

Lily-Jane's Agency

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Lily-Jane's Agency

by [Theoz_wolf](#)

Summary

'Sports Illustrated

THE FIGHT OFF THE ICE

How Shane Hollander spent eight years battling for his son.'

'People

AT LAST

Inside Shane Hollander's emotional custody victory—and the father who never gave up.'

'"I Can Finally Just Be His Dad": Shane Hollander Wins Custody Battle'

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"What now, Daddy?" the boy asked, his voice quiet and curious.

"And now..." Shane smiled, resting his forehead against the boy's. "You're going to come live with me. Forever. Just you and me, buddy."

Notes

If you're new here, hi, I'm Theoz_, english is not my first language, so there's a high chance of grammar mistakes in the translations

I have a Threads account, same username theoz_wolf, and I also have a Tiktok: rhaenyz_

hope you guys like this story<3

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

Chapter 1: Judgment Day

The harsh sound of the gavel echoed through the courtroom, demanding silence.

"Order. The court is ready to deliver the verdict," the judge announced. In his hands rested the decision inside a damn brown envelope. The final ruling.

Beneath the heavy oak table, Shane Hollander's leg bounced frantically, like a jackhammer against the concrete floor. His lawyers tried to maintain a facade of professional sobriety, but small gestures betrayed them: the lead attorney spun her wedding ring endlessly, while her colleague scratched the cap of a metal pen, producing a continuous, irritating click.

At the opposite bench, the defense team appeared equally tense, sweat gleaming under the cold lights of the hall.

Shane risked a glance over his shoulder. In the back galleries, his eyes met his parents'. His father gave him a restrained nod, a silent "everything is going to be okay." Eight years. Eight years of pure hell on earth, trying to balance the crushing demands of a rising sports career with a bloody legal war. Outside the heavy wooden doors, the murmur of reporters and the flashes of cameras were still audible, like a swarm of hungry bees.

Pushing through the crowd to enter the courthouse that morning had been suffocating. The press knew this was judgment day, the conclusion of one of the most highly publicized and lucrative legal battles in Canadian sports history. And he, Shane Hollander—the great captain of the Montreal Metros, the biggest star in the NHL, and a two-time Stanley Cup champion—was the center of the hurricane.

On one side, him. On the other, Jessica Dubois, his high school ex-girlfriend. The trophy in this war? Custody of Liam. An unplanned pregnancy that Jessica had turned into her main weapon for nearly a decade. The lawsuit was a sea of mud: parental alienation, emotional blackmail, and constant accusations that Shane would be a negligent father who would outsource his son's upbringing to grandparents and nannies because of his travels with the team. In her narrative, he would only be a father when it was convenient for the spotlight.

The truth, however, was that Jessica saw him as an endless ATM. Shane would never deny his son any comfort, but her financial demands were absurd, to the point of shocking even Shane's most experienced accountants. She had spent years spreading the narrative that the "toxic culture" of the NHL was not a safe environment for a child.

But nothing—absolutely nothing—hurt more than the words planted in his own son's mouth. The memory of Liam murmuring, "Mommy said you think hockey is more important than me," still made Shane's blood boil. That day, he had wanted to destroy everything around him. Instead, he channeled his anger into strategy, demanding his lawyers ruthlessly contest Jessica's every move. He would never give up his own son, especially knowing that his ex hadn't attended a psychiatric appointment in years.

In high school, Jessica had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder but abandoned her treatment as soon as she discovered the pregnancy. Shane's legal team begged to use her medical records in court, but he flatly forbade it. Using the mental health of his son's mother as ammunition was too low a blow. Furthermore, as an untouchable media star, he was aware of the firepower he possessed; if he had wanted to, he could have publicly destroyed Jessica's reputation. The temptation to paint his ex as the great villain of the story haunted him countless times, but the same question always stopped him: what would Liam think of his father when he grew up and read all that?

"After an extensive eight years of litigation and dozens of hearings in this court, we have arrived, once and for all, at a resolution," the judge's voice cut through Shane's thoughts. "With no room for further settlements, arrangements, or appeals. Will the parties please rise. Miss Dubois and Mr. Hollander."

Shane obeyed immediately. He smoothed his tailored suit jacket and clasped his hands in front of him in a vain attempt to hide the trembling and the cold sweat on his palms. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Jessica. Her blonde hair was meticulously tied back, and her posture exuded an unshakable confidence.

"Regarding the minor Liam Dubois Hollander, the product of a discontinued relationship in his parents' youth, who is exactly eight years of age today, the court has reached a verdict on permanent custody." The judge slid his finger under the flap of the envelope, extracting the sealed sheet.

At that moment, Shane felt his lawyer's hand squeeze his forearm in firm support. He accepted the gesture, holding his breath.

"In the case of Hollander versus Dubois, judged in this district of Montreal, province of Quebec, the court determines that the legal and physical custody of Liam Dubois Hollander shall pass, from this exact moment forward, solely and exclusively to... his father, Shane Hollander."

For a second, Shane's world went completely deaf, only to return in a roar.

"Mr. Hollander, you have full custody of your son." The judge continued, his stern tone now directed at the other end of the room. "The court also informs you that Miss Dubois is strictly forbidden from approaching the child or his residence within a two-hundred-meter radius, as a result of the irrefutable evidence of parental alienation and psychological child abuse. You are also barred from contacting Mr. Hollander or his family members through any means of communication. Failure to comply with these protective measures will result in the immediate transfer of the case to criminal court, subjecting the defendant to arrest. Court is adjourned."

The sharp crack of the gavel sealed the end of an era.

Shane's first reaction was to release the breath that felt like it had been trapped in his lungs for eight years. He spun on his heels, turning to his legal team. Chloé and François greeted him with relieved, exhausted smiles—the raw euphoria of those who had finally won a war of attrition.

"I told you everything was going to be alright, *mon chéri*," Chloé said, her voice thick and her eyes shining with unshed tears, offering him an almost maternal smile of pride.

"I can't even believe it's over..." Shane murmured, his own voice cracking. He looked toward the galleries, his face now completely washed with tears, and saw his parents rushing toward him. "He's going to stay with me."

"He is, my love!" Yuna threw her arms around Shane's neck, hugging him with immense strength as she wept freely on her son's shoulder. David joined them in a three-way embrace, his large, protective hand stroking Shane's hair. From the hallway outside, the relentless flashes of accredited photographers' cameras popped through the glass doors, capturing the Hollanders' victory. "Liam is going to grow up with a family that truly cares about him."

Yuna harbored a deep hatred for the Dubois family since the fateful day Jessica's mother had the audacity to insinuate that the blame for the early pregnancy lay entirely on Shane's irresponsibility. A massive lie. Almost a month after discovering the pregnancy, Shane had found tiny pinholes in the condom wrappers he kept hidden in his backpack. What was sold to the media and the world as an "accident" had, in fact, been a meticulously orchestrated trap by Jessica, set right after scouts confirmed Shane would be a top pick in the NHL draft, leaping from the junior leagues straight into stardom.

But the past didn't matter anymore.

Shane gently pulled away from his parents' embrace, drying his face with the back of his hands. His eyes focused on the side door of the courtroom, which opened with a soft click. The social worker walked in, guiding Liam by the hand. The little boy wore an official Metros jersey—blue, white, and red—that hung adorably loose on his body. On the back, his father's number and surname.

"Come here, son!" Shane asked, his voice thick with emotion. He opened the small gate of the wooden partition that separated the gallery from the floor and dropped to his knees, grabbing the boy and lifting him into his arms in a desperate hug.

Liam squeezed his little arms around Shane's neck but pulled back slightly to look at him, his brow furrowed in an expression of childish doubt.

"What now, Daddy?" the boy asked, his voice quiet and curious.

"And now..." Shane smiled, resting his forehead against the boy's. "You're going to come live with me. Forever. Just you and me, buddy."

The child's face lit up in a radiant smile. The almond-shaped brown eyes, the delicate freckles sprinkled across his nose, and the soft features of his Japanese ancestry inherited from his grandmother—everything about him made him look like a perfect miniature of Shane. Liam buried his face in his father's shoulder again, hugging him with all the strength he had.

In that instant, with the smell of his son's hair filling his lungs, Shane knew the greatest truth of his life: No Stanley Cup in the world mattered. He finally had his boy in his arms. And this time, no one would take him away.

[...]

By some irony of fate, that year, the Metros failed to qualify for the playoffs. The media was well aware that the team's star had his head somewhere else. And although the more humanized news portals understood the situation, the sports press mercilessly massacred Shane.

A month after the hearings ended, however, the dust was beginning to settle and their routine was finding its own rhythm. Shane was relaxing in the backyard of his best friend's house, Hayden Pike, drinking a ginger ale. With them were the team's two alternate captains: Hayden and the veteran J.J. Dagenais, both holding bottles of beer. The three of them kept an eye on the children, who were having a blast in the treehouse, on the swings, and on the slide.

Ruby and Jade, Hayden's twins, were six years old; Elise, J.J.'s daughter, was five. Elise's mother, the actress Simone, was very present in her daughter's life. She and J.J. had amicably shared custody for a few years—a mature, scandal-free separation, the exact opposite of the nightmare Shane had just faced.

Jackie, Hayden's wife, was undoubtedly one of the best people Shane knew. She walked across the deck showing off her five-month baby bump with the couple's fourth child, while the third, little Arthur, took a nap on the fluffy rug next to the men, snoring on his back after emptying his bottle. Watching the peace of a one-year-old baby brought a painful ache to Shane's heart; he deeply regretted having missed that entire phase with Liam.

"Are you going to put him in the twins' school?" Hayden asked, sipping his beer.

"Probably. It's closer to my building. My mom thinks I should move into a house, as if Liam is going to plummet from the penthouse balcony," Shane snorted with some disdain, drawing laughs from his friends. Liam had been visiting the apartment for years and no accident had ever happened. "But I'll wait for the school year to end. It's not good to take him away from his friends right now."

"And so far... have you heard anything from the 'other party'?" J.J. grimaced, then made the sign of the cross, as if warding off a demon. Shane laughed, shaking his head.

"Nothing. My legal team is monitoring her socials twenty-four seven. François is dying to sue her for harassment and defamation, so we're just waiting for her to make her first slip-up," Shane explained, gesturing with his red can.

"Liam doesn't need her, man. Someone who used him as an emotional weapon isn't a mother. He has you now, his grandparents, and two honorary uncles who, combined, have had about five concussions. The kid is going to be fine," Hayden pointed out, making Shane and J.J. laugh out loud.

"Even Simone called me relieved when she saw the custody news," J.J. commented, pointing with the mouth of his bottle. "She said she can recommend our caregiver agency for when we need to travel for games. Elise loves her nanny."

"When we go play away games, I'm going to leave him with my parents." Shane cut the subject off immediately, inflexible. The idea of leaving a stranger alone with his son didn't sit well with him.

"I understand you, *mon ami*," the Canadian defenseman agreed. "Elise stays with her mom when we travel, but when Simone needs to go out for a night shoot, she calls our nanny. He's amazing."

"He?" Hayden and Shane asked in unison, frowning.

Jackie, who had just stepped onto the back deck with a tray full of little bowls of fruit salad, stopped dead in her tracks.

"Your nanny is a guy?" Shane raised his eyebrow with the same intensity as his friends, hurrying to help Jackie with the tray, placing it on the coffee table. The hostess sat on the lounge chair carefully, adjusting her dress over her belly.

"I know, I know. When Simone told me, I was furious. We had a huge fight. But believe me, the guy is extremely trustworthy," J.J. assured them, claspings his hands in front of him defensively. "Want to see? *Ma chérie, viens ici!*"

Elise turned around immediately, her dark curls bouncing. The little girl came skipping toward her father and hung from his neck.

"*Oui, papa?*" said the little girl.

"*Ma chérie, que penses-tu de ton gardien?*" J.J. asked, hugging her from the side.

"*Ilya? Il est vraiment cool, très drôle, et son accent russe est hilarant!*" the girl answered without hesitation, letting out a high-pitched giggle.

J.J. looked at his friends with the smug expression of someone who had just proven his point.

"Ah, *il est russe?*" Jackie asked, surprised, and Elise nodded vigorously.

"What did Daddy say when Mommy hired him?" J.J. asked, this time in English. It was his daily strategy to make his daughter practice both languages.

"A guy, Simone?!!" The girl deepened her voice, doing a perfect imitation of J.J.'s indignant tone, which drew roars of laughter from the adults. "And then Mommy answered: 'And why can only women take care of children?' And then Daddy went very quiet."

"Of course, your dad values his own life," Hayden joked, raising his eyebrows. Then, he turned to the lawn, put two fingers in his mouth, and let out a piercing whistle. The three kids, who were chasing each other around the tree, stopped. "Come eat, gremlins!"

"They don't even know what gremlins are, babe," Jackie commented, shaking her head. Hayden shrugged, laughing.

"*Tu veux une salade de fruits?*" the defenseman offered his daughter.

"*Oui, s'il te plaît,*" Elise accepted, pushing her curls away from her face and taking the colorful little bowl.

"Liam, come eat!" Shane called out.

The boy came quickly, running across the wooden deck. He passed behind the chairs and hung onto Shane's back with familiarity.

"If you don't want a certain fruit, just push it to the corner of the bowl, okay?" his dad advised, handing him his portion.

"Okay." Liam took the container from Shane's hands and sat cross-legged on the floor of the deck. The twins soon joined him, followed by Elise, forming a small, noisy circle under the afternoon sun.

J.J. craned his neck, looking at Arthur on the floor, and pointed with his fork.

"You sure the kid is alive?"

Hayden and Jackie looked unconcerned.

"Have you guys ever seen Hayden sleep?" Jackie mocked, and Shane immediately started laughing; having been the blonde's travel roommate for six years, he knew very well that Hayden slept like a rock—there was no noise in the world that could wake him up.

[...]

Shane pulled the seatbelt and buckled it across Liam's chest in the SUV's booster seat. He took extra care not to bump the boy's knee, which now sported a colorful bandage after a run-in with the thick bark of an oak tree in the Pikes' backyard. The day had been great, but Liam was visibly exhausted, blinking sluggishly to fight off sleep. There was school the next day, and Wednesdays were the boy's favorite because of the double science block.

Liam was fascinated by science, especially marine biology. Shane already had his eye on VIP tickets to take him to a large aquarium or museum next week—his mother, Yuna, had taken on the mission of mapping out the days with the lowest visitor traffic to avoid press harassment.

"Once we get home, it's straight to the shower, you hear? There's dirt even in your hair," Shane warned, resting his arms on the frame of the open car door, watching his son with a restrained smile.

"But I rolled down the slide!" Liam laughed, as if the maneuver justified the state of his clothes.

"I saw your roll alright," Shane agreed, making the boy laugh again. He gently closed the back door and walked around, taking the driver's seat. "And what does the young man want for dinner today?"

"Uhm... I don't know." Liam pursed his lips, swinging his short legs on the seat.

"We can cook something or order food on the app." Shane started the car's quiet engine and glided onto the tree-lined street.

"Mommy said ordering food is for lazy people," the boy pointed out, with the innocent naturalness of a child.

Shane's blood ran cold. His hands gripped the leather-wrapped steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white. He raised his eyes, fixing them on Liam's reflection in the rearview mirror.

"Is that so? And when did she say that?" Shane's voice came out frighteningly normal. Calm, level, and without a single drop of the fury that had just exploded in his chest.

