

Of Tuna Melts, Love Confessions, and Mafia Inclinations

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by [rachelarcher](#)

Summary

"In the songs the old women sing, the forest does not offer mercy... it only offers trades. When Anzhelina was fourteen, she walked into the deepest thicket to find the Young Wolf, Ruslan Dragunov. She did not go with tears; she went with a crown of iron and a heart of flint.

She offered him a life for a life: she would be the moon to his tide, the lioness to his pride, and the mother to his heirs, if only he would tear the throat from the Great Bear, Grigori. Ilya still wonders if the North Wind blew too hard that night, or if it was Lina's own hand that guided the Wolf's teeth toward their brother Andrei, too. Perhaps he was a branch that always needed breaking.

That was the night the girl died, and the Queen of the Fortress was born. She traded her spring so her brothers could finally see the summer."

Notes

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

Chapter 1: Before: Once Upon A Time... [2003-2004]

In the early 1980s the Chertanovo Bratva criminal syndicate began making in-roads in East Boston. The goal was to have a backup location to Brighton Beach (in New York). By the end of the 1990s the Chertanovo's had done their job so well they had complete control of the city, stolen out from under the Patriarca Crime Family seemingly while they slept. By the early 2000s leadership in East Boston was looking to train a replacement. Ruslan Dragunov's name was the first *whispered*, the rumor spread even to the Rozanov household, where the second oldest Anzhelina heard it. Slowly, she began to plan. Bratva, while enemies loved to be together, so when the chance presented itself around Christmas of 2003 the teenager orchestrated a meeting with Dragubov himself.

"Mama, you have to help me get dressed up pretty for tonight." Irina knew objectively what little Lina was going to do, they had whispered about it for weeks, how to posture, how to move, how to look like the future for a man who had no hopes or aspirations past taking over the rest of the Irish holdings in America. The dress had struck that careful balance between elegance and youth, the kind that made people look twice without quite knowing why.

It had been a fitted black lace gown, long-sleeved with a high neckline that kept it refined rather than overtly grown. The lace overlay had been intricate and deliberate, layered over a darker lining so the pattern read clearly without ever feeling too sheer. The sleeves had been fully lace, just transparent enough to soften the look, to keep it from becoming too heavy on her frame. The bodice had been tailored close through her waist, clean and structured, before the skirt fell straight and then eased into a soft flare at the hem, a subtle mermaid shape with layered fabric that moved quietly when she walked.

It had not been a single dress, not really. Irina had made it. She had taken two of her own dresses apart, one for the lace, one for the structure, and rebuilt them with careful, practiced hands. There had been intention in every seam, in the way the fabrics met, in how the silhouette had been adjusted to fit a body still growing, still changing. It had carried the quiet history of its materials, pieces of Irina's own life reshaped and handed down, not as something borrowed, but something remade. It hadn't glittered. It hadn't needed to. The drama had lived in the texture, in the way it fit her, in how it asked her to stand a little taller without demanding she be anything more than she was.

Anzhelina was fourteen, nearly fifteen, caught in that narrow space between girlhood and something more defined. Her face had held onto its softness, the roundness in her cheeks not yet sharpened by time, but there had been something steadier in her eyes, something aware. She had held herself carefully, shoulders back, hands gathered lightly in front of her as if she

had practiced it, as if she understood she was being looked at, even if she wasn't entirely used to it yet. Her hair had been left long and loose, falling in soft waves over one shoulder, keeping the entire look from becoming too severe, too finished.

The jewelry had been chosen with restraint. A fine pendant necklace had rested just below her collarbone, a small, clean piece that caught the light without drawing attention away from her face. At her ears, she had worn simple studs, something bright and clear, no larger than necessary, just enough to frame her features. A thin bracelet had circled her wrist, delicate and almost forgettable, the kind of piece she could turn slightly with her fingers when she grew restless. Then there had been the ring, it had belonged to her grandmother, a Rozanov heirloom, and it had looked almost impossibly large on her hand. The band had been older, heavier than anything else she wore, set with a deep green emerald that caught the light in slow, deliberate flashes. It had not been made for a girl her age, not in scale, not in meaning. It had carried weight, history, expectation, all of it sitting there on her finger as if it had always been waiting for her.

It had been slightly too big, slipping just enough that she had to keep her fingers curved to hold it in place. She had been aware of it constantly, the cool press of metal, the quiet gravity of it. Nothing about it had matched the lightness of the rest of her, but she had worn it anyway, the one inclination that she was a Rozanov. "It is time to change the stars, Mama. Wish on them all for me." With that she moved through the back room, through the party, down the corridor, looking for the rooms she knew the Bratva worked out of when State Dinners occurred. Slipping by the guards her father kept on a leash she looked for Sergei Vetrov, a legendary former Soviet goaltender who became a powerful Russian Minister of Interior (and a heavily involved member of the Chertanovo Bratva criminal syndicate in Moscow).

Once she sighted the man her father loved regardless of their differences, she moved closer to him, "Uncle Sergei, may I have a moment of the birthday boys time? Please?" Sergei regarded her carefully, as if deciding whether or not she was a threat, then stepped aside, the door slowly opened. "Thank you, Uncle." She moved into the dimly lit office, the heavy door closing behind her like a tomb. She couldn't remember a time in her life when she'd actually laid eyes on Ruslan Dragunov but the man before her was not what she expected.

Ruslan Dragunov had not been a large man, not in the way people expected power to look. At five foot eight, he did not dominate a room by height, but by something quieter, more deliberate. He held himself with a kind of contained stillness, the sort that made space around him without asking for it. That night, it had been his twenty-second birthday, a big event for the State Dinner, for Mother Russia - one of her favorite bloody sons rising even higher in trajectory. His jacket had already been discarded, thrown carelessly over the back of a chair as if it had become unnecessary the moment he stepped inside. Without it, the sharp tailoring

of him softened just enough to reveal the rest. The black suit trousers sat low and precise at his hips, clean lines, expensive without needing to announce it. His shirt had been left open at the throat, pale fabric falling in a loose tie that suggested formality without obedience, the knot undone, hanging longer than it should have.

Through that open collar, the first hint of ink had shown. Just at the edge, barely revealed unless someone looked twice, there had been the silhouette of a woman wrapped in roses, dark lines curling into one another, suggestive without being explicit. It had not been decorative, it meant something, art like that always did. At his throat, the wolf had been impossible to miss. A snarling Oskals, teeth bared, stretched across the column of his neck, its expression frozen in that moment between warning and violence. It shifted slightly when he moved, when he swallowed, giving the impression that it might come alive if provoked. It was not subtle. It was not meant to be. Even the jewelry followed that same logic. A simple chain rested at his throat, the pendant small but solid, something worn often enough to feel like part of him rather than an addition. On his lapel, a gold brooch caught the light, shaped with quiet intricacy, just enough to draw the eye without overwhelming the rest.

His hands told the rest of the story. On his right hand, the ink had been heavier, more declarative. The middle finger bore the cross of thieves, stark and deliberate, placed where it could not be hidden, only ignored or acknowledged. Across the back of that same hand, the outline of a church rose in dark lines, unmistakable in its domes and spires, the Kremlin rendered in ink that spread across bone and tendon. It moved when he flexed his fingers, the architecture bending slightly with him, as though it had always belonged there. His left hand and arm carried something different. The cherub angels began at the back of his hand and climbed upward, small figures layered in soft detail, their forms broken occasionally by tiny symbols threaded between them. It softened the overall impression only slightly, adding something almost reverent, though even that felt intentional rather than innocent. There was nothing accidental about any of it.

When Anzhelina came in, he did not move immediately. He had been leaning back slightly, one hand resting against the table, the other loose at his side, expression composed in that same careful neutrality he wore like a second skin. But his attention shifted. Not sharply, not in a way that called itself out, but it settled on her and stayed there. It was the kind of stillness that noticed everything.

The door closed softly behind her, and for a second, Lina just stood there, letting the room settle around her before she moved. Her hand stayed at her side, fingers curled slightly to keep the ring from slipping, the emerald catching the light in a way that felt louder than anything else about her. She slowed the last few steps, measured and careful. When she stopped, it was at a distance that felt correct, not too close, not distant enough to seem afraid. Her shoulders squared, chin level, hands visible. She met his eyes, held it for a moment, then

softened it just slightly. “Good Evening, Ruslan Svyatoslavovich.” Her voice was even, quiet, each word placed carefully, then, “I am Anzhelina Rozanova.”

She didn’t offer more than that at first. Didn’t rush to explain, didn’t fill the silence that followed. She let the name sit there between them, letting it carry what it would, then, slowly, she moved. Her right hand lifted, careful, deliberate, the motion small enough not to startle, but intentional enough that it couldn’t be mistaken. She slipped the ring from her finger, the movement practiced only in the sense that she had thought about it, over and over, long before this moment.

The emerald caught the light as it left her hand, as she held it out, not too close, not forcing it into his space, just offering it across that distance between them, resting in her open palm, “This was my grandmother’s,” she said, her voice steady, though quieter now, “Rozanova.” Another small pause, just enough to mark the weight of it, “I am placing it in your keeping,” she continued, each word chosen with care, “As a vow.” Her gaze didn’t drop. It held, steady, respectful, and aware. “I have a plan”, she said and there was the slightest shift there, a bit of hesitation quickly masked by her sheer determination, “And I will see it through. This is my word on it.”

The ring didn’t waver in her hand, neither did she, and then, as before, she waited, then she switched to her voice lowered, a secret then - something just between them. “And I will not waste your time”, Lina said quietly, “So I will be clear.” A breath, small, controlled. “My father is unstable,” she continued. “And he is escalating. My stepmother will not survive him.” She did not soften it, made no attempt to dress it in anything gentler, “There are three younger children in that house”, she added. “One of them an infant.” She let that sink in, let him understand what she was insinuating., “If nothing changes, they become his next problem”. Her fingers shifted slightly under the emerald, steadying it where it threatened to slide, “I am offering you a solution that benefits us both.”

A transaction offered, she let her shoulders relax, “You are rebuilding”, she said, watching him carefully, not guessing, but knowing. “Your father is dead. Your position is not yet settled. In Moscow, you have strength. In America, you have reach, but not full control.” Her chin lifted just slightly, “You need legitimacy that cannot be challenged. Not just power.” She let that sit for a fraction of a second before continuing. “I am a Rozanova. I come with inheritance, with property in Moscow and in the States, and with a name that settles questions before they are asked”. Her voice stayed even, I am also young enough to be shaped to your household, your expectations, your structure.” No flinch. No apology, “I will give you heirs. As many as required.” Then, quieter, but sharper, “And I will not embarrass you in either country.” The ring caught the light again as her hand tilted just slightly forward, “In return,” she said, “my father dies.” No emotion, just her eyes focused on him, not flinching, “Cleanly. Without scandal that reaches me.” She exhaled, again, settling, “And my older brother, if he

becomes a liability, is handled the same way.” She did not rush past that. She let it stand, as heavy as it was.

“The younger children remain under my protection”, she continued. “My stepmother as well, if she is still alive when this is done.” Now, finally, something almost like a boundary, “I do not ask you to take them in”, she said. “Only that you do not interfere with my keeping them.” Her gaze held his steady, unwavering, “In return, you gain immediate claim to my name, my assets, and my cooperation.” She gave him a long look, eyes raking over his face, “And loyalty that is chosen, not forced.” The smallest shift in her shoulders, not submission, not defiance. Something more precise, “This is my plan”, Lina said. The ring remained in her open palm between them, “My vow is that I will not fail you in it.” And then, as before, she waited.

Ruslan did not reach for the ring. That, more than anything, was the answer at first. He watched her instead, not her face. Not entirely. His gaze moved once, slow, deliberate, from the emerald in her palm to the set of her shoulders, the steadiness in her hand, the way she held her ground without leaning forward, without retreating. Measuring. Not impressed. Not dismissive. Just... measuring. The room stayed quiet around them, then, finally, he shifted. Not toward her. Back, slightly, like he was giving himself more space to think. His hand came up, thumb brushing once along his lower lip, eyes never leaving her.

“You speak,” he said, voice low, even, touched faintly with something that might have been amusement, “like someone much older than fifteen.” It was not a compliment. “Or someone who has practiced this too many times.” His head tilted just slightly, “Which is it?” He did not wait for her answer, instead his gaze dropped briefly to the ring again, still resting in her open palm, “You offer me legitimacy,” he continued, quieter now. “Name. Property. access.” His fingers tapped once against the table beside him, soft, deliberate. “And in return, you ask me to remove two problems.” A soft pause lingered, “Three,” he corrected lightly. “If your brother becomes inconvenient.” His eyes lifted back to hers, “And you present yourself as the solution.” Another pause, longer this time, “And yet,” he went on, “you intend to keep the rest of your household... separate.”

There it was. Subtle, but sharpened, his gaze narrowed slightly, not in suspicion, but in focus, “No,” Ruslan said, almost to himself, before looking at her again. “That is inefficient.” He leaned forward just enough to shift the balance of the space, “If I take this,” he said, nodding once toward the ring, “I take all of it.” His voice did not rise. It did not need to, “Your stepmother. Your brothers.” A slight tilt of his head. “They come under my protection. In my house. Where I can see them.” This was Control, not negotiation, “Assets do not remain scattered,” he added, almost idly. “They are consolidated.” He let that settle between them before continuing, “And you,” he said, “would learn very quickly what that means.”

Then, just as smoothly, he shifted again, back to her, “You are asking me to act on your word,” he said. “And on a ring that does not yet belong to me.” His gaze flicked to her hand once more, “And you assume I will trust that you can hold what comes after.” He let that settle for a moment, then, “You are fourteen.” Not dismissive. Just fact, “In America, this becomes noise. Attention. Questions. I do not invite questions I do not control.” His fingers stilled, “And once your father is gone,” he continued, “your house fractures. Authority does not pass cleanly to a girl, no matter her name.” Now his gaze sharpened, just slightly, “So tell me,” he said, quieter now, more intent, “with what authority do you intend to hold it?” The room seemed to draw tighter around the question.

For a moment, Lina did not answer, she was trying her hardest to be respectful. She took a few calculated steps forward, grounding herself closer to him, showing her own trust in his reputation before she spoke again, “My father has already lost control,” she said, her voice steady, unchanged. “He simply does not know it yet.” Without hesitation she pushed on, “I manage the household accounts,” she continued. “I know where the money moves, and where it is hidden.” A small pause. “I know which men are paid on time, and which are not.” Her fingers adjusted slightly beneath the ring, steadying it, “I know which of his associates will leave the moment he is gone,” she said, “and which will stay if the transition is clean.” Her gaze did not waver, “I have already ensured that it can be.”

That was new. Quiet. Controlled. Done. “My stepmother listens to me,” Lina went on. “The younger children already look to me.” A breath. “The household answers to me when he is not present.” She held his eyes, “I am not asking to take his place,” she said. “I am removing a liability and preserving what remains.” A pause with a promise woven in, “And handing it to you intact.” The ring remained steady in her palm, “Irina and the children come with me,” she added, this time without hesitation. “That is not a point of resistance.” Her chin lifted, just slightly, “It is an advantage.” Another pause, deliberate, “They are leverage,” she said. “And continuity.” A glance, brief but intentional. “And they ensure I remain exactly where you place me.” Then, quieter, “You keep them close, you keep everything close.” The room settled again, it seemed to breathe, “And as for control,” Lina said, her voice lowering just slightly, not softer, just more precise, “I do not expect you to take it on faith.”

Finally, she stepped forward, measured, closing the distance she had so carefully kept before. The ring, still in her palm, now within reach to the man before her, “Give me something to do,” she said. No bravado. No fear. Just the recognition that for her to earn him she had to prove her worth, now. “Something that proves I understand what I am asking for.” Her gaze held his, “And I will do it.” She did not specify what that meant, she didn’t need to, they had both grown up in the Bratva. The offer sat there, clear as the emerald catching the light between them, this time, she did not wait from a distance. She waited in front of him.

Ruslan's gaze lingered on her for a long second after she finished, thinking over what she had offered. It took a lot of boldness to do what she had done this evening, he had to give her that. Finally, he moved, his hand came up, slow, deliberate, and instead of taking the ring, he closed his fingers gently over her wrist, just enough to still it. Not rough. Not soft. Controlled. The emerald caught between them, "You are eager," he said quietly. Not a reprimand but an observation. His thumb shifted slightly against her pulse, feeling it, measuring it, before he let go just as easily as he had taken hold, "And that," he added, "is the first thing we remove."

He leaned back again, reclaiming his space, his authority settling back into place like it had never left, "For the next ten days," Ruslan said, "you will do nothing." His eyes roamed over her again, watching carefully how she handled the order, "You will go home. You will behave exactly as you have been." His eyes held hers. "No changes. No preparations that can be seen. No sudden intelligence." His head tilted slightly, "You will not improve your plan." The boundary was determined, hard, one that Lina would have crossed easily if he had not set it for her, "You will not act ahead of me." He looked her in the eyes, holding her pinned down, as he added, "If your father raises his hand," he continued, voice still even, "you will endure it." To others this would have sounded cruel, but they both knew it was Ruslan extending his control, demanding she prove her loyalty in stages, "Because if you cannot hold your position for ten days, you cannot hold anything I give you after."

The room felt tighter for a moment, the weight of that settling in, the room exhaled when he spoke again, "On the tenth day," he said, "you will act." His fingers tapped once, softly, against the table. "There is a man in your father's circle," Ruslan continued. "Viktor Semyonov. He handles cash that does not pass through official channels." A glance, brief, measuring. "He has begun to take more than he is owed." Ruslan only knew about this because one of his lesser idiots played cards with the man every other Thursday, "You will confirm it," he said. "Quietly. Without asking questions that can be repeated." His gaze sharpened just slightly, "And then you will remove him." No embellishment. No drama, "You will choose how," Ruslan added. "But there will be no noise. No panic. No attention that leads back to you." Ruslan looked her over again, already thinking of ways she could belong to him if she didn't disappoint him, "And nothing missing that would force your father to look too closely." He let that settle before continuing, "When it is done," he said, "his absence will make sense."

Not vanish, disappear correctly. Ruslan's eyes flicked once more to the ring still in her hand, "If you succeed," he said, "I take this." A beat of silence passed between them, "If you fail..." He didn't finish it, he didn't need to, Lina would find herself very dead either by his hand or Grigori's. She half expected him to stand, instead, his gaze returned to her face, steady, assessing. "This is not about whether you can kill, sweetheart," Ruslan said quietly. "It is about whether you can wait, whether you can follow instructions, and whether you understand that control is not taken." A slight tilt of his head, "It is held." Silence stretched

for a moment, then, almost as an afterthought: “And if you are tempted,” he added, “to solve your father before I tell you to...” His expression didn’t change, “Remember that I will know.” The faintest pause, “And I will decide what that means for you.” His attention dropped once more to the emerald, still offered, still untaken, “Ten days,” Ruslan said.

Now he waited for her response.

Lina did not step back when he finished, if anything, she went stiller. The silence stretched just long enough to test her, to see if she would rush to fill it, to soften what had just been placed in front of her. She didn’t, “Ten days,” she said. Her voice did not waver as she assured, “I understand.” Followed with, “I will not move before you tell me to.” There was no defiance in it. No submission either. Just clarity. Her hand remained where it was, the ring still resting in her palm between them, unwavering, “And when I do,” she added, quieter now, more precise, “it will be clean.” Her gaze held his, “It will not come back to you.”

Ruslan watched her for a long moment after that. Then, finally he reached for the ring. Not quickly. Not greedily. His fingers closed over it with the same measured control he applied to everything else, lifting it from her palm as though testing its weight, its reality. The emerald turned once between his fingers, catching the light, “Good,” he said flicking his gaze back to her, “And when you do this,” Ruslan continued, voice low, steady, “and you do it well...” A pause, “I will let you be present when your father dies.” The words landed clean. His head tilted slightly, studying her reaction, “You will see it,” he went on. “You will understand exactly what it means to remove a man like him.” A fraction of a second, “And he will understand exactly where you stand.”

There was something colder in that - not anger - ownership. Ruslan slipped the ring into his hand fully now, closing his fingers around it, “You do not need to prove what you are,” he added, almost idly. “That will be confirmed.” His attention shifted, just slightly, already moving past her, already building the next step, “And your brother,” he said. “Andrei.” The name sat differently to Lina, Andrei had a mother different from her and different from her younger siblings, a whore if the rumors were to be taken seriously. Another of Grigori’s possessions dead before her expiration date, according to Uncle Sergei. “He will be tested as well.” A brief glance back to her, “Men like him either bend,” Ruslan said, “or they break at the worst possible moment.”

Another of Ruslan’s pauses, before, “I prefer to know which before I build anything around them.” His fingers tapped once against the ring in his hand, “You will not interfere with that,” he added. “No warning. No protection.” He moved swiftly then, closer, close enough now that the distance she had so carefully measured no longer existed, that she would have to tilt

her head slightly to keep his gaze. His hand came up, not rough, but firm, fingers settling briefly at her jaw, guiding her attention where he wanted it, he leaned forward to press a tense kiss to her forehead, then her nose, then to her lips, closed mouthed. "This," Ruslan said quietly, "is the last moment you are given the choice to hesitate."

Not a threat, but a boundary, "If you succeed," he continued, his voice lowering just slightly, "everything you've asked for moves forward." A beat passed as he ran his lips over her cheek, again, biting now at her jaw, "If you don't—" He didn't finish it, his hand dropped from her face just as deliberately as it had lifted, and just as quickly, the space between them returned, as though he had never crossed it at all. In his wake a coldness seemed to dance up her body, against her better judgment she almost stepped toward him again, but managed to stop at the last second. His back to her she felt her cheeks flush.

Ruslan turned slightly, already shifting back into motion, into planning, into something larger than the moment, "Ten days," he repeated. The ring remained in his possession now, so did the decision. "And, expect a visit from a doctor, your mother will have called, I want verification of your purity."

"As you wish." She bowed her head, slightly, not in submission, but almost defiance, then she slipped out.

Irina had not sat down once. The room bore the evidence of it, the way a chair had been pulled out and left untouched, the candle burned lower than it should have for the hour, the faint, uneven path worn into the rug between the window and the door. She moved it again now, back and forth, hands clasped too tightly in front of her, then loosening, then tightening again as if she could will herself into stillness and kept failing.

Every sound in the hallway had meant something, every one of them had been wrong, until the door opened. Irina turned immediately, too fast to hide it, breath catching in a way she did not bother to disguise. Her eyes swept over Lina in a single motion, taking in everything at once. Whole. Unharmed. Present. Alive. Relief came first. Sharp. Immediate. But sadly it did not last, "What happened?" Irina asked, already moving toward her. Not soft, not gentle, but controlled in a way that suggested effort. "What did he say? Lina..." She stopped just short of her, searching her face now, closer, more precise, "What did you do?"

Lina closed the door behind her carefully, with determination and near silence, for a moment she said nothing, only her hands at her sides, shoulders settling into place, the same posture she had held before, the same stillness she had carried into that other room. It had not left her, Irina noticed it immediately, and the lack of the emerald ring. That, more than anything, made her expression sharpen. “Anzhelina,” she said, quieter now, but more dangerous for it. “Do not stand there and look at me like that. Tell me what is going on.”

A long stretch of silence moved between them, then Lina met her eyes. There was something different in it now. Not distance. Not coldness. Just... certainty. Something that had not been there when she left, “Everything has been sorted,” Lina said. Her voice was calm. Measured. Final in a way that did not invite interruption.

Irina stilled, “What does that mean?” she pressed, stepping closer again. “Sorted how? What did he ask for? What did you agree to?” The questions came faster now, slipping past control, “Lina—”

“It will come to pass,” Lina said. She didn’t raise her voice. She didn’t speak over her. She simply... finished the thought before Irina could take it somewhere else. “Be patient, Mother.”

The word landed differently now, less affectionate, more a title, a placement of belonging. Irina had been sorted into a category of protection, then. The mother of a future - something to Ruslan Dragunov. Irina stared at her, really stared, as if trying to find the girl she had sent out the door, as if expecting to see her somewhere behind this version instead, “You’re not telling me,” Irina said slowly. Lina gave her no answer, Irina’s jaw tightened, something flickering behind her eyes, frustration, fear, something sharper threaded through both, “What has he taken from you?” she demanded, the control slipping now, just slightly. “What did you give him?”

Lina held her gaze, “Nothing,” she said, and it was not a lie.

Irina searched her face again, harder this time, looking for cracks, for hesitation, for anything she could pull apart and understand, Irina didn’t find it. The silence stretched, and for the first time since Lina had walked back into the room, Irina did not move. Dread filled her stomach, she had known objectively there were dangers when sending Lina to handle Ruslan on her own, dangers that Irina had never encountered before herself, as her marriage had been arranged by her father in an attempt to prevent Grigori from killing him (it hadn’t worked

both Irina's parents and her brother were dead by her husband's hand over a debt they supposedly owed him). Irina mourned for the child she'd sent out into the world that evening, realizing that whatever Lina had worked out with Ruslan would be dangerous.

Lina remained where she was, composed, steady, already carrying the weight of something Irina had not been allowed to touch, and she did not offer it.

Viktor Semyonov's greatest asset was the very thing that made him a liability: he was a man no one watched closely. Existing in the quiet friction between importance and invisibility, he was trusted to shuffle untraceable wealth through the shadows, yet remained unremarkable enough to move it without a second glance. By avoiding the typical vices of his trade; heavy drinking, loud gambling, or conspicuous company; he maintained a life of disciplined consistency and pristine ledgers. This curated boredom meant that if something were to go wrong, the shift would be imperceptible to the untrained eye. Knowing this, Lina didn't rush to find him; instead, she settled into the silence and waited.

Day one passed. Then two. Then three.

She moved through the house exactly as she always had, managing accounts, checking deliveries, speaking when spoken to, quiet when not. Nothing sharpened. Nothing changed. If anything, she softened slightly at the edges, just enough that no one would think to look twice.

By the fifth day, she began to watch. She didn't look at Viktor himself at first, but rather at the patterns pulsing around him. She cataloged the frequency of visitors at the back entrance, the specific nights that demanded liquid assets, and the subtle distinction between envelopes that arrived pre-sealed and those filled within the house. By focusing her attention on everything left unwritten, Lina sought the gaps in his carefully maintained routine, knowing that the truth lived exclusively in the spaces where the ink never touched the page.

On the seventh day, she finally found it. The discrepancy wasn't large, as Viktor was far too meticulous for careless errors, but it was small and repeated. He used rounded figures that made perfect sense to anyone not counting closely, allowing money that should have settled one way to settle another. It was a pattern that suggested confidence rather than desperation,

born from the belief that he was entirely unobserved. Lina chose not to confront him, as that would have created unnecessary noise. Instead, she made her own silent adjustments by setting one envelope aside and double-checking a single count. She introduced a quiet change in placement that was just enough to confirm he would feel the need to correct it later. When he eventually did, he never once looked around to see if he was being watched. That single moment of certainty told her everything she needed to know.

By the ninth day, she knew his routine better than he did.

When he left. When he returned. Which door he used when he did not want to be seen. Which coat he reached for when he expected to be out longer than usual. Which pocket he kept his keys in.

On the tenth day, she finally acted. It was late, but not unusually so, as the house had settled into that specific quiet that follows the day's movement. In the silence of closed doors and faded voices, Viktor stayed behind to finish accounts and correct the numbers he assumed would never be questioned. Lina did not approach him from the front but instead slipped through the side hall with a silence so expected it failed to register. When she stepped into the room, he looked up only briefly before dismissing her as a mere fixture of the house rather than a presence that required his attention.

"Miss Rozanova," he said, distracted, already looking back down. "Is there something you need?"

"Yes," she said, her voice was the same as it always was. That was the last normal thing about the moment. She stepped closer, not quickly, not hesitantly. Just... directly, "I need you to fix something," she said.

He sighed, faintly, irritation slipping through as he glanced up again. "It can wait until—" He didn't finish it, because she was now close enough, he finally looked at her properly. Something in that sudden, direct focus made him pause. The dismissive mask of the house's routine fell away as he truly saw her for the first time, sensing the shift in the air that his ledgers had never warned him about, "What is it?" he asked, slower now.

Lina reached into the ledger beside him, turning it slightly, angling the page toward him. Her finger rested on a number. One of the small ones. One of the repeated ones, "This," she said,

“It doesn’t balance.”

Viktor’s eyes flicked to it, then back to her, something tightening in his expression, quick, defensive, calculating. “It does,” he said. “You’re misreading—”

"No," Lina said, her voice quiet and absolute. He stopped as she spoke, and the room suddenly felt different. Viktor straightened slightly, closing the ledger with a soft, controlled motion, and gave her his full attention for the very first time.

“You should leave this to me,” he said. “It’s not—”

"It’s consistent," Lina continued, as if he hadn’t spoken. "Small enough not to be noticed. Regular enough to matter." She paused, letting the weight of her observation settle between them before adding that he had been careful. His face changed then, not dramatically or in a way that anyone else might have caught, but she saw it. "And confident," she added, and the room fell into a heavy silence.

Viktor studied her now, properly, weighing what she knew against what she didn't and calculating exactly what this moment meant. "What do you want?" he asked finally. There it was: not a denial, but recognition.

Lina met his gaze, “Nothing.” That was the truth, and that was exactly what unsettled him. Because there was no negotiation in her answer and no angle he could work, he realized it wasn't a demand. It was just an ending.

He pushed back from the table slightly, tension gathering in his shoulders now, something sharper slipping into place, “You’re making a mistake,” he said, quieter now. “You don’t understand how this works.”

Lina tilted her head just slightly. “I do,” she said. Then she stepped closer. The rest of it was quiet, a soft injection of purpose where there was no longer any hesitation or uncertainty left to work through. It was simply the next step, already decided. Her hand slipped into her sleeve, her fingers closing around the small glass ampoule hidden there, which felt cool

against her skin. It had been easy enough to take and easier still to keep, as no one questioned the movement of medical supplies in a house like theirs, provided it was done carefully.

Viktor's attention flicked to her hand too late. "What are you—" he started, but the needle slid in cleanly. It was quick and precise, practiced only in theory but executed without error. He jerked back, his breath catching more in surprise than pain. His hand came up instinctively to grasp at her wrist, but the strength behind the movement faltered almost immediately. "What did you—" he tried to ask, but his words broke as the reaction set in faster than he expected. A sudden and overwhelming heaviness took hold, as if his body had decided to stop answering him all at once. His grip loosened, his fingers slipping from her wrist as his balance shifted unevenly beneath him.

Lina stepped back not out of fear, but out of pure intention. She watched as his breathing shortened and grew uneven, his chest rising sharply before struggling to find a rhythm. Confusion crossed his face, followed by a muted sense of panic that seemed dulled by whatever was already taking hold of his system. He tried to speak again, but nothing came out, and within seconds his legs gave way entirely.

The chair caught him on the way down, though not cleanly, as his body folded into it at an angle that looked almost natural, like a sudden onset of exhaustion. His head tipped forward slightly with his chin toward his chest, looking as if he had simply stopped. The room went still with no noise and no struggle, leaving only the quiet aftermath of an act that had happened too quickly to interrupt. Lina waited and counted the seconds without moving or touching him again, watching for any sign of life, but she found nothing.

When she finally stepped forward, it was only to adjust him slightly and settle him into the chair properly, placing one hand where it might have fallen on its own. The ledger remained untouched and the table undisturbed. She withdrew the empty needle and slipped it back into her sleeve, ensuring that by the time she left the room, there was no sign of what had happened. Behind her remained only a man who looked like he had sat down and never stood up again.

Ruslan did not look up when the door opened, already sensing the presence in the room. There was a brief hesitation from the newcomer, the specific kind that occurs when a man is deciding how to phrase news that might actually matter. Then, the silence broke with a blunt announcement: "Grigori's idiot Semyonov is dead."

Ruslan's study was a sanctuary of bruised velvet and cold steel, a room that felt more like a tomb for his enemies than an office for the living. He had inherited his father's sprawling mansion, but he had stripped the warmth from the walls, replacing it with deep navy tapestries and heavy, royal purple drapes that swallowed the daylight. The air smelled of expensive tobacco and gun oil, a constant reminder that violence was the foundation of his comfort. Hidden within the ornate molding and tucked behind the silk-lined bookshelves were the tools of his trade; custom pistols and serrated blades were stashed in every corner, within reach of every chair. He sat behind a desk of polished obsidian, his eyes finally drifting toward the door as he considered the news of Semyonov's end. A slow, dark smile pulled at his mouth, not because he mourned the loss, but because he knew exactly whose shadow had been cast in that room. The idea of Anzhelina, his pretty little murderess, navigating the halls with death tucked in her sleeve intrigued him far more than any ledger ever could (he had already read the autopsy report but there was no need for his men to know that).

"Is he," Ruslan said, almost idly.

The man shifted slightly. "Found in his office. No disturbance. No sign of struggle."

"Accounts were in order." Another of the lackeys offered, unbothered.

That, more than anything, drew Ruslan's attention, his gaze lifted, slow, deliberate, "Of course they were," he said, silence settled for a moment, heavier now, "No witnesses?" Ruslan asked.

"No."

"No noise?"

"None."

Ruslan leaned back slightly, the movement small, but it changed the room around him. Sharpened it, “And this will be handled how?” he continued.

“Quietly,” the man said. “It won’t be pushed. Not worth the attention.”

A faint curve touched Ruslan’s mouth, humorless and sharp. “No,” he agreed. “It isn’t.” He set the glass down with a sound that was soft but precise, then told the men to leave it. They didn’t linger, and the door closed behind them with the same practiced care with which it had opened. Silence returned to the navy and purple shadows of the study, and Ruslan sat there for a moment, unmoving, letting the shape of the news settle into place. It wasn’t the death itself that occupied his mind, but the method: clean, noiseless, and devoid of any disruption to the structure around it. It was exactly as he had instructed. Slowly, his hand slipped into his pocket and drew out a ring, the deep emerald catching the light and turning steadily between his fingers as he contemplated his pretty little murderess.

“She didn’t rush,” he murmured, the realization carrying more weight than the kill itself. To Ruslan, the patience was the message. “And she didn’t improvise,” he added, his voice dropping quieter still. That mattered even more, as it proved she possessed the discipline he craved in his circle. With a simple, “Good,” he closed his hand around the emerald ring, the decision settling in his mind just as cleanly as the act she had committed. Viktor had been nothing more than a test, a sacrificial lamb to see if she could handle the weight of his world. She had passed, and now, the true work could begin.

Ruslan did not bother sending for Andrei; instead, he simply found him. It was not a difficult task, as boys like that never truly hid. They moved loudly through the city, leaving a trail of small disturbances that were too insignificant for a police report but loud enough for someone who knew where to look. A name whispered twice in the same hour, a complaint that died before it reached authority, and a bartender who suddenly remembered a face he didn’t want to describe twice—all these breadcrumbs allowed Ruslan to follow the pattern with ease.

The trail led him to a side street that should have been quiet, but was instead alive with jagged movement. Three boys, only slightly older than Andrei, had him half-surrounded in a loose circle that suggested a practiced familiarity with such confrontations. One of the older boys was laughing, while another was already wiping blood from a split lip. In the center of the brewing violence stood Andrei, looking less like a victim and more like he was exactly where he wanted to be. He didn’t look cornered or afraid. Instead, he stood in the middle of

the circle with a dark, restless energy, appearing to actually enjoy the tension. While the others were focused on the brawl, Andrei seemed to be savoring the friction of the moment, as if the chaos of the street was the only place he felt truly at home.

“You said you’d pay,” one of them was saying, voice sharp, annoyed. “You don’t get to walk away from that.”

“I said I’d pay if it was worth it,” Andrei shot back, quick, careless, a grin cutting across his face that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You’re not.”

The tension shifted as one of the boys moved first, but the exchange didn't last long. Andrei was fast, faster than any of them had anticipated, though his movements lacked any semblance of clean structure. There was no restraint in him, only a sharp and messy violence born of pure instinct rather than calculated control. He landed a swing that was far too heavy, followed by a shove that sent another boy stumbling hard into the brick wall, all while letting out a laugh that came at the entirely wrong moment.

It worked for the time being, sending one of the boys to the ground while the others hesitated, recalculating their odds with a sudden, wavering uncertainty. Seizing the momentum, Andrei stepped forward to press his advantage, but that was his first real mistake. It was then that Ruslan moved, not with speed or noise, but with a gravity that cut through the chaos like a line drawn across the pavement.

His presence alone changed the air in the alley, forcing the boys to freeze as the inherited authority of the mansion and the scent of gun oil seemed to manifest in the shadows. Andrei’s wild energy hit a wall of cold, navy-and-purple-draped reality, and the street fight suddenly felt like child's play in the face of a man who dealt in endings. "Enough," Ruslan said. The word wasn’t raised; it didn’t need to be.

Andrei froze, not completely, not like a child being caught, but enough that the rhythm of what he was doing broke just slightly, just enough to matter. The other boys noticed it too. They stepped back first, not because they understood who Ruslan was, but because something in the air had shifted, and they weren’t interested in finding out why. Within seconds, they were gone.

That left Andrei and Ruslan in the quiet that followed. Andrei straightened slowly, rolling his shoulder once as if nothing had happened, though his breathing was just a fraction too fast and his knuckles were already beginning to bruise. He stood his ground, the restless instinct of the street still humming in his limbs even as he faced the silent gravity of the man in the shadows.

“You lost?” Andrei asked, tone edged, careless in a way that was almost deliberate.

Ruslan regarded him for a moment, noting that at seventeen, the boy was far too old to be this sloppy yet far too young to understand why such a lack of control actually mattered. “No,” Ruslan said, his gaze flicking once to the empty space where the other boys had stood before snapping back to Andrei with a cold, piercing intensity. “You are,” he added, the words hanging in the air during the heavy beat that followed, marking the exact moment Andrei ceased to be a street brawler and became a piece on Ruslan’s board.

Andrei’s expression tightened, just slightly. “Didn’t look like it.”

