Still counts."

That gets him a real smile and Ilya feels it in places that were already compromised.

He comes the rest of the way and stops in front of him.

Shane is in clothes he threw on in a hurry after pacing a hole in the cottage floor half an hour earlier. Hair slightly wrecked. T-shirt wrinkled. Face still carrying the last traces of panic and relief in equal measure.

Ilya likes him very much.

"Hey," Shane says.

"Hi."

Then Shane says, in the same dazed tone as before, "My mom asked if you wanted more salad."

Ilya puts a hand over his own heart. "I know. It was extremely serious for me."

That does it.

Shane laughs and bends forward a little with it, and suddenly the whole night rearranges itself into something survivable.

Ilya reaches up and gets a hand to his jaw. Shane's hand slides to his waist and stays there, familiar in a way that would have seemed like science fiction a year ago.

For a second they just stand there in the entryway, half laughing, half not, the whole cottage quiet around them except for the little tap of something loose against the porch outside.

Then Shane says, quieter, "Thank you."

Ilya blinks. "For what?"

"For tonight."

He says it simply. That's the problem. Shane says things simply and then expects the world not to stop turning for a second.

Ilya looks at him.

Shane looks back with that stupid open face of his, every feeling plainly visible in those wide brown cow eyes.

Really, he never had a chance.

"You okay?" Ilya asks.

Shane is quiet for a second.

Then: "Yeah."

He says it and this time it sounds like maybe he means it.

Ilya studies him for another moment, then says, "Good."

A pause.

Then Shane, because apparently he cannot let sincerity exist in a room without making it worse in a way that is deeply effective on Ilya's central nervous system, says, "Come upstairs, please."

Ilya catches him by the jaw and kisses him properly. They've done enough of that today to qualify as a concern, but this is slower than all the others. Than the dock, slower than the couch, slower than the movie disaster and the kitchen and all the other places the last two weeks have taken them.

Shane opens under it immediately, one hand sliding up between Ilya's shoulder blades. He tastes faintly like salad and ginger ale and the end of a very long night.

When they part, Shane is still close enough that the next breath is basically shared property.

"You ask very nicely," Ilya says.

Shane's mouth twitches. "I know."

Upstairs, the bedroom is cool and dim, the curtains half open to a slice of dark water and sky beyond the trees.

Shane gets as far as the edge of the bed before stopping.

Ilya watches him for a second.

"What is it?" he says.

Shane glances back at him. "I think I'm just still trying to process the fact that they know."

Ilya comes closer and gets his hands on the hem of Shane's shirt.

"They know," he says.

Shane lets him lift it off without helping much, just raising his arms and standing there in the low light with his chest bare and his expression still slightly stunned around the edges.

"They know," Shane repeats.

"And?"

"And..." Shane looks down once, then back at him. "And it went okay. Good, even."

Ilya smiles. "Yes."

Ilya drops the shirt somewhere vaguely near the chair and presses his mouth to Shane's shoulder.

"Come here," he says.

Shane does. He steps in close without hesitation, like Ilya has become one of those things his body understands faster than his brain can keep up with. One hand finds Ilya's side immediately. The other lands, warm and absent-minded, at his back.

That does not help.

Ilya kisses him because his options tonight are that or standing here in the middle of the bedroom smiling like an idiot while Shane Hollander looks at him like this.

The kiss isn't careful, exactly. They are past careful with each other. But slower than the ones downstairs. Slower than the dock. Slower than the whole panicked, relieved, impossible sprint of the evening. Shane opens under it at once, with that same low, quiet eagerness that still occasionally catches Ilya somewhere just north of the sternum and knocks the sense out of him.

There is no edge under it tonight, no private misery waiting in the wings.

There's just Shane.

Shane, who had sat on his mother's couch and said *we're in love* like he was dragging the truth out into daylight by hand and refusing to let it go.

Ilya puts both hands on his face and kisses him deeper.

Shane makes a soft sound into his mouth and takes one step forward, then another, until the backs of Ilya's knees hit the bed.

There is something so indecently domestic about being crowded backward onto clean sheets by a man you are in love with after meeting his parents for dinner that Ilya nearly laughs.