"A while ago." The boy shrugged, looking out the window. "That week we went out with the twins and they bought that giant unicorn balloon."

That was exactly two weeks ago. Shane forced his lungs to draw in air, keeping his eyes on the street and the car in the flow of traffic.

"And where did you see Mommy, buddy?"

"She was there at the park too. She came to talk to me real quick when you and Uncle Hayden were distracted talking near the hot dog stand. But she said it was our secret, so you can't tell anyone, okay?" Liam warned, adopting a serious tone at the end.

Shane forced a short laugh and made the gesture of zipping an invisible zipper over his lips. But inside, he was about to commit murder.

The drive back to the apartment was torture. Shane's shoulders were so tense they felt made of stone, but he nodded and murmured short replies while Liam chattered animatedly about the games he had invented with the twins and Elise.

As soon as they stepped into the private elevator that would take them to the penthouse, Shane pulled his phone from his pocket and opened the messaging app, typing furiously into his legal team's group chat.

[Group: Crisis Management - Legal]

Shane: Jessica broke the restraining order.

Chloé Renault: What? When? How?

François Moreau: Did she go to Pike's house?

Shane: Two weeks ago, when Hayden and I took the kids to the public park. Liam just told me Jessica secretly approached him while I was distracted.

Chloé Renault: Did anyone else see it? We need something material to involve the police. The word of an eight-year-old child, without adult witnesses or cameras, is hard to sustain for an immediate arrest. The DA will ask for proof.

Shane: From what I gathered, only Liam saw her. Fuck, I thought this nightmare was already over!

François Moreau: I'm meeting with the DA tomorrow at 8 AM. Liam's account is certainly enough grounds to open an official injunction violation claim. Jessica isn't stupid enough to approach you, because she knows she'd be arrested on the spot. She aimed for the blind spot.

Shane: Do what you have to do. And changing the subject: can you guys do a background sweep on a caregiver agency for me? J.J. recommended one, and I might need backup when training season starts again. I won't leave him vulnerable.

Chloé Renault: Send the name.

Shane: Lily-Jane's Agency.

François Moreau: I've heard of it. Several Hollywood big shots use that one. They have hubs in Los Angeles and New York; the Kardashians use their nannies, if I'm not mistaken. Extremely high standards.

Chloé Renault: I'll see if I can find any hushed-up scandals regarding the Montreal branch. I'll send the dossier as soon as I'm done. Do you want me to request a pre-selection of their top professionals right now?

Shane: *Oui.*

He locked the screen and put the phone in his pocket just as the elevator passed the twentieth floor. Liam was craning his neck, staring at the digital numbers climbing rapidly on the panel.

"How many meters off the ground do we live, Dad?"

"About eighty meters."

"But it looks way higher." He looked at Shane, intrigued.

"That's because our penthouse has double-height ceilings and two floors, so it's physically taller than normal apartments," Shane explained just as the display dinged and the mirrored

doors opened to their private hall. He typed the password on the main door's keypad, and Liam ran ahead.

"Shoes!" Shane intercepted him.

The boy obediently turned around, took off his dirt-smudged sneakers, and kicked them into the corner of the shoe rack at the entrance.

"And to the shower!" Shane reminded him in a louder tone, seeing the boy already dashing toward the stairs.

"Okay!" Liam's voice echoed through the upstairs hallway before he disappeared toward his suite.

In the penthouse's spacious kitchen, Shane took ingredients out of the fridge to prepare dinner. In the background, the flat-screen TV showed a tight playoff match between the Toronto Guardians and the Boston Raiders; the sound of skates cutting the ice and the thuds against the acrylic glass filled the room in a familiar way.

While he seasoned the chicken fillets, his phone buzzed on the granite island. Through the lit screen, he saw it was a notification from Chloé in the legal group. Before he could open the message, the sound of hurried footsteps echoed. Liam came running down the stairs, jumping the last steps two by two, already dressed in his Captain America flannel pajamas.

"Hey, don't do that, you could get hurt," Shane scolded him with a look of fake severity, but his tone was gentle. The boy walked up to him, stretching on his tiptoes to peek at the counter. "Can you wash the vegetables for me? I need to reply to a message from Grandma."

"I can!" Liam promptly ran to the dining table, pulled out one of the wooden chairs with a dragging thud, and pushed it over to the sink.

Shane washed his own hands quickly and stayed close by as a spotter, while his son climbed onto the chair and turned on the faucet to wash the lettuce leaves and the tomatoes. Only with the boy distracted did he pick up his phone, opening the message.

[Group: Crisis Management - Legal]

Chloé Renault: The agency has an immaculate transparency policy. When caregivers screw up, they don't hesitate to add the infractions to their public profile in the system. I saw a few that had red flags like "recurrent tardiness" or "violated family rules X times". I thought it was fantastic. The roster of elite professionals in Montreal has twenty names, and what surprised me was seeing that eight of them are men. Oh, and I found a review from J.J.'s family highly recommending one of them.

Shane: Wow. Is it a guy named Ilia? Ilya? I don't know how to spell Russian names.

Chloé Renault: Yes, he's a young Russian man. Ilya Rozanov. His track record is impeccable, zero complaints. He has worked with several high-end families, all with

excellent reviews. Currently, he's only looking after Elise, but his previous family was over in Boston: the nephew of Cliff Marleau, captain of the Raiders. They also left sky-high recommendations.

François Moreau: If he has already dealt with NHL hockey players, he might be our best bet. He'd already understand the craziness of our routine, travel schedules, and unforeseen events.

Shane: I'll take a calm look at his profile later. *Merci*, Chloé.

Chloé Renault: No problem, Shane.

Shane locked the screen, set his phone aside, and grabbed the silicone tongs to arrange the chicken fillets on the hot grill pan. The loud sizzle of the meat met the sound of the TV's sports broadcasting.

"Daddy," Liam's little voice called out amidst the noise of the running tap water.

Shane turned his face toward him, the tongs hovering in the air. The boy was staring at a wet tomato in his hands, his expression furrowed.

"I don't know if I like hockey."

Shane's heart gave a slight jolt in his chest, but he kept his face serene. He wouldn't force anything.

"Oh, okay. And that's totally fine, buddy. You don't have to like hockey just because I play it. There are plenty of other cool sports and hobbies we can discover together." He replied with an extremely soft voice, turning his attention back to flipping the meat on the griddle. "But tell me... why do you think you don't like it?"

Liam shrugged his tiny shoulders, his sad eyes fixed on the stream of water, repeating a speech that had clearly been hammered into his mind:

"Mommy always said it's a very violent game. She said that's why you were always away from me. And that's why you sometimes showed up with ugly bruises."

Shane let out a contained sigh, nodding slowly. He needed to disarm those lies very carefully.

"Yeah, I know I travel a lot for games. But I can guarantee you one thing: all the dads on that team would hide their kids inside their suitcases if they could, just so they wouldn't have to be away from them." He lowered the heat on the griddle and leaned against the counter, turning his full attention to the boy. "And yes, hockey is a contact sport, so bruises end up being part of my profession. Think of it this way: a vet comes home covered in dog hair, a mechanic comes home with grease on his hands. Since I shower in the locker room after the game is over, the only thing I end up bringing home, every now and then, are a few bruises. But I promise it's never anything serious. Just like that scrape right there on your knee."

The boy blinked, absorbing the logic, and lowered his gaze to the colorful bandage on his leg.

"It only hurt when I hit the tree," he murmured.

"It's the same thing with me. It hurts at the moment of impact, but then the pain goes away," Shane assured him with a comforting smile. "Besides, when I'm playing, I have two huge friends on the ice with me whose only job is to protect me and stop the opponents from hurting me. J.J. and Viktor."

Liam's eyes lit up in recognition.

"Uncle J.J. is really tall and strong. He looks like a mountain!"

"I actually think you're just way too short," Shane teased, giving a soft, playful flick to the tip of the boy's nose, which finally broke the tension and drew a light, genuine laugh from Liam.

Chapter 2: First Day

Shane tossed the pill to the back of his throat and swallowed it with a generous gulp of water. It was obvious that the headache would come to collect its toll. Somehow, Jessica had found out that Liam was transferring schools and decided to put on a circus on social media. She was legally barred from talking about Shane, but technically, she could still post "motherly vents" about her son's routine. A fine line she loved to skip over.

Shane just wanted a quiet summer. And he tried his hardest to get one: he turned off his work phone and fled with Liam to his cottage. It had been two perfect, isolated weeks. They swam in the lake, roasted marshmallows by the fire—with the boy getting spooked by the nocturnal calls of the loons and ending up in his dad's bed for the rest of the trip. They established that Fridays would be "Movie Night" and Saturdays, "Banana Pancake Morning." Shane even set up a magnetic board with his son's visual routine and pinned it to the apartment wall, sending a photo to his parents so they could follow the same playbook when Liam visited them.

But the bubble of peace had burst. Classes would start in three days, and Liam was terrified. He didn't want to go to the new school, he didn't want to have to make friends from scratch, nor memorize the names of strange teachers. The unknown environment scared him so much that his anxiety turned into a physical fever. Shane had sleepless nights, which resulted in David and Yuna driving two hours from Ottawa to Montreal just to help their son and grandson. When Shane was a child and went through sudden changes, his body reacted the same way. His parents knew exactly how to intervene.

Jessica was playing at the very edge of the restraining order's limits, and Shane's lawyers were watching her like hawks.

But right then, Shane needed to focus on the present: it was the day to interview Ilya. He had decided to give the guy a chance after spending the last week monitoring his professional profile at the agency and sweeping his social media. Ilya seemed like a normal guy. He was physically active, went to parties on weekends, and posted pictures with friends—there was a redhead with beautiful curly hair who appeared frequently on his feed, probably a girlfriend. Ilya also had an Instagram highlight dedicated to the children he had cared for, but all their faces were covered by emojis.

Elise was a panda bear. Shane recognized her from J.J. and Simone's tags in the bottom corner of the screen. In the photo, Ilya was carrying her on his shoulders at an amusement park, holding a giant cotton candy and a Cookie Monster plushie.

The interview was scheduled for two in the afternoon. It was one-fifty. The problem was that Liam had been giving Shane the cold shoulder for two days. A torturous silent treatment. Shane was hating the situation, but pre-season training with the Metros would begin in forty-eight hours. He needed Liam to adapt to the new caregiver as soon as possible—that is, if Ilya passed the interview.

The intercom phone rang. The shrill buzz echoed in Shane's eardrums like a fork scraping porcelain.

"Yes?" he answered, massaging his temple.

"Mr. Hollander, a young man named Ilya Rozanov says he has a meeting with you. Can we send him up?"

"Yes, thank you." Shane hung up, internally surprised by the Russian's punctuality.

He took advantage of the minutes the elevator would take to climb the twenty-five floors and went after his son. He climbed the stairs to the second floor and stopped in front of Liam's door. There was a sheet of printer paper taped there. In the boy's crooked, childish handwriting, it read: DO NOT ENTER. Below the letters, a drawing of a "forbidden" sign covered a hockey jersey with Shane's number.

He took a deep breath, knocking on the wood twice.

"Liam, can you come out for a bit?"

Silence.

"Liam, please. I need to talk to you."

More silence. Shane exhaled heavily, feeling his headache merge with an emotional knot in his throat. He had promised himself he wouldn't hurt his son again, and that was exactly what he had ended up doing.

"Look... if you want to come down and meet the nanny with me, we'll be in the dining room," he gave up, lowering his head.

At that very moment, the main doorbell rang.

Shane rubbed his face with both hands to chase away the exhaustion and walked down the stairs quickly, regaining his posture. As soon as he opened the heavy front door, he came face to face with Ilya Rozanov. The Russian was practically his height, perhaps beating him by a couple of inches thanks to the heavy leather combat boots he was wearing. In person, his eyes were a much more vibrant blue, and his blond curls fell rebelliously across his forehead.

"Shane Hollander?" Ilya held out his hand, his thick Slavic accent rounding the vowels of Shane's name. The handshake was firm, from someone who knew how to assert himself.

"Come in." Shane stepped aside. Ilya nodded, and his eyes quickly scanned the hall, landing on the shoe rack. "You don't need to take off your shoes, it's just a family custom because of my mom's culture."

"It's mine too," Ilya countered naturally, already untying his laces and aligning his combat boots perfectly next to Shane's sneakers. His clothes were casual, typical of late summer, but impeccably clean, not to mention the practical backpack he wore, which had a keychain with

the Russian flag. He straightened up and crossed his arms. "My bosses said you have an eight-year-old son. Correct?"

"You don't follow the news? Like, at all?" Shane frowned, suspicious.

"I don't look up celebrity gossip on the internet," he shrugged, following Shane into the dining room. "But your teammate, J.J., talked about you a lot this week."

Shane gestured to the table. Ilya pulled out a chair fluidly and sat down, and Shane took the seat across from him.

"You're early. We scheduled for two."

"J.J. mentioned you value punctuality."

Shane raised his eyebrows, impressed, and nodded slowly. He tried to mask his fatigue and the slight discomfort from the guy's intimidating presence. Viktor Andropov, the Russian on his team, had a much more subdued accent and a less imposing posture.

"You can ask whatever you want. Besides what you've already read on my agency profile, of course." Ilya leaned back in his chair, relaxed. He had attitude. Shane noticed right away.

"Do you drink?"

"I'm Russian," Ilya quipped, with a smirk. He really did have attitude. "Socially."

"Smoke?"

"Also socially."

"What do you smoke?"

"Usually tobacco. Very rarely, weed. But only and strictly when I'm on vacation," he added. There was a crisp, professional tone in the way Ilya answered, which intrigued Shane.

"What exactly do you know about me?"

Ilya exhaled through his nose and began counting on his fingers.

"Currently the best player in the NHL, two-time Stanley Cup champion. I caught a glimpse of a headline about the custody battle for your kid, but I didn't click to read it. That's it."

Shane didn't entirely buy that summarized version, but decided not to press the issue.

"And why do you work as a nanny?"

"Because I like kids," Ilya replied with an almost raw honesty. "Always have. If I hadn't blown out my knee, maybe I would have become a professional hockey player too. But some goon did me the favor of smashing my kneecap with a puck. I even considered becoming a youth coach, because I love the sport and the energy kids have. It's good. Healing, even."

"And how many times have you been interviewed by someone terrified you're a weird pedophile in disguise?"

"With that exact look? Several," Ilya shot back without blinking, making Shane blink, a little embarrassed at having been read so easily. "Especially by Cliff Marleau, when I was hired to watch his sister and sister-in-law's kids."

Shane raised his eyebrows. Marleau was a massive defenseman, famous for being one of the most terrifying guys to face on the ice. If Ilya had passed his scrutiny, it was a good sign.

"How often would you be able to be here? Because if you also watch J.J.'s daughter, our practices obviously fall on the same days," Shane pointed out.

"I only stay with Elise when Simone has shoots or events out of town. Generally speaking, my schedule is pretty open. I can come every day you have practice. If Simone's emergency days overlap with yours, I can spend the day with both kids together. It's no problem at all."

The Canadian processed the information and nodded slowly.

"Okay." Shane rested his elbows on the table. "Your turn."

"Does he have any food allergies? Does he take any daily medication?"

"No allergies and no chronic meds. When he gets sick or catches a cold, I keep a separate organizer box with children's medicine in that cabinet over there," Shane pointed practically to a cabinet in the kitchen.