“No,” Ruslan agreed. “It didn’t.” He stepped closer, not merely into Andrei’s space but through it, forcing the boy to either adjust or be moved. Andrei didn’t step back, but he noticed the shift, and that awareness mattered to a man like Ruslan. “You hit hard,” Ruslan said, his tone almost conversational, “but you don’t think before you do it.” He took another step, pressing the silent weight of his authority against the boy’s restless energy. “You escalate when you don’t need to,” he added, pausing to let the critique sink in before delivering the final observation: “And you enjoy it.” It wasn’t an accusation, but a cold, hard fact laid bare in the middle of the alley.

Andrei’s jaw shifted. “So?”

Ruslan stopped directly in front of him, close enough for the cold, predatory heat of his presence to be felt. “That makes you predictable,” Ruslan said, his voice cutting through the damp air of the alley. The silence that followed was heavy, pressing against Andrei’s restless energy until Ruslan spoke again, his tone dropping even lower. “And expendable.” The word landed with more force than any of the punches thrown earlier, stripping away the boy’s bravado and leaving only the stark reality of his position in a world that didn’t value unrefined talent.

Andrei's posture changed, just slightly, tension threading through it now, something sharper than before, "Who are you?" he asked.

Ruslan's gaze held his, the cold weight of it pinning the boy to the brickwork. "A man deciding," he said, his voice a low, steady anchor in the fading light, "whether you are useful." He let a beat pass, the silence stretching until the "or not" hung in the air like a blade. The street felt narrower now, the shadows of the navy and purple-draped world Ruslan inhabited seemingly bleeding into the alleyway. Andrei didn't look away, which Ruslan noted as good, but he didn't speak either, which was better. Ruslan studied him for another moment, measuring and weighing the boy's raw, messy violence against the surgical precision he required. Then, he delivered the terms: "If I give you something to do, you will follow it exactly." It wasn't a question; it was the closing of a cage.

"And if I don't?" Andrei shot back.

Ruslan's expression didn't change, "Then you will prove my point."

The silence stretched between them, thick with the scent of rain and old brick. Andrei exhaled sharply through his nose, a flicker of his earlier defiance still clinging to his posture, though it had grown thinner and noticeably less certain under Ruslan's steady gaze. He shifted his weight, the restless energy of the street fight finally beginning to cool into something more cautious. "...What?" he finally asked, the single word cracking the quiet of the alley. Ruslan watched him, noting the shift with the detached satisfaction of a predator; there it was... the hook had set, and he was looking at a man finally ready to be trapped.

Ruslan turned slightly, already moving past him and assuming he would follow. "Walk," he said, the command as cold and certain as the obsidian desk in his study. Andrei hesitated for a heartbeat, a final flickering spark of his street-bred independence, and then he did as he was told. Ruslan did not look back. He did not need to. He had seen enough to know that Andrei could fight, but now the real evaluation began. He needed to see if the boy could be controlled, or if he was merely a liability that would eventually need to be removed.

They walked for several minutes in a heavy, instructional silence. The city thinned around them as the roar of the main thoroughfares faded into the muffled, contained quiet of a district where things happened without ever becoming stories. Andrei stayed half a step behind, a distance kept not out of respect but out of a wary, animal calculation. He was

watching Ruslan's back the way a stray watches a hand that might either feed it or strike it, his own bruised knuckles still stinging in the night air.

Ruslan finally stopped outside a narrow storefront where the lights hummed behind a locked door. "There's a man in there," Ruslan said, his voice dropping into that conversational tone that felt more dangerous than a shout. He did not offer a name or a history, keeping the details sparse as part of the test. "He owes money. Not much. Enough to matter." He let the statement hang, the navy shadows of the street reflecting in the glass as he waited to see how the boy would handle the weight of a debt that had finally come due.

Andrei glanced toward the glass, trying to see through it, already shifting into something more familiar, "What do you want done?" he asked.

Ruslan didn't look at him, his gaze fixed on the glowing storefront instead. "You're going to go in," he said, his voice flat and devoid of any room for debate. "You're going to speak to him. You're going to make him understand that he pays tonight." He allowed a brief, heavy pause to settle between them before adding the final condition: "He will not be injured." The instruction landed with a specific weight, a direct challenge to Andrei's messy, instinctive violence that forced the boy to choose between his impulses and the discipline Ruslan demanded.

Andrei frowned slightly. "And if he doesn't—"

"He will," Ruslan said, his voice not rising but instead becoming more finished, a finality that brooked no argument. A beat of heavy silence followed as he continued to outline the boundaries of the cage he was building around the boy's volatile nature. "You will not raise your voice," Ruslan continued, "and you will not touch him unless he touches you first." Another pause underscored the next restriction, as cold as the steel stashed in the study back at the mansion: "You will not break anything." Only then did Ruslan turn to look at him, his gaze sharp and measuring. "If you cannot do that," he said, making the stakes absolutely clear and contained, "you are not useful to me."

Andrei held his gaze for a second, something flickering there, irritation, disbelief, something closer to insult, "...That's it?" he said.

"That's it," Ruslan replied.

Then Andrei scoffed, a short breath of sound that betrayed his lingering arrogance as he turned toward the door with a sharp, "Fine." He forced it open harder than necessary, a small but telling first mistake that signaled his lack of true composure. Ruslan did not follow him inside. He stayed where he was, positioned just outside in the navy shadows of the street, far enough back to remain unseen from the interior but close enough to hear every serrated edge of the conversation.

At first, it went as expected. He heard the low, gravelly hum of Andrei's voice as the boy tried to mimic control, attempting to shape his wild nature into the disciplined tool Ruslan demanded. There was the murmur of the shopkeeper, sounding confused and cautious, the typical dance of a man realizing a debt had finally come due. But the rhythm broke during the pause that followed. The shift was instantaneous. Andrei's voice sharpened too quickly, snapping with a sudden, jagged edge: "I said tonight." Something fell then, the unmistakable crystalline ring of glass hitting the floor. The second mistake was made, and still, Ruslan didn't move.

Inside the shop, the tension spiked as the careful structure Ruslan had dictated collapsed into something far messier. The man was speaking now, his voice tight with a fear that usually invited Andrei's brand of cruelty. "I don't have it," he pleaded. "I told—" but Andrei cut him off with a snarl, stating he didn't care what had been told to anyone else. A thud followed, not particularly loud but heavy with deliberate intent. "You pay me, or—" The word hung there, the third mistake that could not be undone, followed by a heavier crash as something large was knocked over. The sound carried out into the street, followed by a silence that was far too long and entirely wrong.

Ruslan exhaled slowly, the vapor of his breath ghosting in the cool air. He was not surprised, only disappointed by the predictability of the boy's failure. The obsidian-like calm of his expression didn't flicker, but the decision he had been weighing earlier began to tilt toward a darker conclusion. Andrei had the fire, but he lacked the hearth to contain it, and in Ruslan's world, an uncontained fire was simply a liability that needed to be extinguished before it burned the house down.

When Ruslan stepped inside, it was already done. The shopkeeper lay half against the counter, his breathing uneven and a smear of fresh blood at his mouth where there hadn't been any before. The room was disrupted now, not entirely destroyed, but clearly altered and fundamentally wrong. Andrei stood over him with his chest rising a little too fast, the jagged adrenaline still visible in the tremble of his hands and the aggressive set of his shoulders. "He wouldn't listen," Andrei said immediately, the words coming out defensive before Ruslan had even spoken. "He kept—"

Ruslan raised a single hand, and Andrei stopped. The silence that followed was heavier than anything that had come before it, thick with the scent of dust and failure. Ruslan's gaze moved once around the room, taking in every detail with surgical detachment: the broken glass, the shifted furniture, and the man on the ground. When his eyes finally traveled back to Andrei, they were as cold as the obsidian on his desk, devoid of the intrigue he felt for the boy's sister. The test was over, and the verdict was written in the blood on the floor.

"You were given something simple," Ruslan said, his voice a low, terrifying anchor in the middle of the wrecked shop. It was quiet, perfectly controlled, and devoid of the heat that still radiated off Andrei's trembling frame. He didn't look at the bleeding shopkeeper, nor the broken glass; he kept his focus entirely on the boy who had failed to understand the difference between power and violence. "You made it complicated," he added, the words falling like lead weights, making it clear that in Ruslan's world, complication was a sin that often carried a permanent price.

Andrei's jaw tightened. "He wasn't going to—"

"He was," Ruslan said, his voice as flat and certain as the marble floors of his mansion. "You just don't know how to make that happen," he added, the words cutting through Andrei's remaining bravado like a blade. A pause stretched between them, emphasizing the distance between a boy who fought and a man who ruled. "And so you chose force." There was no anger in his tone, only the cold, clinical assessment of a master realization that his new tool was flawed.

Andrei held his ground, but it was thinner now, less certain, something underneath it starting to crack, "It worked," he said.

Ruslan looked at the man on the floor, his eyes tracing the smear of blood on the counter before returning to Andrei. "No," he said, the word cold and final. He let another pause stretch out, heavy with the weight of the boy's failure. "It didn't," he added, stepping closer until the physical pressure of his presence forced Andrei to stiffen. The air in the cramped shop felt thin, suffocating under the navy-draped authority of a man who viewed such outbursts as nothing more than a lack of sophistication.

“You created noise,” Ruslan continued, each word precise and cutting. “You created attention. You created a situation that now requires correction.” He didn't raise his voice, which only made the critique feel more like a death sentence to Andrei's aspirations. “And you did it because you lack control.” The silence that followed was absolute. Andrei didn't respond this time; he couldn't. The bravado that had fueled his street fight earlier had evaporated, leaving him small and exposed under Ruslan's clinical assessment.

Ruslan studied him for one more moment, measuring the exact depth of the boy's inadequacy. Then, he turned away—not dismissively, but with a decisive shift that signaled the end of the encounter. “Go home,” Ruslan said, not looking at him now, his attention already moving toward the logistical problem of the bleeding man and the broken glass. He spoke as if Andrei were already a ghost, a discarded tool that no longer warranted even a glance.

Andrei blinked, thrown slightly by that. “That's it?”

Ruslan paused at the door, “Yes.” Ruslan sighed, “That's it.”

Andrei left, or rather, he escaped into the night. Behind him, the room remained wrong, the silence echoing with the wreckage of his own impulsivity. He stood in the middle of the mess, breathing too fast, while a heavy sensation settled in his chest—a weight he didn't have a name for yet, but one that felt suspiciously like the onset of true fear.

Outside, Ruslan did not stop walking. He had seen enough to satisfy his curiosity and confirm his suspicions. Andrei was not weak; weakness was a trait Ruslan could have molded or used to his advantage. He was something far worse: he was uncontrolled. And in the world Ruslan built and maintained with surgical precision, men like that did not last.

Andrei didn't come in quietly, the door hit the frame harder than it needed to, the sound carrying through the house in a way that forced people to listen without meaning to. It wasn't shouting, not yet, but it was close enough to a break that it pulled every ounce of attention in the room. Lina looked up from the table where the ledger lay open, her numbers clean and her pen resting exactly where she had left it. She didn't react to the noise right away; instead, she finished the line she was on and closed the book with a quiet, deliberate thud. Only then

did she look at him. Andrei paced once into the room and then back again, like he couldn't decide whether to stay or leave, his energy still sharp and unsettled, looking for somewhere to land. "You were right," he said—not to her, but at her, the words acting as a jagged admission of the failure he had just carried home from the street.

Lina tilted her head slightly, her expression unreadable in the dim light of the kitchen. "What happened?" she asked, her voice even and measured. Nothing in it gave anything away, no flicker of maternal worry or sisterly judgment to soften the blow of his return. She simply waited, a calm mirror to his frantic, jagged energy. Andrei stopped his pacing, the silence of the house pressing in on him far more than the walls of the alley ever had, as he realized that her stillness was exactly what Ruslan had demanded, and exactly what he had failed to provide.

Andrei laughed once, a short and humorless sound that grated against the quiet precision of the room. "What happened?" he echoed, his voice rising with a frantic, jagged edge. "I got dragged around the city by some—" He cut himself off abruptly, his jaw tightening until the muscle leaped in his cheek. "Doesn't matter," he snapped, though the way he refused to meet her eyes said otherwise. It mattered; the weight of the navy shadows and the scent of gun oil were still clinging to his jacket, a silent admission that he had stepped into a world he wasn't prepared to navigate even if he was the supposed heir to the Rozanov Syndicate.

Lina could see it in the way he moved, the way he couldn't quite stand still, the way his hands flexed like they were still trying to hold onto a control that had already slipped through his fingers. She didn't move from her chair, her stillness a stark contrast to his jagged, kinetic energy. "Who?" she asked, the single word falling between them with a weight that demanded an answer. It was simple and direct, the kind of question that left no room for the evasions he usually relied on, and she watched him with a clinical focus that mirrored the man he had just left.

Andrei's gaze snapped to hers, a sudden, jagged spark of his old volatility flaring up to mask the shame of his failure. "Since when do you get to ask me that?" he shot back, the words hitting the quiet of the kitchen with more force than necessary. There it was. It was the defensive wall he always built when he felt small, a desperate attempt to reclaim the power he had just watched Ruslan dismantle without even raising his voice. He looked at her not as his sister but as another witness to the mess he had made, his jaw set in a hard, defiant line that could not quite hide the tremor in his hands.

Lina held his gaze, her posture as unyielding as the wood of the table. "Since it affects this house," she said, her voice dropping into a register that was not louder but significantly

firmer. It was the tone she used when the numbers in her ledger did not balance, the one that signaled a debt was overdue. She did not need to shout to command the space, and the weight of her words settled over Andrei like a physical restraint. She was no longer just his sister; she was the one who had to manage the fallout of the storms he chased.

Andrei scoffed, sharp, disbelieving. “This house?” he said. “You sound like him.”

A beat passed, and Lina didn’t take the bait. She ignored his sudden flare of temper as if it were nothing more than background noise. “You made a mess,” she said instead, her gaze dropping from his face to his hands. Andrei went still. It was not a complete cessation of movement, but the jagged energy that had been driving him through the room hit a wall. He didn’t pull his hands back in time, and Lina watched the way the light caught the raw, broken skin of his knuckles. There was a smear of drying blood there that didn’t belong to him.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, his voice dropping into a register that was quieter now and far more dangerous. Lina didn’t answer that. She just looked at him, her eyes steady and unblinking, and that was worse than any sharp retort he could have provoked. Andrei’s eyes narrowed slightly as something clicked into place, an idea not quite clean or fully formed but enough to irritate the raw edges of his pride. “You think you know something,” he said, but Lina didn’t move. She didn’t confirm or deny his suspicion, letting the silence stretch just long enough to feel intentional, a tactical void that he didn’t know how to fill.

Andrei stepped closer, the heat of his frustration radiating off him in waves. “What did you do?” he demanded, his voice tight with a sudden, sharp need to understand the ground shifting beneath him. Still, there was nothing. Not a word. Lina’s expression didn’t change, and in that vacuum, he found his answer. It wasn’t the truth he saw, but the control she held, a mirror of the very thing Ruslan had just used to dismantle him. He let out a sharp breath as something snapped under his skin, his unsettled energy curdling into a bitter, defensive lunge. “You think you’re better than me now?” he said, the words dripping with a jagged resentment. “Walking around like you’ve got something I don’t?”

Lina’s voice, when it came, was quiet. “I think you don’t understand what you’re doing,” she said, the words landing harder than anything else he had heard that night. The insult to his intelligence was the final spark. Andrei closed the distance in a second, his frustration boiling over into a physical strike. The sound of the slap cracked through the room, a sharp, sudden, and final noise that seemed to echo off the walls. The force of it was staggering; the impact didn’t just sting, it rattled, the sickening sound of bone meeting bone vibrating in the small space as her head snapped violently to the side.

For a moment, nothing moved. The house held its breath, the air thick with the sudden, jagged violence. Lina's hand came up slowly, not to strike back or even to push him away, but simply to steady herself where the blow had shifted her. As she turned her head back to face him, the damage was already rising to the surface. A stark, angry red print of his hand began to bloom across her pale cheek, the heat of the strike radiating from her skin. The structural stillness of her face remained, even as her jaw tightened against the dull, throbbing ache of the impact.

She met his eyes with a calm that was untouched in a way that made the violence seem small, almost pathetic. She didn't accuse him or threaten him with a shout. She just said, "If you ever do that again..." A small pause followed, heavy with a weight Andrei couldn't name. "...you won't get the chance to do it twice." There was no raised voice and no visible emotion, only a cold, flat certainty that chilled the room. It was the same clinical detachment Ruslan had shown in the shop, a refusal to be moved by his outbursts.

Andrei blinked, thrown by her lack of a typical reaction. She still hadn't told him anything—not what she knew, not what she had done, and certainly not what was coming. That vacuum of information was worse than any scream. The silence stretched between them, and though the adrenaline still hummed in his veins, he didn't raise his hand again. Something had shifted, not in her, but in him. For the first time, looking at the red mark on her face and the steady ice in her eyes, Andrei wasn't sure what she was capable of. Lina stayed silent, making sure he remained exactly that way.

The doctor did not arrive through the front door. He never did. Irina let him in through the side entrance just after dusk, when the house was in that in-between state, not quiet yet not busy, the kind of hour where movement blurred into routine if you didn't look too closely. He carried no bag that marked him as anything official, just a worn leather case that could have belonged to anyone with reason to be there. No one announced him, and no one would have known he was there at all if Grigori hadn't been home. That was the problem. Grigori had been in the study all afternoon, doors open for once, his voice carrying when he spoke, men coming and going in a rhythm that suggested he was reminding everyone exactly who he was. It had shifted the house, made it tighter, sharper, every movement measured against the possibility of being seen.

Irina felt it, and so did Lina, the heat of the red print on her cheek a physical weight she couldn't hide. The force of Andrei's strike had been staggering; the impact had rattled her, the

sickening sound of bone meeting bone vibrating in the small space as her head snapped violently to the side. Now, a stark, angry print of his hand bloomed across her pale skin. “Upstairs,” Irina said quietly, not looking at her as she spoke, as if that might make the girl's presence less visible. “Now.”

Lina moved toward the stairs, the doctor following two paces behind like a shadow. He was not there for the bruise on her face or the crack of her bone. His presence was a clinical necessity mandated by Ruslan, a man who left nothing to chance and valued nothing more than an untainted asset. In the sterile quiet of the upper room, the leather case was set upon the table with a muffled click. This was the routine maintenance of her value: a cold, professional verification that she remained exactly what Ruslan required her to be, coupled with the silent placement of the pills that ensured no stray impulse would complicate his ledger.

To Ruslan, her body was a territory to be surveyed and secured, a piece of the board that had to remain pristine for the endgame he was playing. The doctor's hands were steady, his eyes averted from the violence on her face as if the handprint were merely a distraction from the more important data he was sent to collect. He wasn't there to heal her; he was there to audit her, ensuring that the purity Ruslan banked on was still a liquid asset, “You understand why I'm here,” he said.

“Yes.” She met his gaze, her voice even. The examination was quiet. Efficient. Clinical in a way that stripped it of anything else. No lingering, no commentary, no judgment. Just confirmation, the kind that mattered in ways neither of them said out loud. She looked out at the darkening city, her expression as flat and controlled as the man who had sent him, while the heat on her cheek served as a fading reminder that in this house, even her blood was someone else's property.

When he finished, he stepped back, closing his case halfway before pausing. “You're healthy,” he said, his voice as clinical as the instruments he had just put away. “No complications.” A beat passed, the silence in the room growing heavy with the unspoken subtext of his visit. “And no prior—” He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to. The verification was complete, the status of her “purity” confirmed for the man who had paid for the audit. Lina inclined her head once, a single, sharp movement that was her only acknowledgment of the transaction. That was all.

He reached into his case again, drawing out a small packet and setting it on the table beside her. “These,” he said, “you'll take as directed.” His tone didn't change, remaining flat and devoid of any bedside manner. “They will regulate your cycle.” Another pause followed, the

doctor choosing his next words with practiced precision. "And prevent... variables." It was careful wording, a sterilized way of describing birth control for a woman whose future was already being mapped out in a ledger by his boss, a very dangerous man. Lina looked at the packet, then back at the doctor, her expression as unyielding as the red handprint still burning on her cheek.

"I understand."

He studied her for half a second longer than necessary, his gaze lingering on the stark handprint bruising her cheek as if trying to place something about her that didn't quite fit the clinical data he was hired to collect. The violence on her face was a loud, messy contrast to the pristine report he was about to deliver to Dragunov, yet she sat there with a composure that suggested the blow hadn't landed at all. Then he snapped his case shut, the metallic click punctuating the end of their transaction. "I was never here," he said, his voice dropping into the practiced shadow of a man who made his living by being invisible, leaving the packet of pills on the table as the only proof of his intrusion.

"Of course," Lina replied.

The doctor moved toward the door and opened it directly into Grigori. The impact of it wasn't physical; it was immediate, a sudden wall of authority that turned the air in the small room cold. Grigori stood there, broad in the doorway, his presence filling the space before he even spoke. His gaze moved first to the doctor, then past him, cutting through the shadows to take in Lina and the heavy tension that hadn't quite dissipated yet. There was a long, suffocating silence as he mapped the room, his eyes sharp and unblinking. "What is this?" Grigori asked. It wasn't loud. It was worse.

The doctor didn't answer. He stepped back slightly, an instinctive retreat that left the line of sight open and the room's secrets exposed. Grigori stepped inside, his movements slow and measured, the floorboards barely groaning under his weight. His eyes landed on the table, tracking the clinical white of the small packet, and stopped. The air in the room shifted, turning thick with a new, jagged danger. Lina didn't move and didn't look away, even as the red handprint on her cheek began to throb in the presence of her father's scrutiny.

"Explain," Grigori said. The word landed flat, a heavy stone dropped into a dark well. He didn't look at the doctor when he spoke; his eyes were fixed on the birth control packet, the "variable" a rival had introduced into his house without his permission. The silence that

followed was a countdown, and for the first time, the clinical control Lina had mirrored from Ruslan felt like a thin, fragile shield against the man who actually owned the roof over her head.

Irina appeared in the doorway behind him, too late to stop it, just in time to be seen, “It was routine,” she said quickly. “She hasn’t been—”

Grigori held up a hand, and the room fell into a sudden, vacuum-like silence. His gaze remained fixed entirely on Lina, bypassing Irina’s nervous posture and the doctor’s clinical retreat to pin his daughter to her seat. “You needed a doctor,” he said, his voice low and dangerously controlled, vibrating with the weight of a patriarch whose authority had been bypassed in his own home. “And you didn’t come to me.” It was not a question but a cold, final accusation that stripped away any pretense of medical necessity. He was not looking at the packet as medicine; he was looking at it as a betrayal of his command, a secret deal struck in the shadows of his hallways that suggested someone else was now managing the assets he considered his own.

Lina met his gaze, her chin lifting just enough to expose the full, ugly bloom of the handprint on her face. “It’s handled,” she said, the words careful and measured, a perfect imitation of the cold autonomy she had seen in the men who ran their world. She wasn’t answering him; she was dismissing the need for his oversight, and in that room, it was a transgression worse than the secret itself. By refusing to explain, she was claiming a piece of her own life as private property, a boundary that Grigori had spent her entire life eroding. The silence that followed her statement was sharp, a jagged edge that cut through the clinical atmosphere the doctor had tried to maintain, as Lina waited to see if her father would respect the control she was trying to project or if he would shatter it just like Andrei had.

Grigori’s expression shifted, something darker threading through it now, something that had been building all day, all week, all year, and had finally found somewhere to land. “You don’t decide what’s handled in this house,” he said, each word deliberate and heavy with the absolute weight of his history. He took a step closer, the floorboards silent under his sudden, focused intent. “You don’t bring people into my home without my knowledge,” he continued, his voice vibrating with the low hum of a predator reclaiming his territory. His gaze flicked once to the table again, a sharp, disgusted dart of his eyes toward the clinical white of the packet. “You don’t take—that,” he said, followed by a pause that made the air in the room feel thin and combustible. “Without my say.”

Irina stepped forward. “Grigori—”

Grigori didn't wait for an answer. The explosion wasn't a shout; it was a sudden, violent blur of motion. His hand shot out, seizing Lina by the throat with a grip that felt like a closing iron vise. He slammed her back against the wall with enough force to rattle the floorboards. The back of her head hit the wood with a hollow, sickening thud that sent a white-hot spike of pain through her skull. Her air was cut off instantly, her hands flying up to grasp at his thick wrist, but it was like trying to move stone.

He leaned his weight into her, pinning her flat as his face came inches from hers. With his free hand, he swept the birth control packet off the table. He didn't just knock it aside; he backhanded the plastic with a savage flick of his wrist, sending it shattering against the far wall. The small white pills scattered across the floor like teeth, clicking against the hardwood in a frantic, dying rhythm. The violence was precise, a calculated reminder that her body was not a sanctuary or an independent variable; it was a line item in a ledger he had written himself. The red handprint Andrei had left was now being eclipsed by the deepening, mottled purple of Grigori's fingers.

"You don't decide what's handled in this house," he hissed, his voice a low, vibrating growl that felt more dangerous than any scream. He tightened his hold, and Lina felt the terrifying, familiar creak of her own cartilage under the pressure. The room began to swim, the edges of her vision fraying into a dull grey, but he didn't let go. He wanted her to feel the exact moment her borrowed control vanished. He wanted her to hear the silence of the house again, a silence he had reclaimed with a single, brutal motion.

The doctor stood frozen by the door, his case clutched to his chest like a shield, his own breath hitching in time with Lina's desperate, whistling gasps. Grigori didn't even look at him. He kept his eyes locked on Lina's, watching the defiance flicker and struggle behind the mounting panic of suffocation. He didn't know who had sent the man, and he didn't care to ask yet; he only knew that his daughter had tried to build a wall of privacy, and he was going to crush her against it until it broke.

The next morning felt colder than it should have. Church always did in January, the air sharp and the stone holding onto winter like it belonged there. The scent of incense hung low, thick enough to settle into clothes, into skin, into memory. The Rozanov's arrived together, a singular, jagged unit. From a distance, it might have looked normal, a family of status taking their place, but it wasn't. Lina stood straight, coat buttoned neatly to the throat, her hair pulled back with a severity that offered no sanctuary for her face. The split in her lip had

darkened overnight into a crust of dried blood, and the faint, mottled bruise along her jaw was impossible to miss if you knew where to look.

Beside her, Irina was a map of the night's true scale. Both of her eyes were blackened, the swelling heavy and purple, a mask of violence that no amount of powder could soften. She didn't look up. The younger children stayed close—too close. Nikolai clung to the wool of Irina's coat as if it were the only thing keeping him upright, while Misha was held tightly, far too tightly, against her chest. Even Ilya, older and quieter, stood with a rigid, glass-like fragility that didn't belong to a boy his age. Fear sat on them, visible and contained, a silent scream muffled by the sanctity of the cathedral.

Ruslan saw it the moment they entered. He had been standing off to the side, his presence woven into the edges of the room rather than the center, watching the congregation with the detached precision of a predator. His attention settled on them—on her. He tracked the split lip first, then the brutal symmetry of Irina's bruised face, and finally the terrified huddle of the children. His expression didn't change; the mask of the businessman remained perfectly intact. But something in him did shift—a cold, tectonic realignment of his intent. The "asset" he had been auditing was no longer just a piece of a deal; she was a reminder of a debt that Grigori didn't even know he had incurred.

A man stepped in close beside him, low voice, careful, “The doctor,” he said. “Our doctor. Last night. Quiet visit.”

Ruslan didn't look at him, “Who arranged it?”

“The mother,” the man said, his voice a low vibration that barely carried over the low hum of the liturgy. He didn't need to point; the brutal symmetry of Irina's blackened eyes told the story clearly enough. A pause followed, heavy and cold, as his gaze drifted back to the rigid line of Lina's shoulders and the dark crust of the split on her lip. “And the girl,” he added, his eyes narrowing as he watched the way she held herself—not like a victim, but like a soldier holding a position. “Aware.” It was a clinical observation, a confirmation that the blow hadn't just broken skin; it had stripped away the last of the illusions. She wasn't just a daughter in a house of secrets anymore; she was a witness, and to Ruslan, that made her far more dangerous, and far more useful, than she had been the day before.

Ruslan's gaze shifted slightly, just enough to catch Lina again as she moved into place, candlelight catching along the edge of her face, the injury stark against the composure she

still held, “She followed instruction,” Ruslan said, more to himself than anyone else.

“Yes.” Another pause from his lackey, “The father found out.”

Ruslan’s eyes flicked, briefly, to Irina again, the brutal symmetry of her blackened eyes telling a story he didn’t need further explanation to understand. He had already seen the result of the previous night’s chaos, and a flicker of annoyance, brief, cold, and perfectly controlled, passed through him. It wasn’t directed at Lina, but at the situation itself. It was too soon, too visible, and dangerously uncontrolled. Grigori was escalating, moving from calculated dominance to a blind, swinging rage that threatened the stability of the long-term game Ruslan was playing. And that, that was a problem he hadn’t yet factored into his immediate timeline. Ruslan’s gaze returned to Lina, his scrutiny intensifying as he watched her. She stood perfectly still, hands steady and candle held without a single tremor, as if the violence hadn’t touched her, or as if she had already accounted for the cost of her defiance long before the blow ever landed. Even now, with a split lip and a house in ruins, she remained the only variable he could still use.

“She holds,” he murmured, the words barely a breath against the cold air of the cathedral. That settled it. His attention shifted, not away from her, but forward, already moving through the next steps and the next calculations. Timing mattered. Structure mattered. And now, so did urgency. The sight of the broken lip and the bruised mother had changed the tempo of his game; what was once a slow study had become a race against Grigori’s fraying control. “Epiphany,” Ruslan said quietly, the word both a deadline and a vow. He watched the flickering candlelight dance in Lina’s steady eyes, knowing that the feast day would no longer be a celebration of light, but the moment he would finally move to claim the asset Grigori was so carelessly breaking.

The man beside him glanced at him. “January nineteenth.”

Ruslan inclined his head once. The day sat in place immediately, clean and deliberate. It would be public, a ritual of controlled chaos, a moment where attention fractured just enough to move something important without drawing it back together again. He looked at Lina one more time, his gaze tracing the blood still faintly visible at her lip and the way she did not lower her eyes to his. She endured it all without breaking, a silent pillar in the middle of her father’s crumbling authority. Something in his expression shifted then. It was not softer, and it was certainly not kinder. It was simply decided. The debt was called in, the target was locked, and the timeline for her removal from Grigori’s house had just accelerated to the point of no return, “I’ll take her then,” Ruslan said.

Quiet. Final. The bells began to ring, low and resonant, filling the vast stone space as the service moved forward. Around them, people bowed their heads in practiced humbleness, prayed with whispered desperation, and crossed themselves against the cold. But Ruslan stood still, a pillar of immovable intent amidst the shifting congregation. He was watching, he was waiting, and above all, he was planning. January nineteenth was not far, the date looming like a shadow on the winter horizon. And when it came, he would not wait again. The time for observation had ended with the blood on Lina's lip; the next movement would be his, and it would be absolute.

The church had settled into that low, murmuring quiet that came between movements of the service, when people shifted, crossed themselves, and drifted toward candles or icons, each small action folding into the next. Lina had slipped into the confessional before anyone called her. It wasn't for show or even for forgiveness; it was for stillness. She knelt, head bowed, her fingers resting lightly against the worn wood as the familiar rhythm of prayer moved through her under her breath, quiet enough that it barely carried beyond her own space. The words were steady and practiced, something she could hold onto without thinking, something that kept the rising panic of the night before from breaking her surface. "...and grant me patience," she murmured softly, the last word barely more than a breath that disappeared into the shadows of the velvet curtain.

The curtain shifted, and Lina stilled. She wasn't startled, merely aware, her senses already tuned to the specific, heavy gravity of his presence. Ruslan moved into place on the other side of the screen, the wood creaking faintly under his weight as he sat with a relaxed posture, perfectly mimicking a man at confession. For a moment, neither of them spoke, letting the muffled sounds of the liturgy outside provide a thin veil of privacy. "You were seen," he said, his voice a low vibration that didn't accuse or question, but simply stated a fact. Lina did not lift her head immediately; she let the silence sit, allowing her prayer to settle before shifting from her private sanctuary into the cold reality of their pact. "And yet," he added, his voice dropping to a near-whisper, "you did not break."

Her hands lowered from the wood, folding neatly in her lap, as Ruslan continued to map out the wreckage of the previous night. "The doctor. Necessary," he said, and she inclined her head once in a small, contained gesture of agreement. Then the air in the small space shifted. "And your father," Ruslan said, his voice darkening, "has become impatient. He leaves marks." Lina finally lifted her head, not with drama, but with a slow, deliberate strength. Through the lattice of the screen, Ruslan reached out, his fingers ghosting through the narrow opening to touch the edge of her jaw, just barely brushing the bruised skin with a gentleness that felt more dangerous than a blow. "You followed instruction. You waited. You did not act

beyond what I gave you. Good.” The word settled between them, heavy and final, before his tone sharpened with intent. “That window is closing. I will not allow him to damage what is already mine. Epiphany. January nineteenth. That is when this ends.” He withdrew his hand, the cold air rushing into the space where his warmth had been. “You will be ready.”

Lina’s voice, when it came, was quiet, “I will.”

“And until then,” he continued, his voice dropping into a register that felt like a physical weight, “you will endure.” She didn’t flinch, her gaze anchored to the dark lattice of the confessional screen. “You will not provoke him,” he added, the instruction coming a fraction sharper, cutting through the thin air of the small space. “You will not attempt to protect your brother if he chooses to make himself a problem. You will keep your composure. You will not let him see what you are becoming.” The space held, the silence stretched thin by the gravity of his demands, until he spoke again with a quiet, lethal intensity. “Show me,” Ruslan said. It wasn’t a command or a request; it was an expectation, the cold interest of a man assessing the condition of his most valuable investment.

Lina hesitated, not in a moment of refusal, but in one of careful calculation. Then she moved. Her hand lifted slowly, her fingers brushing the edge of her lip where the skin had split and remained tender, the bruise a dark, angry bloom beneath the surface. She turned her face slightly toward the screen, tilting her head just enough so the line of the injury could be caught by the stray light filtering through the narrow divide. The movement was clinical, a silent report delivered in the dark, stripped of any plea for sympathy.

The fabric of her sleeve slid back to reveal the faint, mottled outline of where Grigori’s fingers had gripped too tightly, the marks not as obvious as her lip, but there if you knew where to look. She did not embellish it or explain. Then, with a slow, deliberate movement, she tilted her chin upward. She reached for the high, stiff collar of her coat, undoing the top button to let the heavy wool fall away. Beneath it, the pale skin of her throat was mapped in a deepening, ugly purple. The clear, brutal curve of a thumb and the staggered pressure of four fingers were etched into her windpipe, a silent record of the moment her air had been a commodity Grigori chose to withhold.

She did not flinch as the cold air of the church hit the bruised skin, nor did she seek a reaction. She simply held the position, offering the evidence of her endurance as if it were a titration report. The violence was no longer a secret or a shame; it was a data point in the transaction they were building. Her hand eventually lowered, the fabric of her collar settling back into place, and her posture returned to its rigid, perfect stillness. It was as if the

revelation had never happened at all, the marks once again hidden beneath the armor of her Sunday best.

Ruslan remained silent on the other side of the screen, the only sound the faint, rhythmic pull of his breath. The sight of her throat, marked so precisely by her father's hand, seemed to anchor the air in the confessional. He did not offer comfort, for comfort was a weakness they could not afford, but the temperature in the small wooden box seemed to drop several degrees. The calculation was complete. Grigori was no longer just a hurdle; he was a liability that was actively devaluing *his* asset.

"I have it handled," Lina said quietly. It wasn't defiance, and it wasn't a plea for reassurance; it was simply the truth as she understood it, a cold internal tally of what she could still withstand before the break. She didn't move to cover the marks on her throat or the bruise on her wrist, leaving the evidence of Grigori's ownership exposed in the dark as if to prove she was still standing despite it. And then, she waited. She waited for the weight of his judgment, for the next movement in the gears of his planning, or for the heavy, rhythmic thud of her father's boots to shatter the sanctuary of the wooden box. The silence between them stretched, thick with the scent of incense and the unspoken reality that "handled" was a debt she was currently paying in blood.

"Good, my little princess." With that he slipped away, the heat of him vanishing into thin air.

The three days leading up to Epiphany felt like the slow, pressurized draw of a bowstring. Grigori's presence at home acted as a heavy anchor, dragging the atmosphere of the house into a state of permanent, low-grade fever. Men with hard faces and scuffed boots filtered through the foyer at all hours, their territorial voices barking over the clink of glass and the shuffle of heavy coats. The air tasted of stale smoke and the kind of restless aggression that preceded a purge. In the center of the noise, Grigori sat like a king in a crumbling fortress, his territorial instincts sharpened by a paranoia he couldn't quite name.

Lina moved through the chaos as a ghost might, her presence registered only by the results of her labor. She balanced the ledgers with a clinical, unhurried hand and ensured the kitchen ran with a silence that bordered on the unnatural. She was a master of the periphery, sliding past open doors where men argued over shipments and debts without ever letting her shadow linger too long. She didn't rush, because rushing looked like fear; she didn't hesitate, because hesitation looked like guilt. She simply existed in the gaps between her father's rages.

Irina was the only one who truly saw the shift. She watched her daughter with a gaze that had grown hollow, her own bruises fading into a jaundiced yellow that no amount of light could warm. She moved through the rooms with a frantic, bird-like energy, her eyes constantly darting toward the front door, then back to Lina. She was looking for a crack, a sign, a single tremor in Lina's hands that would tell her the world wasn't about to end.

"What happens on the nineteenth?" Irina asked once, her voice barely a thread of sound as they stood alone in the dim light of the pantry. The smell of stored winter apples was thick and cloying.

Lina didn't look up from the ledger she was marking. The scratch of her pen was the only sound for a long, heavy beat. "It will come to pass," she said, her tone as flat and inevitable as the winter outside.