Then Shane kisses down his throat and he stops finding anything funny.

"I love you."

Shane smiles.

That smile is the whole problem, honestly. Unguarded in a way Ilya still has no built-up immunity for, all warmth and relief and quiet leftover happiness. It's awful. Ilya is obsessed with it.

"I love you, too."

Naturally, he drags Shane in and kisses him again before the sight can do any permanent damage.

After that, other clothes start disappearing in the vague, unstructured way they do when neither person is in charge and both are too invested in touching skin as quickly as possible.

Shane gets Ilya's shirt halfway off and stuck around one wrist somehow.

Ilya laughs into his shoulder. "Excellent work."

"Shut up."

"No."

Then Shane finally gets it over his head and tosses it somewhere behind him with enough satisfaction to suggest he views this as a major personal victory.

Ilya gets his hands on the waistband of Shane's sweats and drags him closer by it, just enough to make Shane inhale and look at him with that quick startled heat that never, ever gets old.

They end up half falling onto the bed, all knees and hands and a brief tangle with the sheet Shane had straightened this morning in one of his many quiet acts of control. Shane lands half over him, catches himself at the last second, and looks down with the expression of a man prepared to apologize.

Ilya gets a hand in his hair before he can.

"No."

"No what?"

"No saying sorry for today. It was a good day, okay?"

"Okay,"

Ilya slides a hand down his back and thinks, with the tired greed of a man who has entirely lost the ability to pretend otherwise, that maybe this is the actual payoff. (Not even the sex, though that too, always.) This. Shane all loosened up from relief and family and too many feelings. Shane draped over him like he has nowhere better to be.

He could live a long and humiliating life this way.

They're too tired for anything other than lazy handjobs at first, but hands start moving with more purpose. Mouths linger longer. Want rises without anybody having to perform it into existence. Shane traces the line of Ilya's ribs with his fingertips like he's relearning a familiar sentence. Ilya hooks a leg over his and feels the answer in the way Shane's body settles more fully between his.

Later, when they finally come apart in earnest, it feels less like being destroyed and more like being let in.

Which is honestly a horrifying development.

Shane comes with Ilya's name in his mouth and one hand fisted in the sheet and the other on the back of Ilya's neck, like even now he needs something solid there. Ilya follows not long after with his face buried against Shane's shoulder and the deeply compromising awareness that he is probably smiling into his skin like a complete idiot.

Afterward, they lie there in a heap like it would hurt to be even an inch apart.

Ilya is half on top of Shane, because his body has made a permanent executive decision on that subject. Shane has one arm thrown across his back and the other tucked under his own head. The sheet is somewhere around their hips. The room smells like sweat and sex and Shane's body wash, which remains offensively expensive for a man who honestly shops like an accountant.

For a while neither of them says anything.

Then Shane says, voice gone rough with sleep, "Ilya."

Ilya lifts his head enough to look at him.

There is no panic in him now, only exhaustion and warmth and the faintly smug afterglow of a man who survived his own nightmare and came home with his boyfriend.

It does truly terrible things to Ilya.

"Hm."

"I love you."

"I love you too," Ilya says, immediate as breathing. Then, after a second: "Obviously."

Shane smiles and shuts his eyes again.

A minute later, very drowsily, he says, "Next time we should change the door code."

Ilya goes still for a second then grins into the dark.

Because really, he had thought this story was going to end in private ruin and emotional frostbite.

Instead, somehow, it has become this: Shane Hollander half asleep under him and still hanging on.

Disgusting, honestly.

Also perfect.

And if this is what a happy ending looks like, Ilya thinks he can probably live with the humiliation.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all again!! i'd love to hear your thoughts <3

also, stay tuned because i outline *another* fic, this time it's a marriage of convenience hollanov, and i am honestly kinda so giddy to start writing it? ~~tentatively named terms of engagement~~ but we'll see if that sticks. i wish i can give an upload timelines, but definitely not before next week because i'm slammed with exams and submissions to wrap up this cursed semester.

► also, to the one person who was like i would love to see marcel, here is a truly god awful doodle of him hahaha (let it be known i am NOT an artist)

see you all in the next one! 💕💕

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!