"You keep medicine in the kitchen?" Ilya narrowed his eyes.

"I don't like keeping them in the bathroom. Moisture and bacteria," he replied, as if it were an irrefutable universal law.

"Okay." Ilya accepted the eccentricity without judging. "Does he usually have nightmares?"

Shane pressed his lips together, his expression falling slightly, and nodded slowly.

"What usually helps calm him down?"

"I usually just lie down next to him until he falls back asleep. If the panic is really bad... I bring him to sleep with me in my bed. And he always has to be cuddling Mr. Bubbles. It's his stuffed hammerhead shark."

Ilya processed the information. Shane felt the Russian was archiving every word with photographic precision in his mind.

"What is he afraid of?"

Shane's leg began bouncing anxiously under the table again.

"Unexpected changes."

"Like what?"

"He likes knowing exactly what's going to happen. Having predictability. If the routine breaks without prior warning, he panics. It's been giving me a hell of a headache this week, so... it's essential that you keep that in mind," he warned seriously.

"What was the change this time?" Ilya adjusted himself in his chair, crossing his thick arms over the table and looking directly at Shane.

"I changed his school. And I only told him a week before classes started."

"That was pretty messed up," the Russian stated point-blank, without a filter. Shane swallowed hard and nodded.

"I know. And, to top off the hell, his mother decided to use the internet to torment my life a little more." Shane rubbed his temples, exhausted.

"Who are the emergency contacts?" Ilya finally reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

"My parents. David and Yuna Hollander."

The Russian slid the mirrored device across the table. Shane took it and quickly typed his parents' numbers into Ilya's contacts, then handed it back.

"Who is legally authorized to pick him up from school?"

"I'm adding you to the principal's list today. Other than you, just me and Jackie Pike, my best friend's wife. Under absolutely no circumstances can he leave there with his mother." Shane was categorical. He saw Ilya type the restriction into his notepad with a quick thumb.

"What's his favorite food?"

"Macaroni, or pretty much any kind of pasta," Shane replied, letting out a half-exhausted laugh.

"Hm. He has good taste," Ilya joked. For the first time all afternoon, Shane offered a genuine smile. "Rules for sweets?"

"No sugar before main meals. He knows very well how many times he's allowed to eat junk food during the week. If he tries to trick you by making up a higher number, cut it in half and you'll get the truth," Shane explained, and Ilya chuckled softly, typing in the rule. He locked the screen and placed the phone back on the table.

"Alright. And where is the famous mini-Hollander?"

"Sulking with me, locked in his room," Shane replied with a defeated smile, the guilt weighing heavily on his shoulders again. "He's been giving me the silent treatment for two days. The fever he got was purely emotional because of the new school."

Ilya observed him for a second, his blue eyes analyzing the Metros' captain with surprising empathy.

"Right at this moment, he probably hates you," Ilya began, with that surgical honesty. "Have you tried sitting down with him and clearly stating that you are sorry for making a decision that hurt him? Because if he doesn't hear from your mouth that you didn't mean any harm, even if the school change was for his own good, in his little head you did it on purpose. He thinks you ripped him away from his friends and favorite teachers out of pure cruelty."

Shane exhaled heavily, rubbing his face with both hands to wipe away the fatigue. It was then that, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a stealthy movement reflected in the glass panel of the staircase railing. It was Liam, peeking from upstairs.

"I already saw you, young man," Shane warned, raising his voice just enough to be heard. He stared exactly at the spot where his son was and, through the reflection, saw the boy shrink back to try to hide again. Ilya turned his head and, from the angle he was sitting, also managed to spot the spy. "Come down here, please. There's someone I want you to meet."

After a few seconds of hesitation, Liam began to walk down the stairs, skipping the steps two by two. At the first bend, however, he met his father's stern, warning look. The boy got the message immediately, slowing his pace and walking down the rest in silence, clutching a black-and-white stuffed animal to his chest.

Shane stood up, and Ilya did the same. When the Canadian opened his mouth to make the formal introduction, the Russian interrupted him with a subtle gesture, slightly raising his hand. It was a silent request to take charge. Ilya took a few steps forward and, despite his imposing stature, squatted down gracefully until his blue eyes were perfectly leveled with the boy's.

"Hi," Ilya said, his deep voice coming out incredibly gentle.

Liam didn't answer. He just squeezed the stuffed animal tighter against his pajamas, assessing the blond man from head to toe with sharp suspicion. Shane was already opening his mouth, ready to intervene and break the ice, when his son finally decided to speak.

"I like whales," Liam blurted out, lowering his gaze to the stuffed animal in his arms.

Ilya broke into a wide smile, his eyes sparkling with a playful challenge.

"That right there isn't a whale." The Russian pointed at the stuffed toy.

Liam's brow furrowed instantly, offended by the stranger's audacity.

"Yes it is, it's an orca whale!" the boy countered, shaking his head stubbornly.

"Actually, orcas are the largest species in the dolphin family," Ilya corrected naturally.

Liam took a step back, indignant, looking like he didn't believe a word of it.

"No, they're not."

"Yes, they are."

"No, they're not!" the little boy stomped his foot, his voice jumping an octave.

"I can prove it." Ilya held up an index finger, asking for a moment.

He stood up, walked back to the dining room chair, and picked up the backpack he had left on the floor. He unzipped it and pulled out a large, colorful hardcover book, the title gleaming: *Encyclopedia of Pacific Marine Mammals*. Ilya clearly walked around prepared for any type of kid. He flipped through the pages quickly until he found what he wanted.

Upon reading the word "marine" on the cover, curiosity won out over stubbornness. Liam approached with quick steps and stopped beside Ilya, who squatted back down to show the book at the boy's height.

"Right here, take a look." The Russian pointed to the two-page spread. It was an incredibly illustrated family tree of the *Delphinidae* family, full of educational drawings and vibrant colors.

Liam's jaw dropped. He widened his brown eyes, staring at the diagram, then looked at Ilya, then at his own stuffed orca, and back to the book, absorbing the new information with fascination.

"What else is in the book?" the boy asked, his voice overflowing with excitement.

And, for the next twenty minutes, Shane Hollander simply ceased to exist.

With an immense relief washing over his soul, the Metros' captain leaned against the kitchen counter and just watched. Liam and Ilya were sprawled on the large living room couch, side by side. The Russian turned the pages patiently, explaining facts about the ocean's creatures, while Liam chattered excitedly about the differences between sharks and true whales, having completely forgotten that, minutes prior, he was on a silent strike against the world.

And then, Liam rose to his knees on the couch, turning to his father with an excitement Shane hadn't seen in days.

"Can I show him my room? There's more ocean stuff up there."

The simple request hit Shane like a punch to the gut. A suffocating wave of memories swept through his mind: years of cold social workers walking into Liam's room with clipboards in hand, inspecting strategic points, checking locks, evaluating window safety, and asking the child trick questions, hunting for any slip-up Jessica could use in court. Shane's body stiffened instinctively.

He blinked, forcing himself to push the thought away. *The war is over*, he reminded himself. Ilya wasn't an agent of the state; he was just the guy who would look after his son.

But before Shane could stammer a reply, Ilya, with frighteningly sharp perception, noticed the captain's tension.

"You know what would be cool? If you and your dad showed me the room together," Ilya suggested, his tone casual and inviting.

Liam agreed immediately, jumping off the couch and hugging the stuffed orca along with the book tightly. Shane let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding and nodded, grateful for the intervention.

They went up to the second floor. The paper with the "forbidden" drawing and the DO NOT ENTER was still taped to the boy's door. Ilya looked at the sign, but didn't say a single word about it. The guy was a professional; he probably dealt with that kind of childhood protest every day. At least, that's what Shane told himself to soothe his embarrassment.

Liam's room was a perfectly organized chaos. Strings of yellowish fairy lights hung across the walls, giving the space a warm and cozy tone. There was a large corkboard covered with the boy's drawings, a bookshelf full of children's books, and shelves packed with stuffed animals. On top of the dresser, meticulously assembled LEGO ships and scenes shared space with a large box on the floor overflowing with loose pieces. On the messy bed lay an open pencil case and colored pencils scattered around unfinished sketches.

Ilya walked into the room with slow steps, observing the small private universe with respect. He approached the desk and picked up one of the drawings sitting on top of a pile.

"Did you make this one?" he asked.

"I did. It's a whale shark," Liam replied, puffing out his chest with pride.

Ilya assessed the paper with a clinical and amused look.

"It's really good. But don't you think it's missing some white spots on its fin?" He pointed to an empty area on the drawing.

Liam squinted, evaluating his own work.

"That's true."

The next five minutes flew by, with Liam leaning over the desk, correcting the drawing with a white pencil, while Ilya helped him smudge the lines. Shane leaned against the doorframe and just watched the scene, crossing his arms. A small, genuine smile broke out on his lips.

It was one of the rare times Liam was actually being treated like an ordinary kid. Not as "Shane Hollander's heir." Not as the trophy of a nearly decade-long legal war.

Ilya treated Liam just like Liam. And that was worth its weight in gold.

Since it was just an interview and not a workday, Ilya left about two hours later. He left behind a small LEGO sculpture in the shape of a clownfish, which Liam promptly made a point of displaying on the main shelf.

Returning from the entrance hall after locking the door, Shane found his son sitting cross-legged on the large modular leather couch, flipping through the marine encyclopedia the

Russian had left as a gift for him.

Shane swallowed hard. He still owed the apology Ilya had suggested earlier. And, besides that, he needed the final verdict on the guy.

"So...?" Shane asked cautiously, stopping near the couch, his hands in his pants pockets.

Liam lifted his head, his big brown eyes meeting his father's.

"He's cool. And his voice is really deep," he commented, a glint of fascination in his eyes.

"You think he's cool, huh?" Shane smiled and sat down next to the boy.

"He knows a lot about sharks." Liam turned another page of the book.

"Yeah, I noticed that." The Canadian laughed softly.

"And..." Liam hesitated, closing the book slowly and looking directly at his dad with a strangely mature expression. "He talked *to* me."

"I know, buddy, I saw you guys talking." Shane stroked the boy's hair, but Liam shook his head in frustration.

"No, Dad. He *talked* to me. He didn't ask me questions the way the social workers did, you know? His questions were because he actually wanted to talk. He wasn't trying to figure out some secret or make me talk about Mom."

Shane's heart broke and mended itself in the same second. He loved and hated how perceptive his son was. He was immensely proud of his intelligence, of course, but deeply hated the fact that he hadn't been able to shield that little boy's innocence—a boy who grew up bouncing from one house to another, always walking on eggshells, always being interrogated by adults in suits.

Shane glanced at the front door, thinking about the big, attitude-filled Russian who had just left. At no point did Ilya ask for a selfie with the NHL star, nor did he ask invasive questions about the custody controversy, or even try to strike up a conversation about hockey to flatter him. He spent the entire visit discussing sharks with an eight-year-old child, without the slightest need to impress the boss.

Shane hated to admit that J.J. was right, mostly because his friend would brag about it for all eternity. But it was undeniable: Ilya was brilliant. Maybe he was exactly the missing piece for Liam's stability. And the desperate help Shane needed.

"When is he coming back?" Liam's voice pulled him back to reality.

"In two days, when I have to leave early for practice," Shane replied softly, shifting on the couch to face his son. He took a deep breath. It was time. "And hey... look at me."

Liam looked up.

"I know you didn't want to change schools. I know you're scared and that you're going to miss your friends there," Shane began, his voice laden with sincerity.

Liam's face began to close off, the sulking expression from the past two days rehearsing a comeback.

"I took you out of there for a number of very important reasons regarding your safety, Li. But... I acted like an idiot by forgetting to consider how it would make you feel. I know I made you sad and scared. And I am so sorry for that. It was never my intention to hurt you. Can you forgive me?"

Shane watched the gears turning behind his son's almond-shaped eyes. Liam processed the apology for long, silent seconds. Finally, the tension left the boy's tiny shoulders.

He set the book aside, crawled across the leather couch, and threw his arms around his father's neck, burying his face in the crook of his shoulder.

Shane let out a long, trembling sigh of relief, wrapping his son in a protective hug. The silent treatment was over.

[...]

Shane's alarm went off at exactly six o'clock. With a harsh groan, he threw the covers aside and dragged himself to the bathroom. His night's sleep had been garbage.

Today would be the first pre-season practice and, consequently, the first time he would leave Liam in Ilya's care. The situation sent his brain working in a loop, replaying years of courtroom battles over the use of third parties in raising his son. Shane remembered perfectly filling out an aggressive questionnaire asking why Jessica hired a nanny when her job was entirely remote. His lawyers' argument had been lethal: if she couldn't take care of Liam full-time, custody should go to the father.

And now, three years after winning that specific round in court, there he was. Outsourcing his son's care.

A massive hypocrite, he thought, staring at the dark circles under his eyes in the mirror.

While brushing his teeth with his free hand, he scrolled on his phone screen to check his emails. His blood boiled slightly as he read a message from the Rolex marketing team demanding an in-person meeting right after practice. Shane hated last-minute schedule changes. The email was drenched in corporate apologies for the late notice, but reinforced the urgency of aligning the details for a new watch collection campaign. Next, there was an email from Reebok, scheduling a meeting for the following week to finalize the photoshoot for an exclusive sneaker line.

The first thing he needed to do was let Ilya know. He wouldn't be home at the agreed-upon time.

[Direct Message]

Shane Hollander: Good morning, Ilya. Just got an email with a bomb in my schedule. I'm going to have a meeting with sponsors right after practice, so I should be home two or three hours later than we agreed.

As soon as he sent the message, Shane spat the toothpaste foam into the sink, rinsed his mouth, and used the water to quickly shave the sparse stubble sprouting on his jaw. He dried his face and marched to his walk-in closet.

When he stepped out, already dressed in dark sweatpants and his Metros practice t-shirt, his phone buzzed. A slight twinge of guilt pricked his chest; maybe he had woken the Russian up.

[Direct Message]

Ilya Rozanov: No problem, Shane. You remember that my daily contract is from 7 AM to 7 PM, right? No need to worry.

Shane Hollander: It's just that it deviated from the strict routine I sent you, so I thought I should let you know.

Shane went downstairs to the first floor. Breakfast was purely mechanical: he blended and drank his protein shake in minutes. It was ten to seven. He sent a quick message to the team group chat warning that he might be ten minutes late—even though he knew perfectly well that practice would take almost an hour to really get going. A bunch of millionaire grown men with skates and sticks always needed a sacred sixty minutes of bantering and messing around on the ice before getting down to serious work.

He went back upstairs and opened Liam's bedroom door gently. A sliver of morning light cut through the room's dimness. Liam was sleeping soundly, curled up and hugging Mr. Bubbles. Shane sat on the edge of the mattress, his weight sinking the springs, and began to stroke his son's messy hair.

"Hey, Li..." he called out in a raspy voice. He was answered with a sleepy grumble. "I'm leaving for practice now, buddy. Do you want to come down and have some juice with me before I go, or would you rather keep sleeping?"

Liam stretched, rubbing his eyes and blinking heavily to get his bearings. Without saying a word, he pulled the covers aside. Shane helped him up, and the boy walked down the stairs in an almost zombie-like silence. He was never very sociable in the first hour of the day.