Irina's hand tightened against the back of a wooden chair, her knuckles turning a stark, bloodless white. She looked at the daughter she no longer recognized—the girl who had been replaced by something made of flint and ice. "You're asking me to trust you," she whispered, a plea disguised as an accusation.

Lina turned the page, the crisp sound of the paper sharp in the quiet room. "Yes."

Across the house, a door slammed with a violence that made the floorboards jump. It was Andrei, his temper fraying in the heat of the house's tension, his footsteps heavy as he stomped toward the kitchen. Lina didn't flinch. She didn't even blink. She simply dipped her pen back into the ink, her eyes fixed on the numbers that were already beginning to count down the hours.

Across Moscow, Ruslan watched, for he had already woven his presence into the very architecture of the coming day. He did not visit the house; he didn't need to. Instead, the city shifted in small, deliberate ways. A man reassigned. Another told to stay away. Routes adjusted. Eyes placed where they would not be noticed. Nothing was large enough to draw the attention of a man as blinded by his own rage as Grigori, yet everything was precise

enough to matter when the first blow fell. Grigori would not see the net closing; that was the point.

“Epiphany,” Ruslan said once, standing over a table marked with nothing written down, everything already decided in the cold quiet of his mind. “We move when the crowd breaks.” No one in the room questioned him. He didn’t repeat himself. The air was already heavy with the inevitable, and the nineteenth was no longer a date on a calendar—it was a trap already sprung.

The house grew quieter as the nineteen approached. It wasn’t the quiet of peace, but the stifling, pressurized silence of a room losing its oxygen. Grigori’s temper had turned inward, becoming something sharper and far less predictable than his usual physical outbursts. He watched more and spoke less, but when he did speak, the words landed with the weight of a blow. He paced the edges of the rooms like a wolf marking a shrinking territory, his eyes tracking every movement of his family with a dark, simmering paranoia.

Irina bore the weight of his scrutiny with a fragile, practiced grace. The bruising around her eyes had begun to turn a sickly, jaundiced yellow at the edges, but the trauma was far from gone. She moved through the house with a careful efficiency, her shoulders perpetually hunched, never quite turning her back fully to any open door. She had become a shadow in her own home, existing only to shield the children who clung to her with a desperate, silent intensity.

Nikolai rarely let go of her sleeve, his small fingers twisted into the fabric as if it were a lifeline. Misha, usually the loudest of the brood, cried more easily now, unsettled by a tension he was too young to name but old enough to feel in the marrow of his bones. Even Ilya had grown unnervingly still, his youthful vibrance replaced by a watchful, stony gaze that mirrored the adults around him. The air in the house was thick with the scent of unwashed glasses and impending ruin.

Andrei avoided Lina at first, his own guilt or fear keeping him in the periphery of the hallways. But that evening, the avoidance broke. He found her in the narrow corridor near the pantry, stepping into her path with a suddenness that forced her to a dead stop. He looked ragged, the bravado of the previous weeks replaced by a frantic, jagged energy, “You think something’s going to change,” he said, skipping any pretense of a greeting. His voice was low, harsh, and cracking at the edges.

Lina didn't flinch. She met his gaze with a clarity that seemed to unnerve him more than a shout would have. "I think it already has," she replied, her voice steady and cool, a direct contrast to the heat radiating off her brother.

Andrei's jaw tightened, his pulse visible in the cord of his neck. "You don't even know what you're stepping into," he spat, leaning toward her as if to regain the height advantage he'd lost to her composure. "You think you've found a way out? You think some shadow in the city is going to hand you a life?"

Lina didn't answer him. She didn't argue or offer the satisfaction of a defense. She simply looked at him, not with anger, but with a clinical sort of pity that made Andrei's hands settle into fists at his sides. He searched her face for a flicker of the sister he used to be able to bully, for any sign of the fear that currently governed him. He didn't find it. The realization that he no longer held any power over her was worse than losing the argument; it was an exile.

"Whatever you think is coming," he said finally, stepping back to let her pass, his voice shaking with a bitter finality, "you're not ready for it. None of us are."

Lina moved past him without a backward glance, her coat brushing against his arm as she retreated toward the stairs. "I am," she said. It was quiet, certain, and final. He didn't follow her. He stayed in the dim light of the hallway, watching her disappear into the upper reaches of the house, already a stranger to the name she carried.

Across Moscow, Ruslan watched, for he had already woven his presence into the very architecture of the coming day. He adjusted the timing. Not by much. By minutes. That was all it took for a gap to become a grave, "The water," one of his men said, checking the coordinates of the river blessing. "You want him there?"

"Yes."

A pause followed, the air in the room cooling as the man looked at the shifting map of the crowd. "And the girl?"

Ruslan didn't answer immediately. He let the silence stretch, his mind anchored to the image of her steady hands in the confessional, "She will be where I can see her," he said finally. It wasn't a promise of protection. It was placement. He was moving her like a queen across a board of pawns, and on the nineteenth, the board would belong to him.

One day before Epiphany, the house felt like it was holding its breath. There were no arguments and no raised voices, just a crushing, silent pressure that seemed to physicalize in the cold corners of the rooms. Grigori watched everything. Lina felt his gaze when she moved, when she spoke, and even when she stood perfectly still. His attention lingered longer than it should have, heavy and suspicious, as if he were trying to grasp a truth that remained just out of his reach. He couldn't find it, and that failure only made him angrier, a silent storm brewing behind his bloodshot eyes.

Irina said nothing. Not anymore. She moved through the day with a kind of quiet, frantic urgency, gathering small things without making it look like she was gathering anything at all. A blanket folded differently. A bag not quite put away. It was preparation without acknowledgment, a mother's instinct sensing the coming blow. Lina noticed every movement, every hidden bundle, but she didn't comment. She simply kept her own counsel, her own bags already metaphorically packed in the stillness of her mind. That night, the house settled earlier than usual. It didn't settle into rest, but into a jagged, shallow kind of waiting. The floorboards creaked under the weight of secrets, and the frost began to claw at the windowpanes, sealing them all inside for one last night of Grigori's rule.

Outside, Ruslan stood in the shadows. The air cut sharp, colder than it had been all week, the kind of deep, Russian frost that settled into bone and refused to leave. He exhaled once, watching the white plume of his breath disappear into the dark, his expression unreadable and as hard as the frozen Neva, "Tomorrow," someone said beside him, the voice low and muffled by a heavy coat.

Ruslan didn't look at him. His eyes were fixed on the darkened silhouette of the city. "Yes."

A beat passed, the silence punctuated only by the distant ring of a tram. “He’ll be there,” the man added, confirming the target's habit.

Ruslan’s gaze shifted, just slightly, toward the horizon where the cathedral spires cut into the night sky. “He always is.” That was the problem, and that was the solution. Grigori Rozanov was a predictable man, and ill-suited even in his youth to run any part of their Brotherhood.

On the morning of January 19, 2004, the light was gray and thin, barely cutting through the heavy frost that had claimed the city overnight. Lina dressed without hesitation, moving with the same care and precision she applied to every other morning, yet today every movement felt exact, practiced, and perfectly controlled. The heavy winter fabric settled where it should, her hair pulled back cleanly, leaving nothing to chance. The mark at her lip had faded slightly, but not enough to disappear; it remained a jagged, violet reminder of the world she was about to leave behind.

Irina stood in the doorway, her own frame trembling slightly as she watched her daughter’s steady hands. She had been awake for hours, moving in the silence like a ghost through the rooms she no longer owned, “You’re very calm,” Irina said. Her voice was a thin, fragile thing, barely rising above the muffled sound of Grigori’s heavy boots downstairs.

Lina didn’t turn around. She watched her mother’s reflection in the glass, noting the dark, hollow circles under Irina’s eyes and the way her hands clutched the doorframe as if it were the only thing keeping her upright. “There is no reason not to be,” Lina replied. She reached for her coat, the wool heavy and familiar, and fastened the top button over the marks on her throat, shielding the evidence of her father's grip from the morning light. “Today is just a day,” she added, though they both knew the lie of it. With a final, sharp movement, Lina adjusted her sleeve, ensuring the bruises on her wrists were tucked safely out of sight.

Irina stepped closer, searching her face the way she had been for days now, looking for a crack, a flicker, or any sign that would tell her what was coming. She still didn’t find it. The girl in the mirror was a stranger made of ice. “Whatever happens today,” Irina said quietly, her voice trembling with a mother’s desperate, misplaced instinct, “you stay close to me.”

Lina met her gaze in the reflection. A pause stretched between them, heavy with the weight of things unsaid. "I will be where I need to be," she said. It wasn't defiance, and it certainly wasn't comfort. It was just the truth, a echoes of Ruslan's own words in the dark of the confessional. Irina inhaled slowly and nodded once, her shoulders sagging. She didn't understand the plan, but she recognized the finality in her daughter's voice. There was nothing else to do but walk into the cold.

Andrei was already downstairs, waiting on something. Not for them, but for something he couldn't quite name, a friction in the air that had been building since the confessional. He didn't know what was coming, and that was the worst part; the uncertainty had stripped away his bravado, leaving him raw and twitching in the cold draft of the foyer. He looked up the moment Lina entered, his eyes searching hers with a desperate, jagged intensity that held her gaze for a heavy, silent second. It felt as if he might finally say something, perhaps a warning or a plea, but the words died in his throat. He just watched her, his sister who had become a stranger, and for the first time in his life, Andrei looked truly uncertain, a boy realizing too late that the floor beneath him was already starting to crack.

Irina followed close behind Lina, her hands ushering the younger three boys into the room like a shield against the rising tension. Nikolai clung to his mother's coat, his eyes wide and darting toward Andrei, while Misha and Ilya moved with an uncharacteristic, heavy-footed silence that mirrored the adults. The foyer, usually a place of chaotic departures, felt like a stage where the actors had forgotten their lines but knew the ending was near. Irina didn't look at Andrei, her focus entirely on keeping the boys in a tight, protective knot near the door. The air was sharp with the smell of wet wool and the ozone of a coming storm, and as the family stood together in the dim light, the divide between them had never been more visible.

Outside, the bells began to ring: low, resonant, and calling. The day had come, and nothing in that house would be the same by the time it ended. Epiphany did not arrive quietly; the bells carried first, rolling out over the frozen air in a heavy, rhythmic toll that seemed to vibrate in the very marrow of their bones. The river drew the crowd as it always did, the ritual unfolding in a practiced, ancient rhythm where voices rose and bodies shifted, pulling all attention outward toward the black water and the priests. As the family stepped out into the biting cold, the house stood nearly empty behind them, a hollow shell of the life they were about to discard. That was the point.

Epiphany did not arrive quietly. The bells carried first, low and resonant, rolling out over the frozen air in a heavy, rhythmic toll. The river drew the crowd as it always did, the ritual unfolding in practiced rhythm, voices rising, bodies shifting, and attention pulled outward toward the ice and the water and the priests. The house stood nearly empty. That was the point. Grigori returned early. He always did when something irritated him, and something always did. The cold, the crowd, the noise, and the press of people who did not move the way he wanted them to had grated on his nerves until he snapped. He dismissed the rest of the day with a sharp word and a wave of his hand, sending the last of his men away before stepping inside. The door shut behind him. Silence followed. It took him a moment to notice it. The house should have had more movement. Someone in the kitchen. A servant in the hall. Something. Instead, nothing. Grigori frowned, shrugging out of his coat and tossing it aside as he moved toward his study, irritation settling back into place where it belonged.

He pushed the door open, and stopped. Ruslan was already inside. Seated. Waiting. Not in shadow. Not hidden. He was positioned at the desk as if it belonged to him, one hand resting lightly against the surface while the other turned something small between his fingers. The emerald caught the light. Grigori went still. Not fear. Not yet. Recognition, "What is this?" Grigori asked.

Ruslan didn't look up immediately. He watched the green spark of the stone for a moment longer before his gaze drifted to the man in the doorway. "This," Ruslan said, his voice as cold as the river, "is the end of the forty years you've spent holding a seat that was never yours to keep."

Grigori's jaw tightened, his hand hovering near his waist. "I took this seat when I was eighteen. I cleared the blood of my father and my brothers off this floor to do it. You think you're the first boy to walk in here with an ego?" Ruslan lifted his gaze. That was enough to cut him off. He didn't do it loudly or aggressively. He did it completely. The air in the study seemed to drop ten degrees, the authority shifting from the man who had held the desk for forty years to the man currently standing behind it. Grigori took a step forward anyway, his hand twitching at his side. "You think you can walk in here," he said, his voice sharpening into a jagged edge, "and—"

Ruslan stood. It was smooth and unhurried, a predatory grace that made the heavy furniture around him seem insignificant. The shift in height closed the distance between them without him moving an inch closer, a silent assertion of the new order, "I don't think," Ruslan said quietly. A beat passed, heavy with the weight of the bells still ringing in the distance. "I know."

Grigori laughed, though it sounded like grinding stones. "You know nothing. You're in my house, boy. My men are at the river. My blood owns this city."

Ruslan didn't blink. "Your men are at the river," he agreed, his tone almost conversational. "But they are no longer yours." The room felt smaller now. The walls, heavy with forty years of Grigori's history, seemed to press inward as the silence from the rest of the house became a physical weight. Grigori's attention flicked once to the ring in Ruslan's hand, the emerald catching a stray beam of gray morning light. Something in his expression tightened further, recognition clicking into place where it had been forming all morning.

"Where did you—" He stopped, the question dying in his throat because he already knew the answer. His gaze snapped toward the door, then toward the hollow depth of the house, reconsidering the absence of noise he had dismissed only seconds ago. Then, his eyes traveled back to Ruslan. Something darker settled in. It wasn't confusion; it was understanding. The pieces of the last three days... the quiet in the halls, the way the servants had vanished, the stillness of his daughter, all of it finally aligned into a single, devastating picture, "You," Grigori said. The word wasn't directed at Ruslan. It was aimed past him, through him, toward the ghost of a girl who should have been at the river.

Ruslan watched it happen. He watched the realization take root and the connection spark in the older man's eyes. He watched the moment the forty-year reign began to dissolve in the face of a betrayal he hadn't seen coming, "Yes," Ruslan said. It was simple, stripped of any need for further explanation.

Grigori's expression shifted, his face reddening as anger rose fast, sharp, immediate, and violent. It was the kind of rage that had always worked for him, the kind that had cleared floors and silenced rivals and forced the world to bend to his will for four decades, "She's a child," Grigori snapped, his voice cracking like a whip in the small room. "You think she has the spine for this? You think she—"

Ruslan didn't move. He didn't flinch at the outburst. He simply waited for the echo of Grigori's voice to fade, his silence more powerful than the shouting. "She chose," Ruslan said. It was flat and final, a statement of fact that landed harder than a blow.

Grigori laughed once, a harsh, disbelieving sound that scraped against the quiet. "You think she understands what you are?"

Ruslan's head tilted slightly, his eyes never leaving the older man's face. "Better than you did," he said.

Silence followed. Then, Grigori moved. It wasn't careful or controlled; he stepped forward with the same brute force he had used for forty years, expecting it to carry him through, expecting the moment to break the way it always had before. It didn't. Ruslan didn't step back. Instead, he spoke loudly, calm, precise, and already in control of everything beyond the room.

"Bring her."

The order carried, immediate and undisputed. Grigori's head snapped toward the door. For the first time, something like uncertainty flickered in his eyes, a crack in the armor of his arrogance. "What did you do?" he demanded, his voice sharper now, something almost protective cutting through the roar of his anger. "If you've touched her..."

Ruslan didn't look at him. He was watching the doorway. "She's exactly where I told them to keep her," he said. A beat passed. "Safe." That word landed wrong. It wasn't reassuring; it was claiming. It signaled a transfer of ownership that Grigori was only just beginning to comprehend. Footsteps approached from the hall, measured and unhurried. The door opened, and Lina stepped inside.

Lina was not pulled, she was not forced, she was escorted, and then released. Grigori saw her. He saw her whole, unharmed, and standing there in the doorway with a composure that didn't belong to the daughter he thought he knew. For a fraction of a second, something like relief broke through his jagged exterior, a flicker of the father he rarely was, before it was instantly replaced by something worse. Understanding. Ruslan watched that shift. He let it happen. He didn't interrupt it and he didn't rush it. He let Grigori arrive at the truth on his own, piece by piece, the way a man like him had to; through the slow, agonizing realization that his walls hadn't been breached from the outside, but opened from within.

"You brought her here," Grigori said. It wasn't a question. His voice had changed; it was still sharp and still edged, but something underneath it had shifted into something tighter and more focused. The realization that Lina wasn't a bargaining chip, but a participant, settled into the room like a layer of ash. Grigori turned his head slowly, his eyes moving from

Ruslan back to his daughter. The silence was no longer the absence of noise; it was the presence of a verdict, "Lina," he said, the name sounding foreign in the heavy air. She didn't flinch. She didn't move toward him. She simply stood her ground, her shadow stretching across the floor to meet Ruslan's.

Ruslan didn't answer immediately, turning the ring once between his fingers instead and watching the emerald catch the light before looking up to meet Grigori's crumbling stare with the quiet, devastating admission, "She came when I asked."

Grigori's jaw clenched, his face reddening as he snapped, "You think that means something?" while trying to force the old, terrifying weight back into his voice. "She's a girl; a child; she does what she's told."

Ruslan's gaze lifted, and held. "No," he said quietly, a snarky smile danced across his features, "She doesn't."

Grigori's attention flicked to Lina again, sharper now, searching her face as if he could still find some scrap of the daughter who belonged to him. "Anzhelina," he said, using her full name with a commanding, expectant weight that had always demanded her absolute submission. Lina didn't move, didn't step forward, and didn't answer; that silence was the only answer he was going to get. Grigori saw it, and something in him cracked... not loudly or outwardly, but enough to show in the way his shoulders shifted and his breath caught just slightly. "You don't know what you're attaching yourself to," he said, directed not to Ruslan, but to her, his voice quieter now and all the more dangerous for the desperation bleeding through it.

Ruslan stepped forward then, just enough to not stand between them but to move decisively into the line of Grigori's focus, his presence a physical barrier to the older man's influence as he spoke the simple, final truth: "She does."

Grigori's gaze snapped back to him, anger flaring again, reaching for something familiar, something he could still control, "You think you own this house now?" he demanded.

Ruslan's expression didn't change, "I think you lost it before I walked in." A pause, harsh and deliberate, "And I chose to take what remained." The words settled heavily.

Grigori laughed once, a harsh and disbelieving sound as he tried to claw some semblance of power back from the air, and asked, “And you think she’s part of that? You think she belongs to you?”

There it was, the opening Ruslan had been waiting for. Ruslan didn’t answer right away; instead, he looked at Lina with a measured, considering gaze before stepping closer to her, not abruptly or aggressively, but with the focused intent of claiming the space around her. His hand lifted to her wrist, settling exactly where her pulse thrummed against her skin, his grip neither tight nor gentle but heavy with a familiar, chilling intentionality. “You misunderstand,” Ruslan said, his voice quiet and perfectly controlled as he looked back to the older man. “She decided where she stands, and I accepted it.”

His thumb shifted once against her pulse before he tugged, and Lina moved of her own accord, letting herself be pulled back until she rested against him. Ruslan wrapped a heavy arm around her waist, his fingers digging firmly into her ribs to anchor her there. He leaned down, his eyes fixed mockingly on Grigori as he pressed his mouth to the column of her throat, biting into the sensitive skin hard enough to leave a fresh, dark bruise. Lina didn’t flinch, her steady silence acting as a conductor for the tension in the room. His hand trailed upward, curving over her side to hold her flush against him as he bit again, marking her with a harsh, possessive affection before finally pressing a lingering kiss to her temple and straightening up.

Grigori saw it all: the lack of resistance, the way she remained steady within another man’s reach, and the fact that she never once looked back toward her father for rescue. That was the moment that mattered, the one where the forty years of Grigori’s dominion finally turned to ash. Grigori’s expression changed again, something final settling into place; it was not confusion or anger, but a cold recognition that there was nothing left to take back. He straightened his spine, trying to summon the ghost of the man who had ruled this city since he was eighteen, and looked directly at the daughter who was now a marked stranger, “Anzhelina, come here,” he commanded, his voice dropping into a low, habitual rumble of authority. The air in the study seemed to hold its breath. It was a test of the old blood against the new, a final reach for the leash he had held since her birth. Lina didn’t even blink. She remained anchored against Ruslan’s chest, her breathing steady under the weight of his arm, her silence a wall that Grigori could no longer climb. Grigori’s hand dropped to his side, his fingers twitching against the fabric of his trousers. The command had been issued, and it had failed. “Then you’re both making a mistake,” he said, his voice thinner now, more hollow than it had been a moment ago.

Ruslan's grip on her waist tightened, his fingers digging into her ribs in a sharp, possessive reminder of who held the room. "A mistake implies a lack of intent, Grigori," Ruslan replied, his eyes dark and unwavering. "There is no mistake here. Only a transition." In the same motion, Ruslan reached up, his hand cupping Lina's jaw to tilt her face toward his. He claimed her mouth in a kiss that was both a shield and a victory, drowning out the world just as the room splintered.

And then, Grigori moved. Too late.

The sound that followed was contained, sharp, and final. Grigori staggered painfully not dramatically, but just enough to lose his center. His hand caught the edge of the desk, fingers gripping the wood so hard the knuckles turned white, his breath pulling in unevenly as the reality of the strike caught up with him. It was a physical debt finally called in, too late to matter. He looked up at Ruslan, at the man who had stepped into his house, into his sanctuary, and ended him within it. Then, his gaze shifted to Lina. He saw Lina, possibly for the first time since the night she was born, and in that final moment, he understood. He didn't understand the logistics or the structure of the coup; he simply understood the choice. His mouth moved, but no sound came.

Lina held his gaze. She did not look away. She did not step back. Ruslan watched her, not Grigori. He was measured, confirming her resolve in the face of the collapse. Grigori's grip slipped, the strength leaving him in ungraceful pieces until there was nothing left to hold him upright. He fell. The room went still. No noise carried beyond the heavy doors. No disruption. Just the absence.

Ruslan didn't move immediately. He let the silence settle, letting the finality of the forty-year reign take its true shape in the shadows of the study. Then his gaze shifted back to Lina. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the air still thick with the scent of cold winter and old blood, "It's done," he said. It wasn't reassurance or comfort. It was a fact. He turned the ring once more in his fingers before stepping forward, closing the distance between them to place it back into her hand. He did not let go immediately, his fingers lingering against hers. "Now," Ruslan said quietly, "everything else begins." Lina didn't pull away. Instead, she leaned into him, her fingers curling into the fabric of his sleeve, a quiet, clingy pressure that spoke of a new kind of gravity. She looked at him with an intensity that bordered on enamored, her eyes tracing the hard lines of his face before she leaned up. She pressed a sweet, lingering kiss to his cheek, a soft contrast to the violence that had just unfolded. It was a claim, marking him as much hers as she was his. Ruslan accepted the touch, his body remaining a steady, unyielding anchor for her as he began to move toward the door. She stayed tucked against his side, her steps matching his, refusing to let the space between them open even an inch.

The bells had not stopped. They carried over the river in steady waves, the ritual continuing as if nothing in the world had shifted, as if the cold water and the prayers could hold everything in place. Irina stood near the edge of the crowd, Misha held tight against her chest, Nikolai pressed into her side, small fingers gripping her coat. Her gaze moved constantly, not searching for anything specific anymore, just... counting.

One.

Two.

Three.

She came up short, her breath caught, “Where is she?” Irina asked, too quickly, too quiet for anyone but Andrei to hear.

Andrei didn’t answer right away, because he had already noticed. Lina wasn’t there. He scanned the crowd again, sharper this time, irritation cutting into something colder as he stepped forward, shifting his position, trying to catch sight of her between shoulders and movement and rising breath, “She was just—” he muttered, cutting himself off. No. She hadn’t been. Not for a while. That realization landed harder than he expected, Andrei’s jaw tightened. Something was wrong, he didn’t know what, and that was the problem, “I’m going back,” he said abruptly.

Irina’s hand caught his sleeve, “No,” she said, too fast, fear threading through it now. “You stay here.”

Andrei pulled free, “I’m not standing here while—”

“Stay,” Irina repeated, sharper this time. He froze, not because of her. Because of the way she said it. Not control but with real, visible fear. Andrei looked at her, then at the children, then

back toward the crowd. Something shifted, not enough, but enough that he didn't move immediately.

Within thirty minutes, Andrei's patience snapped. "I'm going," he said again, more force behind the words this time as he stepped away from the huddled group. Irina didn't stop him. Not this time. She couldn't, because now she was counting too—her eyes darting across the frozen faces of the crowd, searching for a ghost—and she was coming up short.

Grigori's absence did not echo; it was absorbed. By the time Ruslan's men were finished, the study no longer held anything that suggested a violent interruption, the desk cleared where it needed to be and restored where it mattered until the room felt ordinary enough to pass without a second glance. Grigori himself had been removed as cleanly as the paperwork, leaving no trace that would call for immediate attention or an explanation before the new order was ready to give one. What remained of him now was not in the house, nor in the space he had once filled so completely with his noise and his rage; there was only the absence, and even that was being meticulously managed.

By the time Andrei reached the front door, something already felt wrong; it wasn't loud or obvious, but the very rhythm of the house had shifted. The lights were where they should be and the doors were closed, yet as he pushed inside, the silence that greeted him was heavy and unfamiliar. Men he barely recognized moved through the space with a quiet, unsettling purpose—one passing him with an item already wrapped and accounted for, another adjusting a frame on the wall with practiced precision. Nothing looked stolen or disturbed, which was worse; the house was being curated, not ransacked.

"What the hell—" Andrei started, turning sharply to demand an answer from anyone in the corridor, but no one stopped. The realization landed in uneven, unwelcome pieces: the house no longer answered to him, and the authority he had leaned on for years had evaporated in the span of a church service. His gaze snapped toward the study, and seeing the door standing open, he moved toward it with a sharpening urgency, desperate to reassert a control he could feel slipping through his fingers like sand.

He stepped inside the room and stopped. The air was still, the desk was immaculate, and the seat behind it was empty, but the vacuum left by Grigori's presence was filled by a new, terrifyingly calm gravity. Ruslan was there, at the desk, Grigori's desk, settled into the high-backed leather chair that had never held anyone else without a sense of stolen property. Now,

however, the seat looked as though it had always been his. He had shed his heavy winter coat, appearing leaner and more dangerous in the sharp lines of his shirt, one arm resting easily against the polished wood while the other angled slightly to support the weight of the ledger open across his lap. There was no ghost of the man who had occupied this space an hour ago; there was only the cold, efficient reality of the man who had replaced him.

And Lina sat there with him, settled comfortably in his lap as if it were her rightful throne. She, too, had removed her outer layers, moving within Ruslan's orbit with a fluid, unbothered grace that spoke of a long-simmering alliance. She wasn't stiff or uncertain; she was turned slightly inward toward him, one hand resting against the heavy vellum page as her finger traced a line of complex figures. She spoke quietly and precisely, her voice the only sound in the room, treating the transition not as a tragedy, but as a long-overdue accounting.

"...this account moves through the second channel," she was saying, her eyes fixed on the ink. "It won't appear in the main books. My father kept it separate for the offshore transfers in Cyprus." Ruslan's attention was on her... not fully, but with a focused, predatory depth. He followed where she pointed, his gaze moving with quiet concentration, absorbing and integrating every secret she gave up. He didn't just listen to the numbers; he watched the way she handled them, confirming that she was exactly what he had gambled on: the architect of the very empire he was now inheriting.

"And this one?" Ruslan asked, his voice low, vibrating through Lina's back where she leaned against him.

Lina shifted the page slightly, her fingers steady against the paper. "False," she said, her tone clinical. "It's used to balance what's missing elsewhere." She paused, a beat of cold calculation passing between them. "We can close it."

Ruslan considered that for half a second, his gaze tracing the column of numbers she had highlighted. Then: "Yes." The word settled, decided, final and he turned the page. The emerald ring caught the light as he did, heavy on his pinky, an unmistakable and deliberate placement that signaled the Rozanova legacy had been claimed.

Andrei saw it all. He saw the desk, the chair, the strange men moving through the halls, and the way Lina sat there, not forced, not held, but placed exactly where she intended to be. His breath caught in a jagged hitch. "What is this?" he demanded, the sound of his own voice feeling thin and unwelcome in the quiet room.

This time, someone answered. Ruslan's gaze lifted, not with surprise or sharpness, but with the calm acknowledgment of someone watching a slow runner finally catch up to the pack. "You came back," Ruslan said, his observation as flat as the horizon.

Andrei took a step forward, his composure fraying. "What did you do?" he snapped, his voice rising and breaking against the suffocating control that filled the room. "Where is he?"

The question hung, heavy and unanswered. Lina didn't turn immediately; she finished the line she was reading and closed the ledger with a soft, definitive thud. Only then did she look at him—not defensive or apologetic, just steady. Ruslan watched the exchange before speaking quietly. "You're late." It wasn't a taunt; it was a fact that hurt more than a mockery ever could.

Andrei's jaw tightened until it ached. "Where is my father?"

Ruslan leaned back slightly in the chair, Grigori's chair, his now, and the ring flashed again as his hand settled against the leather armrest. "Gone," he said. Simple. Final.

Andrei went still. The room seemed to narrow around him, the weight of that word landing without explanation or detail, leaving him nothing to push against. "No," he said, a visceral, instinctive rejection.

Ruslan didn't argue or elaborate. He didn't need to. Instead, his gaze shifted to Lina for a fraction of a second, a silent confirmation, before moving back to Andrei. "She told me where everything was," Ruslan said, his voice measured and calm. "And I decided what to do with it."

The words weren't an explanation or a justification; they were an assertion of ownership. Andrei's eyes snapped to his sister. "You—" He didn't finish the thought, because she didn't move. She didn't deny it or soften the blow. She simply sat in the lap of the man who had replaced their father and watched him.

The silence stretched, agonizing and hollow. Andrei stood in the middle of it, breathing too fast, something unraveling under his skin that he no longer had the strength to hold in place. The house didn't belong to him. It didn't even recognize him. Ruslan watched him for a moment longer, measuring him with the same clinical detachment he used for the ledgers. Then, almost idly: "We'll see what you do next." It wasn't a threat, not yet. It was an assessment, still in progress, leaving Andrei standing in a room where everything had already been decided except for his own survival.

"Nephew." Sergei stepped into view, "I wouldn't run if I were you." Sergei gripped his upper arm, "Boss?"

"Take him to his room for now." Ruslan ordered attention back on the books and Lina.

Irina did not come back alone. She moved quickly through the front door, the children gathered close around her in half-buttoned coats, their breath still clinging to them from the freezing river air. Nikolai stayed pressed to her side, his small hand tangled in her sleeve, while Misha fussed restlessly in her arms, unsettled by a shift in the house he couldn't yet name. Even Ilya remained uncharacteristically close, his quiet sharpened into something watchful.

She stopped just inside the foyer, and the house answered her differently. It wasn't broken or ransacked, but it was no longer hers. Her gaze moved over the subtle rearrangements and the unfamiliar men who did not avert their eyes quickly enough, the very air feeling recalibrated. "Stay with me," she whispered to the boys before moving forward.

At the threshold of the study, Irina paused and saw. She saw Ruslan seated at Grigori's desk, the high-backed chair claimed without a hint of resistance. And she saw Lina there, perched atop Ruslan's lap, already part of the machinery of the room. The ledger lay open between them, finished. Irina's breath caught, a soft hitch that was enough to make Lina look up. For a moment, a silent recognition passed between mother and daughter all the answers to every question Irina had never been allowed to ask.

Lina stood, smooth and composed, closing the distance between them without looking back to see if Ruslan followed; she didn't need to. "This is my mother," Lina said, her voice steady

and clear. "Irina Rozanova." She didn't hesitate on the name or offer a correction. Then, with a slight turn of her head, she placed her brothers: "Ilya. Nikolai. Mieczyslaw." Each name was deliberate, each one accounted for.

Irina's eyes flicked to her daughter, something fragile and sharp tightening in her expression. Then, Lina turned back toward the desk. "To you," she said, her tone correct rather than deferential, "this is Ruslan Svyatoslavovich Dragunov. The head of this house."

The words settled heavily. Irina felt them all. Her gaze shifted fully to Ruslan, taking him in not as a guest, but as a fixed point in their reality. She measured him, understood him, and beneath it all, accepted what she already knew to be true. "We will be leaving," Lina continued, her voice devoid of ornament. "As soon as arrangements are completed. For America." The word *America* carried a different weight. Irina's fingers tightened against Misha's blanket as the boys shifted closer. Lina didn't look at them yet; she held her mother's gaze. "There are things that must be put in order: papers, accounts, movement of assets. But it will be within the next few months."

Irina swallowed slowly. "And us?" she asked, the question hovering near the edge of fear.

Lina inclined her head slightly. "You come with me." It wasn't a reassurance; it was a placement. Irina's breath left her in a quiet exhale she hadn't realized she was holding, "There is one more thing," Lina added, a final shift occurring in the room's atmosphere. "I will be married before we leave."

Irina's gaze sharpened, jumping to Ruslan and then back to Lina. "You're—" she started, recalibrating on the fly. "To him."

Lina didn't soften. "Yes. For American authorities and their expectations, there must be a structure they recognize. They will require explanation."

"And what explanation is that?" Irina asked, her voice threading with disbelief.

Lina answered without a second of hesitation. "That we were promised to one another. Since my birth."

The room went still; even the men in the hallway seemed to quiet. Irina stared at her daughter. “You want me to say that,” she said slowly. It wasn't an accusation, but an understanding of the depth of the lie.

Lina held her gaze. “It is the cleanest path. And the safest.”

Irina's eyes moved between them, Lina, Ruslan, the desk, and the emerald ring. She understood enough. Her shoulders settled just slightly. “You've already decided.”

“Yes.”

After a long silence, Irina inclined her head once... a small, controlled gesture. “Then I will say it.” It wasn't agreement or approval; it was alignment. There was nothing else left to do. Behind Lina, Ruslan had not moved, not once. but had simply watched and measured the fallout until, with the finality of the room's silence, he realized he now had everything he needed.

Chapter 2: 2008-2012 (Lovers, Ew)

2008 - Prospect World Cup Finals - Saskatchewan, Regina, Canada

Ilya Rozanov made his debut on Team Russia- he was a child with dual-citizenship and at sixteen going on seventeen, he was on top of his game. Two years after Grigori disappeared, the Russian government allowed Irina to formally declare him dead. Within six weeks, she had married her former bodyguard, Filipp, Ruslan's older cousin, and the house had, for the first time, become something stable. His mother, Irina, his step-father, Filipp, and his older sister accompanied him, Lina cupping his face before he entered the locker room for the first time, “Это твоя работа, родной — играть в хоккей. Позволь нам с Русиком самим разобраться с «Братвой». Именно так мы станем более легальными. Я так сильно люблю тебя, душа моя.” She pulled him in and peppered his face with kisses. <<*This is your job, sweetheart, you play hockey. Let me and Rusik worry about Bratva. This is how we become more legitimate. I love you so much, my soul.*>> Irina and Filipp came next, giving him warm affection, before he was heading into the locker room.

Canada won, but Ilya felt a bit like he had - he met Shane Hollander.

2009 - Prospect World Cup Finals - Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Ilya Rozanov wasn't on Team Russia this year, he was on team America. As the rules for the Prospect Cup had changed, he carried them to a win - against Team Canada (and Shane Hollander). This time Rusik and Lina were the ones accompanying him with their young son, Dmitriy, who they called Dima more often than not. The boy was almost two, they had left their older son, Samvel, and daughter, Sabina, at home in Boston with Irina and Filipp, and his Uncle Sergei.

America won, but it felt like a loss for Ilya, because he and Shane Hollander were going to the draft - and probably away from each other forever.

2010 - June - National Hockey League Draft - Las Vegas, Nevada

Ilya should have known, it had his sister's careful fingers all over it. He was the first draft pick, and Shane Hollander the second draft pick, their hotel rooms were side-by-side, and Ilya knew that Lina *knew*. She gave him a graceful out when he wanted to go to the hotel gym, she managed the family to let him be himself. In fact, since she had married Rusik she had made sure that they were all free to be themselves from Irina (Ilya's mother but Lina's step-mother), to Niko and Misha, and now to Irina and Filipp's shared children (Georgi and little Nadia). Lina had even ensured Svetlana, Sergei's daughter, got the best education money could buy. Ilya would forever be thankful for whatever sacrifice his sister had made to bring Rusik into their lives.

2012 - Early Summer - Boston, Massachusetts - Ilya Rozanov's House

In late April, the remains of Grigori Rozanov had been found back in Russia. The world hadn't noticed. Ilya took a few weeks off from the spotlight to pretend to grieve, and the whole family flew back to Russia to bury him. Rusik had promised him then that he would never have to go back, and this time, he kept that promise. Sergei followed soon after, taking a position with the Boston Bears so he could remain close. The family settled into something resembling normal. Ilya told them (his mother, Filipp, Lina, Rusik, his siblings, even Sergei and Svetlana) that he was bisexual and they accepted him without question. The only one they didn't tell was Andrei, who had long since been removed from anything that mattered, tucked away in a penthouse full of bad habits and worse decisions, a contingency more than a brother. For the first time in his life, Ilya had everything he needed—and just enough fear to risk losing it.

He was comfortable enough to do something brave. He'd asked Shane to come home with him, after they had a joint photoshoot, something they had started doing after the draft three to four times a year. Even though they were rivals, they were portrayed as respectful to one another, even friends of a nature. That had been largely with his older sisters' careful sculpting. His mom and Lina had gone through the diet that Ilya had told them Shane was on, and found a series of meals for the weekend, they'd even sent groceries and instructions. He'd bought ginger ale, Ilya was prepared, he wanted... he was desperate to ask, he needed to tell Shane - fuck. He wanted a real relationship with the beautiful boy, and he had his family (even Rusik's) approval.