As soon as Shane opened the fridge and placed the pitcher of orange juice on the kitchen island, the doorbell rang through the apartment. Liam blinked lethargically, staring at the door.

"It's Ilya," Shane let him know, patting his son's shoulder.

He walked to the entrance, unlocked the door, and found the Russian waiting in the hall, putting his phone in his jacket pocket.

"You're terrifyingly punctual," Shane noted, checking his own wrist.

"Nice watch," Ilya countered, his blue eyes assessing the luxury piece on Shane's arm for a second.

"Rolex is my sponsor." Shane stepped aside to let him in. Ilya nodded, already bending down to take off his shoes. "I'm just finishing serving his breakfast. And just to let you know, Liam needs about an hour of system boot-up before he starts speaking in full sentences."

"Understood," Ilya said. He left his shoes perfectly aligned, took his backpack off his shoulders, and dropped it on the living room armchair before following Shane to the kitchen. "You can go finish getting your stuff ready. I'll take over his breakfast."

"I'm already done, it's quick," Shane tried to maintain control of the situation.

"It's exactly seven o'clock right now, Shane. Which means my shift has started," Ilya insisted with a firm but polite tone, stepping past the Canadian and taking the front of the counter. "Good morning, Liam."

"Hi..." the boy murmured softly, quietly sipping his glass of juice without looking up.

Shane leaned against the counter and just watched the Russian move with ease around the kitchen. With a practical manner and without pushing too hard, Ilya managed to coax a few words out of the boy this morning, finding out what he wanted to eat. Liam chose cereal and even stretched his little arm to point to which cabinet the box was in.

Meanwhile, Shane prolonged his stay as much as possible. He pretended to fiddle with the zippers on his duffel bag and wandered aimlessly around the first floor, inventing invisible tasks. He could have left at least five minutes ago, but leaving the apartment was proving to be a physically painful task. His paternal instinct and separation anxiety screamed for him to stay.

Until his eyes landed on the microwave's digital display: 07:10. He couldn't delay the inevitable any longer, or the captain would be the last to arrive on the first day of practice.

"I have to go now, okay?" Shane announced, throwing the strap of his heavy bag over his shoulder. He stepped up to the stool and affectionately ruffled his son's hair.

Liam stopped chewing and dropped his spoon into the bowl, the thud echoing in the silence of the kitchen.

"What time are you coming back?"

"I don't know for sure yet, buddy. Maybe at three or four in the afternoon."

"But you said one o'clock yesterday." His little voice sounded accusatory, the anxiety over the break in predictability already showing through.

"I know, I'm sorry. Something came up at work that I couldn't avoid." Shane pressed his lips together, his heart squeezing with guilt as he saw the boy instantly scowl and pull his shoulders back, building a wall between them.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shane noticed that Ilya had stopped putting away the cereal box and was watching the interaction closely. Not knowing how to fix the situation in the little time he had, Shane planted an apology-laden kiss on the top of Liam's head and pulled away.

He was walking with heavy steps toward the entrance hall when, as he passed the magnetic routine board on the wall, he felt a large, firm hand touch his shoulder.

Shane turned around, surprised. It was the Russian, with a whiteboard marker held out toward him.

"What good is it for you to know every detail of his routine if he has no idea about yours?" Ilya asked, in a low and reasonable tone, pointing his chin at the large planning board. "Write your schedule for today right there. When practice is, when the meeting is, what time you get in the car. Give him back his predictability. That way he'll feel more at ease."

[...]

Crossing the double doors of the locker room, Shane came face to face with Hayden and J.J. standing suspiciously right in front of his locker. The captain slowed his pace and raised an eyebrow, noticing that the rest of the guys were also acting weird. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Viktor trying to hide something behind J.J.'s broad back, but the object slipped upward: a blue balloon.

"What the hell did you guys put in my locker?" Shane asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"We couldn't exactly celebrate with you the day the verdict came out, so..." Hayden offered a crooked smile, and the two finally stepped aside.

Shane's space was completely decorated. Helium balloons with the Metros logo and "Happy Father's Day" banners floated, tied to the metal hooks. There were dozens of photos of him and Liam taped to the walls of the locker, a handmade banner with cutout letters reading "Hollander Wins!" and, sitting on the bench, little teddy bears wearing tiny Metros uniforms with the number 24 on their backs.

"My God..." Shane let out an incredulous laugh.

In that same instant, the entire locker room erupted in applause, whistles, and the tapping of sticks against the rubberized floor.

"Daddy's home!" Hayden yelled, and laughter filled the dense, cold air of the room.

Shane let his heavy bag slip from his shoulder and approached the locker, observing the timeline formed by the photos his friends had gathered.

The first one that caught his attention was, ironically, the very first photo of Shane with his son. Still at the hospital. Yuna had captured the moment: Shane, with his youthful eighteen-year-old face, sitting in the armchair in the room, holding that tiny, fragile little bundle in his arms. His face was blotchy and red from crying so much, his freckles popping against his pale skin, and a gleam of pure, terrified love in his eyes.

Another prominently featured photo was one of the most recent, which Shane himself had posted the week he won the court case. It just showed their legs stretched out on the coffee table, wearing matching socks, with a giant bucket of popcorn between them as they watched a movie in the penthouse. The image had blown up with likes. Most of the photos there were from his friends' personal collections, as Shane fiercely protected Liam's face from social media, no matter how much the paparazzi tried to profit off him.

"Left Liam with Ilya today, cap?" J.J. asked, stopping beside his friend, already wearing his thermal pants and shin guards under his hockey socks.

"Yeah," Shane nodded, starting to unbutton his shirt. "By the way, he mentioned you've been putting in a good word for me."

"Only spoke the truth. *J'te jure*," the French-Canadian assured him, placing a hand over his heart theatrically. Shane laughed, grabbing the upper half of his gear. "And let me warn you right now: the guy cooks pretty damn well! *Mon Dieu*! Liam is never going to want to swallow your food again."

"You know Liam barely makes articulate sounds before eight in the morning, right?" Shane commented.

"Sounds like someone I know..." Hayden hummed from the locker next door, focused on wrapping fresh tape around the blade of his stick. Shane just rolled his eyes.

"The point is that Ilya managed to get him not only to speak, but to say what he wanted to eat for breakfast," Shane admitted. He was genuinely impressed, and a sense of relief tingled in his chest; finally, some good news.

"Elise used to hate vegetables. Do you know what that brilliant bastard came up with when her baby teeth started falling out?" J.J. rested his elbow on the metal of the locker. "He told her that the 'new teeth' came with different taste buds, so she had an obligation to try all the foods she didn't like before again, just to test them out. Result: today my daughter devours broccoli and radishes."

Hayden stopped what he was doing and turned his head slowly.

"Does that actually work?" he asked, with the pure academic curiosity of a struggling father.

"It worked with Elise," the defenseman raised his hands in surrender.

"Liam has never had much of a problem with vegetables," Shane shrugged, putting on his shoulder pads.

"Bullshit. He refuses to eat anything cooked, you complained about that yourself on the flight during our last road trip," Hayden called him out on the spot.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean he doesn't eat them. I just give him raw carrots, cut up like a snack. And with broccoli, I just blanch it in hot water so it doesn't get mushy," Shane explained with the calmness of someone who had mastered the routine, making his friends laugh at his survival tactics.

"Want to know an incredible psychological trick?" Mitty, the starting goalie, chimed into the conversation as he buckled his massive, heavy leg pads. "I told my nephews that every time a child lies, a star appears on their forehead, and only adults can see it. My sister says that, to this day, when they're about to tell a lie, the first thing they do is cover their foreheads with both hands."

"Wait a minute... why have we never used this locker room to exchange parenting tips before?!" Hayden asked loudly to the rest of the team, drawing widespread laughter.

"Dude, you're the one going on your fourth kid. You're the one who should be our guiding star on this subject," joked Drapeau, lacing up his skates.

"God forbid. Hayden is the perfect example of what not to do," Andropov pointed at Pike with the shaft of his stick, adding to the chorus of laughter in the locker room.

"Hey, screw you guys! It's not my fault I got two for the price of one on the first try!" Hayden shot back, flipping them off, but with a proud smile on his face.

The practice flowed well—or, at least, the closest thing to "smooth" that a heavy Montreal Metros practice could be. Shane was in his element, his mind sharp and one hundred percent focused on the game. He wasn't the best player in the league by accident; he was the captain with the highest Hockey IQ today, the absolute record holder for speed and accuracy shooting in the All-Star Game. And now, after eight years of torment, he finally found himself free to give his all to the ice.

If, even while going through absolute hell in his personal life, Shane had been able to carry the team on his back and hoist the Stanley Cup twice, what would he be capable of now? Liam was safe, protected under his roof, miles away from Jessica and her manipulations. Everything was finally back on track.

During the hydration break on the bench, while the Zamboni smoothed the other side of the rink, Shane grabbed his phone, which he had left with the athletic trainer in case of emergencies. The screen showed a notification. Opening it, he saw two photos sent by Ilya. The first showed Liam super focused, building a new, complex LEGO structure on the living room rug. The second was a selfie of the two of them smiling in a relaxed way at the tree-lined park across from Shane's building.

The captain broke into an involuntary, relieved smile.

Hayden glided swiftly across the ice to the bench, braking sideways and throwing up a cloud of crushed snow before leaning over the acrylic boards next to Shane.

"Is that the nanny guy?" he asked, craning his sweat-covered neck.

Shane nodded and turned his phone screen to show the selfie.

"Wow..." Hayden's eyes widened. "Man, it's a good thing you're single and that Simone is already fed up with the male sex. Because, let me tell you, I would never feel secure with a guy like that walking around my house all day."

"Because of Jackie?" Shane laughed, locking the device's screen.

"The dude looks like a Calvin Klein model, Shane!" Hayden pointed out, as if it were the most obvious realization in the world. "Come on, you never had a crush on a babysitter when you were a teenager?"

"I never had a babysitter in my life, Hayden. My parents had different schedules and there was always one of them at home with me," Shane reminded him, making the blonde roll his eyes.

"Well, it's never too late to have a crush on your kid's nanny," Hayden teased, flashing a wicked smirk.

"Leave the romance for the locker room, princesses!" Viktor Andropov yelled, skating at high speed behind them, tapping the blade of his stick on the ice as he did his explosive drills.

The tease drew loud laughs from Shane and Hayden, completely dissipating any remaining trace of the tension the captain had been carrying since the morning.

[...]

As soon as he stepped into the high-end photography studio booked by Rolex, Shane realized the meeting would be much more than just signing papers and measuring wrists. Right off the bat, he spotted a woman who clearly didn't belong to the production crew.

She exuded the kind of confidence of someone perfectly accustomed to the spotlight. She wore an impeccable tailored suit—a burgundy set with the structured blazer draped casually over her shoulders. Her short, wavy red hair framed her face, which was focused on her phone screen, while her other hand balanced a steaming cup of coffee.

When she turned her body slightly, humming something softly, Shane recognized her immediately: Rose Landry. An A-list Hollywood actress. The whole world was anxiously awaiting the sequel to the blockbuster *X-Squad*, eager to discover her character's fate.

"Ah, you're here!" The creative director appeared, clapping softly. The sound made Rose look up and give a little start when she saw the player standing there. "Shall we take the measurements for the watches and set up the shoot?"

"Sure." The two agreed in unison.

Rose put her phone in her pocket and walked toward Shane, flashing a charismatic smile.

"My God. I had no idea they were going to call you for this campaign." The redhead held out her hand. Her long nails boasted sophisticated nail art. "Rose Landry."

"I know exactly who you are." Shane shook her hand firmly, returning the smile politely without sounding pedantic. The actress let out a light laugh. "The marketing team told me about this shoot this morning. There was absolutely nothing about it on my schedule."

"Ah, my bad..." Rose grimaced apologetically and sipped her coffee as they walked side by side toward the dressing rooms. "That's my fault. I found out at the last minute that today was my only day off this entire month. My agent let Rolex know, and as soon as they saw the opening, they made sure to make me 'not free' immediately."

"And then they decided to drag the brand's other big face to pose together on the same day to ride the momentum. I get their desperation," Shane added humorously, drawing another laugh from the actress. "You're in town filming the *X-Squad* sequel, right?"

"I am. And I can't wait for this movie to come out," she agreed, her eyes shining. "Did you watch the first one?"

"You can consider me a fan."

"The great Shane Hollander is my fan. Oh my God, I've won at life." Rose placed her palm flat against her chest and looked dramatically at the ceiling, making the Canadian laugh for real.

"I watched the first two movies of the franchise with my son not too long ago," he commented casually.

They entered the prep room. Shane sat in the leather chair one of the jewelers pointed to. Rose quickly pulled a second chair nearby, extending her elegant wrist so the other assistant could start taking her measurements, not wanting to interrupt the conversation.

"You know the rating for that movie is PG-13, right?" Rose raised an eyebrow in a playfully scolding tone.

"Oops. My bad," Shane joked, shrugging, which made her laugh again.

The redhead tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She was stunning in person; it was no surprise that a luxury brand like Rolex wanted her as an ambassador. While the jeweler adjusted the measuring tape on Shane's wrist, Rose's tone became a bit more subdued.

"On a serious note... I'm a huge hockey fan. So, as a fan, I'm really glad all that legal hell is over and you can finally go back to focusing just on the ice."

The sentence took a turn Shane hadn't expected. He was already shielded and ready to deflect an intrusive or curious question about Liam, but Rose didn't cross the line. It was just a supportive comment, mature and direct.

"Thank you, Rose. It means a lot," he thanked her sincerely, his shoulders relaxing. "But hold on... aren't you from Detroit?"

"I am..." She broke into a wide, slightly guilty smile. "And it would be a huge favor if you took it easy on my team when the season starts. We're suffering."

"Uhm..." Shane pretended to ponder, narrowing his eyes playfully. "I'll think about it, Miss Landry."

Chapter 3: Like father, like son

Chapter Notes

I'm loving this fic so much hehehe

and to think that in about a week, s2 starts to be filmed - i'm unwell

"What keychain is that on your backpack?" Liam asked, playing with the small metal object jingling attached to the zipper of one of the pockets.

"It's my country's flag," Ilya replied. He was finishing washing the lunch dishes in the kitchen island sink, keeping the boy comfortably in his field of vision. Before leaving, Shane had left a credit card on the counter to cover any expenses, but Ilya intentionally ignored it. He had paid for lunch himself through a delivery app; it was a quirk of his, a treat he liked to give on his first day with his new kids.

"And where are you from?" Liam inquired, raising his almond-shaped eyes from the shark he was coloring. The drawing was part of a brand-new coloring book that Ilya had bought during their morning walk through the park, after a strategic stop at the local bookstore.

"From Russia," the Russian replied with his back turned, soaping the glasses.

"Where is that?"

"Have you learned about the continents in school yet?"

"No. I don't like geography." Liam made an adorable grimace of disinterest.

"Well, the world has six continents: America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania, and Antarctica." Ilya adopted a patient and didactic tone, noticing that although Liam wasn't looking, he was listening attentively. "Canada is in America. But since it's giant, we divide it into three pieces: North, Central, and South America."

"And which piece are we in?" The colored pencil stopped scratching the paper.

"The North one," Ilya replied. Liam finally let go of the pencil and rested his chin on both hands, curiosity overcoming his dislike for geography. "Russia, on the other hand, is the largest country in the whole world. It's so colossal that it didn't fit in just one continent. So, it's spread across two: one part in Europe and the other in Asia."

"And which part are you from?"

"The European part," Ilya smiled, rinsing the glasses and placing them on the drying rack. "More specifically from the capital, called Moscow."

"Does every country have a capital? Like Ottawa is ours?" he asked, returning to filling in the shark's fin with dedication.

"Exactly. Every country has one."

"And what's it like in Russia?"

"It's very cold, actually more like the winter here in Canada than you might imagine," Ilya said, and Liam raised his eyebrows, impressed. "It snows a lot and temperatures stay below zero for a good while."

"Are there bears there? I saw a really big bear in my grandpa's garden last year!" The boy rummaged through his pencil case, looking for the gray crayon.

"There are lots of bears. And there are also tigers. Siberian tigers, who love the snow," Ilya commented with a mysterious, exciting air that made the boy giggle.

"Is it far? Do you go there a lot?"

"It's very far. You have to take an airplane for many hours," Ilya nodded, picking up the sponge again. "I usually only visit every once in a while, once a year."

"Does your whole family live there?"

"Yes, everyone."

"And are your parents married or do they fight and yell like mine?"

Ilya's hands stopped under the running water. The sponge stalled. No matter how many years of experience he had as a caregiver, the brutal, innocent honesty of a child dealing with divorce always disarmed him. Their sad stories always ended up bumping into his own sad stories.

"My parents are married, yes," he replied, his voice slightly softer. It wasn't a lie, but it was also far from the complete truth.

"Do you have any siblings?"

"I have a brother who is four years older. His name is Alexei," Ilya anticipated, knowing the pattern of childish interrogation well.

"Ruby and Jade have brothers. But Elise and I don't. It's kind of boring."

"Boring because you don't have someone to keep you company all the time?" Ilya asked, turning off the faucet and shaking the excess water from his hands.

Liam shrugged, deeply focused on coloring a shell neon orange.

"Well, I'm here to keep you company now. And in a little while, at four o'clock, your dad is going to be here too."

"Dad doesn't have siblings either." Liam stopped coloring and frowned, staring at the caregiver in confusion. "How do you get siblings? How do we show up?"

The Russian pulled out one of the high stools at the island and sat facing Liam, throwing the damp dish towel over his shoulder. It definitely wasn't the first time he had faced the crossfire of this question.

"Think of it like this," he began, choosing his words with playful care. "Your dad received a very special seed, that only your mom could water and take care of. And, for that seed to bloom, they had to sleep together to plant it deep inside her tummy. When they woke up the next morning, the seed was already there, warm and protected. It took a long nine months for it to bear fruit, to grow arms and legs. And, at the very end, you were born."

Liam widened his large almond-shaped eyes and opened his mouth in a small "o," completely amazed by the botanical explanation.

"Are you serious?!"

"Very serious." Ilya broke into a restrained, affectionate smile. "But don't worry, in a few years, in your science classes, the teacher will explain to you in much more detail how this 'planting' works."

As soon as Liam finished coloring the drawing, Ilya suggested they continue building LEGO sculptures, but with the challenge of trying to recreate the animals from the book.

The idea resulted in two hours of pure entertainment. Ilya built a starfish so bizarre and crooked that it made the boy laugh out loud. On the other hand, Liam proved to have a talent for it: he managed to build a hammerhead shark about six inches long, full of details, and proudly placed it in the center of the coffee table. The Russian, meanwhile, took apart his failed star to try something different.

They then decided to join forces to build an orca, using Liam's stuffed toy as an anatomical model. In the middle of the process, Ilya took a picture of the mess and sent it to Shane, keeping his promise to update him throughout the day.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Liam asked suddenly, while rummaging through the large plastic box in search of more little white pieces.

"No," Ilya replied without looking away, trying to snap a black block into what would be the orca's tail.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not necessarily looking for one at the moment." Ilya shrugged, focused on the toy.

"Mommy said my dad doesn't know how to talk to girls. She said she was the one who had to ask him out the first time," the boy rattled off the gossip with the naturalness of a child, dumping a handful of pieces onto the rug.

For the first time all day, Ilya had to bite the inside of his cheek to hold back a laugh.

The irony was palpable. The biggest star in the NHL, on the cover of sports magazines, the guy who was always posing in soaking wet white shirts in beverage commercials and looking sensual with luxury watches—literally voted the most handsome player in the league by three different publications—supposedly couldn't exchange two words with a woman.

But, of course, it could also just be another one of the many narratives invented by Jessica Dubois. Ilya genuinely didn't know their story, and he definitely wouldn't use the child to find out.

"My friends are all girls. Ruby, Jade, and Elise," Liam continued, changing the subject while sorting the blocks by color. "I don't have boy friends. At my other school, the boys didn't really like me."

Ilya looked up, a gleam of genuine concern replacing the humor from seconds ago.

"Why not?" he asked, his voice gentle.

Liam shrugged, shaking away the sad little pout that formed on his lips with a quick shake of his head.

"I prefer having girl friends, they're nicer and they don't hit. And the boys there made fun of me for that."

"Have you ever told your dad that?" Ilya inquired cautiously, picking up another black piece to complete the animal's tail.

Liam shook his head, looking down.

"And why not?"

The boy shrugged again, about to answer, but the time had passed so quickly that neither of them noticed the late afternoon approaching. The metallic sound of keys unlocking the front door broke their bubble of concentration.

"Liam? Ilya?" Shane's deep voice echoed through the entrance hall.

From the angle where Ilya was sprawled on the living room rug, the glass of the staircase blocked his view of the door. But Liam had a clear view.

"Daddy!" The boy dropped his handful of pieces, grabbed his new LEGO hammerhead shark, and ran toward the hall. "Look at the shark I made! Look, look, look!"

Shane let out a tired but affectionate laugh.

"Wow, it looks incredible, buddy. Really good," the player praised, letting his heavy equipment bag slide off his shoulder onto the floor.

Ilya stood up from the rug. The movement made his bad knee pop loudly and dryly, echoing through the room.

"Wow. I heard that pop from over here." Shane grimaced, watching the Russian straighten up.

"Two titanium pins. They like to show off," Ilya joked, smoothing out his wrinkled shirt.

"Li, why don't you go put that shark on your shelf while I talk with Ilya for a bit, huh?" Shane asked, fixing his son's dark hair.

Liam nodded, turned his back, and started climbing the stairs, skipping the steps two by two.

"Liam!" Shane scolded him instantly.

The boy let out a cheeky giggle and started taking the stairs one at a time, behaving. Shane let out a long sigh and then turned his attention back to Ilya.

"He's in one piece, as you can see," Ilya preempted, stuffing his hands into his pants pockets.

"How was the day?"

Shane walked toward the kitchen. He couldn't help but notice that the island was impeccably clean, without a single sign of the lunch mess. He opened the fridge and grabbed a bottle of cold water.

"Pretty quiet. After you left for practice, he ended up sleeping a little more on the couch. He woke up, played with LEGOs, and since the sun wasn't too strong, we went for a short walk in the park. On the way back, we stopped by a bookstore, came back, he ate a really good lunch, spent some time coloring his new book, and by the late afternoon, he decided he wanted to build an orca. So far we only have the tail," Ilya listed the events with the precision of a military report, but with a relaxed tone.

Shane nodded, satisfied, and took a generous gulp of water.

"And how much was the book?"

"Twenty dollars."

"Did you use the card I left on the counter?"

"Nope." Ilya popped the "p", shaking his head.

Shane frowned, scowling with an expression incredibly similar to the one Liam used to make when he was upset.

"Ilya, I left the corporate card there specifically to cover anything he wanted or needed to buy. You don't need to, and certainly shouldn't, spend your own money on my son."

"Well, technically you're the one paying me, so at the end of the day, it's still your money," the Russian countered with logic, raising his eyebrows in a cynical and provocative manner.

Shane tried to maintain his stern expression, but the corner of his lips betrayed him, and he failed miserably to hide a snort of laughter.

"You can go do your things, I've got him," Ilya assured with a calm smile.

Shane wanted to refuse out of pure paternal instinct, but reality knocked on his door: there were still three long hours left until the Russian's shift ended. He needed to empty his sweat-soaked equipment bag, put his practice clothes in the wash, rub muscle-relaxing gel on his throbbing thighs, and above all, get out of those jeans that felt like they weighed a ton.

From the living room rug, Liam was already shaking a colorful little piece in the air, calling for his caregiver unceremoniously.

"Ilya! Look at this one, it looks like a blue whale's tail!" the boy called out, totally immersed in the new build.

Shane let out a defeated sigh and nodded slightly to Ilya, accepting the help. After all, that was exactly what the guy had been hired for.

"I'll be right back so you can tell me all about your day, okay, buddy?" Shane let him know, hoisting the heavy equipment bag and starting the climb toward the second floor.

Liam didn't even turn his face to answer, absorbed by the box of blocks and already laughing at some other funny observation the Russian had just made.

[...]

Around seven in the evening, the shift came to an end. Ilya said his goodbyes and, to Shane's absolute surprise, Liam threw his arms around the Russian's waist in a spontaneous hug. The captain blinked, shocked. Liam hated physical contact with strangers. That was, ironically, one of the rare things Shane and Jessica agreed on: never force the child to hug anyone. And there he was, hugging the nanny on the first day.

"And what do you want for dinner, buddy?" Shane asked as soon as they were alone, already wearing comfortable shorts and a worn-out t-shirt for lounging around the house. "And I'm warning you now: tonight is an early bedtime. You have school tomorrow."

"Okay." Liam climbed onto the kitchen island stool and looked at his dad. "When is Ilya coming back?"

Shane laughed lightly through his nose, opening the fridge to grab the vegetables.

"Every day that I have practice. And you know what? I'm going to put my schedule right on that routine board of yours, so you can read it and know exactly where I am."

Liam smiled and promptly offered to wash the vegetables, while Shane took over the dangerous part involving knives and the stove. They ate dinner together right there at the counter, and the boy spent the entire meal chattering about his day, detailing every new piece of information he had discovered about the Russian's life.

"And he taught me about the six continents of the world! He said Russia is so giant that it doesn't fit in just one continent. A piece of it is in Europe and the other is in Asia."

"Did you know our family also comes from Asia?" Shane commented casually, chopping a piece of cauliflower.

Liam stopped chewing and widened his eyes, astounded.

"Seriously?!"

"Yes. Your great-grandparents came from Japan. And Japan is in Asia," Shane explained, letting out a soft laugh at the boy's surprise. "Have you never noticed that Grandpa Yuji's and Grandma Hikari's names are different from ours?" He cited his maternal grandparents, who were currently enjoying their retirement in Toronto, far from Japan. "Even Grandma Yuna's name is Japanese."

"And why don't we have names like that?"

"Because Grandpa David was the one who picked my name, the same way I was the one who picked yours," Shane replied, smiling.

"And why 'Liam'?"

"Because I think it's beautiful. It suits you." Shane shrugged, and the boy laughed lightly.

"It sounds like Ilya's name. It has a similar sound," the boy pointed out, fishing the raw carrot slices out of his salad. "He has an older brother named Alexei. Oh... and he told me how we are born."

Shane choked violently. He coughed, thumped his own chest, and grabbed his glass of water, downing a desperate gulp to clear his throat.

"H-He did, huh?" his voice came out squeaky.

"Yeah. He said that every dad plants a seed really deep in the mom's tummy at night, that it takes nine months to bear fruit, and that's how we are born," Liam explained the botanical version naturally, chewing the carrot with a crunchy sound.

Shane let out a sigh so long and relieved that his shoulders slumped.

"Yeah... it's pretty much something like that," the Canadian agreed, mentally thanking the Russian for the impeccable metaphor. Ilya had probably already told that exact story to

dozens of curious children, sparing Shane an early heart attack.

"And he doesn't have a girlfriend," Liam added, without the slightest filter.

Shane let out a weak laugh at the abrupt change of subject.

"He doesn't?"

"Just like you. Do you think he doesn't know how to talk to girls either?"

Shane snapped his neck toward his son so fast he almost heard his vertebrae crack.

"Who told you I don't know how to talk to girls?"

"Mommy." Liam shrugged, oblivious to the chaos. "She said she was the one who had to ask you out when you were younger, because you didn't know what to do."

Shane's neck grew hot instantly. In his mind, he cursed Jessica Dubois with every name possible and imaginable in three different languages. That woman's audacity knew no bounds.

"I was just a shy guy in high school, that's all," Shane defended himself, pointing his fork at his son in a good-humored protest.

"Mommy also said that was going to be your excuse."

Shane felt the tip of his tongue itch to counter the provocation with the fact that, just a few hours prior, he had exchanged phone numbers with Rose Landry, the most coveted actress of the moment. But he stopped himself in time. His eight-year-old son didn't need to know absolutely anything about his father's contacts or love life. On the other hand, Liam would definitely freak out if he found out that Shane had met the big star of *X-Squad*, his favorite action franchise.

"You know who I met at work today?" Shane changed the subject with a sly smile, fishing his phone out of his shorts pocket and opening the image gallery. There were a few behind-the-scenes shots taken by the Rolex production team.

"Who?" the boy asked, already craning his tiny neck over his plate, his curiosity overflowing.

Shane selected a specific photo and turned the lit screen toward his son. In the image, he and the actress appeared side by side in the dressing room chairs, laughing while being prepped by the makeup artists.

"Is that Rhea Darkthorn?!" Liam gasped, almost choking on his food again. His brown eyes widened in pure disbelief as he recognized the armed protagonist of his favorite movies, now casually sitting next to his dad.

Shane let out a loud laugh and nodded.

The rest of dinner flew by as the captain recounted, step by step, what the behind-the-scenes of the campaign had been like. He described how nice and funny Rose was in person, detailed the lights and the size of the studio, and lamented—to Liam's dramatic disappointment and grumbles—that he hadn't managed to wring a single measly spoiler out of the actress about what would happen in the next movie of the saga.

[...]

[Direct Message]

Rose Landry: My best friend is freaking out because I met you today.

Shane Hollander: 😂 I also told my son that I met Rhea Darkthorn and he almost lost his mind.

Rose Landry: 🙄🙄🙄 You can tell him Rhea says hi. And goodnight, of course.

Shane Hollander: Will do! 😂

Shane let out a low laugh, locked his phone screen, and slid it into the pocket of his sweatpants. He walked down the hallway and stopped at Liam's bedroom door, leaning his shoulder against the frame. The boy was hunched over the desk, deeply concentrated on coloring the book Ilya had given him.

"Nine o'clock, young man. Bedtime," Shane announced.

"Hold on. I'm almost done with this star," Liam asked, his voice drawn out by concentration.

Shane crossed his arms and waited patiently, until he saw the tip of the colored pencil skillfully jump from a finished starfish to a completely blank shell.

"Liam..." Shane called out, his tone gaining a note of paternal warning as he caught the ruse.

"Wait, just this one," the boy insisted, without taking his eyes off the paper.

"You can finish coloring tomorrow after school," Shane argued, walking over to him and resting his hands gently on his son's shoulders. "We agreed that you would go to bed earlier today so you'd be rested, remember?"

Liam let out a sigh of defeat, dropped the colored pencils on the paper, and pushed the chair back.

Shane walked him to the bed. He pulled the soft blankets up to the boy's chin, tucked the stuffed hammerhead shark, Mr. Bubbles, into his arms, and combed the dark strands of hair from his son's forehead with his fingers.