Ilya had never been afraid of much, not on the ice, not in front of cameras, not even in the shadow of what his family had built. But this was different. If he said it out loud... if he asked Shane to stay, to be something real... he could lose him. Not just Shane, but everything that came with him. The rivalry. The careful image Lina had built for them. The careers they were both just beginning. One wrong word, and he could fracture all of it. Shane could laugh, or walk, or worse: choose the version of his life that didn't include Ilya at all. And Ilya wouldn't just lose him. He would have to play against him, knowing exactly what he had ruined.

The doorbell rang, a sharp, melodic intrusion into the curated silence of the foyer, followed immediately by a firm knock. Ilya was there in an instant, pulling the heavy door open before Shane could even raise his hand to the wood a second time, "Do I take my shoes off?" Shane asked, his voice already halfway across the threshold as he began to step inside.

"No, you're good," Ilya said, his tone carrying a trace of the easy, inherited authority that came with a home like this.

Shane stepped in and stopped. His gaze drifted upward, tracing the high ceilings and the architectural lighting that bathed the room in a warm, expensive glow. This wasn't the sterile luxury of a showroom; it was a sprawling four-bedroom sanctuary in the heart of Boston, decorated with deep leathers, dark wood, and the kind of high-end clutter, there were open books, a discarded wool throw, a half-empty glass all of which made the wealth feel lived-in and effortless, "Wow," Shane breathed, his eyes moving slowly across the open-concept space. "Wow," he repeated, almost to himself. "This place is great."

Ilya shut the door behind him, the heavy thud sealing them inside. He leaned against the frame, watching Shane's reaction more than the house itself. To Ilya, the crown molding and the custom cabinetry were just the background noise of his life, but seeing it through Shane's eyes made the disparity of their worlds feel momentarily loud.

"Did you get this built," Shane continued, glancing back at the meticulous detail of the staircase, "or do you know who did?"

Ilya huffed a quiet, self-deprecating breath. "Mr. Real Estate," he deflected, his thumb hooked into his pocket.

“That’s not what I meant,” Shane said, his expression softening as he turned fully to face him. “I just...” He trailed off, the weight of the evening, and the secrets they hadn’t quite finished unpacking, settling between them. A pause stretched, thick with everything left unsaid. “You think we need to talk?”

Ilya shook his head once, a decisive movement that cut through the tension. “No, ебать, yes.” he said, his voice dropping an octave. “After.” <<*fuck*>> That was enough. The house, with all its luxury and history, faded into the background as the focus shifted entirely to the space between them.

The transition from the entryway to the living room was seamless, the low light of the Boston skyline bleeding through the floor-to-ceiling windows to catch the edges of the deep leather sofa. Ilya didn’t lead him there so much as pull him into the orbit of it. The “after” he had promised arrived the second Shane’s back hit the cushions. There was no more space for Real Estate or polite inquiries; there was only the sudden, heavy heat of Ilya crowding into his space, hands finding the hem of Shane’s shirt with a restless, hungry precision.

Shane let out a breath that was half-gasp, half-shudder as Ilya’s mouth found his. It wasn’t a tentative kiss. It was the kind of contact that claimed territory, a bruising, desperate pressure that tasted of unspoken tension and the sudden release of it. Ilya’s fingers drifted upward, skin skimming over skin, his touch firm and possessive as he mapped the line of Shane’s ribs, his thumb hooking into the waistband of Shane’s jeans to pull him flush against his hip.

Shane’s hands were just as busy, tangling into the hair at the nape of Ilya’s neck, pulling him closer until there wasn’t a whisper of air left between them. He could feel the steady, rapid thrum of Ilya’s heart against his own chest—a frantic, living rhythm that matched the way Ilya was moving against him, teeth catching Shane’s lower lip just hard enough to make him see stars.

The expensive leather creaked under their weight, the smell of woodsmoke and Ilya’s cologne thick in the air, but the luxury of the room felt miles away. In the dark, with Ilya’s weight pressing him down and hands wandering with a blunt, honest intent, the only thing that mattered was the friction and the fever of finally being touched like he belonged there. The air in the room was thick, charged with the kind of heavy, silent frequency that only exists when two people finally stop pretending they aren’t thinking about each other.

Shane's hands didn't hesitate. He reached out, his fingers hooking into the hem of Ilya's shirt and tugging it upward. The fabric gave way with a soft rustle, and then there was nothing but the heat of Ilya's skin against his palms. Shane's touch was blunt, a restless mapping of the hard muscle of Ilya's stomach and the sharp, elegant dip of his waist. He felt the sudden, jagged hitch in Ilya's breathing, a sound of pure, unvarnished wanting that made Shane pull him even closer, his nails grazing lightly against the small of Ilya's back.

Ilya surged upward, bracing his weight on his forearms to hover over Shane, his chest rising and falling in a ragged rhythm. He stopped then, just for a second, the low light from the Boston skyline catching the amber in his eyes and the flush creeping up his neck. He looked down at Shane with an intensity that felt like a physical weight, his gaze scanning Shane's face as if he were trying to memorize the exact shade of his blown-out pupils and the way his lips were swollen from the friction of their kisses. There was no "Mr. Real Estate" in that look, no legacy of the Rozanova name... just the raw, predatory focus of a man who had finally found the one thing he didn't want to share.

Ilya's hand moved, his fingers sliding into the hair at Shane's temple, his thumb tracing the line of his jaw with a possessive, heavy pressure, "You have no idea," Ilya murmured, his voice a low, rough vibration that Shane felt in his own bones, "How long I've wanted to get you into this house." He didn't wait for an answer. He leaned back down, his mouth finding the sensitive cord of Shane's neck, his teeth grazing the skin just enough to leave a mark... a silent, physical claim that said mine more clearly than any word ever could. Shane arched into him, his hands sliding further up Ilya's bare back, pulling the weight of him down until the luxury of the sofa and the quiet of the city outside disappeared entirely into the heat of the "after."

The sheets were a tangled, high-thread-count wreck, the cool evening air from the cracked window finally beginning to win against the heat they'd generated. The birds in the Boston suburbs were starting their twilight chorus, a faint, rhythmic chirping that felt miles away from the heavy, skin-to-skin reality of the bed.

Shane sat up first, the movement pulling the duvet down to his hips. He looked around the darkened room, his silhouette sharp against the expensive wallpaper. "I should go," he said, though his voice lacked any real conviction. It sounded more like a habit—the reflex of a man used to leaving before things got complicated.

Ilya didn't move. He remained sprawled on his back, one arm flung over his head, looking entirely too comfortable in the wreckage of the pillows. "Or you could stay."

Shane glanced over his shoulder, squinting through the gloom. "Stay?"

"Here tonight," Ilya said, his voice a low, gravelly vibration that seemed to hook into the base of Shane's spine. "I'm not done with you." A beat passed, thick with the kind of blunt honesty that usually stayed hidden in the dark. "And we have an afternoon game tomorrow. No morning skate."

Shane let out a small breath, the sound catching in his throat as he ran a frustrated hand through his sleep-mussed hair. "I told Hayden," he muttered, more to the wall than to Ilya.

Ilya finally shifted, propping himself up on one elbow. He blinked, his dark eyes tracking the line of Shane's bare shoulders. "Is Hayden your mother?"

That pulled a short, genuine laugh out of Shane, the kind that broke the tension just enough to let the air back into the room. "No." He paused, the smile fading into something more contemplative. "Feels like it sometimes."

"Then why do you care what you told him?" Ilya said, his gaze unwavering, stripping away the excuses until there was nothing left but the invitation. "Stay."

Shane hesitated. He looked at the door, thinking of the world outside this room; the teammates, the expectations, the rigid structure of their lives. Then he looked back at Ilya, who was watching him with a quiet, predatory patience that made the rest of the world feel like background noise. "OK," Shane said softly. He slid back down into the heat of the bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. As he settled in, Ilya's hand found the small of his back, a firm, possessive anchor that pulled him close. It wasn't just a night anymore; it was a shift in the gravity between them, a quiet admission that the "after" was only just beginning.

The silence of the bedroom was no longer the heavy, cautious thing it had been an hour ago. It was soft now, the edges blurred by the shared heat of the mattress and the slow, synchronized pull of exhaustion. They fell asleep like that, without a plan and without a wall

between them, drifting off into the kind of deep, uncomplicated rest that usually only comes after a long road trip.

When the light finally shifted from the deep blue of twilight to the pale, intrusive gray of a Boston morning, it found them completely tangled.

For the first time ever, there was no distance. Shane woke to the steady, warm weight of Ilya's arm draped over his chest, his own leg hooked between Ilya's as if they were trying to solve a puzzle in their sleep. The expensive sheets were a knot around their ankles, but neither of them moved to fix it. The air was cool, but the space between their bodies was a fever.

Ilya stirred first, his face pressed into the crook of Shane's neck. He didn't pull away. Instead, he let out a long, sleepy exhale that ghosted against Shane's skin before he spoke, his voice a gravelly ruin.

"I'm hungry," Ilya said, his fingers twitching against Shane's ribs.

"For what?" Shane asked, his eyes still closed, a lazy, half-formed smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"For food, pervert," Ilya shot back. To drive the point home, he nipped sharply at Shane's shoulder, his teeth grazing the skin just enough to startle a jolt of electricity through Shane's system. That earned a real, loud laugh, the kind that echoed off the high ceilings and made the room feel suddenly, brilliantly alive.

Ilya didn't stop there. He surged upward, suddenly fueled by a burst of morning energy, and began tugging at Shane's arm to pull him toward the edge of the bed. When Shane groaned and tried to bury his face back into the pillow, Ilya changed tactics. He dove back down, his fingers finding the sensitive dip of Shane's waist in a flurry of relentless tickling, "Get up," Ilya commanded between lunges, his own dark hair a wild mess, his expression lighter than Shane had ever seen it. "The kitchen is downstairs, and I'm not eating alone."

Shane writhed under the attack, breathless and laughing, his hands catching Ilya's wrists to try and pin him down. In the bright, honest light of the morning, the uncharted territory didn't feel like a threat anymore. It felt like a destination.

The transition from the bedroom to the stairs was a slow, quiet shuffle of bare feet and sleep-heavy limbs. Shane was a soft, rumpled mess, his hair standing in every direction as he kept the heavy wool throw blanket pulled tight around his shoulders like a cocoon. Ilya walked just ahead of him, stripped down to his boxers, his movements already regaining that effortless, predatory grace even with the morning light reflecting off his bare back. Shane watched the play of muscles in Ilya's shoulders, feeling a sudden, sharp tug of genuine affection that had nothing to do with the heat of the night before and everything to do with the way Ilya hadn't pulled away when they woke up.

The kitchen felt warmer than the rest of the house. It was controlled and precise, every high-end appliance exactly where it belonged, reflecting the same quiet order that seemed to govern Ilya's life. Ilya moved through the space like he had done it a thousand times, pulling down a pan and clicking the stove to a steady flame. Shane leaned back against the marble counter, clutching his blanket and watching the domesticity of it all. He was still trying to place this version of Ilya—the one who knew his way around a spatula as well as he knew his way around a power play.

"You like tuna melt?" Ilya asked, his voice still holding that low, gravelly morning rasp as he set a jar on the counter.

Shane blinked, his heart doing a strange, heavy roll in his chest. A tuna melt wasn't just a random choice; it was the exact, high-protein meal Shane required for his pre-game routine. The fact that Ilya knew that, and was currently reaching for the sourdough to start it, felt like a quiet confession.

"You gonna make me a tuna melt?" Shane shot back, a sleepy challenge in his eyes, though his voice had softened significantly.

"I was gonna make one for me." Ilya didn't look up, but the corners of his mouth twitched as he reached for the bread. He let a beat of silence hang between them, the hum of the refrigerator the only sound in the room. "I can make two," he added quietly.

Shane watched him for a second longer, the smell of warming butter starting to fill the air. The luxury of the house usually felt intimidating, but watching Ilya fuss over a sandwich in his underwear, specifically tailoring the morning to Shane's needs, made the whole world feel suddenly, strangely accessible. A slow, lopsided smile spread across Shane's face, a look of pure, unvarnished fondness, "Yeah," Shane said, pulling the blanket a little tighter as he stepped a half-inch closer to the heat of the stove and the man standing over it. "Make it two."

They drifted into the living room with plates in hand, the high-ceilinged space feeling smaller and more intimate in the light of the late morning. The TV filled the room, the low, rhythmic hum of hockey commentary giving them a comfortable structure to sit inside. Ilya settled onto the edge of the sofa, his eyes tracking Shane with a quiet, lingering intensity that he didn't bother to hide; there was a soft, lovesick gravity to the way he waited for Shane to get settled, his gaze anchored to the way the throw blanket still clung to Shane's shoulders.

"You head to Florida after this, right?" Ilya asked, his voice low, his thumb tracing the edge of his plate.

"Yeah," Shane said, sinking into the cushions beside him, feeling the solid, grounding heat of Ilya's leg near his own. "Right after the game. Tampa, then Sunrise. Then Dallas and St. Louis."

"Ah," Ilya said, a small, knowing smirk playing on his lips. "All the hot spots." That pulled a genuine grin from Shane, a look of unvarnished fondness that made his eyes crinkle at the corners. He reached for the glass Ilya had set out for him. "Ginger ale cold enough?" Ilya asked, his tone laced with a protective sort of hovering that Shane found unexpectedly endearing.

"Yeah, it's great," Shane replied, leaning back and letting the domesticity of the moment wash over him.

"Good." Ilya watched him take a sip, a fleeting, tender expression softening the usual sharp lines of his face.

"You know this guy?" Shane said suddenly, gesturing with his fork toward the TV where a highlight reel was playing. "Ryan Price?"

“Yeah,” Ilya said, leaning back as well, though he didn't break the physical orbit they had established. “From playing against him and not wanting to fight him.”

“You did a season with him, right?”

“Mmm.” Ilya gave a careless shrug, but his eyes remained on Shane, as if the hockey talk was just a way to keep Shane talking, to keep him there in the room just a little longer. “He’s not what you’d think.”

“How so?”

“Quiet. Doesn’t talk. Keeps to himself.” A beat passed as Ilya shifted closer, his arm brushing Shane's blanket-covered one. “Not a bad guy. Just doesn’t make friends.”

“Well,” Shane said, looking from the screen back to Ilya, his expression softening with a deep, quiet affection. “He gets traded every season. Hard to make friends that way.”

“Probably wants to get traded again,” Ilya muttered, a low chuckle vibrating in his chest as he caught the warmth in Shane's gaze. “Buffalo is terrible.”

“Yeah,” Shane added with a playful nudge of his shoulder against Ilya's, “and their team sucks too.” That got another laugh, bright and easy, breaking the last of the morning's lingering shadows. Ilya looked at Shane then, not with the calculated focus of a teammate, but with the open, vulnerable heat of someone who was realized he was in much deeper than he'd ever planned to be.

The conversation drifted as easily as the steam off their plates, anchored by the low hum of the television. Ilya’s lovesickness was a quiet, heavy thing, manifesting in the way his eyes tracked Shane’s every move—how he sat, how he held his glass.

“What’s your favorite city?” Shane asked, his tone warm and filled with the morning’s lingering fondness.

“On the road?” Ilya leaned back, his leg pressing against Shane’s through the wool throw. “I like New York. Because it’s New York.” A beat. “They hate me there.”

“They hate you everywhere,” Shane teased, a small, affectionate smirk playing on his lips.

“Not Florida,” Ilya shot back. “Full of Boston people. And you?”

Shane shrugged. “Ottawa. My hometown. Toronto. Winnipeg... I’m happy they have a team again.”

Ilya watched him, his gaze intense, absorbing the way Shane’s face lit up when he talked about home. “What, are those boring answers?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, but his voice was soft, devoid of any real bite.

Shane smirked, leaning into Ilya’s space. “Well, I like the hot places too.”

“Hot like weather?” Ilya asked. When Shane nodded, Ilya continued, “LA is hot. Hot women.”

Shane snorted, his fondness for Ilya’s bluntness peaking. “There are hot women everywhere.”

Ilya nodded once, though his mind was clearly elsewhere—locked on the man sitting next to him. “There is a girl I like here,” he said. Shane’s eyes flicked toward him, a sharp spark of curiosity hitting his chest. “Oh?”

“Svetlana,” Ilya said. “Old friend. From Russia. Her father was a famous goaltender. She knows everything about hockey.”

“Cool.”

“And she likes you very much.”

Shane huffed a laugh, his chest tightening with a strange, sweet confusion. “That’s nice. So she’s your girlfriend?”

“No,” Ilya said quickly, almost defensive. “Nothing like that. She’s just... there.”

Shane leaned back slightly, trying to read the Russian’s unreadable face. “Sounds perfect for you.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, though the word felt hollow. He was drowning in his feelings for Shane, but the English words were failing him, coming out as cold facts instead of the adoration he felt. The shift came slowly. “You like girls?” Ilya asked, his eyes fixed on the TV to hide the vulnerability in them.

Shane shrugged, keeping it casual. “Yeah.”

Ilya glanced over, his heart hammering against his ribs. “I never hear you with girls.”

Shane didn’t miss the weight behind the comment. He offered a small, private smirk. “My life is private.”

“Obviously.” Ilya held his gaze for a second longer than necessary, his lovesickness threatening to spill over. He wanted to tell Shane he was the only thing he thought about, that the “hot women” of LA didn’t exist when Shane was in the room. He took a breath, reaching for the sentiment in a language that felt like a blunt instrument.

“I like girls,” Ilya said.

“Yeah,” Shane replied. “No shit.”

Another pause stretched between them, too long and far too real. Then, Ilya leaned in, his voice dropping to a rough, honest register. “But I also like you.”

The silence that followed was thick. Shane didn’t laugh or deflect; he just looked at Ilya, his own affection battling with the sudden gravity of the confession. “Lucky me,” he said finally.

Ilya stepped closer, his mind racing to translate the Russian concept of liking someone's company versus valuing their presence. He wanted to say that his feelings for Shane transcended the physical, that it wasn't just a casual "person-to-person" attraction but something soul-deep. But the English words tripped him. He meant to say he didn't just like Shane for superficial reasons. What he meant to say was "*I don't just like you as a person, I love you*", but it came out as a brutal, accidental insult.

“Not as a person, of course,” Ilya said, intending to mean it's so much more than that.

Shane went still, the fondness in his eyes flickering into a cold, sharp hurt. “Of course,” he said, the words tasting like ash. Ilya felt the slip, the panic rising as he tried to claw back to the intimacy of the morning. He wanted to compliment Shane, to tell him he was beautiful, to bring back the heat of the bedroom where they had been so perfectly aligned. He reached for a compliment about Shane’s face, about the way he talked, about the way he looked when he was happy.

“But you have a good mouth,” Ilya added, meant as a desperate, clumsy praise of Shane’s beauty.

To Shane, it was the final blow, a confirmation that he was just a body, a "good mouth" for a man who didn't even like him "as a person." The warmth of the morning vanished, replaced

by a stinging sense of being used. That broke it. Shane reached for him, but the touch wasn't soft anymore; it was a rough, wounded reclamation of the only thing Ilya had said he valued.

Ilya caught his hands, “No, солнечный свет,” Ilya breathed, the Russian slipping out before he could stop it. “We need to. The talk, I am fucking it all up-” The cold air from the open door sliced through the lingering warmth of the kitchen, a physical manifestation of the sudden, jagged distance between them. Shane was halfway onto the porch, his face set in a mask of wounded pride, the blanket he'd been wrapped in now forgotten on the sofa like a shed skin.

Ilya felt the panic clawing at his throat. He realized, with a sickening lurch, that his English had betrayed him again, turning a confession of soul-deep devotion into a shallow, transactional insult.

"Ilya—" Shane started, his voice cracking with the effort of holding himself together. "I can't."

He turned to leave, but Ilya moved, his hand catching the edge of the door to keep it from swinging shut. "We need to talk," Ilya said, his voice dropping into a desperate, gravelly register. "Yes, I have fucked up. My words... they are wrong. Let me..."

Shane stilled, his shoulders tight beneath his thin shirt. He didn't turn back, but he didn't step further into the night either.

"I am choosing you," Ilya said, like it was the only truth he had left. "Please."

The weight of the word please—a word Ilya Rozanov rarely used for anything—held Shane in place. He turned slightly, his eyes searching Ilya's face for the lie, but finding only a terrifying, lovesick sincerity. "Ilya..."

"Let me talk to you," Ilya said, stepping into the threshold, closing the gap until the heat of his body began to fight the winter draft. "Let me tell you—" He stopped himself, his mind racing to find the right structure, the right gravity to explain why Shane wasn't just a "mouth" or a "body," but the only anchor he had in a life built on shadows.

"Let me tell you a story," Ilya said quietly.

That caught him. Shane's frown deepened, his defensive posture faltering. "What?"

"My sister," Ilya said. "Lina." A beat passed, the name carrying a weight that Shane couldn't yet fathom. "I've told you about her. Briefly."

Shane nodded slowly, his gaze dropping to the floor. "I remember."

Ilya took a step closer, his voice dropping to a whisper that felt more intimate than the bedroom had been. "She built all of this," he said, gesturing vaguely to the sprawling, silent luxury of the house behind them. "Everything. The money, the safety, the names we use... she carved it out of a world you do not know."

He looked at Shane then, his dark eyes brimming with a truth he had never shared with anyone outside his bloodline.

"If you walk away now," Ilya said, his heart hammering against his ribs, "you don't understand what you're walking away from. You think this is a game. You think I am playing with you because I say the wrong words."

A pause stretched between them, cold and sharp.

"And if you go," Ilya finished, "I don't get to explain that you are the first thing in this house that is mine. Not Lina's. Not the family's. Mine."

Silence followed, real and heavy. Ilya didn't move. He didn't reach out to grab Shane's arm or force him back inside. He stood there in his boxers, rain cutting through the doorway, shivering and exposed in a way that had nothing to do with the cold, waiting to see if Shane would choose to hear the rest of the story.

Shane should have kept walking, especially as the rain began to come down harder, a steady and cold downpour that immediately soaked through the thin fabric of the hoodie he hadn't even realized he'd grabbed. The fabric smelled overwhelmingly of Ilya, a mix of faint cologne and a clean, lingering warmth underneath, which only served to sharpen the sting of the last hour. He managed to make it three steps, then four, before his momentum simply failed him and he stopped dead in the driveway. His shoulders tightened and his breath caught in a way that had nothing to do with the freezing Boston air. Instead, it was the echo of Ilya's voice chasing him out into the night, growing louder and more impossible to shake with every second of silence. *I am choosing you.* The weight of that raw, desperate admission crushed the distance Shane was trying to build, forcing him to swear under his breath before he finally turned back toward the open door.

The door was still open and Ilya hadn't moved. He was still standing there, barefoot and half-dressed, the rain cutting through the threshold and soaking into his skin as if he didn't even feel the chill. It was as if he wasn't aware of anything in the world except Shane, just waiting with a quiet, devastating patience. Shane hated that. He hated the way that silent focus pulled him back in, dragging him toward the center of a gravity he couldn't escape. He stepped inside without speaking, water tracking across the expensive floor as the door swung shut behind him with a soft, final sound that felt heavier than it should have. For a moment, neither of them moved. They just stood there in the entryway, dripping and breathing, caught in a space that was suddenly too close again.

"You're freezing," Ilya said, his voice dropping to a rough, pained whisper. He didn't wait for an answer. He reached out, his hands trembling slightly as he gripped the edges of the wet hoodie Shane was wearing. The lovesickness was back, raw and unfiltered, stripping away the polished athlete until there was only a man terrified of losing the one thing he had chosen for himself.

"I don't care about the hoodie," Shane muttered, though he didn't pull away.

"I know," Ilya replied, his eyes searching Shane's with a frantic, silent plea for a second chance. "But you stay. You listen. I tell you about Lina. I tell you why I am... why I say things so poorly."

Shane looked at him, truly looked at him, seeing the way the water ran down Ilya's chest and the way he was braced as if for a blow. The fondness was still there, buried under the hurt,

and it was the only thing that kept him from turning back toward the rain, "Okay," Shane said finally. "Tell me."

Ilya didn't let him walk away again. He reached out, his hand wrapping firmly but gently around Shane's dampened forearm, guiding him away from the cold draft of the foyer and toward the small, tiled laundry room. The space was warm, smelling faintly of lemon and high-end detergent, a stark contrast to the storm they had just stepped out of.

"You said you were choosing me," Shane said finally. There it was, the question hanging in the air like a physical weight. He looked at Ilya directly now, no humor left to soften the blow. "What does that even mean to you?"

Ilya didn't answer right away. For once, he hesitated, not because he didn't know the answer, but because he was trying with everything he had to get it right. He reached into a cabinet, pulling out a stack of thick, white towels and handing one to Shane before beginning to dry his own hair with a frantic, distracted energy.

"My life," Ilya said slowly, his voice muffled by the towel, "is not simple."

Shane huffed, the sound sharp in the small room. "Yeah, I got that."

"No." Ilya pulled the towel down, his eyes dark and quieter than Shane had ever seen them. "You do not."

That landed. It wasn't a sharp retort; it was just a plain, devastating truth. Shane's shoulders tightened, his defensive instinct flaring as he gripped his own towel.

"Then explain it," he shot back. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you bring me here, you—" He stopped, frustrated, the memory of the bedroom clashing with the insult in the kitchen. "And then you tell me I'm not even someone you like as a person."

"I did not say that," Ilya insisted, his jaw tight.

“You literally did.”

“My words were wrong,” Ilya said, the frustration evident in the way his English seemed to strain under the weight of his intent.

“Yeah,” Shane snapped, the hurt resurfacing. “No shit.” Silence snapped between them then, clean and unforgiving. Ilya dropped his towel to the floor, stepping fully into Shane's personal space until the scent of the rain and the warmth of the laundry room blurred together. He looked like he wanted to reach out, to shake the misunderstanding out of Shane, but he kept his hands at his sides. Ilya stepped closer, the sterile, warm light of the laundry room catching the dampness on his skin. He looked at Shane with an intensity that was almost painful to witness, his hands gripping the edge of the towel he was holding as if to anchor himself to the conversation.

“I said I like you,” Ilya continued, his voice careful and strained. He reached for the next thought, but the words seemed to catch in his throat. “I meant...” He stopped, his jaw tightening as he forced the frustration down. He took a breath, his gaze never leaving Shane's. “When I am with you,” he said, the admission coming out raw, “everything else becomes... less.” Shane stilled. The towel in his hands felt forgotten as the defensive edge in his posture began to crumble, “I do not think about the game,” Ilya went on, his English simplifying as he stripped away the pretenses. “Or the team. Or...” He gestured vaguely toward the rest of the house, toward the legacy and the pressure and the ghosts of the Rozanova name. “Anything.” He let out a shaky breath, his eyes searching Shane's for any sign of understanding, “That is not small for me.”

The statement landed heavier than anything else they had said that morning. For a man like Ilya, whose entire existence was defined by hyper-focus, duty, and the crushing weight of his family's expectations, the ability to simply not think was the greatest luxury he possessed. He wasn't telling Shane he was a tool or a body; he was telling him that Shane was his only sanctuary. Shane looked at him, the silence in the laundry room suddenly feeling less like a battlefield and more like a bridge. The hurt was still there, but it was being crowded out by the realization of what Ilya was actually trying to confess.

Shane swallowed, the sound thick in the quiet, humid air of the laundry room. He looked away, his gaze catching on the rhythmic tumble of the dryer before he forced himself to look back at Ilya, “You don't get it,” he said, his voice dropping to a level that was barely a whisper. “You don't get what this does.”

"Then tell me," Ilya said. It was a simple command, stripped of the usual arrogance or the sharp deflection of a joke, "I am here." Ilya took another step closer. He wasn't touching Shane yet, but he was close enough that the radiant heat of his body began to cut through the damp chill of Shane's skin. The space between them was electric, a narrow corridor of tension where the rest of the world: the NHL, the fans, the crushing legacy of the Rozanov name all of it ceased to exist.

Shane felt the pull of it, the way Ilya was offering himself up as a blank slate, waiting for Shane to fill in the blanks of his own hurt. It was the most vulnerable Shane had ever seen him, standing there in the fluorescent light, stripped of his armor and his language, just waiting, "It makes me feel like a ghost in my own life," Shane admitted, the words finally breaking free. "Like I'm only real when I'm under you, and as soon as the sun comes up, I'm just... a good mouth. A part of a routine."

Ilya's expression fractured, a look of genuine horror crossing his features as the full weight of his linguistic failure finally sank in. He didn't speak immediately; he just let the silence sit there, heavy and honest, as he reached out a hand, hovering it just inches from Shane's cheek. Ilya didn't let the word *ghost* hang in the air for a second longer. He bridged that final, agonizing inch, his hand sliding firm and warm against the back of Shane's neck. He didn't pull him into a kiss; he just held him there, thumb tracing the line of Shane's jaw with a reverence that was entirely too heavy for a casual hookup. It was a grounding weight, a physical anchor designed to prove that Shane was solid, present, and undeniably real.

Shane let out a slow, shuddering breath, his forehead dropping forward until it rested against Ilya's shoulder. The heat of the laundry room seemed to intensify, trapped between their bodies, "You're not just some guy," Shane said, his voice muffled against Ilya's skin. "You're..." He stopped, searching for a word that didn't feel like a surrender. "You're *you*."

Ilya frowned, the expression tugging at the damp hair plastered to his forehead. "That is not helpful."

Shane huffed a short laugh despite himself, the sound vibrating against Ilya's chest. The absurdity of them - two of the league's most notorious competitors standing in a laundry room in their underwear - finally started to crack the tension. "You're my rival," Shane said, finally pulling back just enough to look Ilya in the eye. "We play each other. We're supposed to hate each other. That's the whole thing. That's the script."

"I do not hate you," Ilya said. The statement was flat, factual, and utterly devoid of the linguistic tripping from before.

"Yeah," Shane said, his gaze softening with a reluctant, deep-seated fondness. "I noticed." A beat passed, the hum of the dryer the only thing filling the silence, "That's the problem," Shane whispered.

Ilya didn't look away. He leaned in, pressing his cool nose against Shane's, a gesture so domestic and tender it felt like a brand. "Is not a problem for me," Ilya murmured. "I like the problem. I want the problem." He reached for a second dry towel, draped it over Shane's shoulders, and began to briskly rub the moisture from Shane's arms, his movements possessing a focused, quiet care, "Dry now," Ilya commanded softly. "We go back to the room. I tell you the rest. No more wrong words."

The walk back to the living room was a quiet, heavy procession. Ilya didn't let go of Shane's arm, his grip firm as if he expected Shane to bolt for the rainy driveway again the moment he found a clear path. He led them back to the sprawling sofa, the room now dimly lit by the gray afternoon light filtering through the clouds. Ilya didn't just sit next to him; he moved with a sudden, possessive gravity, pulling Shane into the corner of the cushions. He settled behind him, wrapping his arms around Shane's chest and pulling him back against his own heat. Shane was bundled in a fresh, dry throw blanket, but he felt the solid, real weight of Ilya's heart beating against his spine. Shane did his best not to run. Every instinct he possessed as a professional athlete told him to keep his guard up, to maintain the distance that kept his life manageable. But the way Ilya's chin rested on his shoulder made the label of being rivals feel thin and performative.

"You are staying," Ilya murmured, the words a half-command, half-plea.

"I'm here," Shane said, his voice low. He reached up, his fingers brushing the back of Ilya's hand where it was locked over his sternum. "I'm listening." Ilya took a long breath, the scent of the rain still clinging to them both. The house felt massive and silent around them, a fortress built of glass and secrets. "You said you wanted to tell me a story," Shane said finally, his voice cutting through the stillness.

There it was. The shift in the room was instantaneous. Ilya's expression changed, the lovesick wandering of his gaze snapping into something focused and certain. "Yes," Ilya said. He let out a slow breath, his chin dipping to rest on Shane's shoulder, his stubble grazing Shane's skin. "My sister." The word carried a weight that seemed to press down on the very air in the room. Shane glanced around the space again, seeing it differently this time. It wasn't just expensive; it was structured. Every piece of furniture, every shadow in the hallway, felt intentional... like a fortress designed to keep the world out, or perhaps to keep someone in, "She built this," Ilya said, his voice dropping to a quieter, more reverent register. "Everything you see. The walls. The name. The life I have when I am not on the ice."

Shane shifted, the wool of the blanket scratching against his neck as he tried to reconcile the fierce, independent player he knew with this sudden admission of debt, "And what does that have to do with me?" Shane asked.

Ilya tightened his grip, his fingers digging slightly into the fabric of the throw. He didn't look away, turning his head just enough so that his dark, honest eyes met Shane's. He looked at him, really looked at him, stripping away the language barrier and the rivalries until there was nothing left but the truth, "Everything," he said.

Ilya's grip didn't loosen, his arms a heavy, protective band around Shane's chest as the gray light of the afternoon seemed to grow colder. The domestic warmth of the laundry room felt miles away now, replaced by a history that predated both of them, "Once upon a time," Ilya said quietly, the words slower now, more deliberate. "There was a girl who lived in Russia." He took a long inhale and exhale, finding the English words for what he wanted to say, "Her name was Anzhelina Rozanova."

He shifted slightly against Shane's back, his chest rising and falling in a slow, rhythmic tension, like he was deciding how much of the truth Shane could actually carry. "Her family was... old," he went on. "Old before the revolution. Before the last Tsar fell. They had money, land, power. The kind that does not disappear when governments change." He took a moment to pause, and think again, "It just becomes something else." His mouth tightened slightly, his stubble grazing Shane's shoulder as he leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a gravelly, intimate frequency, "In her time," he said, "it had become Bratva."

The word sat between them, untranslated and unsoftened. It was a jagged, heavy thing that didn't belong in a sun-drenched Boston suburb or a high-end kitchen. It was the shadow behind the luxury, the steel beneath the velvet. Shane went very still. He knew the word. Everyone knew the word, but hearing it vibrate out of Ilya's chest, feeling the reality of it in the very house he had slept in, made the air in the living room feel dangerously thin.

Ilya's voice had a hollow quality to it now, as if he were reciting a legend he had memorized long ago to make sense of his own skin. He tightened his hold on Shane, his fingers curling into the wool of the blanket, anchoring himself to the present while his mind went back to the frost and the shadows of his youth.

"She lived in a big house," Ilya continued, the words dropping like stones into a deep well. "Very beautiful. Very cold. The kind where everything looks perfect, but you do not breathe easy." A beat, "She had a father who was powerful. Dangerous."

He didn't look at Shane when he said it. His gaze was fixed on the far wall of the living room, looking through the expensive art and the floor-to-ceiling windows at a horizon Shane couldn't see. The lovesickness from before had transformed into something somber and protective, a desperate need for Shane to understand the architecture of his silence. "People listened to him," he added, his chest expanding against Shane's back with a heavy, jagged breath. "Because they were afraid." Another pause, "And he liked that."

The admission hung in the air, thick and suffocating. Shane felt a chill that had nothing to do with the rain outside. He realized then that the *order* he had admired in Ilya's kitchen wasn't just a personality trait; it was a survival mechanism, a way to keep the chaos of that cold, beautiful house from bleeding into the life he had now. "The girl learned quickly," Ilya said, his voice dropping into a quieter, more deliberate rhythm. "How to be quiet. How to watch. How to understand what people mean without them saying it."

He shifted slightly against Shane's back, the weight of his arms around Shane's chest feeling less like a simple embrace and more like a barricade against the world, "She learned how to make herself small when she needed to be," Ilya continued, a rare, fragile note of empathy bleeding through the gravelly morning rasp. A breath hitched in his chest, expanding against Shane's shoulders, "And very big, when no one was expecting it."

That hint of pride was there again, completely unavoidable and fierce. It was the pride of someone who had watched his savior transform from a frightened child into a master of the shadows that had once hunted them. He didn't look at Shane as he spoke; his gaze was fixed on the far wall of the living room, looking through the expensive art at a horizon Shane couldn't see. The lovesickness from before had transformed into something somber and protective, a desperate need for Shane to understand the architecture of his silence.

Ilya's fingers curled into the wool of the blanket, anchoring himself to the present while his mind went back to the frost and the shadows of his youth. "She had a mother," he said, the words dropping like stones into a deep well. "Not the one who gave birth to her. But one who stayed, and there were children. Younger." His gaze flicked briefly toward Shane, then away. It was a quick, sharp look—a search for judgement or perhaps for a reflection of the same protective instinct Shane sometimes showed on the ice, "So she became something like a shield," he said. "No one told her to. She just... did." This wasn't just a story about a sister; it was a story about the cost of safety, and how Lina had built a fortress out of her own iron will to keep the younger ones from being crushed by the weight of their father's world.

Ilya's grip shifted, his fingers tracing the edge of the blanket with a slow, rhythmic pressure. The intensity from before had softened into something else—a fond, bittersweet reverence for the girl who had been forced to grow up in the dark, "She learned where things were hidden," Ilya went on, his voice dropping to a low, intimate murmur. "Money. Papers. Names." A delicate beat as Ilya searched his vocabulary for the words he needed now, "Secrets." The silence in the living room felt less like a threat now and more like the very shadows he was describing.

"She learned how to fix problems." He hesitated, his chest hitching slightly against Shane's back. Then, quieter, offered, "Sometimes before they happened." The pride in his voice was unmistakable, but it was laced with a sharp, lingering grief for the childhood she never had. He wasn't just describing a strategist; he was describing a girl who had traded her own peace to ensure his. Shane felt the weight of it... the realization that Ilya's entire life, from the skates on his feet to the roof over their heads, was a meticulously maintained miracle performed by a woman who had seen the worst of the world and decided her brother never would.

Ilya's grip tightened, his chest expanding against Shane's back as he took a breath that felt like it reached all the way back to that cold Russian winter. The fondness in his voice was now underscored by a jagged, sharp-edged awe, "One day," Ilya said, his voice lower now, "she understood that if nothing changed... the house would not survive." A longer pause stretched between them, the hum of the modern, safe living room suddenly feeling thin and fragile, "So she made a plan."

He shook his head faintly, a small, rhythmic motion against Shane's shoulder, as if he still couldn't entirely wrap his mind around the sheer scale of what a child had managed to do, "She was very young," he said. "Too young, only fourteen. But she made it anyway." The weight of that number, *fourteen*, hit Shane like a physical blow. He tried to imagine a girl that age, navigating the lethal politics of a Bratva household, mapping out an escape for a family that didn't even know they were drowning yet. Shane felt the tension in Ilya's arms, a vibrating energy that spoke of a debt that could never be fully repaid. This wasn't just a sister;

she was a *god* of his own making, a girl who had looked at a collapsing world and decided she would be the one to hold up the ceiling.

Shane moved slightly so his hands were wrapped around Ilya's arms around his waist, making sure Ilya could feel him embracing him. Ilya let out an exhale, kissed softly at the corner of Shane's jaw, then continued on. "There was a man," Ilya continued. This time, something shifted in his tone. It wasn't softer, but it was steadier, grounded by a different kind of history, "Older, I believe just turned twenty-two to her fourteen" he said. "Already dangerous. Already... established." The air in the room seemed to hold its breath. "He should not have listened to her." Another beat of silence, "But he did."

Ilya shifted slightly, his chin grazing Shane's shoulder as he looked toward the window, where the rain was still blurring the world outside. "He saw her," Ilya said simply. "Not as a child." Ilya paused, shook his head again, and exhaled, finding the right words, "Not as something fragile, but as something capable." He exhaled slowly, the warmth of his breath ghosting over Shane's skin, "And instead of breaking her... he gave her space."

A flicker of something almost warm touched his voice then, a resonance of gratitude for the one person who hadn't tried to crush the flame out of his sister, "He gave her power," he said. "And trusted her to use it." Shane felt the weight of that trust. It wasn't just a story about survival anymore; it was a story about how a fourteen-year-old girl had found the one person in a world of monsters who recognized her as a peer. It was the moment the shield became a sword.

Shane didn't just stay there. He couldn't. The weight of the words was too much to carry with his back turned. He shifted, the blanket sliding as he turned in the narrow space of the sofa, hitching his legs over Ilya's until he was straddling his lap. He needed to see him. He needed to be the anchor. As Shane settled, he felt the dampness on his own shoulder—the quiet, hot tracks of tears Ilya hadn't even tried to wipe away. Shane reached up, his large, calloused hands framing Ilya's face, his thumbs moving in slow, rhythmic sweeps to brush the salt from his high cheekbones. He leaned in, pressing soft, lingering kisses to those same damp cheeks, grounding them both in the friction of skin and the steady reality of the present, "Look at me," Shane murmured, his voice a low vibration. "Ilya. Look at my eyes."

Ilya did. His gaze was raw, his dark eyes shimmering with a history that felt centuries old, "They built something together," Ilya continued, his voice cracking slightly before he found the rhythm again. "Not quickly. Not loudly. But completely." He leaned into Shane's touch, his hands coming up to grip Shane's hips, holding him there as if Shane were the only solid

thing in a shifting sea, “He does not stand in front of her,” he said, looking directly into Shane’s eyes. “Not really. He stands beside her. And when it matters... behind.”

Ilya took a ragged breath, his thumbs digging into Shane’s sides, “In the beginning, it was... a deal. Cold. Like a trade. There was no love, only survival. But now?” A strange, bittersweet smile touched his lips. “Now they are like... *Gomez and Morticia*. Dark. Fierce. Protective in a way that makes the world stay away. They would burn everything for the other. I see them and I... I want that. I want a love that is a fortress.” He swallowed hard, the intensity of his gaze never wavering, “She made choices,” Ilya said, quieter now. Careful. Measured. “I do not know all of them. I think... some of them were not clean. I think some of them were... necessary.”

His jaw tightened under Shane’s thumbs, “But I was young. And she did not tell me everything. She still does not. But when it was done, the house was different. Safer. Stronger. And no one touched what was hers. Or his.” Ilya’s hands moved up, his fingers curling into the fabric of Shane’s shirt, pulling him a fraction closer until their foreheads rested against each other, “She moved us,” Ilya continued. “Across ocean. Across everything.” A faint, almost disbelieving exhale brushed Shane’s lips. “And she made it so that we could live... normally.”

The word sounded strange, almost alien, coming from him, “I play hockey,” he said, the simplicity of it heartbreaking. “I travel. I speak to media. I... exist in the world like it is easy. It is not because I am special.” He shook his head once, a minute movement against Shane’s forehead, “It is because no one is stupid enough to touch what belongs to Anzhelina Rozanova and Ruslan Dragunov.” He pulled back just enough to hold Shane’s gaze fully. The vulnerability there was staggering... a king confessing that his crown was forged in his sister’s blood. “And that is why I can stand here, sit here,” Ilya said quietly, “and tell you that I choose you. Because she made a world where I am allowed to.”

The weight of the confession seemed to pull the air from the room, leaving only the sound of their shared breathing and the distant, rhythmic drumming of rain against the glass. Shane held Ilya’s face, his thumbs catching the last of the salt on his skin, anchoring him to this couch, this moment, this version of himself that wasn’t a superstar or a protected asset. Ilya’s hands remained locked on Shane’s hips, grounding himself in the solid, warm reality of the man straddling his lap. He looked at Shane with an intensity that felt like a brand, a gaze that finally stopped searching for a way out and settled for a way in.

“That is the story,” Ilya said, his voice dropping to a softer, more intimate register that made the hair on Shane’s neck stand up. A small, almost self-aware pause followed. Ilya’s eyes

drifted for a fraction of a second, acknowledging the gaps in his own history, the blood he hadn't seen spilled and the deals he hadn't been in the room for, "My version." He looked back at Shane, his expression open and raw, stripped of the bravado that usually defined the Rozanov name on the ice, "It is not complete," he admitted, his breath ghosting over Shane's lips. Then, after a beat, "But it is true."

The silence that followed wasn't heavy or suffocating like it had been in the laundry room. It was a clean silence, the kind that exists after a storm has passed, leaving the earth damp but the air clear. Ilya wasn't just telling a story; he was handing Shane the keys to the fortress Lina had built for him. Shane leaned in, his forehead resting against Ilya's, their noses brushing. The rivalry felt like a ghost story told by people who didn't know them. "I believe you," Shane whispered, the words a vow. "I've got you."

The air in the room, once sharp with the scent of rain and old secrets, finally seemed to settle. Ilya's breath hitched: a broken, jagged sound that betrayed just how thin his composure had worn. He wasn't just crying for the past; he was crying for the terrifying uncertainty of the present. To a man who had been a protected asset his entire life, Shane's autonomy was the most beautiful and frightening thing he had ever encountered. Shane didn't move right away. He stayed there, forehead pressed to Ilya's, breathing him in, letting the words settle somewhere deeper than thought. It wasn't just a story. It wasn't just Lina. It was structured. It was protection. It was a life built on choices Shane couldn't fully see, but could feel pressing in from all sides.

His hands stayed where they were, thumbs brushing once more over Ilya's skin, slower now, grounding instead of searching, "You're insane," Shane murmured. Not harsh. Not unkind. Just... honest. A breath ghosted between them. "But you're not lying." He pulled back just enough to really look at him. At the cracks. At the way Ilya held himself like he was waiting for the moment Shane would decide it was too much. Too complicated. Too dangerous. Shane let out a quiet breath. "That's not just a family," he said. "That's... something else." His gaze flicked, just for a second, around the room. At the house. At everything it represented. Then back. "And you're just standing here telling me like... what?" A faint shake of his head. "Like I'm supposed to just nod and be okay with it?" A beat. His voice softened. "I don't even know what that means yet."

Ilya didn't interrupt. Didn't try to fix it. For once, he let Shane take the space. Shane's hands shifted slightly, still holding him there, still keeping him there. "But I get one thing," he said, quieter now. More certain. "That none of that made you *this*." His thumb brushed once along Ilya's cheek again, certain in his resolve. "You're not standing here because you're protected," Shane continued. "You're standing here because you chose to say it anyway. To me." That landed differently. Shane could see it in the way Ilya's eyes widened, the way his fingers tightened their grip on Shane's hips.

Shane swallowed. Then let out a small breath, something loosening in his shoulders, not gone, not resolved, but... shifting. "I don't think I understand your world," he said, honestly. "I probably won't. Not fully, at least not fully for a while." Another pause. "But I understand you enough." He leaned in again, just slightly. Not closing the distance completely. Leaving space. Choice. "That whole thing?" Shane added, quieter. "About no one touching what's hers?" A faint, almost crooked edge to his mouth. "That's not what I'm here for."

His gaze held Ilya's, steady. "I'm here because you asked me to stay," he said, genuine, "And you didn't hide. And you didn't run." That was the moment. The real one. Shane shifted again, closing the space this time, his forehead pressing back to Ilya's, their noses brushing lightly. "I don't need a fortress," he murmured. Softer now. "But I'm not walking away from one either." A breath. Warm. Close. Real. Then, quieter still, almost lost between them, "Just don't talk like I'm something you're collecting," Shane added, the edge of earlier hurt still there, but dulled now, honest instead of sharp. "I'm not part of the empire."

Shane paused, then whispered against Ilya's lips, "I'm yours because I choose to be." Ilya let out a sound that was half-sob, half-laugh, the tension finally snapping. He didn't wait for permission this time; he surged forward, his mouth finding Shane's in a kiss that tasted of salt and rain and a desperate, newfound freedom. It wasn't a routine kiss. It was a seal on a contract that neither of them fully understood, but both were finally willing to sign. Ilya couldn't help but smile into the kiss, as Shane's arms came around him more, eventually Shane pulled back, "Do they know about me?"

"They know I have someone, that I call you Jane." Ilya breathed out, evenly, "Lina wants to meet you, my mama wants to meet you." Ilya pressed a kiss to the underside of Shane's jaw, "Rusik wants you to know you will be safe no matter what choices you make, that me telling you is not... it does not require you to stay." That part was whispered, "He did give me permission to tell you, and I don't... my job is hockey, legitimately." Ilya breathed out, hoping to make Shane understand he didn't kill people, sure he was Bratva but he wasn't... he wasn't one of the ones who did the heavy lifting.

Ilya went still. It was a complete and unnerving silence, as if something vital in him had been struck clean through. For a long second, he didn't speak or move. He simply looked at Shane with a raw, searching gaze, as if he were trying to understand how something so precious could be given so freely. When his hand finally rose, the movement was slow and agonizingly careful. He cupped Shane's jaw, his thumb brushing once along the ridge of his cheek in a silent confirmation that they were both still there, grounded in the salt and the rain.

"Ты..." he began, his voice catching on the syllable. He swallowed hard, the muscles of his throat working against the silence before he tried again. "Я люблю тебя." The words fell between them softer than anything he had said all night. They were unpracticed and stripped of his usual defensive armor. They were simply true. This was not the polished declaration of a man who knew how to be loved. It was the quiet confession of a man who was finally letting himself be seen.

Shane blinked, a small and startled breath escaping him as the weight of the Russian words settled into the space between them. "I don't..." he started, then stopped, a slight shake of his head cutting off the uncertainty. "Say it again," he whispered, his voice dropping to a plea.

Ilya did not hesitate. He leaned in, the gravity of the moment pulling them together until he could repeat the vow. "Я люблю тебя," he said, followed by the English translation that sounded broken and new on his tongue. "I love you."

That was the breaking point. Shane's breath hitched, and the guarded expression he had worn like a shield finally shattered, leaving him entirely open. "Yeah," he murmured, a small and disbelieving huff of breath escaping as his hand slid up to settle at the back of Ilya's neck. His fingers curled into the hair there, anchoring himself to the reality of the man in front of him. "Yeah, I got that. I love you too."

Later, the house had gone quiet again. The rain had softened to something distant and steady against the windows. They were tangled together on the couch, the earlier tension burned down into something warmer and heavier. Shane lay half-sprawled across Ilya with one arm draped over his waist, their legs tangled beneath a blanket neither of them remembered grabbing. Ilya's hand rested at the back of Shane's neck. His fingers idly traced the same slow pattern over and over again, as if he could not quite stop touching him. It was as if he did not want to risk letting go.

Time slipped. It went unnoticed. The TV had gone dark at some point and the lights dimmed low. The house was usually so controlled and so precise, but it finally felt lived in. It felt soft and safe. Shane shifted slightly, pressing closer without waking fully, which was something instinctive in the movement. Ilya's grip tightened just a fraction in response. It was protective. It was automatic.

It was well past one when the phone rang. The sound was sharp and jarring, cutting through the quiet like a blade. Ilya's eyes snapped open immediately. His body went rigid beneath Shane, and every ounce of softness he had allowed himself was gone in an instant.

Shane stirred with a quiet groan, blinking against the dim light. He was disoriented and heavy with sleep. "What..." he muttered, the word trailing off into the persistent ringing.

Ilya was already reaching for the phone. He was already alert and already somewhere else. He glanced at the screen, and everything in his expression changed. It was not fear, not exactly, but it was something close to it. "Nikolai," he said, more to himself than to Shane, before he answered. "Да?" <<Yes>>

There was a long pause while the voice on the other end spoke. Then, Ilya's entire posture shifted. He softened completely. "Niko," he said, his voice dropping into a register that was gentler than anything Shane had heard. The Russian flowed easier now. "Что случилось?" <<What's happened?>> Shane pushed himself up slightly, still half-asleep. He watched and he listened. He did not understand the words, but he understood the tone. Something was wrong. Whatever world Ilya had just let him into, it had not gone anywhere. It was right here in the room.

Ilya stayed silent for a moment, his thumb rubbing at his temple as he listened to the frantic, breathless Russian on the other end. "It was the same one?" he asked softly in English, a slip of the tongue that showed how tired he truly was. He sighed, a sound of deep, weary affection. "Breathe, Niko. Just breathe. I am coming."

He moved to stand, but Shane reached out, his hand catching Ilya's forearm. The skin was cool now, the shared heat of the couch dissipating into the room. "He's having a nightmare?" Shane asked, piecing together the broken fragments of the conversation.

Ilya nodded, his eyes already searching for his boots in the shadows. "He does not handle the dark well when he is alone. I have to go to him."

Shane didn't hesitate. The choice felt as instinctive as the love they had confessed hours ago. "I'm coming with you," he said.

Ilya paused, one hand resting on the back of the couch. He looked at Shane, really looked at him, weighing the danger of his world against the sincerity in Shane's eyes. "It is late, Shane. You should sleep."

"I'm not staying here while you're out there dealing with this alone," Shane replied, his voice steady even in the dim light. "I'm coming."

The transition from the warmth of the blankets to the damp, midnight air of Boston required a different kind of armor. Ilya moved with a practiced, lethal efficiency, shedding the softness of the couch for layers that signaled he was back on the clock. He pulled on a dark, heavy hoodie and a waterproof tactical jacket, the fabric rustling sharply in the quiet room. He moved like a man who was used to dressing in the dark, his movements sure and silent.

Shane followed his lead, though his movements were slower, still heavy with the remnants of sleep. He pulled on his own boots, lacing them tight against the chill that always seemed to roll off the Atlantic during a summer storm. He grabbed a windbreaker, the material thin but enough to cut the bite of the rain. They didn't speak as they moved toward the door. The time for words had passed when the phone rang.

They stepped out into the night, and the Boston air hit them immediately. It was thick with the scent of wet asphalt and salt. The rain wasn't the heavy downpour from earlier; it had turned into a fine, persistent mist that clung to everything.

Waiting in the drive was the car, a 2012 Lamborghini Aventador, imported and finished in a matte, predatory grey that seemed to swallow the dim light of the streetlamps. It was a ridiculous piece of machinery for a city of cobblestones and narrow alleys, a screaming testament to the life Ilya lived when he wasn't on the ice. The scissor doors swung upward like the wings of a dark bird, revealing the glowing, high-tech interior. Ilya slid into the driver's seat, his hands settling on the steering wheel with a familiarity that was almost telescopic. He waited for Shane to settle in beside him, the cabin feeling small and pressurized, smelling of expensive leather and cold rain.

"He's at a friend's house in the North End," Ilya said, his voice low as he pressed the ignition. The engine didn't just start; it barked to life, a raw and mechanical roar that vibrated through the carbon fiber frame and settled deep in Shane's chest. Ilya's hands gripped the wheel, his knuckles white against the leather. This was not how he had planned this. He had

imagined a quiet afternoon or a neutral restaurant, not a frantic midnight run to pick up a terrified twelve-year-old.

Shane looked out the window as the wipers cleared a steady path through the mist. He could feel the shift in the air, the way the car seemed to hum with a different kind of urgency. “Then let’s go,” he said, his voice a quiet anchor in the sudden noise of the engine.

Ilya shifted into gear and the car lurched forward, a streak of matte grey disappearing into the wet and shimmering labyrinth of the city. He drove with a cold, focused precision, weaving through the narrow streets as they headed away from the rink. They would get Nikolai from the North End and then they would have to drive him all the way back to the main family compound in Jamaica Plain. It was a long drive through a city that felt too small for the secrets they were carrying.

The reality of it weighed on Ilya. He was taking Shane to the heart of the Bratva, to the place where the *legitimate* hockey player and the family foot soldier became one and the same. It was a threshold he hadn't been ready to cross, but as the lights of East Boston blurred past them, he knew there was no turning back. Nikolai needed him, and for better or worse, Shane was already standing by his side.

The North End was quieter than the rest of the city. It wasn't empty, but it felt closed in. The streets were narrower and the buildings were older. The lights were warmer but dimmer somehow, as if they didn't quite reach the ground. Ilya slowed as they turned down a tight side street, and the engine dropped from a growl to something lower and more controlled. The car slid into place with surgical precision in front of a narrow brick building where the windows were lit on the second floor.

The door was already open. A man stood there, perhaps in his mid-thirties, with dark hair and a steady posture. His eyes were already on the car, waiting. He didn't move forward or wave. He simply watched as Ilya stepped out. “Он наверху,” the man said quietly. <<*He’s upstairs.*>> Ilya nodded once. He was already moving. Inside, the building smelled faintly of old wood and something that had been cooking hours ago. It felt warm and lived in, but it was tense. It was the kind of quiet that wasn't restful; it was the kind that waited. “Ilya—!” The voice broke before the name finished. It was high and shaken, caught somewhere between sleep and fear. Ilya took the stairs two at a time.

The room was small and dim. A lamp had been knocked crooked on the nightstand, and the light spilled unevenly across the walls. Nikolai sat on the bed with his knees pulled tight to his chest. He was breathing too fast, his eyes wide and unfocused as if he hadn't fully come back from wherever the nightmare had taken him. "Ilya—" He didn't get anything else out. Ilya was already there, already pulling him in.

"Я здесь," Ilya said. His voice was low and steady. He cradled the back of Niko's head, pressing him close. "It's okay. You're okay."

Niko clung to him instantly and hard. His fingers twisted into the back of Ilya's shirt as if letting go would allow something worse to happen. "Ilya—he—he was—" Niko tried, but the words broke apart.

"Shh," Ilya murmured, smoothing a hand down his back. "It's just a dream. Ты в безопасности." You're safe.

Niko shook his head against him, desperate. "No—no, it was—"

"I know," Ilya said. He was quiet and certain. "I know."

Shane stayed in the doorway. He didn't step in right away or interrupt; he just watched. Everything Ilya had said earlier about Lina, about protection, and about safety finally clicked into place. It had nothing to do with power. This was why. Niko's breathing didn't slow enough, and his grip only tightened. "I don't want to stay here," he whispered, the words barely there. "Ilya, please."

That did it. Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him, one hand still firm at the back of his neck. "You don't have to," he said. There was no hesitation and no discussion. "We go home." Niko nodded immediately, too fast, still shaking and not quite present. Ilya stood, but Niko didn't let go. He stayed pressed to him with his arms locked tight and his face buried against Ilya's shoulder. Ilya didn't push him off or tell him to stand on his own. He simply adjusted, lifted him slightly, and carried the weight without comment.

By the time they reached the car, Niko was still clinging, his breathing still uneven. Ilya opened the passenger side door and stopped. He looked down at the boy, then at the seat, and then back. It wasn't going to work. "Ilya," Niko said, panic creeping back into the edges of his voice. "Don't—"

"I'm not," Ilya said immediately. He turned to Shane. "Drive."

Shane blinked once, processing the shift, and then he moved. There was no hesitation. He went around the car and into the driver's seat. Ilya slid into the passenger side, but it wasn't controlled or contained like before. Niko stayed half in his lap, twisted toward him with his arms locked and one hand fisted in Ilya's shirt. Ilya didn't try to correct it. He pulled him closer, one arm wrapped securely around his back and the other braced against the door. "Я здесь," he murmured again. "I'm here."

Shane shut the door. The car felt different this time. It wasn't sharp or precise; it was full and crowded and human. He glanced over once at Ilya and at the kid pressed into him. He saw the way Ilya had shifted without thinking. "Where am I going?" Shane asked.

Ilya didn't look up. "Home," he said. Then, he was more specific. "Jamaica Plain."

Shane nodded and turned the key, quickly looking for *home* in the GPS, relieved to find it. The engine roared again, but this time it didn't feel like power. It felt like urgency. The transition from the salt-slicked streets of the North End to the iron-clad perimeter of Jamaica Plain was a blur of neon and grey mist. With Shane driving, the Aventador didn't growl; it purred, a low, controlled vibration that seemed to match the quiet tension in the cabin. Shane drove with a reserved, steady hand, a sharp contrast to the car's aggressive architecture, navigating the narrow streets of the compound with careful precision.

Niko was a heavy weight in Ilya's arms, his twelve-year-old frame trembling against Ilya's chest. Ilya held him tight, his hand buried in the boy's damp hair, whispering low, rhythmic Russian that Shane couldn't understand but recognized as a lifeline. The *I love you* from earlier felt like a distant memory, replaced by a fierce, protective urgency.

As the gates of the Jamaica Plain compound slid open with a heavy, hydraulic hiss, the sheer scale of the property began to reveal itself. The house rose out of the trees, a sprawling silhouette of grey cedar and stone, ten bedrooms wrapped in a ten-million-dollar fortress of

old-money elegance and 2012 state-of-the-art security, "Slow down here," Ilya murmured, his eyes never leaving Niko's pale face.

Shane nodded, easing the car up the long gravel drive, the tires crunching softly against the stones. He killed the engine, and the silence that followed was absolute. He looked out at the facade, noticing the way the mature landscaping, the spruces and heavy rhododendrons, seemed strategically placed to mask the glint of lens and sensor. The stone turret on the left side of the house felt less like an architectural flourish and more like a watchtower.

They moved toward the main entrance, Ilya carrying Niko, whose head was tucked into the crook of his neck. Their boots were heavy on the stone steps. The unique glass of the double doors was dark, reflecting the three of them back in the dim light of the lanterns. Ilya, shifting Niko slightly, placed his free palm against a subtle plate near the handle, and with a series of muffled clicks, the seal broke. Inside, the house felt vast and deceptively warm. The rich wood paneling of the entryway and the ornate red carpet on the stairs suggested a life of comfort, but Shane could see the seams where the 2012 upgrades had been integrated. There were no visible wires, but the air felt pressurized, the silence too thick to be natural.

"Rusik may already be in the command center," Ilya whispered. He looked at Shane, his expression a complicated mix of exhaustion and resolve. "Go to the sunroom. It is the most secure glass in the house. I must take him down to the lower level." Shane nodded, while Ilya carried Niko toward the lower levels, Shane found himself alone in the quiet, expansive heart of the compound. The house was a labyrinth of luxury, but every high-end finish seemed to serve a dual purpose of comfort and concealment.

He moved toward the sunroom, his footsteps muffled by the heavy rugs. It was less of a room and more of a private sanctuary. A heated pool dominated the space, the water dark and still, reflecting the lush green of the tropical plants that lined the perimeter. A small, man-made waterfall trickled over smooth stones, the sound designed to mask any noise from the outside world. To the side, a whirlpool spa steamed slightly in the cool night air, tucked away behind a screen of broad-leaved palms. It was a piece of the tropics transplanted into a Boston fortress.

Shane stepped back into the main hall, passing the entrance to the game room. Through the open door, he could see the silhouette of a professional-grade pool table under a low-slung lamp. Beyond it sat a full sauna and a sprawling bath, the kind of space meant for recovery after a long day of *work*. It was all so precise, so deliberate. Even the upper floors spoke of a life prepared for any contingency. He knew the third floor housed an entire guest suite, two bedrooms, a full kitchen, and a private dining area, that led out onto a secluded deck. It was a

house within a house, a place where someone could disappear for weeks without ever needing to leave (only because Ilya had mentioned it once).

He looked up the grand staircase, thinking of the primary suite where Ilya usually stayed when he was here. It was a space of spa-style baths and a massive deck topped with a cedar pergola, overlooking the grounds. Those grounds, even in the rain, felt like an extension of the interior. The indoor-outdoor flow was seamless, with multiple living spaces carved into the landscaping, though Shane now realized every stone bench and garden path likely held a sensor or a camera. The silence of the house was heavy, punctuated only by the distant hum of the 2012-era security servers. Shane leaned against the doorframe of the sunroom, watching the mist cling to the glass. This was the *main family compound* Ilya had spoken of. It wasn't just a home; it was a statement of intent. It was beautiful, expensive, and utterly impenetrable.

From the floorboards beneath him, he felt a faint vibration. The mechanical roar of the house's hidden systems adjusting. He was in the belly of the beast now, and as he looked at the dark water of the pool, he realized that *home* for Ilya meant a place where you never had to stop looking over your shoulder.

The sunroom was an anomaly within the hardened shell of the compound. While the rest of the house felt clinically precise, this space breathed with a humid, tropical life that defied the cool Boston mist outside. A heated lap pool, tiled in deep cobalt blue, was sunk into the polished green marble floor. To the side, a fieldstone waterfall trickled steadily, the sound mixing with the distant hum of the advanced filtration and environment controls that were cutting-edge for 2012. Giant palms and broad-leaved philodendrons grew thick and lush in recessed planters, casting heavy, prehistoric shadows across the water.

Shane stood near the cobalt pool, tracing the edge of the water with his gaze, feeling completely out of place in his simple rain gear. The house was too big, too expensive, and too fortified to be real. From deeper within the compound, past the billiard room and the hidden lower-level complex, he heard a door thud shut with a heavy, metallic resonance that signaled the security system had sealed a high-risk zone.

"It's a complete illusion, isn't it?"

The voice didn't startle him, but the person it belonged to did. Shane turned to find a woman leaning against the doorframe leading back into the main Great Room. He froze, his mind

immediately jumping to the name Ilya had mentioned. Lina.

He was struck instantly by her size. She was tiny, barely five feet tall, and looked almost fragile against the massive, dark wood architecture of the house. But the impression of fragility vanished the moment he met her eyes. She possessed a dangerous, under-the-surface precision that made her feel twice as large as the room itself. She wore a dark, oversized men's silk shirt, the sleeves rolled up, and she was currently occupied with a deck of cards, her fingers moving with a mechanical, restless speed that suggested she didn't like her hands being idle.

She didn't move forward. She simply watched him, her blonde hair falling over her shoulder, her expression a mix of cool assessment and weary amusement. She looked like someone who had been up for days and was still the most dangerous person in the room.

"The tropical illusion," she continued, gesturing vaguely with the cards toward the waterfall. "The warmth, the humidity. It's supposed to make people forget where they are. That they're trapped in a fortress in Jamaica Plain." Her eyes locked on Shane, sharp and unblinking. "But you look like you understand exactly how thick the glass is."

Shane shifted, his throat dry. He didn't know whether to step forward or stay put. The power dynamic in the room had shifted the second she spoke, and he felt the weight of her scrutiny like a physical pressure.

A small, dry smile touched her lips, though it didn't reach her eyes. She began to bridge the distance, her movements light and silent on the marble. She stopped a few feet away, looking up at him, way up, with a tilt of her head that was more predatory than friendly.

"Ilya said you were resourceful. But you are far more reserved than I anticipated." She fanned the cards out in a perfect arc, then snapped them shut. "You must be Jane." The silence in the sunroom stretched, thick and humid, broken only by the rhythmic snick-snick-snick of the cards in Lina's hands. She didn't look away from Shane. Her gaze was clinical, the kind of stare that didn't just see a person, but dismantled them into parts: threats, assets, or obstacles. "Ilyushenka has never brought anyone home," she said, her voice dropping into a conversational tone that felt entirely artificial. "So this is a rare treat, yes?"

Shane didn't answer immediately. He couldn't shake the feeling that any word he chose would be the wrong one, a loose thread she could pull until he unraveled. He looked at the tiny woman, her oversized silk shirt making her look like a child playing at being a soldier, though the way she handled the cards told a completely different story, "I'm Jane," he said finally. His voice was raspy, but he held her gaze. It felt like a surrender and a challenge all at once. If this was the game they were playing, he was stepping onto the board.

Lina's lips quirked. She performed a one-handed flourish with the deck, the cards blurring into a perfect waterfall. "I know. But names are just placeholders in this house until someone earns a real one. You're the one he brought home during a crisis. That says more than a driver's license ever could." She began to move, a slow, predatory circle that took her toward the edge of the cobalt pool. Before she could speak again, the heavy atmosphere of the room shifted.

The sound of heels on the green marble was different from Lina's silent tread. It was purposeful, steady, and carried the weight of a different kind of authority. Irina appeared from the hallway, her presence cutting through the humidity like a winter breeze. She was dressed for the hour in a long, elegant robe over silk, her hair pulled back, but she didn't look like a woman who had just been woken up. She looked like the heart of the fortress. Shane realized in a shuddering way that this woman must be Ilya's mother. Irina didn't stop at first. She was heading toward the lower-level stairs, her mind clearly on her sons. But as she passed the wide entrance to the sunroom, she caught sight of Shane.

Then she stopped, the silence changed. If Lina's scrutiny was a blade, Irina's was a lens. She looked at Shane, really looked at him, with an intensity that felt maternal and terrifying all at once. She noted the dampness of his jacket, the way he stood, and the look in his eyes that mirrored the exhaustion of the night. She didn't ask who he was. She didn't need to. After a long, agonizingly slow moment, Irina let out a soft, low hum. It wasn't a sound of disapproval, nor was it a welcome. It was simply a recognition. A filing away of a new variable.

Without a word, she turned and continued toward the stairs, the sound of her footsteps fading into the depths of the house. Lina watched her mother disappear, then turned back to Shane, her grin sharpening. "That," Lina whispered, "was the high-court verdict. You're lucky. She didn't tell me to throw you in the pool." Lina leaned back against the cool glass of the sunroom, her eyes never leaving Shane's. The cards in her hands continued their restless, rhythmic dance. "You want to know what the hum meant?" she asked, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper that didn't feel friendly. "In this house, silence is the ultimate judgment. If my mother had seen a threat, she would have spoken. If she had seen a distraction, she would have sighed. But a hum? That is a Rozanova-Dragunov 'maybe.'"

Shane shifted his weight, his damp boots squeaking slightly on the green marble. "A maybe," he repeated.

"It means you aren't an enemy yet, but you're also not quite a guest," Lina explained. She stepped closer, her five-foot frame doing nothing to diminish the space she took up. "You're a variable she's decided to let run. She saw how you looked at the house. You didn't look at the art or the marble. You looked at the exits. You looked at the cameras."

Shane didn't deny it. "Hard not to. The place is a fortress."

"It has to be," Lina said, her expression flickering into something somber before the mask slid back into place. "But my mother noticed something else. She noticed that you were the one who brought him home. Not just Ilya, but Nikolai too. You were the one holding the wheel when the world was falling apart."

She stopped her card-shuffling, the deck snapping together with a sound like a small gunshot. "My verdict is simpler than hers. I'm still deciding if you're the one who finally makes my brother stop looking for a fight, or the one who gives him a reason to start a bigger one."

Shane looked toward the dark water of the pool, the waterfall trickling in the background. "I'm just the guy who drove the car, Lina."

"No one is just anything in this family," she countered. She reached out, her tiny hand patting his arm in a gesture that felt more like a brand than a comfort. "You're Jane now. And Jane is currently the only person in this house who isn't a Dragunov. That makes you either the safest person here or the most dangerous. I'm leaning toward dangerous. Ilya only *just* told you about us, that was tonight, yes?" Shane nodded his head, "You have taken a leap of faith, a dangerous one." With that she patted his shirt, "Come."

Downstairs, the atmosphere was far less cerebral. The blue-white glow of the 2012-era monitors cast sharp shadows across Irina's face as she watched the exchange in the sunroom

through a high-definition lens. "She is testing him," Irina murmured in Russian, softly as Ruslan continued to search the cameras for any signs of Andrei, that was who Niko dreamed about, Andrei avenging Grigori and coming for them all, even if the little one didn't know the full weight of the nightmares, they lingered so.

Ilya didn't look at the screen. He couldn't. His entire world was narrowed down to the weight of Nikolai in his lap. The boy had finally fallen into a shallow, fitful sleep, his forehead pressed against Ilya's collarbone. "Lina tests everyone. It is how she breathes."

"She is right about one thing," Irina said, her eyes softening as she looked at her eldest son. "He did not flinch when he saw the gate. He did not ask questions when you handed him the keys to a car that costs more than a house. He just drove."

Ilya closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the cold metal of the server rack. The hum of the cooling fans was a constant, grounding drone. "He's different, Mama. He doesn't want anything from us."

"Everyone wants something, Ilyushenka," Irina said, though there was no malice in it. She reached down, gently adjusting the blanket around Nikolai's shoulders. "But perhaps what he wants is simply to be the one who keeps you steady. If that is true, then the verdict is correct. He is a variable we keep."

Irina didn't look away from the screens. The cool, flickering light of the monitors emphasized the sharpness of her features, a map of a life spent calculating risks. "You say he wants nothing," she said, her voice dropping into that low, melodic Russian that carried the weight of a command. "But he is a hockey player. A professional. They are built on wanting. They want the win, the contract, the glory. What does he see when he looks at you, Ilyushenka? Does he see a teammate? Or does he see the Rozanov name?"

Ilya adjusted his hold on Nikolai, the boy's head shifting against his shoulder. "He sees me," Ilya said, and for the first time all night, his voice wasn't just tired. It was fierce. "He doesn't care about the name. Half the time, I think he wishes I were someone else entirely. Someone who didn't come with all of... this." He gestured vaguely at the server racks and the security feeds.

Irina was silent for a long beat, her gaze drifting back to the sunroom where Shane was standing his ground against Lina's restless energy. "Then he is a danger to you in a different way," she murmured. "But if he keeps you steady, I will not interfere. Not yet." Ilya didn't wait for a more formal blessing. He stood up slowly, his muscles protesting the sudden shift in weight as he kept Nikolai cradled against him. The boy let out a soft, sleepy mumble but didn't wake, his fingers remaining curled into the fabric of Ilya's jacket.

"I'm taking him up," Ilya said.

Irina watched them go. She waited until the heavy, reinforced door of the command center clicked shut behind them before she leaned forward, her fingers flying across the keyboard of the 2012 console. She pulled up the high-resolution logs from the front gate, zooming in on the moment the Lamborghini had arrived. She watched Shane's hands on the wheel: steady, no tremors, no hesitation, and finally, she let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

Upstairs, the house felt even larger in the dark. Ilya carried Nikolai past the game room and the marble halls, his footsteps silent on the thick rugs. He reached Niko's bedroom, a space that was a strange mix of typical teenager interests and the high-security reality of their lives. He laid the boy down on the bed, pulling the heavy duvet over him. Nikolai stirred, his eyes fluttering open for a brief, disoriented second. "Ilya?"

"Go to sleep, Niko," Ilya whispered, his hand resting on the boy's forehead. "You're at the house. Mama is here. Lina is here. Ruskia is here. I'm here. You're safe." The boy drifted back almost instantly, the tension finally draining out of his small frame. Ilya stayed there for a moment in the dark, listening to the steady rhythm of his brother's breathing. The urgency of the night was over, leaving only the cold reality of what came next.

Ilya moved through the shadows of the hallway, his steps silent on the heavy rugs. He had expected to find Shane cornered, perhaps struggling under the weight of Lina's invasive questions or her silent, predatory stares. Instead, as he reached the wide entrance of the sunroom, the sound that met him wasn't an interrogation. It was the rhythmic, tactile clack of clay chips hitting a marble tabletop.

They were sitting at a small, ornate wood table near the edge of the pool. Lina had apparently produced a professional-grade set of chips from somewhere in the game room, and the scene was jarring: the five-foot Dragunov princess in her oversized silk shirt, and the exhausted, damp hockey player, locked in a game of high-stakes poker.

Lina didn't look up as Ilya approached, but she didn't have to. "He's a terrible liar, Ilyushenka," she said, her voice bright with a sudden, genuine amusement. "His eyes do this little twitch when he's holding a pair. It's adorable."

Shane looked up at Ilya, and the relief in his expression was palpable, though he didn't fold his hand. He looked like he'd been through a war and then got stuck in a math final he hadn't studied for. "She's been taking my money for twenty minutes. I didn't even know we were playing for money."

"In this house, you are always playing for something," Lina countered, tossing a blue chip into the center. "I'll see your 'I'm just the driver' and raise you 'I actually like the monster holding the boy upstairs.'"

Ilya stepped into the light of the sunroom, the tension in his shoulders finally beginning to uncoil. He stood behind Shane, placing a hand on the back of his chair, a gesture of both support and territoriality. "Lina, leave him alone. He's had a long night."

"He's doing fine," Lina said, finally folding her cards with a flourish. She leaned back, her small frame swallowed by the chair, and looked between the two of them. The deck of cards sat dormant on the table. "He's steady. And he doesn't flinch when I talk about the glass. I like him. He can stay for breakfast."

Ilya looked down at Shane, his thumb tracing a small circle on the wood of the chair. "Niko is asleep. Ma is with him. The house is sealed." He met Shane's eyes, his voice dropping to a private, grounded frequency. "You should sleep, too. I'll show you to a room. It's quiet. No cameras inside the rooms."

Shane stood up, his joints popping after the long drive and the tense sit-down. He looked at the chips on the table, then at Lina, who was already shuffling the deck again with that mechanical, restless speed. "Do I owe you?"

Lina gave him a sharp, feline grin. "Consider it a down payment on the next crisis. You're Jane now, remember? Jane always pays his debts." Shane wasn't sure if he liked that sentiment, or not, but he nodded his head in slow agreement.