"Do you want a specific book today or do you want me to pick?"

"Whatever," Liam shrugged, his voice already sounding sleepy.

Shane nodded and went to the bookshelf, running his fingers over the spines until he pulled out an illustrated Winnie the Pooh book. It was one of Liam's favorites. And, secretly, one of the worst for Shane.

He hated reading that book, because the bear's melancholic lines always forced him to swallow a thick knot in his throat. He felt like an idiot for wanting to cry while reading a children's bedtime story, but there he was, deepening his voice to read the tales and hiding his face behind the hardcover so his son wouldn't see the wet shine gathering in his eyes.

Shane read in a low voice for fifteen minutes. He knew Liam hadn't fallen asleep yet, because the boy had a habit of rubbing his feet together under the covers when he was awake, and the friction of the sheets was still audible.

"Goodbye? Oh, no, please. Can't we go back to page one and do it all over again?" Shane finished the sentence, closed the book, and placed it on the nightstand.

Liam was watching him. His brown eyes were narrowed and heavy, but fighting bravely against sleep. His father pushed his own urge to cry away and gently caressed his son's little hands, which were squeezing Mr. Bubbles like an anchor.

"What is it, buddy? Don't want to sleep alone in your room the night before your first day of school?"

"What if the new boys are like the ones at my other school?" Liam murmured, his voice so low Shane almost didn't hear it. The boy lowered his head, hiding his face in the stuffed animal. "They didn't like me there."

Shane felt his stomach drop.

"What do you mean, Li?" He sat on the edge of the mattress, holding his son's hand.

"They made fun of me because I only have girl friends. They called me a little girl..." Liam swallowed hard, a trembling pout forming on his lips as the words finally poured out. "They said I wasn't a real boy and that that was why you and Mommy fought so much. They said you didn't fight to see who got to keep me, but to keep pushing me onto each other, because neither of you wanted to have a weird kid."

The tears Shane had tried to hold back all day, all week, all month, came back with full force, burning his vision. His heart shattered in his chest. He sniffled audibly and let out a harsh, trembling sigh.

"My God... Why did you never tell me this?"

Liam just shrugged, a silent tear sliding down his freckled nose.

Shane didn't need another word. He pulled the blankets off the bed with one hand and opened his arms with the other. Liam quickly got up, throwing himself into his father's lap. The boy wrapped his legs around Shane's torso and hid his face in the crook of his neck, clinging to him as if he were a lifeboat.

"Come here. You're going to sleep with Dad tonight. And whenever you want," Shane whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

He grabbed Liam's favorite pillow and carried him down the dark hallway to the master suite. He deposited his son in the middle of the massive king-size bed, and the boy already began settling in, curled up. Shane turned on the dim light of the bedside lamp, kicked his slippers away, and lay down beside him, pulling him immediately into a tight, protective hug.

"Listen here, and pay very close attention to what I'm going to tell you," Shane began, his deep, absolute voice vibrating in his chest, right where Liam's ear was resting. "Those boys are idiots who know absolutely nothing about our life, okay? They have no way of knowing that I already loved you crazily from the exact second I found out you were going to exist. They have no idea how many nights I cried from missing you because you were far away from me. I may have won a bunch of silver cups, but my biggest and only trophy will always be you. Simply because you are my son. You are mine. And nobody is ever going to change that."

He kissed the top of Liam's head firmly before continuing.

"And you want to know a secret? When I was in school, the boys in my class hated me too. They didn't like me, but they couldn't deny that I was a thousand times better than all of them at hockey. The exact same way you are a thousand times better than any of those idiots at soccer or building Legos. Let them talk to themselves. I love you more than anything in the world, you hear me?"

Liam squeezed Shane's t-shirt with his tiny fingers, relaxing his shoulders for the first time that night.

"I love you too, Daddy."

As soon as Shane realized Liam was asleep, he let his tears fall, but quickly wiped them away, taking slow, deep breaths. He hated seeing patterns repeating themselves with his son.

[...]

When dropping Liam off at the new school, Shane stood paralyzed next to his SUV, watching his son walk across the courtyard. Relief only came when the boy found Ruby and Jade; even though the twins were a grade below him, at least Liam would have familiar faces for recess. Jackie Pike stopped next to Shane, touching his arm and assuring him everything would be fine, praising the teachers' welcoming policy on the first day.

Still, Shane spent the entire practice with his head somewhere else. He skated on autopilot, terrified at the idea of checking his phone during the break and finding a message from the principal saying Liam had gotten sick or had an anxiety attack.

As soon as the rink clock hit ten o'clock, Shane was the first to sprint to the locker room. He took a shower in record time, changed clothes, and vanished from the arena. Liam wouldn't get out until noon, but Shane was determined to follow his plan: sit in the park across from the school and keep watch for the next two hours.

He chose an isolated bench with a strategic view of the gates. He pulled the brim of his cap down, adjusted his sunglasses to avoid being recognized, and opened a book he needed to finish, trying to force his mind to relax.

About forty minutes and seven chapters later, a deep, familiar voice, mixed with the noise of the people in the park, made Shane look up.

In the distance, Ilya. The Russian was wearing dark athletic clothes and stretching his long legs. He was talking to a redheaded woman with olive skin and voluminous, curly hair, who was also wearing workout clothes. Both were gleaming with sweat. There was a famous running trail nearby, which they were probably returning from.

It was weird for Shane to see Ilya out of context, acting like just some guy on a morning off. He looked relaxed, conversing fluidly and casually in Russian with the woman. And, watching from afar, Shane noticed how absurdly broad and muscular the Russian's back was. A pang of pure male envy hit him. Shane was an elite athlete, at the peak of his physical form, but his build was lean, built for explosion and speed on the ice. Ilya, on the other hand, looked like he was carved out of marble for hand-to-hand combat.

The two said something that made them laugh out loud. The blond affectionately hugged the redhead, pressed a kiss to her temple, and together, they walked to a car parked at the curb.

It wasn't just any car. It was an impeccable black McLaren—the same sports car that had caught Shane's attention when he arrived at the park. The redhead unlocked the vehicle and took the wheel, while Ilya slid into the passenger seat. The engine roared like a waking beast, and the insanely expensive car disappeared down the tree-lined street.

Shane's brain tied itself into a knot. A nanny riding in a McLaren?

Driven by pure investigative curiosity, Shane pulled out his phone and opened Ilya's Instagram profile, hunting for any tag that would lead him to that redheaded woman. It didn't take long to find. In one of the recent photos from a party was the profile *@Svetrova*. She had hundreds of thousands of followers and showcased the lifestyle of a fitness influencer and model.

But it was the last name that made Shane's gears turn: "Vetrova." The feminine version of "Vetrov."

Sergei Vetrov. One of the greatest goalies in NHL history, now retired.

Shane scrolled through the redhead's feed, and there was the proof: a pinned photo of Sergei, gray-haired and smiling in his prime fifties, hugging Svetlana and... Ilya. It looked like a birthday dinner. Shane remembered the Russian commenting on the day of the interview that, if it weren't for his blown-out knee, he would have pursued a professional hockey career. But the Canadian definitely did not expect Ilya to be so intimate with NHL royalty.

Shane shook his head, locking the screen and mentally reprimanding himself. *Why the hell am I stalking the guy who takes care of my son?*

He buried his face back in the book until he heard the unmistakable chaos of the bell ringing and kids screaming. He hurriedly packed his things and crossed the street to the school entrance.

It didn't take long to find Liam in the middle of the crowd. The boy was giggling, chatting animatedly with a teacher. The man was a mountain of muscles, with deep dark skin, arms covered in tattoos, and dreadlocks tied back in a ponytail. He was squatting to speak at the boy's eye level, wearing his physical education uniform. The teacher laughed at something Liam said, stood up, and placed a protective hand on the boy's shoulder, guiding him to the gate.

When Liam finally spotted his dad, he sprinted toward him.

"Daddy!" The boy collided with him, grabbing his waist.

Shane let out a relieved laugh, a ton of weight disappearing from his shoulders. He squatted down immediately, stroking his son's messy hair.

"Hey there, buddy. How was the first day?"

"Really cool! We played soccer in Mr. Bood's class!" Liam pointed excitedly at the teacher right behind him.

Shane smiled and planted a loud kiss on his son's forehead before standing up.

"Mr. Hollander. It's a pleasure." The man extended a giant hand. Out of the corner of his eye, Shane noticed some parents whispering and pointing at him, but he ignored the audience and returned the handshake firmly. "Zane Boodram, P.E. teacher and youth team coach."

"The pleasure is mine, Zane," Shane offered a polite smile. "Did everything go well with him in class?"

"Everything was excellent! This little guy right here showed he's got sports in his blood. He dribbled past three boys two grades above him like it was nothing." The teacher winked at Liam, who puffed out his chest with pride. "I even thought he was going to ask me for a hockey stick right off the bat."

Shane laughed, ruffling his son's hair.

"He already has way too much hockey around him in life. And he prefers soccer. You guys have youth soccer teams, right?"

"Yes, sir. Practices are every Tuesday and Thursday at three in the afternoon. Sign-ups open next week, but I can go ahead and guarantee Liam's name on the list if you'd like," Boodram offered with a wide smile, proving to be an extremely charismatic guy.

"So? Want to join the school's official team?" Shane looked at Liam.

"I want to, I want to, I want to!" The boy bounced in place.

"That's the spirit, champ!" Boodram raised his hand, and Liam gave him a crisp high-five. "But hey, if you're feeling daring, hockey practices are on Mondays and Wednesdays, okay? Just a tip."

Liam crossed his thin little arms in front of his chest, mimicking the posture of a businessman analyzing a contract.

"Uhm... Depends. I'll have to check my schedule first."

Shane let out a genuine burst of laughter, joined by the teacher.

"Alright, sir. I look forward to your professional response," Boodram joked, waving at both of them. "See you tomorrow!"

Shane said goodbye, holding his hand out for Liam to take. During the walk back to the SUV, the boy chattered endlessly about how he had scored a goal and visited the library.

That was when Shane caught a sudden movement out of the corner of his eye.

Behind the park's trash can. A glint of a lens. Someone holding a sturdy black object at face level.

Camera.

Shane's instinct was instantaneous and lethal. He pulled Liam's hand firmly, pressing the boy's face against his abdomen and covering the side of his head with his own sports jacket. Liam didn't complain or try to look; he already knew by heart how to act when his dad made that move.

Shane locked his eyes in the direction of the lens, his expression hardening in fury. The frantic sound of shutters sliced through the air. *Click-click-click*. Flashes went off, even in broad daylight, as the murmurs of the people around them swelled.

Shielding his son like a human shield, Shane quickened his pace, keeping himself between the lenses and the child, feeling the heat of the flashes hit his back until he finally slammed the heavy car door shut and locked them in safely.

Chapter 4: New old things

When the regular season calendar finally knocked on the door, Shane tried with all his might not to panic about the logistics of traveling with the team. At first, Plan A had always been to leave Liam at his grandparents' house. Just the thought that David and Yuna could drive to Montreal to pick him up served as a natural tranquilizer.

But Murphy's Law never failed: the Metros' first official game would be an away game, against the Toronto Guardians. And his parents were in Florida, enjoying a well-deserved retirement trip.

Shane's solution? Ilya. The Russian had already been working as Liam's caregiver for almost two continuous months, and the dynamic between the two flowed wonderfully. It was the logical choice to invite him to spend the night at the penthouse with the boy. And, obviously, Liam thought the idea was incredible. He adored the Russian.

"Alright, do I need to repeat the rules one more time?" Shane asked, squatting in the entrance hall to get down to his son's eye level. His travel bag was already packed by the door. Ilya was leaning against the wall a few feet away, watching the scene in silence. "Don't try to trick Ilya about your schedule, because everything is written on that board. And no stalling when it's time for bed. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon, hear me?"

"Okay, Dad," Liam huffed, rolling his eyes with the typical impatience of his age. Shane had already gone over that same list of rules two other times just while zipping up his bag.

"Don't roll your eyes at me, young man," Shane warned, giving his son a light poke on the shoulder, which made the boy laugh. "Give me a hug. I have to go to the airport."

Liam jumped at his father's neck. Shane let out a deep sigh, closing his eyes and holding his son tightly against his chest until the last tolerable second. The irrational fear that something bad would happen while he was away still scratched at his throat. Before standing up, he left a lingering kiss on the boy's dark hair and then looked up at Ilya.

"He will be right here, in one piece and safe, when you get back, Shane," the Russian assured him in a deep, comforting tone, his hands buried in his pants pockets.

The backpack Ilya had brought this time was much larger, clearly stuffed with the necessities to spend the night. Shane had left the guest room spotless for him, and the best architectural detail was that the room shared a wall with Liam's bedroom—in case the boy had a nightmare in the middle of the night, Ilya would hear it immediately.

"Okay." Shane nodded, taking a deep breath and walking to the door. He pulled the retractable handle of his suitcase and grabbed his keys from the console table. "Bye, Li. I love you, okay?"

"I love you too, Daddy!" Liam replied over his shoulder, already turning his back and running to the living room.

In the center of the rug, a monstrous LEGO orca sculpture—a custom three-thousand-piece project they had been building little by little over the last two months—awaited them. Shane gave a small, defeated smile and gave one last wave to Ilya before walking out the door.

Alone with the child, Ilya cast a quick glance at the large magnetic routine board. Not that the schedule would magically change. That was Liam's "Free Time" block, the sacred moment when he could do whatever he wanted. Without saying a word, the Russian walked to the rug and sat cross-legged on the floor, helping the boy sort out the black and white pieces.

Meanwhile, in the backseat of the executive car taking him to the airport, Shane's leg bounced frantically. A dull anxiety beat in his chest, making him feel like he was committing a crime by leaving his son behind.

Until his phone buzzed in his jacket pocket.

Shane's heart skipped a beat. An emergency, was his first logical thought. But as he pulled out the device, the name glowing on the screen wasn't Ilya's with news of an alien invasion at the penthouse. It was Rose.

[Direct Message]

Rose Landry: Hey. I'm coming back to Montreal next week for some reshoots. I'm going to have three days off and I may (or may not) have taken a sneaky peek at the NHL schedule and seen that you're free on Wednesday. 🙄

Rose Landry: If you don't have any other crazy commitments, want to go out for coffee or grab a bite? I know absolutely nothing about Montreal and wanted a decent local guide to show me the good stuff.

Shane blinked, feeling an electric jolt in his stomach, very similar to the butterflies of a teenager. Rose Landry. Rose the-biggest-movie-star-of-the-decade Landry had just asked him out on a date?

Shane Hollander: Well, I'm originally from Ottawa, but I think I've lived in Montreal long enough to know a decent place or two.

Shane Hollander: Nothing comes to mind this exact second, give me a minute to check my schedule.

Rose Landry: No rush! 😊

Shane opened his calendar app. Indeed, on Wednesday of the following week, right after morning practice, he had no obligations with the team or sponsors. His initial instinct was to block out the afternoon to be with Liam, but he quickly remembered that this was the time Ilya would be at the apartment looking after the boy after school. There would be no problem at all in going out to have some fun for a few hours.

His teammates were always on his case, saying that Shane's social life boiled down to a sad route: from the penthouse to the arena, from the arena to the penthouse. He hadn't lived for

himself in almost a decade. And now, a brilliant and beautiful woman was actively wanting to go out with him.

Shane Hollander: Yeah, my schedule is indeed free. What time did you have in mind?

Rose Landry: Since your game the next day is against my beloved Detroit babies, I won't be mean and make you stay up late. Lunch, maybe?

Shane Hollander: It's a date. I'll look for a restaurant that's exclusive and safe enough for a Golden Globe winner.

Rose Landry: That is exactly my standard of requirement. 🙄

Shane let out a low, nasal laugh, locking his phone screen and resting his head against the car's leather seat. And suddenly, without him even realizing it, the crushing anxiety was gone.

[...]

Shane dragged his rolling suitcase down the long terminal corridor, pushing through the sea of cameras, microphones, and reporters who always set up camp at the airport whenever the Metros traveled. He pulled the brim of his cap down, adjusted his sunglasses, and quickened his pace, wanting to get out of that hell as fast as possible.

That was when one of the shouted questions cut through the air, sounding less like gossip and more like a venomous accusation:

"Already abandoned your son to go back to partying, Hollander?!"

Shane's jaw clenched so hard his teeth ground together. One of the team's massive security guards noticed the change in his posture and stepped in, using his broad body as a shield to keep the reporters from crossing the barrier tape. The captain kept his eyes fixed straight ahead until he was swallowed by the double doors of the private boarding area.

Arriving at the team's VIP lounge, the first scene he witnessed was J.J. and Andropov, standing about six feet apart from each other, trying to toss and land gummy candies straight into each other's mouths. Further back, Hayden was sprawled across three connected armchairs, wearing his hoodie backward with the hood covering his entire face, completely passed out. Jackie was entering the ninth month of a heavy pregnancy, which explained his friend's lethal exhaustion.

"Daddy's home!" Mitty yelled upon noticing Shane's arrival.

The captain just shook his head, letting out a tired laugh. He greeted a few guys with quick fist bumps and walked around behind Viktor to avoid crossing the gummy candy line of fire. The goalie's shout made Hayden stir; the blond lazily lifted his legs, and as soon as Shane sat

in the empty armchair, Hayden dropped his feet back down, resting them unceremoniously on his friend's lap.

"Didn't sleep last night?" Shane asked, settling his suitcase next to the chair.

"A girl in the twins' class invited Jade to her birthday party, but didn't invite Ruby. Ruby spent the entire night sobbing from being rejected, while Jade went to the damn sleepover at her little friend's house," Hayden reported, his voice slurred and muffled under the hoodie.

"Yeah, man. They've reached the age where they start realizing they're two different people, not just a single unit," Shane tried to offer some comforting wisdom.

"Trying to console a crying child, having an incredibly pregnant and irritable wife in the same bed, with your kid kicking your ribs in the middle of the night, is not my idea of fun," Hayden grumbled, yawning loudly. He pulled his hood back, revealing a rumpled face and deep dark circles. "Around three in the morning, I threw in the towel and went to sleep on the living room couch. And by six, I was already up."

"I had to force myself to sleep last night. I even took melatonin. I couldn't shut my eyes without thinking about the fact that I'd be leaving Liam alone for the first time today," Shane confessed, rubbing the back of his neck.

Hayden let out a weak laugh.

"Left him with that Calvin Klein model nanny guy?"

"With Ilya, yes," Shane corrected, ignoring the nickname. "And please, don't make me overthink it. It was already physical and mental hell managing to turn my back and leave the house this morning."

Hayden laughed with a little more enthusiasm.

"Believe me: a little while from now, you're going to thank God for getting a moment of peace, quiet, and fresh air away from kids," the American assured him. "And you need to come out of your cave more, man. Now that Liam lives with you and everything is sorted out, you can give yourself the right to breathe. Go out drinking with us, go to some parties. You practically weren't a teenager, you skipped that phase."

"I was a teenager, yes. I was just the sensible kind of teenager who didn't go to parties because he hates crowded places," Shane defended himself, even though Hayden was already sick of hearing that. "And, for your information, you massive idiot, I have a date next week."

The entire VIP lounge seemed to freeze.

J.J. choked violently on the red gummy candy that Andropov had just landed in his throat. He coughed and spit the candy right into his own hand.

"What?!" the defenseman's eyes widened, staring at the captain.

Hayden sat up in his armchair with a jolt, his feet hitting the floor, his mouth perfectly agape.

"Holy shit, he's gonna get laid!" Hayden yelled, putting both hands on his head as if he had witnessed a miracle.

"I said I have a date, not a hookup, you assholes!" Shane tried to correct them, feeling his ears burn, but neither of the alternate captains took him seriously.

J.J. brought a hand to his eyes, pretending to wipe an invisible tear of emotion.

"Ils grandissent si vite..." he murmured in French, his voice theatrically thick with emotion, lamenting that they grow up so fast.

"For the love of God, check the condom wrapper against the light before you put it on this time, otherwise Liam is going to end up getting a little brother!" Hayden warned, pointing a finger in Shane's face with extreme urgency. "The last time you got laid in your life was literally to manufacture Liam. Nothing will get that out of my head."

"Ew! Why the hell do you spend your time thinking about my sex life?!" Shane grimaced in pure disgust.

"What sex life?" J.J. countered, raising a sharp eyebrow.

Shane sank into his armchair and covered his face with both hands, defeated.

"I never should have opened my mouth."

"Who's the unfortunate girl?" Hayden asked, entirely interested, blinking his blue eyes at his friend.

"I'm not telling," Shane immediately shook his head. "If everything goes well, I'll tell you next week, after the date."

"What day of the week is it going to be? So I can set an alarm," J.J. said, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

Therault whistled loudly and called all the boys for boarding.

"Saved by the bell," Shane muttered to himself.

[...]

"What do you want to take for school lunch tomorrow, Liam?" Ilya asked, entering the kitchen while the boy remained hunched over the dining table, finishing his homework.

"Uhm... I don't know." He shrugged, without taking his eyes off the notebook.

"Well, since tomorrow you also have your first soccer practice after school, you're going to need two hearty snacks. Give me an idea so I don't have to guess," Ilya insisted, encouraging the boy to participate in his own choices.

"Cheese crackers! Dad bought a new box yesterday." Liam pointed excitedly with his pencil at the cabinet next to the fridge.

Ilya nodded and opened the cabinet door, faced once again with Shane's absurd level of organization: the shelves were filled with airtight containers, all perfectly aligned and labeled down to the millimeter. He grabbed the container with the cheese crackers and left it on the island. To balance out the carbs, he opened the fridge and took out the boxes of fresh grapes and strawberries.

"The school is having a Halloween party next week," Liam blurted out suddenly, in a casual tone.

"Really? That's really cool. Have you thought about a costume yet?" Ilya asked, grabbing a deep glass bowl and filling it with water and a pinch of baking soda to wash the fruit.

"Last year, at my other school, I went as Captain America. I wanted to go as a different hero this time, but I don't know which one." The boy continued to fill in the answers for his science assignment, the only subject he stood his ground on and made a point of finishing without anyone's help.

"There are plenty of options. Iron Man? Spider-Man? Superman?" Ilya suggested.

Liam stopped writing and stared at the sheet of paper.

"It's kind of annoying that there are barely any famous heroes who look like me," the boy commented, his little voice carrying a sincere frustration, as he turned the page of his notebook.

Ilya looked up from the sink, his hands still in the water, and let out a silent sigh. The kid was absolutely right. It was hard for a child to find protagonists they could physically identify with, especially having Asian ancestry. The Russian dried his hands and thought fast, looking for a way out that would rescue the boy's excitement.

"You know you're right? It really is annoying. But... what if you dressed up as a hero that has everything to do with the thing you like most in the world?"

"Like who?" Liam turned his face to Ilya, his curiosity hooked instantly.

"Aquaman." Ilya cracked a half-smile. "He lives underwater, talks to fish and sharks, and, to top it off, he walks around with a giant trident."

"A trident..." Liam repeated.

The disappointment vanished from his face like magic. The boy's large, almond-shaped eyes shone brightly, his imagination already running wild with the idea of parading around the school armed with a giant trident.

Ilya gave a small smile and focused back on the boy's insulated lunch box. Seconds later, his phone buzzed on the counter, sounding the alarm he had set so they wouldn't miss the start of the broadcast.

"Are you done over there? The game is about to start."

"Aaaand... done!" Liam closed his science notebook theatrically. The boy jumped out of his chair, ran to the living room, and climbed over the back of the couch, throwing himself onto the leather seat before grabbing the remote control and quickly punching in the ESPN channel.

In the kitchen, Ilya took the dinner that Shane had made a point of leaving perfectly prepared and labeled out of the fridge, and put it in the microwave. While waiting, he made himself a hearty pastrami sandwich, watching over the counter the images on the large flat screen, which was already showing the commentators analyzing the tense pre-game atmosphere.

At the microwave's beep, Ilya carried the hot plate into the living room, handed it to the boy, and sat comfortably next to him, balancing his own sandwich in his free hand.

"Dad doesn't like that guy." Liam pointed his fork at the screen. The camera was doing a tight close-up on the face of the Toronto Guardians' captain: Dallas Kent.

Ilya nodded silently. He had already heard Cliff Marleau, the intimidating Boston captain, trash-talk that same guy in the past. Kent's reputation behind the scenes of the league was unanimous: he played dirty, specialized in cheap shots in the referees' blind spots, and, as a human being, was a massive asshole.

"I've heard people talk about him too," Ilya agreed in a diplomatic tone, taking a bite of his sandwich. The boy, oblivious to the tension on the rink, loaded his fork with brown rice and ate the sautéed chicken cubes with gusto.

"Make way, ladies and gentlemen, for the first official game of the season! The visitors take the ice... Give it up for the Montreal captain: Shaaaaaaaane Hollaaaander!" The arena announcer's voice exploded through the TV speakers.

Number 24 stepped onto the ice at high speed, his blades tearing the cold surface as he took his warm-up lap under the spotlight beam. Immediately, the stadium DJ—probably at the behest of some jokester in the Metros' locker room—dropped Usher's *Hey Daddy (Daddy's Home)* over the sound system.

Ilya almost choked. He had to cover his mouth with the back of his hand to hold back a burst of laughter while chewing. Someone on the technical staff would definitely lose their job or get a raise for that joke. But, evaluating Shane's profile on television... the title of single father of the year actually made the song match the captain's swagger perfectly.

"And now, defending home ice, the face of Toronto... Daaaallaaas Keeeeent!" The announcer bellowed, making the Canadian crowd go wild.

The robust figure of Dallas Kent glided onto the rink, leading the home team in his own introductory lap. The stands shook with the deafening screams of thousands of fans, who pounded on the protective acrylic glass and waved signs under the thunderous and intimidating sound of the opening chords of AC/DC's *Thunderstruck*.

[...]

[Direct Message]

Rose Landry: Is your defenseman's hand in one piece? I heard J.J. broke Kent's nose.

Rose Landry: Not that I'm complaining, of course. Kent sprained the Detroit left winger's ankle in last year's playoffs. I think he got off easy. 😂

Shane Hollander: 😂😂😂 J.J. is fine. His hand is a little bruised right now and it'll hurt tomorrow, but it's nothing compared to the damage to Kent's nose. And the asshole deserved every millimeter of that punch.

Rose Landry: Glad to hear it. Especially since you had the good sense to dodge the fight.

Shane Hollander: I'm just glad Ryan Price retired, honestly. J.J. is huge, but Price was a literal tank.

Rose Landry: Oh, I loved Price! Did you know he's dating a singer now? I'm really good friends with Fabian Salah. The two of them make one of the cutest couples I've ever seen.

Shane didn't know that. Curious, he immediately opened Instagram and typed the name "Fabian Salah".

The profile [*@FablouSalah*](#) had almost six million followers and showcased a type of aesthetic Shane rarely saw up close in his hockey bubble. Fabian wore artistic makeup, colorful and elegant clothes with sheer fabrics, shiny jewelry, and painted nails. In one of the most recent pinned photos, the singer appeared kissing Ryan Price's cheek. The former player—a nearly six-foot-six redheaded giant with a scruffy beard—used to be any athlete's worst nightmare when the gloves dropped on the ice.

The chant "Pay the Price!" echoed deafeningly through the arenas when Ryan executed his role as an enforcer, the team's goon focused on protecting the stars and hunting for fights. But now, he had retired suddenly in the middle of last season and was, publicly, dating a man.

Shane had absolutely no idea he was gay. Openly gay players in the NHL weren't a reality. Pure and simple statistics proved they obviously existed, but the weight of the sport's culture kept them in the closet. Price had left the league and not a single sports tabloid published even a note about his new relationship. Maybe it was a purposeful agreement to keep Ryan

out of the spotlight, since, behind his heavy fists, he had always been a genuinely shy guy. Or maybe the traditional sports media just had no interest in shining a light on the story of a gay ex-NHL enforcer. Shane had the impression the second option was the most likely, and that Ryan, somehow, must be deeply grateful for that invisibility.

Shane Hollander: I had no idea who this Fabian was. Just stalked his profile.

Rose Landry: Fabs is a sweetheart, I swear. He did the soundtrack for an indie movie I shot a few years ago and gave VIP tickets for his show to the whole crew. It was the best experience of my life. And keep in mind I've been to a Taylor Swift concert.

Shane Hollander: Just one?

Rose Landry: I like a song or two, but I'm more of a Chappell Roan fan.

Shane Hollander: I honestly think you're just making up people's names now.

Rose Landry: 😂😂😂😂😂

Rose Landry: She's a diva. The songs are incredibly good. My ex-boyfriend and I went to one of her concerts together once. Honestly, I should have figured out he was gay back then, because it was his idea to go, but anyway.

Shane Hollander: Your ex is gay?

Rose Landry: Yes! We became best friends after we sat down and realized there was no point in forcing a vegan to eat meat. I know it's a terrible analogy, but I blurted it out during the breakup and it ended up becoming our inside joke.

Shane Hollander: The meat fell onto the vegan's plate by accident. 😂

Rose Landry: Exactly like that. 😂

Shane laughed to himself at the screen and dropped his phone on the messy sheets of the hotel bed. He stretched his sore back and walked toward the bathroom to brush his teeth—it was past ten at night and he was exhausted.

However, upon stopping at the bathroom door, he found Hayden in front of the mirror. The American was incredibly dressed up, wearing a dark button-down shirt and adjusting his hair with gel.

"Oh, no," Hayden narrowed his eyes at the reflection upon seeing Shane, who was already comfortably tucked into pajama pants and an old t-shirt. "You can take that right off. You're going out with us."

"Hayd... I'm dead..."

"Shane." The blond turned around, crossing his arms and nipping his friend's whining in the bud. "We won three to one at their house. You scored a fucking perfect hat trick, J.J. smashed that racist piece of shit's face in, and we came out in one piece. We deserve, and you and J.J.

especially deserve, to drink something that costs over three hundred bucks a bottle tonight. Hurry up."

Shane let out a frustrated groan, letting the back of his head thump against the wooden closet door. He knew perfectly well he wouldn't win that argument. When Hayden got something in his head, he was more stubborn than a balking mule; and with J.J. needing to celebrate the justifiable damage he did to Dallas Kent's face, the team's peer pressure would be unbearable.

"Ten minutes," Shane yielded, pointing a finger at his friend's face. "If you guys take longer than that in the lobby, I'm coming back up, locking the door, and turning off my phone."