Ilya didn't wait for Shane to answer. He didn't have to. The way Shane was leaning into the back of the chair, his shoulders dropping an inch just by having Ilya near, was answer enough.

"Lina, the bank is closed," Ilya said, his voice firm but no longer sharp.

Lina waved a dismissive hand, her focus already back on the deck of cards, though the corners of her mouth remained upturned. "Whatever. I already have his soul as collateral. Go. Sleep. You both look like ghosts." Lina stood, Ilya ducked down to kiss her cheek as she picked up her cards, she gave Shane a warm look then ducked out of the room.

Ilya reached down, his fingers brushing against the back of Shane's neck, a touch that was both a guide and a grounding wire, and led him out of the tropical warmth of the sunroom. They moved through the quiet house, past the Great Room where the embers in the fireplace were nothing but grey ash, and up the grand staircase. They didn't stop at the third floor. Ilya led him to the primary suite. As the heavy wood door clicked shut behind them, the atmosphere changed instantly. The security hum of the house was still there, but it felt distant, muffled by the thick rugs and the expansive, spa-style layout of the room. The air smelled of cedar and the faint, crisp scent of the rain clinging to their clothes.

"You're not on the third floor," Shane noted, his voice low. He looked around the room, taking in the large deck with its dark pergola visible through the glass, and the open door to the master bath that looked more like a high-end retreat than a bathroom.

"No," Ilya said. He stepped close, his hands finally coming up to rest on Shane's waist, pulling him in until their foreheads touched. The professional mask, the dual weight of both the Rozanov and Dragunov names, the protective elder brother, it all seemed to shed off him in the dark. "I'm not letting you stay in a guest room. Not tonight."

Shane let out a long, shuddering breath, his hands coming up to grip Ilya's forearms. "Your mom... she's terrifying, Ilya. And your sister is..."

"A menace," Ilya finished for him, a small, tired chuckle vibrating in his chest. "But you handled them. Better than anyone else I've ever seen." He pulled Shane toward the bed, the

linens crisp and cool. "The shower is yours. There are clothes in the dressing room, they'll be big on you, but they're soft. Then we sleep. No more talk of 'Jane' or verdicts or North End nightmares."

Shane looked at him, the exhaustion finally winning the fight behind his eyes. "You're sure? About me being *here*? In this room?"

Ilya leaned in, pressing a slow, lingering kiss to Shane's temple. "This is the only room in the world where I can hear myself think, Shane. And right now, all I'm thinking is that you're the reason my brother is safe." He stepped back, gesturing toward the spa-bath. "Go. Wash the rain off."

The spa-style bathroom was a blur of steam and white marble. When Shane finally emerged, the heat had scrubbed the North End's chill from his skin, but his mind was still heavy with the night's architecture: the gates, the silent monitors, and the tiny woman with the cards. He was wearing a pair of Ilya's joggers that he'd had to tie tight at the waist and a soft, grey t-shirt that smelled faintly of the cedar in the dressing room.

Ilya was already in bed, propped up against the headboard. He had changed into simple black sleep pants, his chest bare, revealing the sharp, athletic lines of a man who spent his life on the ice. The bedside lamp was dimmed to a warm amber glow, casting long shadows across the room and highlighting the sprawling deck outside where the pergola stood like a silent skeleton against the mist.

As Shane approached, Ilya reached out, his hand wrapping around Shane's wrist and pulling him gently onto the mattress, "You're still thinking," Ilya murmured, his voice a low vibration in the quiet suite.

"Hard not to," Shane admitted, sliding under the heavy duvet. The linens were crisp, expensive, and smelled of home, not the temporary home of a hotel or a locker room, but something permanent. "Your family... they don't exactly do things halfway, do they?"

Ilya turned on his side, bracing himself on one elbow. He reached out with his free hand, his thumb tracing the line of Shane's jaw, lingering on the pulse point that was finally, mercifully, slowing down. "We are Rozanovs and Dragunovs. We protect what is ours. My mother, Lina... they were just making sure I hadn't brought a wolf into the nursery."

"And?" Shane asked, his eyes searching Ilya's. "What did they decide?"

"They decided you're the one who keeps the wolf at bay," Ilya whispered.

He leaned in, his lips meeting Shane's in a kiss that was slow and devoid of the night's urgency. It wasn't about the Bratva or the North End or the hockey season. It was just the two of them in a room that felt, for the first time, like it was sealed against the rest of the world. Shane shifted closer, his head finding the hollow of Ilya's shoulder. He could hear the steady, rhythmic beat of Ilya's heart, a much more comforting sound than the hum of the security servers downstairs. Ilya's arm draped over him, a heavy, protective weight that anchored him to the bed.

"Go to sleep, Jane," Ilya said softly, using the name with a trace of a smile.

"Shane," he corrected sleepily, closing his eyes, "Or Hollander, if you're being an asshole."

"Tonight, you are whoever you need to be to feel safe," Ilya murmured, pressing a final kiss to the top of his head. "But in this room, you are just mine." Outside, the Boston rain continued to lash against the reinforced glass, but inside the primary suite, the silence was finally, truly restful.

The breakfast table at the Rozanov-Dragunov compound was a masterclass in controlled chaos. The consolidation of the two syndicates hadn't just merged bank accounts and territories; it had fused two bloodlines into a single, formidable wall of family. Ruslan (age 30), affectionately called Rusik by the family and Lina (real name: Anzhelina, 23) sat near the center, the architects of this unified front. While the world saw them as the dual heads of a massive criminal enterprise, here, they were just parents and siblings. Rusik was currently refereeing a dispute between the six year old twins, Samvel and Sabina, while Lina was expertly flipping the deck of cards from the night before, her eyes flicking toward Shane with a sharp, morning-after glint. Nearby, Rusik's youngest, three year old Dmitriy was busy trying to feed a piece of toast to the floor.

The table was a sprawling map of the family's complex branches, Irina, probably in her late thirties if Shane were guessing, and Filipp who didn't look a day over fifty, sat together, the silent pillars of the house. Filipp's hand rested on the back of Irina's chair, a quiet anchor as she watched their children, Georgi, who had told Shane he was five, twice that morning, and three year old Nadia, negotiated over pieces of fruit. Misha, at nine, was seated next to Niko, the two of them speaking in low tones. Niko looked remarkably better in the daylight, his eyes clear, though he stayed within arm's reach of Ilya. Sergei Vetrov was the picture of a man who never truly slept. He was already in his Bears track jacket, a stark reminder that while he was family security, he was also the man who would be standing behind the home bench tonight. His daughter, Svetlana who was the same age as both Shane and Ilya, sat beside him, her focus on her phone, likely coordinating the logistics that kept both the house and the team running.

Ilya sat with a heavy, calm presence, his broad shoulders draped in a hoodie that just said Boston across the chest. He knew that in a few hours, he'd be pulling on the black and gold jersey with **ROZANOV** stitched across the back. He kept the Dragunov side of his heritage for the compound and the business; on the ice, he was the pure, focused legacy of his father.

"First line against first line," Rusik noted, finally looking up from his coffee. He looked at Shane, then at Ilya. "The Montreal media is calling it the 'Battle of the Centers.' They don't know the half of it."

"They don't need to know," Ilya said, his voice level. He reached for a piece of rye bread, his movements efficient. "Shane is the best playmaker the Metros have had in a decade. If we don't shut him down in the first period, it's going to be a long night."

Shane felt the weight of the room's attention. It wasn't just a hockey conversation; it was a Dragunov-Rozanov evaluation. "I've played in the Garden before," Shane said, his voice steady despite the sea of powerful faces. "But I've never had the Assistant Coach staring at me across a breakfast table before the puck drop."

Sergei didn't look up from his tablet, but his voice was like gravel. "I am not looking at you as a guest right now, Jane. I am looking at your entry speed on the power play. You lean too far left when you're looking for the cross-ice pass."

"Sergei, let the man eat his breakfast," Irina chided softly, though her eyes were twinkling with a rare bit of humor.

Lina leaned in, her cards snapping shut. "Don't listen to him. Just make sure you don't bruise Ilya's face too much. He has a photo shoot for the team calendar on Monday, and I'd hate for him to look like he actually lost a fight."

The morning was a sensory overload for Shane. As a 21-year-old only child, his baseline for *family breakfast* was a quiet kitchen in a suburban home, dominated by his mother, Yuna, hovering over his caloric intake with a clipboard while his dad, David, leaned back and reminisced about his glory days playing D1 college puck. In the Hollander household, the air was thick with expectation and specific brand management. Here, in the Rozanov-Dragunov compound, the air was thick with everything.

Between the three-year-olds throwing toast and the legendary Soviet Minister of Interior dissecting his power-play entry, Shane felt like he was watching a movie he hadn't been cast in.

Svetlana, who had been relatively quiet while tracking team logistics on her phone, suddenly leaned across the table. She had the same sharp, calculating eyes as her father, but they were currently dancing with a very specific, modern brand of mischief, "Ilya says the Montreal media is obsessed with you this morning, Shane," she said, her voice cutting through the chatter of the younger children. "They're calling you the 'Golden Boy of the North.' My social feeds are a disaster."

Shane managed a small, tired smile. "My mother probably hired a PR firm to flood the tags. She doesn't believe in organic growth."

Svetlana laughed, a bright sound that made Sergei glance up from his tablet. "Tell you what. I have a very expensive, very authentic Hollander jersey in my closet, the away white. If you agree to take one selfie with me before warmups, just one, for the aesthetic, I'll wear it tonight. Right behind the home bench. I'll make sure the cameras catch me cheering for the visitor's first-line center."

Ilya narrowed his eyes, though there was no real heat in it. "Svetlana, you're an employee of the Boston Bears. That's treason."

"It's not treason, it's engagement," Svetlana countered with a wink at Shane. "Besides, watching you try to play focused while your sister-figure is wearing your boyfriend's jersey in the front row? That's just good entertainment."

Lina cackled, tossing a grape at Ilya. "She's got you there, Ilyushenka. It's a psychological play."

Shane looked at Ilya, then back to Svetlana. Compared to his mother's high-pressure "mom-ager" tactics, this felt... fun. "One selfie," Shane agreed. "But if your dad benches Ilya because of it, I'm not taking the blame."

Sergei finally looked Shane dead in the eye, his expression unreadable. "If I bench him, it will be because he missed a defensive assignment, not because of a shirt." He paused, then added in a low growl, "But make sure you're smiling in the photo. My daughter doesn't post blurry pictures."

The transition from the roar of a ten-person breakfast to the sudden silence of the upstairs hallway felt like a physical weight lifting. Ilya led Shane away from the clatter of plates and the high-pitched negotiations of the toddlers, moving toward the quiet seclusion of the primary suite one last time before the day officially claimed them.

Ilya closed the heavy bedroom door, cutting off the sound of Lina laughing at something Misha had said. He didn't turn on the lights; the morning sun was filtered through the mist outside, casting a soft, grey-blue glow over the room.

He turned to Shane, his hands sliding into the pockets of his hoodie. For a moment, he just looked at him—really looked at him. The dampness from the night before was gone, replaced by the clean, borrowed scent of the house, but the exhaustion still lingered in the faint shadows under Shane's eyes.

"Lina is bringing the SUV around to the side gate," Ilya said, his voice low and private. "She'll drop you at the Ritz. It's better if the press doesn't see a Montreal Metro exiting a Dragunov-Rozanov stronghold six hours before puck drop. My mother already cleared the security loops."

Shane nodded, leaning back against the doorframe. The reality of their lives, the "mom-ager" expectations of Yuna Hollander and the fortress-mentality of the Rozanov-Dragunovs, felt like two separate storms they were trying to navigate in a very small boat. "The Ritz. Back to the 'Golden Boy' routine."

Ilya stepped into his space, closing the gap until he could feel the heat radiating off Shane. He reached out, his fingers hooking into the collar of Shane's borrowed shirt, pulling him just an inch closer, "Tonight, when you're standing across from me at the dot," Ilya murmured, his eyes searching Shane's, "remember that I am the one who carried my brother because you held the wheel. The jersey I'm wearing says Rozanov, but the man inside it is the one who was in this bed with you three hours ago."

Shane reached up, his hand covering Ilya's on his chest. "I know. But I'm still winning that first face-off, Ilya. Sergei told me I lean too far left, so now I'm going to lean right just to spite him."

Ilya let out a short, breathy laugh, his forehead dropping to rest against Shane's. "Good. If you made it easy, I wouldn't want you." He paused, his expression sobered by the lingering tension of the night. "Thank you. For last night. For not asking questions when the world got dark."

"I told you," Shane whispered, his thumb tracing the line of Ilya's jaw. "I'm Jane. I'm just the driver."

"No," Ilya corrected, his voice a fierce, low rumble. "You are Shane Hollander. And tonight, you are the only person on that ice I'm actually afraid of." He pressed a final, lingering kiss to Shane's mouth, one that tasted of coffee and promise, before stepping back. The moment of stillness was over. The game, the families, and the city were waiting, "Go," Ilya said, his mask beginning to slide back into place, the sharp focus of the first-line center returning to his eyes. "Lina is waiting. And don't forget the selfie for Svetlana. I'd hate for her to have to tell my mother you were 'difficult.'"

Shane made his way down, the cold of leaving Ilya settling like dread in his stomach. Lina at least had a sensible if not very blacked-out SUV idling on the curb. The drive to the Ritz was as efficient as everything else in the Rozanov-Dragunov world. Lina handled the armored SUV with a relaxed, one-handed grip, her eyes constantly checking the mirrors, not for traffic, but for tails.

"You look like you're bracing for an execution," Lina said, her voice cutting through the quiet hum of the engine. She glanced at Shane, a small, knowing smirk playing on her lips. "Is it the game, or the 'mom-ager'?"

Shane leaned his head against the cool glass of the window. "Both. My mother has a way of making a regular season game feel like a Senate hearing."

Lina reached into the center console, pulled out a loose cigarette, but didn't light it. She just tapped it against the leather. "Ilya likes you because you're a tether. Most people try to fly with him, or they try to cage him. You just... hold the line. It's a good quality. Very rare in our circles." She pulled the SUV to a smooth stop a block away from the Ritz, tucked into a service alley that stayed out of the main security cameras. "Don't let the Golden Boy routine swallow you whole, Shane. My brother finally found something he doesn't want to break. Try to stay in one piece."

Shane climbed out, the morning air finally feeling crisp instead of heavy. "Thanks for the lift, Lina. And the cards."

"Next time, we play for real stakes," she called out with a wink before the tinted glass slid up, and the SUV vanished into the Boston traffic.

The lobby was a blur of high-end luggage and hushed conversations, but the moment Shane reached the elevators on his floor, the peace shattered. Hayden, his best friend and the Metros' hard-hitting winger, was pacing the hallway like a caged animal, "Oh, thank God," Hayden hissed the second he saw Shane. He didn't even wait for Shane to get close before he was shoving a buzzing iPhone into his hand. "Your mom has been calling me nonstop, dude! Literally every ten minutes for the last four hours."

Shane took the phone, the screen lighting up with 14 Missed Calls: Mom, "When you left to see 'Lily' last night, you left your phone on the nightstand, man," Hayden continued, his voice rising in a mix of panic and confusion. "Where the hell have you been? Coach was asking at the early meal, and I had to tell him you were doing some 'focused visualization' in the dark. I can only lie for you so much, Hollander!"

Shane looked at the phone, then at Hayden's frantic face. The contrast between the lethal, quiet world of the Dragunovs and the high-strung, public-facing panic of the Metros was jarring. To Hayden, "Lily" was just some girl Shane was seeing on the side—a secret to keep from Yuna, "I... I got caught up," Shane said, his voice sounding raspier than he intended. "The weather was bad. I stayed over."

"Stayed over?" Hayden blinked, his eyes widening. "With Lily? Dude, is it that serious? You look like you haven't slept in a week, and we have the Bears in six hours. If you're off your game because of some girl, Yuna is going to have my head on a platter along with yours."

Shane pushed past him into the room, tossing the phone onto the bed. "I'm not off my game, Hayden. If anything, I'm more awake than I've ever been."

"Yeah, well, tell that to the twenty texts from your mother asking if you've had your electrolyte 'pre-load' yet," Hayden muttered, following him in. "Call her. Before she calls the National Guard."

Shane took a breath, bracing himself as if he were about to take a cross-check to the ribs, and hit the callback button. The phone didn't even have time to ring once.

"Shane! Finally. Do you have any idea what time it is?" Yuna's voice crackled through the speaker, sharp and vibrating with a frantic, maternal energy that felt like a localized power surge. "Hayden said you were 'visualizing,' but I called the front desk and they said you hadn't ordered your pre-game amino-acid blend. I was ten seconds away from calling the team's security liaison."

Shane sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing his face. The opulent quiet of the Dragunov suite felt like a dream from another life. "I'm fine, Mom. I went for a drive. I needed some air away from the hotel."

"A drive? In that weather? Shane, your father and I didn't invest in this season for you to catch a cold or get into a fender-bender before the biggest game of the quarter," Yuna moved at a mile a minute, the sound of papers shuffling in the background. "The Montreal Gazette has a full-page spread on the matchup today. 'Hollander vs. Rozanov.' It's the narrative of the

year. I've already spoken to your agent—if you out-perform him tonight, we're looking at that luxury watch endorsement by Monday."

Shane closed his eyes, leaning his head back. "It's just a game, Mom. One of eighty-two."

"It is never just a game when you're playing a Rozanov," Yuna countered, her tone shifting into 'manager' mode. "That family... they're thuggish. Brilliant, yes, but dangerous. I don't like you being in the same zip code as those people, let alone on the same ice. They play dirty, Shane. They don't have your discipline. They don't have your brand."

The irony was so thick Shane almost choked on it. He thought of Irina's soft hum, Niko's sleeping face, and the way Ilya had held him in the dark. *Thuggish*. "Ilya Rozanov is the most disciplined center in the league," Shane said, his voice a little too firm.

There was a beat of silence on the other end. "I expect you to be better," Yuna said, her voice dropping that frantic edge for something colder. "David is already at the arena. He's going to meet you at the tunnel for a quick talk. Drink your aminos, Shane. And for heaven's sake, stay away from the boards. Don't let them bait you into a fight."

"I'll see you after the game, Mom," Shane said, hanging up before she could start on his heart-rate recovery stats.

He looked at Hayden, who was hovering by the minibar, looking incredibly uncomfortable. "She's already at the Garden, isn't she?"

"Probably scouting the exits," Hayden muttered. "Dude, seriously. You okay? You've got this look on your face like you're about to defect to Russia."

Shane stood up, reaching for his team tracksuit. "Not Russia, Hayden. Just... somewhere else."

Yuna Hollander was power-walking toward the VIP entrance, her eyes glued to her tablet as she monitored Shane's live biometrics. She didn't see the small, blur of silk and leather until it was too late. *Oof*. Yuna stumbled, her tablet nearly slipping from her manicured grip. Lina didn't budge; she stood her ground like a concrete pillar, a bored expression on her face, "Watch where you're going," Yuna snapped, straightening her designer blazer. "This is a restricted corridor."

Lina tilted her head, her dark eyes scanning Yuna with the clinical detachment of a shark. "Technically, my family owns a significant stake in the vendor contracts for this 'restricted' corridor. So, strictly speaking, you're walking on my floor."

Yuna stiffened, her mom-ager instincts sensing a threat. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"You're the woman who treats her son like a thoroughbred horse," Lina said, a sharp, feline grin spreading across her face. "I'm the woman who knows what he actually does with his free time. You should check your 'biometrics' for his heart rate around midnight. It was... enlightening." Before Yuna could process the insult, Lina stepped around her, the scent of expensive perfume and cold steel lingering in her wake.

Near the elevator bank, David Hollander was leaning against a railing, looking like a retired athlete who just wanted a beer. He watched as a massive entourage approached: Filipp Dragunov, looking every bit the understated patriarch, was ushering Irina and a small army of children toward the Rozanov-Dragunov private box. Misha was carrying Nadia, while Georgi tried to outrun Niko. Samvel and Sabina had little Dimtry with them, the boy holding onto them both.

David straightened up as Filipp stopped to let the kids pass. "Hell of a group you got there," David said, nodding toward the kids. "Reminds me of my old locker room days. I'm David Hollander. Shane's dad."

Filipp turned, his expression neutral but not unkind. He shook David's hand with a grip that suggested he'd spent a lifetime handling more than just business. "Filipp. I am the stepfather to the Rozanov boys."

"Rough night for you, then?" David gestured to the ice. "One son against the world?"

"In this family, we do not play against the world," Filipp replied smoothly, his eyes briefly meeting Irina's as she gathered the toddlers. "We simply let the world try to keep up. Good luck to your boy, David. He'll need it to get past Sergei's defense plans tonight." The statement left David Hollander gapping after him.

Down by the glass during warm-ups, Svetlana was leaning over the boards, her white Hollander jersey a glaring beacon of *treason* in a sea of black and gold. Rusik stood behind her, acting as a human shield against the surging crowd, "You're going to get Sergei fired," Rusik muttered, though he was holding Svetlana's phone ready.

"Papa loves me too much to fire me," Svetlana chirped. She flagged Shane down as he drifted toward the bench. "Shane! The aesthetic! Don't make me look like a liar!"

Shane, despite the 180°C intensity of the pre-game skate, skated over. He leaned in for a quick, sweating selfie with a grinning Svetlana, "Traitor," Ilya shouted from the center circle, though the look he threw at Shane was anything but angry.

As Shane moved toward the tunnel, Lina appeared out of nowhere, ducking under the security bar. She didn't ask. She simply grabbed Shane's arm and snapped a photo of the two of them—her looking smug, him looking confused, "For the group chat," Lina whispered. "I'm going to send this to your mother's publicist. I think 'The Golden Boy and the Mob Princess' has a nice ring to it, don't you?" Shane didn't have time to respond before she vanished back into the shadows.

The game play started pretty normal - both Boston and Montreal were performing leaps and bounds above their normal statistics. The third period was a bloodbath. The score was tied 2-2. The "Battle of the Centers" had lived up to the hype, with Ilya and Shane trading hits and highlight-reel passes. Following a defensive zone face-off, Shane won the draw cleanly and

turned to transition out of the zone. He didn't see Cliff Marleau, Ilya's best friend and a 220-pound wrecking ball, coming at full tilt.

It wasn't dirty, but it was *late*.

C R A C K.

The sound of shoulder meeting chin echoed through the arena. Shane's head snapped back, his helmet flying off as he hit the ice with a sickening thud. He didn't slide; he just crumpled. The Garden went deathly silent. Up in the boxes, Yuna screamed. In the other box, Irina stood up, her hand flying to her mouth. On the ice, Ilya didn't even wait for the whistle. He dropped his gloves, but he wasn't looking for a fight. He was looking at the motionless body of the man who had held his brother the night before.

The Garden, usually a deafening cavern of noise, sucked in its breath. The only sound was the scraping of skates as the referees blew the whistle, but Ilya was already there. He didn't care about the puck, the play, or the fact that his best friend, Cliff Marleau, was the one who had delivered the hit. To the ten thousand fans in the stands, it was a highlight-reel collision; to Ilya, it was the sound of his world shattering for the second time in twenty-four hours.

Ilya dropped to his knees so hard the impact echoed through his shins, his gloves discarded somewhere near the blue line. Shane was motionless, his face pale against the white ice, a thin trail of blood tracing a path from his temple where his helmet had been ripped away. Ilya's hands hovered over him, trembling—a sight no scout or teammate had ever witnessed. This was the "Ice King," the stoic Rozanov legacy, and he was currently falling apart in front of a national television audience. "*Shane*," he hissed, the name a jagged, private plea that was lost in the sudden roar of the crowd. "Shane, look at me. Open your eyes."

The medical staff was swarming, but Ilya wouldn't move. He shoved a trainer's hand aside, his eyes wild and fixed on Shane's shallow breathing. The irony was a physical ache in his chest, he had spent all night protecting his brother from the shadows of the North End, only to have his own life's work, the game he loved, break the person who had kept him steady. He felt a hand on his shoulder, Cliff trying to apologize, trying to explain, and Ilya let out a low, guttural snarl that sounded more like a Bratva enforcer than a hockey player. He wasn't a teammate right now; he was a shark circling a wounded mate.

While the medical team stabilized Shane's neck and loaded him onto a stretcher, a different kind of violence was erupting in the VIP corridor. Yuna Hollander was screaming at a wall of black-suited security guards, her face flushed with a terrifying mix of motherly panic and "mom-ager" fury, "That is my son! Let me through!" she shrieked, her nails digging into the sleeve of a guard who didn't even blink. David was behind her, his face ashen, trying to use his "former player" credentials to push past, but the Garden security had been replaced by a much more specialized unit.

"Out of the way." The voice was quiet, but it cleared the hallway like a shotgun blast. Rusik and Lina moved through the crowd with the synchronized grace of predators. They didn't shout; they didn't need to. The security guards stepped aside instantly, opening a path that had been denied to the Hollanders, "You can't go back there," Rusik said, his voice level as he looked at David and Yuna. He didn't wait for their protest. He looked at Lina, who was already stripping off her designer blazer to reveal the functional gear beneath. "Lina, please. Go. Stay with him. If the doctors breathe wrong, call me."

Lina nodded once, her expression devoid of its usual mischief. She looked at the frantic Hollanders. "I'm going with him in the ambulance. I'll make sure he gets the private wing at Mass General. Ilya is going to be a liability until he knows Shane is breathing, I'm the only one who can keep my brother from burning this arena down."

"Lina, wait!" Yuna cried out, her voice breaking. "Who are you? Why do you get to go?"

Lina paused at the heavy double doors leading to the training room, her dark eyes flashing. "I'm the one who owns the ambulance, Mrs. Hollander. And I'm the only friend your son has in this city who can actually protect him." She disappeared through the doors just as the stretcher rolled out.

Rusik turned to David, his hand coming up in a gesture that was surprisingly grounded. "Mr. Hollander, gather your things. My family is taking you to the hospital. We have the transport ready, and we have the best neuro-surgeons in the country on retainer. You won't get through traffic faster than we will."

David looked at the younger man, seeing the cold, efficient power of the Rozanov-Dragunov machine in full swing. He nodded, grabbing Yuna's arm. "We're going with them, Yuna. It's

the only way."

The transition from the roar of the arena to the sterile, vibrating interior of the ambulance was a sensory whiplash. The sirens were a distant wail, muffled by the heavy-duty insulation of the private Dragunov-owned vehicle. Lina sat in the cramped space, her silk shirt a sharp contrast to the medical monitors and the EMTs hovering over Shane. Shane was drifting with his eyes glazed, a terrifyingly deep bruise already blossoming along his jawline where Marleau's shoulder had connected.

"Hey, Golden Boy," Lina said, her voice uncharacteristically soft as she reached out and gripped his hand. It wasn't a gesture of comfort; it was a tether. "Stay with me. If you close your eyes now, Ilya is going to assume you're dead and he'll probably dismantle the TD Garden stone by stone. I don't want to deal with the insurance paperwork."

Shane's fingers twitched in hers. His voice was a dry rasp. "Lina...?"

"Yeah. It's the scary sister," she murmured, leaning in so he could see her face. "You're going to the private wing. Best doctors money can buy, and more importantly, best security money can buy. No press. No 'mom-ager' for at least another twenty minutes. Just keep breathing."

Back at the Garden, the game had been called, but the violence hadn't left the air. Ilya was a ghost of a man, still in his jersey, his skates clicking hollowly on the concrete. He was shaking—not with cold, but with a repressed, tectonic fury. Rusik intercepted him before he could reach the locker room, grabbing Ilya by the back of the neck and shoving him into a quiet alcove, "Look at me," Rusik commanded, his voice like iron.

Ilya's eyes were bloodshot, his chest heaving. "He didn't move, Rusik. He didn't move."

"He's breathing. Lina is with him," Rusik said, his grip tightening until Ilya finally focused on him. "Listen to me, Ilyushenka. You cannot go to that hospital as a hockey player. You are

a Rozanov. If you walk in there looking like this, the press will eat you alive and Shane's mother will have a restraining order signed before midnight. Go to the room. Change. Sergei is waiting to drive you. I will handle the parents."

Ilya let out a jagged, broken breath, his forehead dropping against his older brother's shoulder for a split second. "If he's not okay..."

"He's a future Rozanov," Rusik said, his voice dropping an octave. "He's too stubborn to die in our city. Now go." Rusik shoved him, hard, Ilya nodded his head and pulled his older brother-in-law in for a hug then retreated to his locker room, quickly changing.

The black SUV was a tomb of high-tension silence, broken only by Yuna's sobbing. She was vibrating with a frantic, aimless energy, her phone clutched in her hand like a weapon, "This is your fault!" she cried out, pointing a trembling finger at Irina. "Your son... that animal Marleau... you people are predators! My son is an Olympic-caliber athlete, and you've brought him into this... this circus of violence!"

Irina sat perfectly still, her hands folded in her lap. She didn't look offended; she looked like a woman who had survived much worse than a hysterical mother. Filipp sat beside her, his hand resting on the door handle, his expression unreadable as he watched the Boston traffic for their motorcade, "Mrs. Hollander," Irina said, her voice a calm, chillingly steady contrast to Yuna's screeching. "My son is currently the only reason your son is being treated by the head of neurosurgery instead of a resident on call. We are not your enemies tonight. The clock is your enemy. My husband is making sure the roads are clear. Please, sit back and breathe."

David was staring out the window, his hand over his mouth. He looked at Filipp, seeing the grim, professional efficiency of the man. "He's all we have," David whispered, his voice cracking. "Shane... he's everything."

Filipp turned his head slightly, his eyes meeting David's. There was a moment of shared, paternal understanding that transcended the drama. "I know. We will get there."

The basement of the hospital was a labyrinth of steam pipes and humming generators. It was a far cry from the luxury Shane was currently being wheeled into, but for Ilya, it was the only way in. Sergei Vetrov moved with the practiced shadow-work of a former Minister, his hand on the small of Ilya's back, steering him past the laundry service elevators. Svetlana walked ahead, her phone out, flicking through the hospital's internal security feeds. She was still wearing the white Hollander jersey, now wrinkled and stained with a stray drop of Gatorade from the bench, a jarring bit of "treason" in the cold concrete halls, "Keep your head down, Ilyushenka," Sergei growled, his voice echoing off the low ceiling. "If a janitor recognizes you, the story isn't 'hockey player visits friend.' The story is 'Mafia Elitist Rozanov-Dragunov occupies Mass General.' We do not need that noise tonight." Ilya didn't respond. He looked like a man walking to his own execution. He had scrubbed the dried blood from his hands, but he could still feel the phantom vibration of the hit in his own bones.

Four floors up, the atmosphere was entirely different. The "private wing" had been effectively annexed. Lina stood at the central nursing station, her arms crossed over her chest. Two senior neurosurgeons and the Chief of Staff were standing before her, looking remarkably like students being scolded by a principal half their age.

"I don't care about the 'standard observation' protocol," Lina said, her voice a sharp, frigid blade. "I want a 24-hour dedicated nursing rotation, the MRI results on my tablet in ten minutes, and if I see a single paparazzi within two blocks of this entrance, I'm holding this board personally responsible for the security breach. Am I clear?"

"Miss Dragunov, we are doing everything..." the Chief started.

"You are doing what is *expected*," Lina interrupted, leaning in. "I am telling you to do what is *required*. He gets the best of everything. If the machine he needs is in Zurich, you buy it. If the specialist he needs is in Tokyo, you fly them here. My brother's heart is in that room. Don't let it stop beating."

While the Dragunov machine hummed with lethal efficiency, Yuna and David were finally ushered into the plush waiting lounge of the private suite. The room was filled with expensive leather furniture and a stocked bar, but it felt like a cage. Yuna had stopped screaming. She was sitting on the edge of a chair, her eyes fixed on the heavy oak doors that led to Shane's room. She watched as Rusik entered, speaking quietly into a burner phone in Russian, followed by Irina, who was calmly arranging a bouquet of lilies that had appeared out of nowhere.

"David," Yuna whispered, her voice trembling. "Look at them." David looked. He saw the way the hospital staff bowed slightly when Irina passed. He saw the way the security guards outside the door didn't just watch the hallway, they watched the world, "They aren't just 'teammates,' are they?" Yuna asked, the realization finally cracking through her "mom-ager" shell. "The way that boy, Ilya, looked at Shane on the ice... the way this girl Lina is talking to the doctors like she owns their souls..."

David stood up, walking to the window that overlooked the city. He saw the black SUVs idling in the emergency lane, the lights flickering. "Yuna, Shane didn't just go for a drive last night. He went home. With them." He turned back to his wife, his face etched with a new kind of fear, not of the injury, but of the depth of the secret their son had been keeping. "He isn't 'The Golden Boy' to these people. He's... something else. And the fact that they've locked us in this room with them means they aren't hiding it anymore."

Just then, the service door at the back of the lounge clicked open. Ilya stepped in, flanked by the Vetrovs. He was pale, his eyes red-rimmed, still wearing his team joggers but looking every bit the Rozanov prince. He didn't look at the Hollanders. He walked straight toward the ICU doors, "Ilya!" Yuna called out, her voice a mix of demand and desperation.

Ilya paused, his hand on the handle. He turned his head just enough to look at her. The silence in the room became absolute, "He's awake," Ilya said, his voice a ghost of a sound. "And he's asking for me. Not the press. Not the 'brand.' Me." The heavy, soundproof door clicked shut behind Ilya, instantly severing the tension of the waiting room. Inside, the room was bathed in a dim, clinical blue light. The hum of the monitors was a steady, rhythmic pulse, a much kinder sound than the silence on the ice.

Shane looked small against the vast expanse of the hospital bed. His head was wrapped in a white bandage, and the bruising along his jaw had darkened into a deep, painful purple. He wasn't the *Golden Boy* right now; he was a man who had been broken by the game they both loved. Ilya didn't move for a long moment. He stood at the foot of the bed, his breath hitching

in his throat. The sight of Shane, hooked to wires, pale and fragile, made the *Rozanov* mask crumble completely, "Shane," he whispered, his voice cracking.

Shane's eyes fluttered open. They were glassy, the pupils uneven from the concussion, but they focused on Ilya with a slow, painful clarity. He tried to shift, a small wince of pain crossing his features, then, "Illllyaaaa."

"Don't move," Ilya commanded, moving to the side of the bed in a blur. He reached out, his hand hovering over Shane's before he finally let his fingers settle against Shane's skin. His touch was feather-light, as if he were afraid Shane might shatter. "The doctors... they said you have to stay still."

"I missed the third period," Shane rasped, his voice a ghost of its usual self. He tried to offer a small, lopsided smile. "Did we... Did we win?"

Ilya let out a sound that was half-laugh, half-sob. He leaned down, pressing his forehead against the side of the mattress, his hand gripping Shane's with a desperate intensity. "I don't know. I walked off the ice the moment you went down. I don't care about the score, Shane. I thought you were dead."

Shane's fingers twitched, trying to curl around Ilya's. "I'm not. Just... everything hurts. My head feels like it's full of glass."

"Lina is here," Ilya murmured, looking up, his eyes swimming with a vulnerability he only ever showed in the dark. "She's scaring the surgeons. My mother is here. Your parents are outside."

Shane's breath hitched. "My parents? They saw... they saw you?"

"They saw everything," Ilya said, his thumb tracing the back of Shane's hand. "There is no more 'Lily,' Shane. There is no more hiding. Rusik is telling them who we are. All of it."

Shane closed his eyes for a moment, the weight of that reality sinking in even through the haze of the painkillers. He didn't look scared; he looked relieved. "Good. I was tired of the lie anyway."

Ilya leaned in, pressing a soft, lingering kiss to the only part of Shane's face that wasn't bruised, his forehead, just below the bandage. "You're safe. I have the whole house here. Sergei is at the door. No one gets in unless I say so."

"Even my mom?" Shane whispered.

Ilya's expression hardened, the Rozanov steel returning for just a second. "Especially your mom. Not until you're ready." The sound of the heart monitor was the only thing filling the silence for a long minute. Ilya didn't sit; he hovered, his large frame casting a protective shadow over the bed. He looked like he wanted to physically shield Shane from the very air in the room, his eyes scanning every wire and tube as if he could intimidate the machines into working faster.

Shane reached out, his hand clumsy and heavy from the IV, and fumbled for the hem of Ilya's hoodie. "Sit. You're making... the room spin faster."

Ilya sank into the plastic bedside chair instantly, not breaking eye contact. He took Shane's hand in both of theirs, pressing his knuckles against his lips. "Sergei is going to kill Marleau," Ilya murmured into Shane's skin. "And if he doesn't, I might."

"Don't," Shane whispered, a small wince pulling at his bruised jaw. "It was a hockey play, Ilya. I leaned... I leaned the wrong way. Your dad was right."

"Do not defend him," Ilya snapped, though the bite was gone, replaced by a raw, jagged edge of guilt. "I should have been there. I should have seen him coming. I was so focused on the puck, on the game—"

"You were playing," Shane interrupted, his voice gaining a fraction of strength. "That's what we do. We're first-line centers, remember? We don't... we don't watch each other's backs on the ice. We compete."

Ilya shook his head, his thumb stroking the pale skin of Shane's wrist. "Not anymore. Not after tonight. Seeing you hit the ice... hearing the sound... I realized I don't care about the 'Battle of the Centers.' I don't care about the Boston Bears. I just wanted to pick you up and walk out. If I can make it happen, would you come to Boston, play with me on my team"

Shane looked at him, really looked at him. The "Ice King" persona was completely shattered. Ilya Rozanov was gone, and the boy who had sat in the sunroom watching Shane play poker with his sister was all that was left, "My mom is going to make this a circus," Shane said, the reality of Yuna's "manager" brain finally catching up to his concussion-fogged mind. "She's going to want statements. She's going to want to sue the league. She's going to want me away from you."

Ilya leaned in closer, his voice dropping to that low, tectonic frequency that usually meant someone was about to be handled by the Rozanov-Dragunov machine. "She can want whatever she likes. But she is in *my* city, in a wing controlled by my family. Rusik is out there right now explaining to her that the 'Golden Boy' narrative is dead. We are moving you to the compound the moment the doctors clear you for transport."

Shane blinked, the gravity of that statement settling in. "The compound? Ilya, my parents will lose their minds."

"Let them," Ilya said, his eyes flashing with a fierce, possessive light. "You almost died tonight because of a 'brand' and a game. No more. You're staying with us. Lina has already mapped out a recovery suite next to mine. Niko wants to show you his new skates. My mother has already decided which soup will fix your brain."

A tiny, genuine smile finally touched Shane's lips. "Soup? Your mom is scary, Ilya."

"She is," Ilya agreed, leaning down to press his cheek against Shane's hand. "But she likes you. And in this family, that is the only security clearance you will ever need."

"I will play for Boston, if you can make it happen, and *if* you think about bringing Hayden Pike here, eventually." Shane murmured.

“He is fifteenth worst play on Metros.” Ilya muttered, but leaned forward and kissed Shane’s shoulder, a promise, one that they both knew meant Ilya would get Lina to provide, because she did the heavy lifting.

The silence Ilya left in his wake was absolute. Yuna stood frozen, her hand still reaching out as if she could pull the "Golden Boy" narrative back into existence. But the boy who had just walked through those doors wasn't the clean-cut rival center she'd spent years analyzing on game tape. He was a force of nature, bloodied and raw, and he had looked at her with a chilling level of dismissal. David moved to his wife's side, placing a hand on her shoulder, but his eyes were fixed on Rusik, who was calmly folding a piece of paper and tucking it into his pocket.

"He's asking for him," Yuna whispered, her voice finally cracking. "Shane is in there, with a concussion, and the first person he wants is... a Rozanov?"

Irina stepped forward. She didn't offer a hug or a platitude; she offered a seat. "Your son has been living two lives, Mrs. Hollander. One for your cameras, and one for my son. Tonight, the cameras stopped rolling. I suggest you sit down before you fall."

"I am his manager!" Yuna snapped, the reflex of her career momentarily overriding her shock. "I have to handle the press! The 'Battle of the Centers' just ended in a medical emergency. I need to call the league, I need to—"

"You need to be a *mother*," Lina interrupted, leaning against the doorframe of the ICU wing. She had reappeared from the nurses' station, looking entirely unimpressed. "The 'brand' is currently under a concussion protocol. If you start calling agents and PR firms from this hallway, my security will escort you to the sidewalk. We don't do 'leaks' in this family."

David looked between the two young Dragunovs: Rusik, the stoic commander, and Lina, the sharp-tongued enforcer. "Who are you people, really? We know the names, we know the hockey... but this? This is a private wing. This is an armored motorcade. You're acting like you're at war."

Rusik stepped into David's space, not aggressively, but with the undeniable gravity of a man used to being obeyed. "We are at war with anyone who threatens what is ours. For years, your son has been 'ours.' Even if we didn't know his name, he has slept in our homes, lived a life with Ilya they both protected, he has protected my younger brother-in-law from nightmares, and he has earned the loyalty of a family that does not give it lightly." He paused, letting the weight of that sink in. "Ilya is in there because he is the only person who can keep Shane's heart rate steady right now," Rusik continued. "And you are out here because you need to decide if you want to be part of Shane's recovery, or if you want to keep being his manager. Because as of tonight, the Rozanov-Dragunov family is handling the security. Your 'PR firm' stops at the hospital gates."

Yuna looked at Irina, one mother to another. She saw the lack of judgment in Irina's eyes, replaced by a terrifyingly calm competence. "He's in love with him," Yuna realized out loud, the words landing like lead. "Ilya. He... he loves my son."

"And Shane loves him," Irina said softly. "Which is why he is going to be okay. But you have to choose, Yuna. Do you want to see your son, or do you want to see the 'Golden Boy'?"

The atmosphere in the lounge shifted from high-tension drama to cold, military precision the moment the service doors swung open again. Sergei Vetrov stepped in, his presence so massive and weathered it seemed to suck the remaining oxygen out of the room. Behind him, Svetlana was still a blur of motion, her thumbs flying across her phone screen, the white Hollander jersey she wore now a surreal contrast to her father's grim demeanor. Sergei didn't look at the luxury bar or the plush seating. He looked at Rusik and gave a sharp, single nod, the universal language of *"the perimeter is set."*

"The basement is sealed," Sergei announced, his voice a low, gravelly rumble that silenced Yuna's next protest. "I have my men on the service elevators and the roof. No one enters this wing without a biometric scan. Not even the night shift nurses."

David stood up, his protective instincts as a father warring with the sheer intimidation of the man standing before him. "Sergei... you're the assistant coach. What is this? This isn't a team matter."

"Tonight, I am not the coach, David Hollander," Sergei said, turning his heavy gaze toward him. "Tonight, I am the man who ensures that when Shane Hollander wakes up tomorrow, there are no cameras in his face and no threats at his door. Your son is under a Rozanov-Dragunov 'Protection Order.' In my world, that is more binding than a court injunction."

Svetlana finally looked up from her phone, her expression a mirror of Lina's; sharp, youthful, and entirely too competent. "I've pulled the lobby footage," she said to Rusik. "Three 'paparazzi' were spotted trying to bribe the valet. I've had their plates run and their memory cards... neutralized."

Yuna gasped. "You can't just..."

"We can," Svetlana interrupted, her voice coolly professional. She looked at Yuna with a flicker of something resembling pity. "Mrs. Hollander, your son's brand is safe because we are making sure the 'story' stays in this room. But if you want to see him, you need to turn your phone over to Sergei. No social media. No 'updates' to the press. Just you and your husband."

Sergei stepped forward, holding out a large, lead-lined security bag. The silent command was clear. David was the first to move. He pulled his phone from his pocket and dropped it into the bag without a word. He looked at Yuna, a silent plea in his eyes to just let go of the control for one night. After a long, agonizing pause, Yuna followed suit, her hand shaking as she surrendered her connection to the outside world, "Good," Sergei grunted. He looked at the heavy double doors where Ilya had vanished. "He's in there. Go. But if you upset my first-line center while he's trying to keep your son's heart rate down, I will have you removed."

As the Hollanders walked toward the door, they passed Irina, who was quietly handing a cup of tea to Niko. The twelve-year-old looked up at them, his eyes wide and dark, a living reminder of the stakes from the night before, "He's the bravest person I know," Niko said softly to David as they passed. "Shane. He didn't let go of me or Ilya once." David paused, the weight of the boy's words hitting him harder than any of the threats. He looked at the Rozanov-Dragunov family, this strange, lethal, deeply protective tribe, and finally understood. They hadn't kidnapped his son. They had claimed him.

The heavy doors to the ICU suite hissed open, and David and Yuna stepped into a world they didn't recognize. The room was dim, the only light coming from the rhythmic, glowing

monitors and a single, low-set lamp in the corner. The air smelled of antiseptic and the faint, grounding scent of cedar, undoubtedly Ilya's scent. They stopped short at the foot of the bed. Ilya hadn't moved. He was sitting in the low chair, but he had leaned forward so his chest was nearly resting on the edge of the mattress. His large, calloused hand was cupping Shane's much darker one, his thumb moving in a slow, hypnotic circle over Shane's knuckles. He looked exhausted, his hair disheveled and his jersey-clad shoulders slumped, but his eyes were fixed on Shane with a terrifying, singular devotion.

"Shane?" Yuna's voice was a fragile thread, the "manager" persona finally stripped away to reveal a terrified mother. Shane's head turned slowly on the pillow. The bruising looked even worse up close, a violent map of the collision that had nearly ended everything. He blinked, his gaze drifting from Ilya to his parents.

"Mom," he whispered, his voice thick. "Dad."

David moved to the other side of the bed, his hand shaking as he reached out to touch Shane's shoulder. "Hey, son. We're here. We're right here." Yuna hovered at the foot of the bed, her eyes darting to Ilya. She expected him to move, to stand up, to yield the space to them. But Ilya didn't budge. He stayed anchored to Shane, his grip on Shane's hand never wavering. It wasn't an act of defiance; it was as if he were a vital organ Shane needed to keep functioning.

"Ilya," David said softly, looking at the young Rozanov. "Thank you. For... for staying with him."

Ilya finally looked up. His eyes were bloodshot and dark, the *Ice King* replaced by a man who had stared into the abyss and survived. "I love him," Ilya said, his voice a low, jagged rasp. "I am not leaving him."

Shane reached out his free hand, blindly searching for his mother. Yuna caught it, her tears finally spilling over. "Oh, Shane. We were so scared. The papers, the news..."

"Don't," Shane interrupted, a small wince of pain tightening his features. "Don't talk about the news, Mom. Not tonight." He looked back at Ilya, and the silent communication between them was so loud it filled the room. It was a language of shared secrets, late-night drives, and

a bond that had been forged in a much darker world than the NHL, "They know," Shane whispered to Ilya.

"I know," Ilya replied, his voice softening just for Shane. "Rusik told them. It's over, Shane. The hiding is over."

Yuna looked between them, the realization hitting her with the force of a cross-check. Her son wasn't just dating a rival; he had been subsumed into a dynasty. He wasn't the *Golden Boy* anymore. He was something far more complex, and far more protected, "We just want you to be safe," Yuna sobbed, leaning over to kiss Shane's hand.

Shane looked at the door, where he knew the Dragunov-Rozanov machine was standing guard, then back at Ilya's steady, unwavering gaze, "I am safe, Mom," Shane said, his voice finally sounding sure. "I've never been safer."

The air in the ICU suite was thick with a tension that no amount of hospital-grade filtration could scrub away. It was the collision of two completely different Americas: the polished, meritocratic dream of the Hollanders and the old-world, guarded fortress of the Rozanov-Dragunovs.

Yuna sat on the edge of a plastic visitor's chair, her hands clasped so tightly her knuckles were white. She kept looking at Ilya's hand, which was still firmly entwined with Shane's. Every time she opened her mouth to speak, she seemed to remember the wall of black-suited security in the hallway and the way Sergei Vetrov had looked at her like she was a minor administrative error.

"So," David said, his voice echoing in the quiet room. He was leaning against the windowsill, looking between his son and the young Russian powerhouse. "How long? How long has this been... this?"

Shane swallowed hard, the movement sending a ripple of pain through his jaw. He looked at the ceiling, the clinical lights blurring. "Since rookie year."

"No," Ilya grumbled, his voice a low, possessive vibration. He didn't look up from Shane's hand; he just tightened his grip as if anchoring them both to the truth. "Summer before that."

Yuna let out a sound that was half-gasp, half-sob. "The Prospects Camp? You've been... you've been doing this since the draft? Shane, you were barely sixteen at the first camp... You were the rivalry. You were the 'Standard Bearers' for the next generation of the sport!"

"We were kids," Shane whispered, his eyes finding Ilya's. "And we were lonely. Everyone else wanted a piece of the 'Golden Boy' or the 'Ice King.' We just wanted... each other."

Ilya finally looked at David, his gaze steady and unapologetic. "Your son didn't just join my family tonight, Mr. Hollander. He's been the reason I've stayed sane for three seasons. Every time I hit the ice, I was playing for him. Every time I bled, he was the one I called. You saw a rivalry. I saw the only person who actually knew my name." David ran a hand over his face, the weight of the three-year deception sinking in. All those "hard-fought" games, the media-driven animosity, the tension at the All-Star breaks, it had all been a shield. Ilya added, his voice low and devoid of apology. "He was the only person in this league who didn't look at me like a trophy or a target. He just looked at me."

Yuna let out a shaky breath. "Shane, honey, do you have any idea what this does to your career? The Metros... the fans... the endorsements. A Hollander and a Rozanov? It's... it's a PR nightmare. It's a conflict of interest on every level."

"It's not a nightmare, Mom," Shane rasped, his eyes fluttering shut for a second as a wave of nausea hit him. "It's my life. I'm tired of being a 'brand.' I'm tired of the 'Golden Boy' script. I just want to play hockey and... and be with him."

Ilya's grip tightened on Shane's hand, a silent vow of support. He looked at Yuna, his expression cooling into something professional. "The 'brand' is irrelevant now. Shane is injured. He needs a recovery that isn't dictated by a press release."

While the quiet conversation continued inside, the hallway was anything but peaceful. Lina was pacing the length of the VIP corridor, her phone pressed to her ear. She wasn't talking;

she was dictating.

"I don't care about the trade deadline, Mark," Lina snapped, her voice carrying the terrifying weight of the Dragunov name. She was currently on the line with the Boston Bears' General Manager, who had likely been woken up by the news of the hit. "And I certainly don't care about the Bear's' cap space." She paused, listening to the frantic voice on the other end, her eyes narrowed as she watched Ruslan lean against the wall, watching her with a faint, prideful smirk.

"Listen to me very carefully," Lina continued, her tone dropping to a dangerous, silky whisper. "Shane Hollander is currently in a hospital bed because one of your players, Ilya's own winger, put him there. My family is currently paying for the security, the surgeons, and the silence. If you want Ilya Rozanov to stay in a Boston jersey next season, you will find a way to acquire Hollander's contract by the time he is cleared for contact. Move picks, move prospects, I don't care. But I am not letting my brother's heart drive four hours to Montreal every weekend once he's healed." She hung up without waiting for a reply and turned to Rusik. "He's stuttering. He'll call back in ten minutes with a plan."

"You're going to bankrupt the team's future for a romance, Lina?" Rusik asked, though his tone suggested he'd have done the same.

"I'm securing the asset," Lina countered, tucking her phone into her pocket. "And I'm making sure that when Yuna Hollander tries to drag him back to Canada, she realizes she's fighting a multi-billion dollar sports franchise as well as us."

The silence had returned, but it was broken by David. He walked over to the bed, looking down at the intertwined hands. He was a hockey player first, and he knew a teammate when he saw one, "Ilya," David said, his voice steady. "You realize that if you do this, if you bring him into your world, there's no going back for him. He won't just be Shane Hollander anymore. He'll be yours. And your family... they aren't exactly quiet."

Ilya looked up, his eyes meeting David's with a fierce, unwavering clarity. "He has already saved my life more times than I can count, Mr. Hollander. He is already one of us. I am not bringing him into my world. He built a new one for us last night."

Shane reached out, his hand trembling slightly, and touched the hem of his father's shirt. "Dad... let them help. Please."

David looked at his son's bruised face, then at the desperate, protective love in Ilya's eyes. He looked at Yuna, who was staring at the floor, her world-view crumbling in real-time, "Okay," David whispered. "Okay."

The hallway outside the ICU felt more like a war room than a hospital corridor. Lina was leaning against the cold marble wall, her thumb hovering over the screen of her buzzing phone. When she saw the caller ID, Mark, the Bears' GM, she didn't smile. She just looked at Ruslan, who was watching her with the calm, predatory patience of a King who knew exactly how this was going to end.

"Talk to me, Mark," Lina said, her voice dropping into a low, dangerous register. "And tell me you aren't about to waste my time."

"Lina, listen," Mark's voice was thin, vibrating with the kind of stress that usually preceded a heart attack. "Montreal is digging in their heels. They know they have the leverage. They want two first-rounders, our top defensive prospect, and, this is the kicker, they want us to eat the PR fallout. They want a joint statement saying Shane requested the move for 'personal medical reasons' to save face with their fan base."

Lina's eyes narrowed. "They want him to look like the quitter so they don't look like the villains who traded a concussed captain. Typical."

"But here's the 'creative' part," Mark continued, his tone shifting into a frantic hustle. "If we do an immediate 'Emergency Medical Loan'—it's a loophole in the bylaws for long-term recovery—we can move him to our facility tonight. He stays on their books for forty-eight hours while we finalize the paperwork for a 'Player Performance Swap.' We give them the picks, but we also offer them a secondary 'Consultancy Fee' through one of your family's shell holdings. It keeps the cap hit legal for the league, but it lines the owner's pockets in Montreal."

Lina looked at the heavy doors of the ICU, where her brother was currently tethered to a man who had been a secret for three years. "So, he belongs to Boston by midnight?"

"Technically, he's a 'Ward of the Bears' for medical oversight as of twenty minutes ago," Mark said, sounding like he was finally breathing again. "I've already alerted the league office. The Metros' GM is signing the release now. He's... he's yours, Lina."

"Good," Lina said, her voice snapping shut like a briefcase. "I'll have the 'Consultancy' funds transferred by dawn. And Mark? If a single word of this 'fee' reaches the press, I'll make sure the only thing you're managing next season is a peewee rink in Siberia."

She hung up and looked at Ruslan. "He's ours. We just bought a NHL captain with a 'consultancy fee' and a few draft picks."

Ruslan gave a slow, dark chuckle. "Money well spent. Go tell the lovebirds. I'll go tell the 'mom-ager' that her son just got traded while he was asleep." Lina let herself be pulled into a deep hug, his lips found hers and he kissed her sharply, "Have I mentioned to you lately, that I love you, my little Princess?"

"I think you should say it on the hour *every* hour, Rusik." With that, Lina didn't knock. She pushed open the double doors, the clinical quiet of the room shattering as she stepped inside. Ilya didn't even look up; he was still holding Shane's hand, his thumb tracing the line of Shane's knuckles. David and Yuna were huddled near the foot of the bed, looking like they had aged a decade in two hours.

"The room is spinning again," Shane murmured, his eyes fluttering toward Lina.

"That's just the sound of your career changing, Golden Boy," Lina said, walking to the side of the bed. She looked at Yuna, who was clutching her designer purse like a shield. "Mrs. Hollander, I hope you like black and gold. Because as of twenty minutes ago, your son is no longer a Montreal Metro."

The room went deathly silent. Even the heart monitor seemed to skip a beat, "What?" Yuna gasped. "You... you can't. The trade deadline... the league—"

"The league likes money, and the Bears like winning," Lina interrupted, her gaze shifting to Shane. "You've been 'loaned' for medical recovery, Shane. But the permanent papers are being filed. You're staying in Boston. You're a Bear."

Ilya's head finally snapped up. A slow, terrifyingly beautiful smile spread across his face, the first genuine expression of joy Shane's parents had seen from him. He looked at Shane, his grip tightening. "You're staying," Ilya whispered.

Shane let out a breath that sounded like a sob, his head sinking deeper into the pillow. "No more drives? No more lies?"

"No more drives, I can not promise about the lies, Милая моя," Lina confirmed, her voice softening just a fraction. "We're moving you to the compound tonight. Sergei has the ambulance ready. And David, Yuna? There's a car waiting for you, too. You're staying in our guest house until he's cleared to walk."

Yuna looked at David, her mouth hanging open. David just looked at Shane, seeing the sheer, unadulterated relief on his son's face. He looked back at Lina, the realization of the Dragunov power finally settling into his bones, "You didn't just trade for him," David said, his voice full of awe. "You annexed him."

"In this family," Lina said, turning toward the door to coordinate the transport, "there isn't much of a difference."

The transfer from the hospital to the Rozanov-Dragunov compound was less like an ambulance ride and more like a high-stakes extraction. Three black SUVs flanked the private medical transport, their tinted windows reflecting the neon blur of the Boston night. As the motorcade turned off the main road and approached the massive iron gates of the estate, the sheer scale of the "security" the Hollanders had been promised became terrifyingly visible.

The gates didn't just swing open; they retracted into the stone walls with a heavy, mechanical hum.

Sergei was already out of the lead vehicle before it fully stopped, his radio crackling with status reports from the perimeter teams. Yuna and David sat in the back of the second SUV, watching in stunned silence as men in tactical gear, not hospital security, but the family's private guard, cleared the path for the stretcher. Svetlana was on the gravel, her Hollander jersey covered by a heavy tactical jacket as she directed the medical team toward the West Wing entrance. "They have snipers on the roof," David whispered, his eyes tracking the red glint of a lens near the chimney stack.

"They have a legacy to protect," Rusik replied from the front seat, not turning around. "And tonight, your son is the most valuable part of it. We don't take chances with family."

The ambulance doors opened, and Ilya stepped out first. He hadn't left Shane's side for a second. He hovered as the paramedics wheeled the stretcher into the house, his hand never more than an inch from Shane's arm. The transition was seamless moving from the cold night air into a hallway that looked more like a five-star hotel than a recovery ward, complete with a specialized lift that bypassed the main living areas.

Once Shane was settled and the medical team had finally retreated, leaving only a private nurse in the hallway. Ilya sat on the edge of the oversized bed, the room bathed in the soft, warm glow of a single dim lamp. Shane reached out, his fingers brushing against the silk duvet. He looked around the room taking in the wood, the heavy drapes, and the framed photo of the Rozanov brothers on the nightstand that had clearly been moved there just for him, "You really brought me home," Shane rasped, his eyes finally losing that frantic, concussed edge.

Ilya leaned over, kissing the crown of Shane's head. "I told you. No more drives. No more mistakes."

The adrenaline of the extraction had worn off, leaving Shane in the heavy, pressurized silence of the Rozanov-Dragunov West Wing. The room was beautiful—vast, shadowed, and smelling of the expensive wood polish and old-world history that defined Ilya's life. But as the painkillers began to fluctuate in his system, the reality of what had just happened started to claw through the concussion-induced fog.

Shane's breathing hitched, the sound sharp and ragged in the quiet suite.

"Shane?" Ilya was beside him in a second, his hand moving to Shane's shoulder, but Shane flinched.

"I'm a Bear," Shane whispered, his eyes darting around the darkened room, landing on the heavy velvet curtains that blocked out the rest of the world. "Ilya, they traded me. I didn't—I didn't say goodbye to the guys. My locker... my apartment in Montreal..." The panic in the room shifted instantly. Shane's breathing, which had been a jagged, terrifying sound, hitched at the mention of his actual life. His fingers dug into Ilya's forearms, his eyes wide and unfocused under the dim medical lights. "Puck," Shane gasped, the name of his cat acting like a lightning rod for his concussed brain. "Ilya, Puck is in the apartment. He...he doesn't like the automatic feeder, he bats the kibble across the kitchen. If I'm a Bear, if I'm here... who is petting him? Who's giving him his wet food?"

Ilya didn't skip a beat. He didn't care about the cat, but he cared about the rising line on the heart rate monitor. "Lina," he barked toward the door, not raising his voice but infused with enough command to rattle the glass, the door swung open. Lina was already there, a tablet in one hand and a cold espresso in the other. She took one look at Shane's spiraling eyes and Ilya's protective crouch, "The cat, Lina," Ilya said. "Puck. He's in Montreal."

Lina didn't blink. She didn't roll her eyes. She simply tapped a command into her screen. "The extraction team is already at the condo for his 'essential items.' I'll update the manifest. Puck will be on a private flight within the hour. He'll have a window seat and a salmon-based catering menu. Satisfied?"

Shane slumped back against Ilya's chest, the sheer, absurd efficiency of the Dragunov machine finally blunting the edge of his terror. "He hates flying," Shane whispered.

"He'll survive," Lina said, her eyes softening just a fraction as she looked at her brother's distraught face. "And by the time he lands, he'll have a custom-built scratching post in the West Wing. Now, breathe, Golden Boy. I have a billion-dollar trade to finalize, and I can't do it if you're hyperventilating over a tabby."

"He's not a tabby..." Shane muttered even as Lina leveled him a look, one that promised she was doing her best here to not be bitchy. She stepped back out of the room, carefully. "My mom is in your guest house," Shane continued, his voice rising, cracked with a growing hysteria. "She's going to hate this. She's going to hate you. And the fans... they're going to think I bailed. They're going to think I'm weak because I got hit and then vanished into a Russian fortress. I'm the captain, Ilya. Captains don't just... disappear."

He tried to sit up, a move that sent a white-hot spike of agony through his skull. He let out a choked gasp, his hands flying to his head as the room tilted violently, "Stay down," Ilya commanded, not as a suggestion, but as an anchor. He climbed onto the bed, sliding behind Shane and pulling him back against his chest, wrapping his massive arms around Shane's torso to keep him still. "Listen to my heart. Just the heart, Shane."

Shane's chest was heaving, his heart rate monitor beginning to beep a frantic, rhythmic warning. "Everything is gone. The Metros, the brand, the plan... it's all gone. I don't even have my own clothes, Ilya. I'm wearing your shirt in your house while your sister buys my life with shell companies."

"Good," Ilya murmured into his hair, his grip firm and unshakable. "Let it be gone. The 'Golden Boy' was a cage, Shane. You were drowning in that city. You were drowning in that 'brand.' Here, you aren't an asset. You aren't a rivalry. You're just the man who loves me."

"It's too much," Shane sobbed, the physical pain of the concussion merging with the psychic break of losing his entire identity in a single night. "It's too fast."

"I know," Ilya whispered. He began to hum, the same low, wordless Slavic melody Irina had used to soothe the toddlers at breakfast. He rocked Shane slowly, his chin resting on Shane's bandaged head. "It is fast because I am never letting you go back to a place where you have to hide. You are a Rozanov now. We don't do 'slow.' we do 'forever.'"

Slowly, the frantic beeping of the monitor began to level out. Shane's hands, which had been clawing at Ilya's forearms, finally went limp. The panic was still there, a cold weight in his stomach, but the heat of Ilya's body was a more powerful reality, "I'm a Bear," Shane repeated, this time it sounded less like a crisis and more like an acceptance.

"You're mine," Ilya corrected. "The team is just where you work."

"What uh, what is wrong exactly with me?" Ilya sat in the dark, his eyes never leaving the glowing green line of the EKG. Every time the rhythm spiked, Ilya's hand tightened on Shane's, "It's too loud," Shane whispered, his voice strained from the pressure on his ribs. "The beeping."

"It's the only thing telling me you're still here," Ilya muttered, his thumb brushing the one spot on Shane's hand that wasn't bruised. "The doctors say your heart is bruised, Shane. You have to be still. You have to let us carry the weight for a while."

Shane tried to take a breath, but the cracked ribs caught, forcing a small wheeze of pain. "Lina... did she really get the cat?"

"She did," Ilya said, a ghost of a smile appearing. "And if you don't keep your heart rate down, she's going to tell the GM to trade Puck to the Rangers. So breathe. For me." Ilya paused, "Many things according to list, let me see." He pulled his phone from his pocket and looked it over, "Grade three concussion, cracked ribs, cardiac contusion - that is bruised heart, or so Lina tells me." Ilya breathed out, "And broken collarbone."

While Shane was being settled into the "West Wing Suite", a room reinforced with soundproofing and blackout curtains for his concussion, Rusik led the Hollanders across the manicured lawn to a sprawling, two-story stone cottage that the family referred to as the "Guest Cottage." *Cottage* was a massive understatement.

Yuna stepped inside and nearly tripped over the plush Persian rug. The interior was a masterclass in European luxury: vaulted ceilings, a fieldstone fireplace already roaring with a welcoming fire, and a kitchen stocked with enough organic recovery food to feed a small army, "This is... where we're staying?" Yuna asked, her voice echoing in the marble foyer. She looked at the fresh lilies on the mahogany table, the same flowers Irina had been arranging at the hospital.

"For as long as Shane is in recovery," Rusik said, leaning against the doorframe. "There's a direct intercom to the main house. If you want to see him, you call Svetlana. She'll coordinate with the nursing staff so we don't overwhelm his sensory load."

David walked to the window, looking back at the main compound. He could see the light in the upper window where he knew Shane was. "And the press? The Metros? Our lives back in Montreal?"

"Lina is handling the Metros. My mother-in-law is handling the press," Rusik said, his tone final. "As far as the world is concerned, Shane Hollander is at an undisclosed neurological facility undergoing elite treatment. No one knows he's here. No one gets past the gate."

Yuna sank into a velvet armchair, her head in her hands. The mom-ager was officially retired; there were no more schedules to build, no more brands to manage. She was in a gilded cage, protected by the very people she had spent years calling *thugs*, "He's not ours anymore, is he?" she whispered.

David sat on the arm of her chair, looking at Rusik. He saw the way the younger man stood almost relaxed, yet ready to kill or die for the people inside those walls, "He's everyone's now, Yuna," David said softly. "But mostly, he's exactly where he wants to be."

Downstairs, the breakfast had turned into a cold realization of the new world order. David was staring at the press release, his thumb hovering over the "Consultancy Fee" line in the digital contract Lina had left on the table, "You paid them," David said, looking at Filipp, who was calmly sipping his black coffee. "This isn't just a trade. You paid the Montreal ownership group a 'fee' that equals three years of Shane's salary. Just to let him go without a fight."

"We found that their ownership had some... liquidity issues," Filipp replied smoothly. "We provided a solution. In exchange, they provided a clean break. Your son is no longer a Metro, David. He is a Bear. But more importantly, he is a private citizen under our protection. The Metros have signed an NDA that would bankrupt their franchise if they ever speak of the 'real' reasons for this move."

Yuna looked out the window at the high stone walls. The realization was sinking in: the Dragunovs hadn't just saved Shane's life; they had bought his history.

"And Puck?" Yuna asked, remembering the one thing Shane loved more than his stats. "The cat?"

"Currently being escorted to the airport by two men who usually guard offshore accounts," Svetlana chimed in, entering the room with a fresh stack of tablets. "Honestly, that cat is going to have better security than the Prime Minister."

Upstairs, the door opened again. Lina walked in, but she wasn't carrying a tablet this time. She was carrying a heavy, high-quality garment bag. She draped it over the chair at the foot of the bed and unzipped it with a sharp, decisive zip. The black and gold of the Boston Bears jersey seemed to glow in the dim light. On the back, in bold white lettering, was **HOLLANDER**, and right above it, the Captain's 'C' had been replaced with an 'A'.

"You're a Bear, Shane," Lina said, her voice unusually quiet. "And since Ilya refuses to give up his 'C', you're his Alternate. You start training the second the doctors clear your scans. Together." Shane looked at the jersey, then at Ilya, who was looking at him like he was the only thing in the world that mattered.

"I think Puck is going to look good in black and gold," Shane whispered, a small, exhausted laugh finally breaking through, Lina rolled her eyes helplessly as she looked at Ilya, who only grinned.

The dining room of the Rozanov-Dragunov estate felt less like a breakfast nook and more like a high-stakes closing room. The scent of expensive coffee and sourdough toast mingled with the clinical, metallic tang of the legal documents sitting on the mahogany table. Rusik slid two thick, black leather folders toward David and Yuna. Inside were the non-disclosure agreements; not the standard league paperwork, but the kind of ironclad contracts the family used to protect their international interests, "If you want to stay in the West Wing, and if you want to be part of Shane's recovery, you sign," Rusik said, his voice as steady as a heartbeat. "This ensures that what you see in this house, the medical equipment, the security, and the nature of my brother's relationship with your son, never leaves these walls."

David picked up a heavy fountain pen, his eyes scanning the clauses. "This says that if we speak to the press without authorization, the family can seize our assets in Canada."

"It's a deterrent," Lina chimed in, leaning back with a smug, cat-like grin. "Think of it as a safety net. It ensures you don't have a 'moment of weakness' with a reporter from the Montreal Gazette." Yuna looked at the pen, then at the high-security monitors mounted subtly in the corner of the room. She was about to protest when the heavy front doors groaned open. The sound of heavy tactical boots echoed on the marble. Sergei, a man who looked like he could bench-press a mid-sized sedan, walked into the dining hall. He looked profoundly out of place, not because of his scars or his scowl, but because of the sleek, carbon-fiber pet carrier he was holding with the tips of his fingers.

Inside the carrier, a disgruntled, long-haired tabby was let out a low, vibrating growl, "The... package... has arrived," Sergei grunted, looking at the carrier as if it might explode. "He tried to bite the pilot. Twice."

"Puck!" Yuna gasped, standing up.

"Don't touch the cage, Mrs. Hollander," Svetlana warned, tapping away at her tablet. "He's had a stressful flight, and he's currently under the same security protocol as the rest of the family. Sergei, take him up to the West Wing. Shane's heart rate is finally stable, and the doctors think a 'sensory anchor' might help the concussion fog." Sergei looked at the cat. The cat hissed back. The giant man sighed, turned on his heel, and began the trek up the grand staircase, followed closely by a curious Niko.

The distraction of the cat seemed to break the last of the Hollanders' resistance. David looked at Yuna, saw the exhaustion in her eyes, and signed the document with a sharp, decisive flourish. Yuna followed suit, her signature trembling slightly, "Welcome to the inner circle," Lina said, snapping the folders shut. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go deal with the NHL Commissioner. He's under the impression that we need to provide a 'public medical update' by noon. I'm going to go explain to him why that's a terrible idea."

As Lina swept out of the room, Rusik stood up. "The cat is upstairs. Ilya is waiting. You can see him now, but remember: Shane's ribs are fragile, his collarbone is braced, and his heart is bruised. If you upset him, Sergei will personally escort you back to the guest house."

Upstairs, the heavy oak door creaked open. Ilya was still in his chair, but his head was turned toward the door as Sergei deposited the carrier on the rug, "Puck?" Shane's voice was a mere rasp, but his eyes lit up with a clarity they hadn't had all morning.

Ilya reached down and unlatched the door. The cat didn't bolt; he crept out with the cautious, arrogant grace of a creature who knew he was the center of attention. Puck sniffed the air, looked at the IV pole with deep suspicion, and then leaped, with surprising gentleness, onto the edge of the bed. The cat didn't head for Shane's chest; he seemed to sense the injury, instead curling up right against Shane's good hip, purring with a frequency that rivaled the hum of the heart monitor.

"He's here," Shane whispered, his hand shaking as he reached down to scratch behind Puck's ears.

"Everything is here," Ilya murmured, leaning over to press his forehead against Shane's. "The cat, your parents, your new contract, me. You just have to heal." As David and Yuna hovered in the doorway, watching their son find peace in the heart of a Russian stronghold on American soil, the heart monitor's steady *beep... beep... beep...* finally settled into a perfect, healthy rhythm. They watched as Ilya bent down and kissed Shane, then rubbed Puck's head - the cat let out a sweet purr.

The sports world didn't just react to the news; it suffered a collective nervous breakdown. By 12:01 PM, the "Trade of the Century" was the only thing appearing on every screen from Vancouver to Vladivostok. While Shane lay in a darkened room in Brookline, the rest of the world was screaming. TSN had gone into a "Breaking News" loop, with analysts staring at the trade terms in stunned silence.

The official line: Hollander traded to Boston for "medical oversight" and a historic haul of picks, was being picked apart by every Twitter scout with a wifi connection.

Montreal was in mourning. Fans were filmed burning #24 jerseys outside the Bell Centre, while Boston fans were already lining up at the ProShop to custom-order "Hollander" sweaters in black and gold.

"How does a Captain get traded while he's in a neck brace?" was the trending question. The "Consultancy Fee" remained a ghost in the machine, buried under layers of Dragunov shell companies, but the sheer speed of the move felt like a heist.

Lina stood in the command center of the estate, watching four different news feeds. "Look at them," she murmured to Ruslan. "They think it's about hockey. They think we're building a roster."

"We are," Ruslan replied, checking a perimeter feed. "We're just building it around a heart instead of a trophy." He pressed a kiss to the back of her head, proud in a way that spoke volumes. He was a clever, cold man, but his wife was brilliant in ways he would never be. She turned in his arms, pouting up at him until he ducked down to kiss her and whispered, "I love you, Мой маленький бешеный монстр." <<*My little rabid monster.*>>

An hour later, the "inner circle" gathered in the West Wing sitting room, just outside Shane's bedroom door. The clinical smell of the hospital had been replaced by the scent of expensive tea and the faint, grounding aroma of Sergei's tobacco from the balcony. Irina sat on the velvet sofa, her posture perfect. Filipp stood behind her, a silent, watchful shadow. David and Yuna sat opposite them, looking like they had been hollowed out. Rusik, Lina, and Svetlana leaned against various pieces of antique furniture, forming a literal wall of Bratva youth.

"We should start with the truth," Irina said, her voice soft but carrying the weight of a decree. "Because for three years, our sons have been living a lie that nearly killed one of them tonight."

David leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees. "I watched the tape. I've watched every game Shane has played against Ilya. They hit each other. They slashed each other. Ilya once put Shane into the boards so hard he missed two shifts. You're telling me that was... what? Foreplay?"

"It was survival," Ilya said. He had stepped out of the bedroom, leaving the door cracked so he could hear the heart monitor. He looked exhausted, his jersey replaced by a black hoodie, his eyes dark. "If we didn't play hard, the scouts would notice. If we were 'soft' on each other, the media would start asking why the two best centers in the world were suddenly acting like teammates. We had to be enemies so we could be together."

Yuna shook her head, her eyes red-rimmed. "But the secrets, Ilya. The burner phones? Driving four hours in the middle of a blizzard just to spend three hours in a basement apartment? Shane is the face of the league. He had everything."

"He had nothing," Lina interrupted, her voice sharp. "He had a mother who managed his 'brand,' a team that treated him like a vending machine for goals, and a spotlight that didn't let him breathe. My brother gave him a home. We plan to give him a family that doesn't care about his jersey sales."

"We are not a normal family, David," Filipp said, speaking for the first time. He looked David in the eye, man to man. "You are a hockey player. You understand teams. We are a *Vory* legacy. We protect our own with a violence that your world doesn't understand. When Shane saved Ilya—when he chose to stay in that house and protect my son instead of calling the police and ending his career... he stopped being a 'Hollander' in our eyes. He became a Rozanov-Dragunov."

"He saved Ilya, more than metaphorically?" Yuna whispered, looking at David. "He never told us."

"Because he knew you'd make him leave," Ilya said, his voice flat. "He knew you'd see the danger and not the loyalty. He chose us. He's been choosing us for three years, even if he didn't realize it. I tried to..." He hung his head, "There was a darkness, I wanted to die. I thought I could end everything, he was so far away... he stayed, made sure I wasn't dead, took care of me."

The room went silent, the only sound the distant, rhythmic beep from the bedroom, "What happens now?" David asked. "He's a Bear. He's living here. But the world is going to want to see him. The Metros' fans want blood. The league wants an interview."

"The world gets what we give them," Svetlana said, tapping her tablet. "I've already mapped out the 'Recovery Vlogs.' We'll release controlled snippets of Shane in physical therapy. No Ilya. No Rozanovs. No Dragunovs. Just Shane, looking brave and 'recovering' in a high-end facility. By the time he's cleared to play, the narrative will be so focused on his 'miraculous return' that no one will notice he's moved into a fortress."

"And us?" Yuna asked, looking at Irina. "Where do we fit into this 'controlled' life?"

Irina stood up and walked over to Yuna, sitting beside her. She took Yuna's hand, not as a gesture of friendship, but as one of shared burden. "You are his parents. You will always be his parents. But you have to understand: the Hollander name is now tied to the Rozanov-Dragunov name. If you speak against us, you hurt Shane. If you betray us, you lose him. But if you stay... you will see a version of your son that is actually happy. For the first time since he was drafted."

David looked at the cracked door, seeing the edge of the bed where his son lay, finally asleep without a camera in his face. He looked at Ilya, who was leaning against the doorframe, guarding the entrance like a sentinel, "He really loves him, doesn't he?" David asked.

"He would burn this city down to keep Shane's heart beating," Rusik said simply. "And Lina would probably bill the city for the matches."

"I would," Lina agreed, unrepentant.

"We stay," David said, looking at Yuna. "We stay until he's on his feet. And then... we figure out how to be part of this circus."

"Good," Filipp said, the ghost of a smile touching his lips. "Sergei will show you where the gym is. If you're going to be part of this family, David, you need to learn how to handle a weapon. The 'Golden Boy' is dead. We need to make sure the man who replaced him stays alive."

The transition from "International Hockey Star" to "Protected Asset of the Dragunov Dynasty" happened in the quiet, sterile pauses between pain medication doses. The West Wing didn't feel like a hospital anymore; it felt like a sanctuary at the edge of the world. The first vlog was a masterpiece of misdirection. Svetlana set up the ring light in a corner of the sunroom that looked sufficiently like a high-end medical suite. Shane sat in a recliner, his right arm immobilized in a sleek, black medical brace, his "A" patched Boston jersey draped over his shoulders. The bruising on his jaw had faded to a yellowish-green, though his eyes still lacked their usual spark.

"Just look at the lens, Shane," Svetlana directed, her voice cool and professional. "Tell them you're focused on the process. Tell them the Bears' medical staff is 'world-class.' Don't mention the soup. Don't mention the snipers." Ilya was sitting on the floor just outside the camera's frame, his hand resting firmly on Shane's knee, a grounding weight that kept the "room spinning" at bay.

"I'm... I'm doing okay," Shane said to the camera, his voice raspy but steady. "The support from the fans has been incredible. It's a long road back, but I'm in the best possible hands. See you soon, Boston."

The moment the red light went off, Shane slumped. Ilya was up instantly, tucking a pillow behind Shane's head. "You did well, *малыш*," Ilya whispered. "The world thinks you're in a clinic. They don't know you're in a kingdom." <<*baby*>>. Shane huffed as Ilya lifted him back into his bed, his taller beloved crawling in with him, and kissing him gently, "Sleep, you did good."

As the days blurred into weeks, the fortress revealed its true nature. To the outside world, it was an impenetrable stronghold of the Bratva. To those inside, it was a place where reality was whatever Lina and Rusik decided it was. When Shane mentioned he missed the sound of the ocean, a massive saltwater aquarium appeared in his sitting room forty-eight hours later. When he lamented that he couldn't play cards because his arm was braced, a custom-built, voice-activated card shuffler was installed on his bedside table.

Yuna watched from the doorway as Irina stirred a pot of borscht, the older woman moving with a quiet, lethal grace. Yuna had tried to help once, but Irina had simply handed her a glass of wine and pointed to a chair, "In this house, we do not 'hover,'" Irina had said firmly. "We provide. If Shane wants for nothing, he heals faster." Yuna realized then that she was no

longer the manager. She was a guest in a hive where every bee was armed and every honey-cell was filled with a dream. She deferred to Lina, who managed the household's rhythm with a ruthless efficiency that made Yuna's old PR firm look like a lemonade stand.

Because Ilya still had a season to finish, his nights were spent on the road or at the Garden. During those long, lonely hours when the concussion-induced nightmares crept in, it wasn't the nurses who stayed with Shane, it was Lina. She would sit in the armchair by his bed, a deck of cards in her hand, flipping them with a rhythmic snap-snap-snap. She told him Russian bedtime stories—not the sanitized versions, but the dark, ancient tales of Ivan the Fool and the Firebird.

"In Russia," Lina murmured one night, dealing a hand of Durak onto his duvet, "the hero doesn't win because he is the strongest. He wins because he is the one who refuses to die. You are the Firebird, Shane. You fell out of the sky, and now you are burning a hole in my brother's heart. It's very inconvenient for his stats."

Shane laughed, the sound catching on his cracked ribs. "I'm sorry about his stats, Lina."

"Don't be," she smirked. "He's playing like a man possessed. He scores a goal and points to the sky, and the fans think he's being religious. I know he's just checking the wind direction toward home."

The most surprising therapy, however, came from the children. Niko and the younger twins had claimed Shane as their own. They didn't see the "Golden Boy." They saw the man who had sat in the dark with them when the world was loud.

They would creep into his room in the afternoons, bringing their drawings and their plastic hockey sticks. They treated Puck the cat like a minor deity, draping him in handmade "Bears" ribbons, "Ilya says you're going to teach me the backhand," Niko whispered one afternoon, sitting cross-legged at the foot of Shane's bed while Puck groomed himself on his lap. "When your heart isn't purple anymore."

"I will, Niko," Shane promised, his eyes soft. "I'll teach you the one that beats the goalies in Montreal."

The world at large now understood the new rules. A subtle but terrifying message had been sent through the underground channels: Shane Hollander is off-limits. A photographer who had tried to drone-film the estate's courtyard found his equipment vaporized and his bank account frozen. A reporter who tried to corner David at a grocery store was "escorted" home by two men who didn't say a word but looked like they had stepped out of a nightmare.

Even the cat was protected. Sergei had personally commissioned a high-tech collar for Puck that tracked his vitals and location. Puck, for his part, had taken to sleeping on Sergei's boots, the only living thing in the house brave enough to treat the giant like a footstool. Inside the fortress, Shane was safe. He was healing. He was a prince in a kingdom where the walls were made of stone, the soup was made of love, and the future was being written in black and gold.

The West Wing was no longer a quiet recovery suite; it had become the pulsing heart of the estate. The heavy, gold-leafed doors were almost always propped open, allowing the chaotic, joyful energy of the next generation of the Rozanov-Dragunov dynasty to spill inside. Dmitriy and Nadia, the youngest of the brood, had decided that Shane's oversized bed was the safest place in the world. They would scramble up the silk duvet, their small bodies curling into Shane's good side with the practiced ease of kittens.

"Again, Shanezhka," Nadia would whisper, her dark curls tickling his chin. "Tell the one about the Golden Bird."

Shane looked over at Lina, who was leaning against the doorway with a deck of cards. She was the one who had first dropped the diminutive, her voice casual but the meaning heavy: Shanezhka. Little Shane. A term of endearment that marked him as theirs, "You heard the lady, Shanezhka," Lina smirked. "But use the Russian words Ruslan taught you. If you're going to be their favorite storyteller, you have to do it properly."

Shane smiled, his hand resting protectively over the two sleeping children. He began the fable, weaving in the rough, melodic Russian nouns Ruslan had been drilling into him during their morning sessions - *ptitsa* for bird, *zoloto* for gold, *skazka* for story.

Physical therapy was no longer a grueling chore led by a stoic trainer. Instead, it was a comedy routine led by Samvel, Sabina, and little Georgi. The six-year-old twins took their jobs very seriously. Samvel would hold the stopwatch with a look of intense concentration, while Sabina "assisted" by handing Shane his water bottle every thirty seconds. Georgi, only

five, was in charge of "morale," which mostly involved giggling and cheering whenever Shane managed a set of resistance band pulls.

"Why aren't you guys in school?" Shane asked one afternoon, breathless from a set of shoulder rotations.

"We go to school here!" Sabina chirped, pointing toward the East Wing. "Until we're big. Then we go to the Academy, but they let us come home every night because Papa says we aren't 'boarding' people." Shane realized then how deep the protective streak ran. Even their education was a fortress: a private, elite world that made exceptions for the family name, ensuring the children were never truly beyond the reach of the estate's walls.

When the younger kids napped, the older set took over. Niko and Misha would sprawl across the foot of the bed with their laptops and gaming controllers, "Shane, look at my roster," Misha complained, shoving an NHL video game screen toward him. "The AI traded my best defenseman for a bag of pucks. How do I fix the chemistry?"

Shane, the ultimate tactician, would spend hours helping them build out their digital teams. He didn't just play; he taught. He explained the geometry of the ice, the psychology of a power play, and the subtle art of the pest. They soaked it up like parched earth, their eyes wide with hero worship, "When you can skate again," Niko whispered, "will you show us how to do the no-look pass? Ilya says he's too busy scoring to teach us fancy stuff."

"I'll show you everything," Shane promised, settling his bones more firmly into the structure of the household.

His lessons with Ruslan always happened late at night or early in the morning. As the sun dipped below the tree line, Ruslan entered the room, carrying a small glass of amber liquid for himself and a specialized protein shake for Shane, "Repeat after me, Shanezhka," Ruslan said, sitting in the chair Ilya usually occupied. "Ya doma."

Shane looked at the kids asleep on his bed, the cat curled at his feet, and the jersey hanging on the wardrobe, "Ya doma," Shane repeated. << *I am home.* >> It didn't feel like a lie.

Downstairs, a different kind of education was happening. Irina and Lina had taken Yuna and David under their wings, guiding them through the transition from *Suburban Parents* to *Bratva-Adjacent*. "The world you knew is a shadow, Yuna," Irina said softly as they sat in the sunroom, watching the security detail cycle through their shift change. "You worry about the 'brand' because you think it provides security. In this house, we provide the security so the brand can be whatever we want it to be."

Yuna watched as Lina expertly navigated a conference call with the league office while simultaneously ordering a custom-built, armored SUV for David. There was no panic, no PR crisis. There was only the calculated application of power. David and Yuna were beginning to see the *Kingdom of Dreams* for what it was. It wasn't just about the money; it was the fact that within these walls, the Canadian Golden Boy was allowed to be human, and his parents were allowed to stop being his managers.

Ilya had all but abandoned his Boston house in order to integrate back into the compound until such time Shane was ready to leave it (which Ilya realized might never come to pass, and he was mostly ok with that). The air in the West Wing changed before the front doors even opened. There was a specific frequency to the house when Ilya was home like a tightening of the atmosphere, a collective exhale from the security detail, and a sudden, sharp focus in the eyes of every child. Ilya didn't stop to take off his suit jacket. He didn't check in with Rusik or Lina. He moved through the estate with the singular, predatory grace of a man who had been starved of his oxygen for three days.

When Ilya pushed open the doors to his bedroom, he stopped dead. His sanctuary, usually a place of minimalist shadows and cold precision, had been utterly colonized. Puck the cat was sprawled across Ilya's silk pillows. Nadia and Dmitriy were fast asleep, their small limbs tangled around Shane's good side. Misha was slumped in the armchair, an NHL playbook resting on his chest, and the room smelled of Irina's medicinal soup and the faint, sweet scent of the kids' shampoo. Shane looked up from a Russian vocabulary sheet, his eyes instantly locking onto Ilya's. The weariness of the road trip, the bruises from the games, the glare of the stadium lights, seemed to slough off Ilya's shoulders the moment their eyes met, "You're home," Shane whispered, careful not to wake the litter of children pinned to his side.

"You are learning my language." Ilya walked to the edge of the bed, his presence looming and warm. He reached down, his large hand cupping Shane's jaw with a tenderness that would have baffled his teammates. "You look... better," Ilya murmured, his thumb tracing the

fading yellow bruise on Shane's neck. "You look like you belong here, Shanezhka." Shane blushed under Ilya's gaze.

Shane smirked at the name. "Lina's been teaching the kids to call me that. I think I've lost my 'Golden Boy' status. I'm just the neighborhood storyteller now."

Ilya leaned down, pressing a lingering, possessive kiss to Shane's forehead. "Good. The Golden Boy was for everyone, public knowledge. Shanezhka is private, for family only." He ducked then, to kiss Shane's lips softly. Three hours later, the house was truly silent. The children had been carried off to their own beds by Sergei and Irina, and the Hollanders were asleep in the guest house. Ilya didn't use the main lights when he led Shane down to the estate's private rink. He used the dim, blue perimeter LEDs, casting the ice in a ghostly, ethereal glow. Shane was bundled in a heavy Bears hoodie, his right arm still braced, but his skates, sharpened to a lethal edge by Sergei, were laced tight.

"I shouldn't be doing this," Shane whispered, the cold air hitting his lungs and making his cracked ribs ache with a familiar, nostalgic sting. "If your team doctor saw this, he'd have a stroke."

"The team doctor doesn't work for the Draganovs," Ilya said, stepping onto the ice first and reaching back a hand. "I do. And I say you need to feel the glide." Shane took Ilya's hand, stepping onto the ice for the first time since the hit. The world stopped spinning. The vertigo that had haunted him for weeks vanished, replaced by the perfect, frictionless slide of steel on frozen water. Ilya didn't let go. He skated backward, pulling Shane slowly into the center of the rink. He kept his body close, a human shield against the cold, his eyes watching Shane's every breath, "Slowly," Ilya commanded. "Just the edges, Shanezhka."

They moved in silence, two shadows weaving through the blue light. For the first time in years, there was no crowd, no scoreboard, and no *Battle of the Centers*. There was just the rhythmic shh-shh of their blades and the feeling of Ilya's heart beating through his chest as he held Shane steady. Shane leaned his head against Ilya's shoulder, closing his eyes. He wasn't the captain of the Metros anymore. He wasn't a PR golden boy with perfectly curated answers and too tight smiles. He was just a man on the ice with the only person who had ever truly seen him, "I can do this," Shane whispered into the dark. "I can come back."

"You already have," Ilya replied, pulling him into a slow, tight circle. "You're home."

The transition from the *Kingdom of Dreams* to the cold, industrial reality of an NHL practice facility was a shock to the system. The Boston Bears' training center was a cathedral of glass, steel, and high-performance anxiety. As the armored SUV pulled into the private players' lot, Shane felt the familiar flutter of pre-game nerves, but this time it was different. He wasn't the visiting captain anymore. He was the most expensive, most controversial *medical miracle* in the history of the sport.

Ilya didn't just walk into the building; he carved a path through it. He kept his hand on the small of Shane's back, a silent warning to the gathered trainers and staff. Behind them, Sergei loomed like a thundercloud, carrying Shane's new gear bag, while Lina walked a few paces ahead, her eyes scanning the hallways for any unauthorized cameras, "Head up, Shanezhka," Ilya murmured as they approached the heavy double doors of the locker room. "You aren't a guest. You're the missing piece."

The room went dead silent when they entered. Thirty sets of eyes tracked them. The formal rivals were now a unified front, and the visual of the two greatest rivals in the league standing side-by-side in matching black-and-gold tracksuits was enough to make the veterans blink. In the far corner, Cliff Marleau, the man whose hit had started this entire domino effect, was taping his stick. He froze, his face pale. The room held its breath. Since the trade, the locker room had been a powder keg; half the team was thrilled to have Hollander, the other half was terrified of what the Rozanov-Dragunov influence meant for their job security.

Ilya's posture shifted, his shoulders squaring, the *Ice King* persona clicking into place. But Shane stepped forward first. His collarbone was still braced under his shirt, and his breathing was still a bit shallow from the bruised ribs, but his gaze was level. "Cliff," Shane said, his voice carrying through the silence.

Marleau stood up slowly. "Hollander. I... look, I didn't mean to—"

"I know," Shane interrupted, his voice steady. "It was a hockey play. But you're a Bear, and I'm a Bear, now. Which means the next time you hit someone that hard, make sure they're wearing a Montreal jersey." A few of the younger players let out a nervous chuckle, the tension in the room snapping like a broken twig. Marleau nodded, a look of profound relief washing over him. He held out a gloved hand, and Shane took it carefully, but firmly.

The practice wasn't a full-contact scrimmage; it was a "return to play" protocol. The coaching staff had been briefed by Lina (and intimidated by Sergei), so the drills were designed to keep Shane in the clear. When Shane stepped onto the ice in a non-contact red jersey, the sound of sticks tapping against the boards echoed through the rafters. It was the ultimate sign of hockey respect. He and Ilya skated the first lap together. No pucks, no whistles, just the two of them, "Look at them," Lina whispered to the GM in the observation booth. "They're already calculating the power play. By the time Shane is cleared for contact, this league is going to be playing for second place."

That evening, back at the estate, the atmosphere was bittersweet. The Hollanders' bags were packed and sitting by the front door. The private jet was fueled and waiting at Logan International. Yuna stood in the foyer, looking at her son. He looked different: older, certainly, but more settled. The frantic *Golden Boy* energy had been replaced by a quiet, iron-clad confidence, "We're heading back to Montreal, Shane," David said, pulling his son into a careful hug, mindful of the ribs. "We have to clear out the condo. We have to... we have to figure out what 'normal' looks like without a schedule."

"Visit often," Shane said, his voice thick. "The kids will be devastated if you don't. Nadia already thinks you're her new grandmother, Mom." Yuna looked at Irina, who was standing nearby. The two women shared a look—one of mutual understanding. The NDAs were signed, the secrets were kept, and the alliance was formed.

"We'll be back for the home opener," Yuna promised, reaching out to squeeze Ilya's hand. "Take care of him, Ilya. If I see a single bruise on him that isn't from a puck, I'm calling the Commissioner."

Ilya gave a rare, respectful nod. "He is home, Mrs. Hollander. He is safe." As the SUV pulled away, taking David and Yuna toward the gates of the fortress, Shane stood on the porch with Ilya, Lina, and the pack of children. He felt the cold Boston air, saw the flash of the snipers on the roof, and felt the weight of the Rozanov-Dragunov legacy around him. For the first time in his life, he didn't have a PR plan. He just had a family, and that felt more freeing than anything else he'd ever encountered.

The quiet of the estate was a fragile thing, easily shattered by the digital roar of the outside world. While the "Medical Recovery" narrative had bought them time, the sheer physics of two young, attractive, and historically rivalrous superstars living under the same roof was

starting to strain the public's suspension of disbelief. It started with a "leaked" grainy photo of Ilya's SUV leaving the practice facility with two silhouettes in the front seat. Then came the deep dives. Fans on X (formerly Twitter) and Reddit began compiling "The Timeline."

@HockeyHeartbeat: "Are we really ignoring that Ilya walked off the ice mid-game to follow Shane to the hospital? I've seen teammates stay on for a Cup win with a broken leg, but Rozanov left a tie game for a 'rival'?"

The Athletic (Speculation Piece): The Bromance of the Century or Something More? Why the Hollander-Rozanov Trade Feels Like a Marriage Contract.

PuckCheck Magazine: A cover story titled "The Fortress of Boston," featuring a long-lens shot of Shane and Ilya walking the estate grounds, Shane's hand resting—just a second too long—on Ilya's arm.

The speculation reached a fever pitch. The "Are they lovers?" threads were garnering millions of views. The narrative was slipping out of the Dragunovs' hands, and in this family, that was unacceptable. Lina called a "summit" in the library. She had printouts of the most viral tweets and a digital mock-up of an upcoming Sports Illustrated cover, "The 'friends' narrative is dead," Lina said, tossing a tablet onto the coffee table. "People aren't stupid. They see the way Ilya looks at you, Shanezhka. He looks like he's ready to bite the head off anyone who breathes your air. We can either let them invent a scandal, or we can give them a truth they can't argue with."

Shane looked at Ilya, who was leaning against the bookshelf, his jaw set in a hard, protective line. "You want us to come out," Shane said, the weight of the word hanging in the air. His literal nightmare come to life, Ilya took his hand, pulled his wrist up and kissed his pulsepoint.

"I want you to claim your territory," Lina corrected. "We tell them you've known each other since the U16 Prospects Camp. We tell them you've been best friends and 'confidants' through the draft. And we tell them that the hit in Boston made you realize that life is too short to live in two different cities."

"They'll say it's a conflict of interest," Ilya grumbled.

"It's not a conflict if you're on the same team," Lina countered. "That's why I bought your contract, Shane. To make the 'conflict' a 'chemistry' story. We do one sit-down interview. One. With a journalist I've already... vetted." The way she said that let Shane know this journalist was one on the take and two pointedly too fucking scared of Lina to do anything remotely stupid.

The interview took place in the library of the estate. The lighting was warm, the mood intimate. Shane sat on the leather sofa, his posture relaxed despite the brace, with Ilya sitting close enough that their shoulders brushed. The interviewer was a pretty girl named Rose Landry, she and Svetlana smiled at each other just a little too long to be just friends, but neither Ilya nor Shane felt the need to comment on that. She was apologetic before the interview, and went through the list with Lina on what she couldn't ask like this was normal for her.

Once they were sat down in the library, Rose jumped in quick and efficient, "The world is calling this the 'Trade of the Century,' but the rumors are calling it something else. Shane, how long has Ilya Rozanov really been in your life?"

Shane took a breath, feeling Ilya's warmth beside him. "Since I was sixteen. We met at a the Prospect World Cup in Regina Everyone expected us to hate each other because of the rankings, but... we just clicked. It started as hockey, and then it became a friendship that survived three years of playing for rival cities."

With practiced ease, Rose asked, "And now?"

Ilya didn't wait for Shane to answer. He reached out, his large hand covering Shane's in plain view of the cameras. "Now, there is no more Montreal. There is no more 'rivalry.' Shane is my partner. He has been for a long time. The hit... It changed our perspective. I wasn't going to let him go back to a city where I couldn't protect him."

Rose visibly swooned over the statement. When they wrapped up she offered, "I'm on the payroll around here, but if either of you ever want to hang out, Sveta can get me here." With

that she ducked off giggling with Svetlana who kissed her cheek loudly as they disappeared into the hallway.

The clip hit the internet like a tidal wave.

@NHL_Update: "CONFIRMED: Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov have been in a dedicated relationship since before they were drafted. The 'Battle of the Centers' was a cover."

Vanity Fair: The Ice King and the Golden Boy: How Hockey's Greatest Secret Became Its Greatest Power Couple.

The reaction was a chaotic mix of shock, support, and "I knew it!" memes involving Puck the cat. The Dragunov name was never mentioned in the broadcast, but the message to the league was clear: They were a unit. A brand. A kingdom. In the West Wing that night, after the cameras had packed up and the house was quiet, Shane leaned into Ilya's side. "Was it worth it?" Shane asked, looking at his phone as the notifications rolled in—millions of people finally knowing who he was.

Ilya didn't look at the phone. He looked at Shane, pulling him into a slow, deep kiss that tasted like relief. "I don't care about the world, Shanezhka. I just like that I don't have to hide your cat in my luggage anymore."

The atmosphere at TD Garden wasn't just electric; it was combustible. This wasn't just a hockey game; it was a cultural shift. The Hollander-Rozanov Generational Rivalry had officially become the "United Front," and the hockey world was watching with bated breath—and in the case of Toronto, with a sneer. The paparazzi outside the VIP entrance nearly blinded the security detail as the Rozanov-Dragunov motorcade arrived. David and Yuna Hollander walked in first, looking remarkably composed in tailored charcoal overcoats, flanked by two of Sergei's best men.

But the air truly left the room when the three women following them stepped out. Lina was a vision of lethal elegance. She wore a shimmering, architectural silver mini-dress that caught every flashbulb, looking like she'd been forged in a high-end foundry. Over it, she draped a thick, black fur peacoat that screamed old-world power. On her left was Svetlana, looking sharp in a deep emerald suit, and on her right was Rose, radiating a quiet, dangerous sophistication. "They aren't just here to watch a game," one reporter whispered. "They're here to remind everyone who owns the ice here in Boston."

The first period countdown ended abruptly. The puck hadn't even hit the ice before the chirping started. The Toronto bench was loud, and their comments weren't about Shane's stats. The words being tossed toward Shane were ugly, archaic, and meant to draw blood. Ilya heard every syllable.

Three minutes into the game, a Toronto defenseman took a late, unnecessary run at Shane's injured side. He didn't connect, but the intent was there. Before the whistle could even blow, Ilya was a blur of black and gold. He didn't just hit the guy; he decimated him into the boards.

Penalty: 2 minutes for Roughing.

Ilya sat in the box, his eyes fixed on the Toronto bench like a wolf watching a herd of sheep. Every time Shane took a hit, Ilya found a way to make someone pay. By the end of the first, the score was 0-0, but the penalty minutes were already staggering.

The second period shifted. The Toronto squad realized that chirping wasn't working rather it was just making the Bears more violent. Shane, despite the brace and the lingering ache in his ribs, began to find his rhythm.

And then it happened. Ilya won a faceoff, pulled the puck back to the point, and instead of taking the shot, he threaded a blind, backhand pass through three defenders. He knew exactly where Shane was without looking. Shane caught the puck on his tape, spun, and fired a wrist shot that caught the top corner of the net.

The Garden erupted. Shane skated toward the corner, and Ilya met him there, pulling him into a brief, fierce embrace. It wasn't a *teammate* hug; it was a declaration. In the VIP box, Lina

stood up, letting her fur coat slip an inch off her shoulder, a cold, triumphant smile on her face as she looked down at the stunned Toronto fans.

Score: 1-0, Boston.

Toronto turned desperate. The comments got louder, and the hits got dirtier. Ilya spent nearly half the period in the penalty box: five minutes for fighting after he dropped the gloves with a player who called Shane a slur, and another two for cross-checking. Every time Ilya was in the box, he looked at Shane, and every time Shane looked back, he nodded. *I've got this.*

With two minutes left, Toronto pulled their goalie. The pressure was immense. Shane took a hard slash to the ankles, but he didn't go down. He swiped the puck, looked up, and saw Ilya—just out of the box—streaking down the wing. Shane didn't take the empty-netter for himself. He passed it. Ilya buried it.

The buzzer sounded. **2-0, Boston.**

As the teams lined up to leave the ice, the Toronto captain tried to get one last word in. Ilya didn't even let him get close. He stepped between Shane and the opposing team, his stick held low, his expression utterly void of mercy.

In the tunnels, the media was waiting, but they were met by Sergei and Lina, "Mr. Hollander and Mr. Rozanov will not be taking questions about 'personal' comments made on the ice," Lina announced, her silver dress glittering under the fluorescent lights as she stood between the locker room and the press. "If Toronto wants to talk about performance, they can look at the scoreboard. If they want to talk about anything else, they can talk to my legal team."

Inside the locker room, away from the noise, Shane slumped onto the bench, exhausted and aching. Ilya was there instantly, dropping to one knee to help Shane unlace his skates, "You okay, Shanezhka?" Ilya asked, his voice low and private.

Shane looked at the "A" on his chest, then at the "C" on Ilya's. He looked at the chaos outside the door and the safety inside the room. "I'm perfect," Shane whispered. "Let's go home."

The Garden had barely cleared out before the internet began its two-pronged assault: dissecting the legendary chemistry of the "Bruise Brothers" on ice and worshipping at the altar of Lina's sartorial warfare. By the time the motorcade reached the estate gates, Lina's outfit was already the top-trending topic on X and Instagram. The contrast of the industrial, sharp-edged silver dress against the sheer bulk of the black fur peacoat had created an image of power that transcended sports.

@HighFashionPuck: "Lina didn't come to a hockey game. She came to a coronation. That dress says 'I own your team,' and the fur says 'And I'll bury you in the woods behind it.' 10/10."

@BruinsBabe88: "Can we talk about the power move of the Hollanders sitting in the Rozanov-Dragunov box? The alliance is real. The silver dress is the new armor. #SilverLina #HollanderRozanov"

Vogue Digital: Lina Dragunov Redefines 'WAG' Style: How the Silver Shield Mini-Dress Became the Night's True MVP.

Lina was scrolling through the comments in the back of the SUV, a faint, predatory smirk on her lips. "They're calling it 'Armor Chic,'" she noted to Svetlana. "Excellent. That's exactly what it is."

"It's a statement of wealth and privilege." Rose countered.

"And it's so fucking cunt." Svetlana added, kicking at Lina who flipped her off.

"What can I say, I am not jumping, but I will die to settle scores." The attitude had both Rose and Svetlana cackling, both with the honesty and the open unabashed grin on Lina's face. "Rusik is going to be so happy about this." She added, already grinning. "He loves when I trend, likes the world to see what is *his*."

The dining hall of the estate was transformed. Gone were the tablets and the medical files; in their place were white linens, heavy silver, and a feast that represented both the Russian and Canadian hearts of the new household. Irina had outdone herself. There was traditional Coulibiac and Pelmeni, but also a massive, perfectly seared prime rib that David Hollander had personally helped the chef oversee.

Shane sat at the center, still glowing from the win but visibly drained. He had swapped his jersey for a soft cashmere sweater, and Puck the cat was already back in his rightful place happily anchored to Shane's lap as if he hadn't left for a second. Ilya sat beside him, his hand never leaving the back of Shane's chair. "To the first of many," Filipp announced, raising a glass of vintage red wine. "To the boys who proved that a house divided cannot stand, but a house united... well, it wins 2-0."

"And to Ilya's disciplinary record," Rusik toasted with a wicked grin. "Thirteen penalty minutes in one game? You're going to be on a first-name basis with every ref in the Eastern Conference by Christmas."

David laughed, clinking his glass against Rusik's. "If they keep chirping Shane like that, I'll pay his fines myself."

As the meal progressed, the tension that had defined the Hollanders' arrival finally dissolved. Yuna was deep in conversation with Lina, discussing the logistics of a joint foundation. They weren't fighting over Shane's brand anymore; they were building a fortress around his happiness. "You look beautiful tonight, Lina," Yuna said, her voice genuine. "That dress... it was a statement. Thank you for standing between them and the cameras."

Lina leaned in, her silver sequins catching the candlelight. "I don't just protect my brother, Yuna. I protect what belongs to the family. And your son belongs here."

Toward the end of the night, the younger children—Niko, Misha, Samvel, Sabina, Georgi, Dmitriy, and Nadia—shuffled in, still in their pajamas, begging for "one more story" before the Hollanders headed back to the guest house. Shane looked around the table. He saw his parents laughing with the most feared family in Europe. He saw his partner, bruised and

victorious, looking at him with a gaze that had no secrets left. He saw the children who called him *Shanezhka*.

"We did it," Shane whispered to Ilya under the cover of the table's cross-talk.

Ilya squeezed his hand, his thumb tracing the line of Shane's knuckles. "No, *Shanezhka*. We're just getting started."

Niko and Misha, the eldest of the pack, tried to look dignified, but Dmitriy and Nadia were already scrambling into Shane's lap, completely ignoring Puck the cat's offended hiss as he was displaced. Samvel, Sabina, and Georgi fanned out around them, leaning against the table with wide, expectant eyes. "One more story, *Shanezhka*," Sabina pleaded, tugging at the sleeve of his cashmere sweater. "The one about the boy who caught the North Wind."

Shane looked at Ilya, who was watching the scene with a rare, relaxed warmth. Ilya leaned back, his arm draped over the back of Shane's chair, his fingers idly playing with the hair at the nape of Shane's neck. "He just played three periods of hockey with a cracked rib, *deti*," Ilya said, his voice a low rumble. "Give him a break."

"It's okay," Shane whispered, his heart full in a way it had never been in Montreal. He looked at Yuna and David, who were watching from across the table. For the first time, his parents didn't look like they were calculating his next move; they just looked like grandparents witnessing a miracle. Shane cleared his throat, pulling the younger two closer to his chest. He began to weave a tale that was part Russian folklore—courtesy of Lina's late-night lessons—and part hockey grit. He told them of a Prince who lived in a glass palace (Montreal) and had everything but a heart, until a Warrior from the North (Ilya) broke the glass and showed him the way to the Forest of Shadows (Boston).

"And did they win?" Georgi asked, his voice muffled by Shane's sweater.

"Every time," Shane promised. "Because the Warrior had a shield, and the Prince had a map, and together, nobody could stop them." As Shane spoke, Irina began to quietly move around the table, gathering the smaller children. She pressed a kiss to the top of Shane's head, a gesture of total acceptance, before leading the sleepy procession back toward the nursery wing.

The Hollanders stood up, the weight of the evening finally settling. The Victory Dinner had served its purpose: the two families were no longer allies of convenience; they were a singular, strange, and formidable unit. "We're leaving at dawn, Shane," David said, stepping forward to give his son one last, firm hug. "The jet is ready. We'll be back for the playoffs. Don't you dare get injured again before then."

"I've got the best security in the world, Dad," Shane joked, glancing at Sergei, who was hovering near the door.

Yuna turned to Lina, who was still draped in her shimmering silver dress, the fur coat now abandoned on a chair. "Take care of the 'Golden Bird,' Lina. And keep an eye on that silver dress. I think the world is going to be talking about it for a long time."

"Let them talk," Lina said, her eyes flashing with a sharp, brilliant pride. "I'll give them something else to talk about next week."

Once the Hollanders had retreated to the guest house and the children were tucked away, the main house fell into its deep, guarded hush. Shane and Ilya walked slowly toward the West Wing, Puck trailing behind them like a tiny, arrogant shadow.

In the sanctuary of their bedroom, Shane finally let out a long, shaky breath. He sat on the edge of the bed, feeling the ache in his side and the weight of the day. Ilya was behind him in an instant, his hands sliding under Shane's sweater to find the heat of his skin, "You did it, Shanezhka," Ilya murmured, his breath warm against Shane's ear. "The fans love you. The kids adore you. And your parents... they finally see us."

Shane leaned back into Ilya's strength, closing his eyes. The *Kingdom of Dreams* wasn't just a fortress anymore. It was his life, "I think I'm ready to stop being a 'story,' Ilya," Shane whispered. "I just want to be here."

"You are here," Ilya promised. "And I am never letting you go back."

Chapter 3: The Happily Ever After (OR the epilogue)

The heavy, iron-scented mud of the Massachusetts coastline didn't give up secrets easily, but it gave up Andrei Rozanov.

He had been missing for three years: erased from the board the same week the "Trade of the Century" had been finalized. The official story was that he'd fled to Cyprus to avoid a mounting gambling debt. The truth, known only to the inner sanctum of the estate, was that Ruslan had personally ended him. Andrei had been a leak; he had tried to weaponize Shane and Ilya's secret to incite a coup within the family. He had called Shane a "liability" and Ilya a "traitor" to the wrong ears. Ruslan had ensured he never spoke again, but now, a construction crew at a private pier had unearthed the past.

Inside the West Wing, the air was thick with a different kind of intensity. The news of the body was a distant thunderclap, muted by the immediate, overwhelming reality of the nursery.

Lina was reclined on a massive velvet chaise, her feet propped up on a stack of silk pillows. She looked radiant and utterly bored, her pregnant belly, carrying the next generation of the Rozanov legacy, prominent under a designer silk robe.

Shane Rozanov, formerly Hollander, was sitting on the edge of the chaise, meticulously peeling an orange for her. He wore a simple gold band on his left hand, his face filled out, the "Golden Boy" shadows replaced by the steady, calm gaze of a man who knew exactly who he was.

"Eat," Shane murmured, handing her a slice. "The doctor said you need the Vitamin C."

"The doctor is a bore, Shanezhka," Lina sighed, though she took the orange. She looked toward the window, where Ilya was standing, his back to the room. He was staring out at the driveway where Ruslan's SUV had just pulled in.

"He's found, isn't he?" Ilya asked, his voice a low, dark vibration.

"He is," Ruslan said, stepping into the room. He looked older, more scarred, the weight of the family's violence etched into the lines around his eyes. He glanced at Shane, then at Lina's belly. "The police will call it a 'mob hit' and move on. The Dragunov name is clean. But we all remember why it happened."

Shane didn't flinch. Three years in the fortress had taught him that peace was bought with blood. "He tried to destroy what we were building, Rusik. He doesn't get to haunt us now." Shane murmured, looking at the back of his brother-in-law, then at his husband, who inclined his head just a bit to show agreement.

An hour later, the tension of the dead was pushed aside by the living future. Irina and Svetlana were in the newly finished nursery, organizing a mountain of cashmere baby blankets. The room was a masterpiece. Two hand-carved cribs sat side-by-side, one draped in a light blue silk, the other in a soft cream. On the wall, a mural depicted a great forest where a Golden Bird and a Winter Wolf watched over a sleeping village.

David and Yuna Hollander were there, too. They had moved to Boston a year ago, taking a townhouse just twenty minutes from the estate. They were no longer managers; they were just grandparents-to-be, arguing over whether the twins would prefer hockey skates or tiny pianos first. "They're kicking," Lina called out from the doorway, supported by Ilya and Shane on either side.

Ilya dropped to his knees, pressing his ear against Lina's stomach, his large hand—the one that still broke records and occasionally bones on the ice—trembling slightly as he felt the rhythmic thumping of his children. "They have your kick, Shanezhka," Ilya whispered, looking up at his husband.

Shane reached down, resting his hand over Ilya's. "And your stubbornness. God help the league in twenty years."

That night, after the house had settled, Shane and Ilya stood on the balcony overlooking the estate. The snipers were still there, the gates were still locked, and the world still whispered about the Rozanov Dynasty, but inside, it was quiet. "Three years," Shane said, leaning his head on Ilya's shoulder. "We're fathers, Ilya. We're... we're a family. Really. Finally."

Ilya pulled him closer, the scent of the pine trees and the cold Atlantic air surrounding them. Andrei was gone, the secrets were out, and the *Battle of the Centers* had ended in a total, unconditional victory, "We were always a family, Shanezhka," Ilya said, kissing the crown of his head. "The world just finally caught up."

Hayden Pike, his wife and their young children were moving to Boston in the summer, Lina had finally secured his trade, and Shane couldn't be happier.

Down in the shadows of the garden, Puck the cat, now older, grayer, but still the king of the compound prowled the perimeter, a silent guardian of the Lina's *Kingdom of Dreams*.

End Notes

I wrote this instead of working on my other story for this fandom... Oops.

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