Half an hour later, the Metros' captain was settled into the leather seat of an armored SUV rented by the team, wearing a dark button-down shirt perfectly tailored under a leather jacket. The destination was one of the most exclusive, expensive, and discreet lounges in downtown Toronto.

The place was exactly the type of environment Shane usually avoided in his single-dad life: indirect neon lights slicing through the dimness, electronic music with bass that made your chest vibrate, and people willing to pay the equivalent of a compact car for a few bottles of liquor. But the VIP area reserved for the team was isolated by thick velvet curtains, offering the privacy NHL stars needed to avoid becoming headlines the next day.

J.J. was sprawled in the center of the main sofa, balancing a wide glass of neat whiskey in his left hand while his right—already showing scraped, purple knuckles—rested on an ice pack provided by the bartender. Andropov and Mitty were already on the dance floor, drawing stares.

Shane leaned back in the quietest corner of the booth, sipping his beer. Liam's absence still bothered him like a phantom pain, but his phone buzzed in his jacket pocket, bringing an immediate cure.

It was a notification from Ilya.

The photo that opened on the screen showed Liam sprawled in the middle of Shane's massive king-size bed, his mouth slightly open in a deep sleep, with one leg and one arm thrown over Mr. Bubbles.

[Direct Message]

Ilya Rozanov: Passed out ten minutes ago. No nightmares, but he insisted on sleeping in your bed. Tomorrow's lunchbox is already prepped in the fridge. Everything is under control over here, Captain. Enjoy the win.

Shane felt his shoulders, tense from the moment he stepped into the airport, finally melt. The relief was so great that he let out a long sigh, typing quickly.

Shane Hollander: Thank you, Ilya. Truly. I don't know what I'd do without you. Good night.

With his fatherly heart pacified, Shane's mind wandered dangerously back to his previous conversation. He opened Rose Landry's chat.

Shane Hollander: I was dragged against my will to a club by my team. If I stop replying in the next few hours, just know Hayden forced me to chug a bottle of tequila and I died.

The typing indicator flashed almost immediately. The actress, apparently, was also a night owl.

Rose Landry: Tequila on a post-game Wednesday? Look at that, the great captain has a wild side. Take a shot for me! 🍷

Shane Hollander: I'm a nearly thirty-year-old family man, Rose. My wild side these days is letting Liam eat sweets before dinner every now and then.

Rose Landry: Shocked by such rebellion. 😏

"That stupid little smile at the phone again." Hayden's drawn-out voice cut through the message exchange. The American threw himself into the empty space on the sofa next to Shane, holding a longneck bottle of beer. He narrowed his blue eyes, his tone purely speculative. "So? Who does the smile belong to? Is it an untouchable Hollywood actress or a single mom from the school soccer team?"

Shane locked his phone screen and shoved it into his pocket with an agile movement, shooting a death glare at his best friend.

"Go to hell, Hayden."

"Ah, *mon ami*!" J.J. yelled from across the glass table, raising his whiskey glass and the ice pack at the same time. "A toast to Shane! He scored three goals, guaranteed our day off tomorrow, and, apparently, is finally back to flirting!"

The rest of the guys in the booth raised their glasses in unison, laughing and making a loud toast toward Shane. The captain just rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help the smirk that broke his serious expression. For the first time in almost ten years, he was just existing, without the weight of an invisible war crushing his back.

[...]

As soon as Ilya cleared Liam to run over to the rest of the group on the soccer field, he pulled out his phone and took a picture to send to Shane. He knew the captain was probably boarding the return flight from Toronto at that exact moment and that he might arrive in time to catch the end of practice.

The Russian settled into the metal bleachers. It was his first time bringing Liam to the soccer clinic; Shane always made a point of taking him personally. When practices fell during Ilya's working hours, Shane simply gave the Russian those two hours off, without docking a cent from his salary. The environment, however, wasn't foreign to him: he used to clock in on the bleachers of little league baseball practices when he looked after Marleau's nephews in Boston.

His phone buzzed. In response to the photo, Shane sent a smiley face emoji and let him know he was about to take off. Ilya typed "have a good flight", put the device in his hoodie pocket, and turned his attention back to the field, watching Coach Boodram gather the kids for the stretching circle.

Shortly after, a group of four mothers sat a few steps below Ilya. At first, they cast curious and slightly suspicious glances at the large, unknown man, but quickly relaxed upon seeing the child's insulated lunch box resting at his feet.

"Yes, but what about their French teacher? Did you guys see that really short skirt she wore last week? How do you think she's going to have the nerve to dress up for the Halloween party?" one of the women asked, her voice carrying a thick Quebecois accent.

"I never liked her," decreed the second, a woman with a flawless blonde bob haircut and a pearl necklace that looked entirely too expensive for an afternoon at the field. "Louis has a really hard time remembering the gender of words, and she makes absolutely no effort to help him."

Ilya narrowed his eyes. *'Mademoiselle LeClaire is really nice. She always helps everyone in the class who can't speak right or is shy'*, he remembered Liam commenting about the exact same teacher days ago. The Russian concluded that the teacher probably wasn't the problem. Unconsciously, Ilya swept the field with his eyes until he found a goofy-looking blonde boy doing jumping jacks entirely out of rhythm. *Must be Louis*, he deduced.

"Oh, and changing the subject, did you guys see the news about yesterday's game? Metros against Guardians?" the third mom, a redhead in a smart-casual white coat, asked excitedly. "It seems the Toronto captain, Dallas Kent, called Hollander some racist nonsense, and that's why Dagenais was so brutal defending him and broke his nose."

"Oh, let's be real... drama aside, Shane Hollander is a very hot dad," blurted out the fourth mother, who sported a messy bun and designer sunglasses. "May my husband forgive me, but good lord."

"*Oui, oui*," agreed the first, fanning herself with her hand theatrically. "And to think I followed almost that entire custody case in the media. It was pretty irresponsible of him to get his high school girlfriend pregnant, but at least he fought for the boy until the end."

"But do you guys think it's true what his ex used to say about him?" The redhead raised an eyebrow, lowering her voice for more conspiratorial gossip. "That he was a toxic guy, who yelled at her and neglected his own son because of the sport?"

"Well, his son is right there on the field right now, but he must still be in Toronto." The one with the bun pointed discreetly with her chin toward Liam, who was stretching his legs. "Could it be Shane's mom who brought him?"

The women craned their necks and scanned the bleachers, but found no sign of Yuna Hollander.

Meanwhile, Ilya had taken his phone back out and was scrolling through his Instagram feed, actively ignoring the conversation, although he couldn't disagree with the part where they said Shane really was a handsome guy. Which didn't change the fact that he was his boss.

"Oh, hello!" The female voice pulled him from his thoughts. Ilya briefly closed his eyes before lifting his head; unfortunately, his "invisible guy on the phone" disguise had failed. The mom with the messy bun was smiling at him. "You're new around here, aren't you?"

"Yeah. It's the first time I bring him to practice," Ilya replied, his deep, polished voice echoing. Immediately, he noticed that the sound of his accent captured the attention of all of them at once.

"Uhm... and where does that velvety accent of yours come from?" The redhead broke into an openly interested smile.

"I'm Russian," he answered, maintaining his leaned-back posture and a polite distance.

"And you brought your son to practice, huh? What's his name?"

"Believe it or not, I'm the nanny." Ilya left no room for further assumptions. With a practical motion, he pulled the high-end Lily-Jane's Agency ID badge from inside his hoodie and held it between two fingers for them to see.

"A... male nanny?!" The blonde with the pearl necklace gasped, the shocked and slightly prejudiced reaction escaping before she could stop herself.

"Christy!" The one with the bun gave a reprimanding slap on the blonde's shoulder, shooting an apologetic smile to the Russian. "Forgive her lack of manners, handsome. She didn't mean any harm."

Without much escape, Ilya ended up sucked into the gossip circle, although he magically managed to dodge the question about who the child under his care was. In a few minutes, he mapped out the group: Christina was the blonde with the pearl necklace; Marianne, the one with the thick accent; Rosalie, the redhead; and Erika, the one with the messy bun.

His instincts were also sharp: the goofy-looking blonde kid was, in fact, Louis, Christina's son. Marianne was the mother of Phillipe and Jeremy; Rosalie, of Mathieu; and Erika was Noah's mom.

"And have you been working with kids for a long time?" Christina asked. She still seemed to be the most shocked by the fact that a man of that size was a childcare provider.

"About six years," Ilya answered, with a casual nod of his head.

"It's very cute to see that you like kids that much," Erika commented, her sunglasses slipping down her nose as she offered a suggestive smile. "But tell us, Ilya... Are you single? A single nanny?"

"Wow, that was fast," the Russian countered with the same boldness, drawing laughs from the group.

"I don't like to waste time." Erika leaned in slightly on the bleachers. She was undeniably beautiful, but Ilya was undeniably on the clock.

"Looking to not be single anymore, maybe?" Marianne winked at him. Ilya quickly noticed that, of the four, she was the only one without a gold band on her finger.

"I don't know, I'm not focused on that." He shrugged, turning his eyes back to the small turf field, where the boys were starting to do clumsy kick-ups to warm up.

"Have a girlfriend?"

"Nope."

"Are you gay?"

"More or less," Ilya answered bluntly.

He pulled a granola bar from his hoodie pocket and began opening the plastic wrapper, while watching Liam kick the ball back to a little boy who seemed somewhat excluded from the main group.

The four mothers looked at each other, confused and with intrigued smiles.

"What do you mean, 'more or less'?" Christina frowned.

"Enough to recognize that the boys' coach is pretty hot," Ilya pointed his chin toward Zane Boodram.

The women burst out laughing.

"Don't even try. He is super happily married to the school's swim teacher, Cassie," Rosalie replied, waving her hand in the air. "By the way, her maternity leave ends in November, doesn't it?"

And just like that, as if by magic, the subject ceased to be a failed attempt to flirt with the Russian and became teacher Cassie's newborn baby. When the scrimmage finally started, the mothers changed personalities, beginning to quietly curse any kid who pushed their sons.

Until it was Liam who gave a strategic shoulder check to Louis—a hockey player's son, after all—stole the ball, and scored a clean goal in the net. Ilya couldn't help a proud smile and clapped his hands. The boy looked for the Russian in the bleachers immediately. As soon as Boodram blew the whistle marking halftime, Liam came running at full speed.

The blond stood up, holding the insulated lunchbox, and the boy collided with him, hugging his waist.

"Did you see, Ilya?! Did you see my goal?!" Liam panted, grabbing the fabric of his nanny's hoodie.

The Russian laughed, brushing the sweat-slicked hair from the boy's forehead and squatting down to be at eye level.

"I did see it, it was a beautiful shot." Ilya extended his large hand, and Liam gave him a crisp high-five. "Now, your mission is to score two more. To complete a hat trick just like your dad did yesterday."

"You bet! I'm going to be as good at soccer as Dad is on the ice!"

"As good, Liam," Ilya corrected him gently.

The boy laughed, grabbed the lunchbox, and the two sat on the first few benches of the bleachers. Liam attacked the container with carrot snacks and the main dessert: apple slices with peanut butter.

Ilya's phone buzzed in his pocket. It was a notification from Svetlana.

[Direct Message]

Sveta: Your dog is madly in love. Her suitor's name is Toby. He lives in the house across the street, has red fur, heterochromia, and howls with a very melodious voice.

Ilya: Are you talking about that unbearable neighbor's noisy husky?

Sveta: That exact menace. They played until they almost passed out at the dog park this morning. Anechka is exhausted, snoring on the rug.

Ilya: Give her a really big treat for me. And stop texting, I can't be on my phone while I'm working, you know that.

Sveta: Argh, go take care of the hottest guy in the NHL's little boy since you refuse to give me his number, go. 🙄

Ilya: He's my boss, Sveta. Just tell Anya that Daddy loves her.

Sveta: 🙄

Ilya let out a silent laugh through his nose and put his phone back in his pocket. When he looked up, he saw that Liam had walked a few steps away and was talking to that same little boy who had been excluded at the beginning of practice.

When Liam held out his little hand, offering a slice of apple slathered in peanut butter, Ilya's professional instinct screamed.

The Russian extended his long arm instantly, gripping Liam's wrist firmly, but without hurting him.

"Liam, wait. You don't know if he's allergic to peanuts," Ilya warned, his voice deep and serious.

A woman who was on the bench next to them widened her eyes, seemingly snapping out of a trance.

"Oh my God! He is!" The mother pulled the little boy close, letting out a nervous, guilty laugh. "A thousand apologies, truly! It's just that Bash loves apples, he was going to grab it without thinking."

"No problem. There are more plain apples in the other bag in the lunchbox." Liam quickly solved the problem. He ran back, grabbed the spare bag, opened it, and offered it to the boy.

"Say thank you to your friend, Bash." The woman, who had beautiful curly hair, squatted down to her son's eye level and rubbed his back. Attached to the boy's backpack, Ilya managed to spot a small Autism Spectrum Disorder identification pin.

"T-Thank you..." Bash stuttered softly, his eyes averted, taking the clean apple slices.

"Want to go kick the ball at the goalpost with me?" Liam offered with a smile. Bash nodded, already chewing the fruit.

They ran together to the sideline where the spare balls were kept. The woman let out a deep, noticeably relieved sigh, settling back onto the bench and looking at Ilya.

"Your son is a little lifesaver, you know? He's a sweetheart," she commented, adjusting the volume of her curls.

"He's not my son. I'm his caregiver," Ilya corrected with a friendly smile, gathering the empty containers Liam had left on the bench and closing the lunchbox.

"Oh! It's just that you had such a protective reflex that I swore you were the dad." She laughed, alternating her gaze between the Russian and the boys on the field. "Bash is new to the class. We moved to the city recently, and I was terrified thinking he wouldn't be able to make friends in the room. But for about two weeks now he's been coming home from school talking non-stop about a 'nice boy' who talks to him."

"He isn't very verbal outside the house?" Ilya asked, using the correct terminology naturally.

"Exactly. He talks a lot with us, with people he already knows well, but in public or with strangers, it's rare that he can formulate long sentences," she shared, her tone mixing pride and maternal exhaustion, before sighing. "It warms my heart to know he finally made a little friend."

"Liam was also terrified of not being able to fit in. It's good they found each other," Ilya commented, nodding.

The woman tilted her head to the side, analyzing him.

"You have a thick accent... Are you Russian or from somewhere in Eastern Europe?"

"I'm from Russia, yes," Ilya confirmed. "And you definitely don't have the classic Canadian accent."

"I've been caught. I'm from California," she laughed, rolling her eyes. "His dad got a job offer as a senior lawyer and we had to move here because of the firm's headquarters. But, being completely honest? I love Canada. Starting with not having to sell a kidney every time I need to use the healthcare system."

Ilya let out a genuine burst of laughter, throwing his head back.

"I lived in Boston for four years. I know exactly what you're talking about."

"Have you been taking care of Liam for a long time?" the woman asked.

"For almost two months," Ilya replied, leaning back on the metal bench. "And, to be honest, he is one of the easiest and most polite kids I've ever worked with. Which is a miracle, considering he's a millionaire's heir."

"Ah..." She let out a small giggle, understanding. "So he really is Hollander's son, huh? The Metros' captain."

"That's him," Ilya confirmed.

"My husband is more of a football fan, but we followed the buzz of that legal fight in the media. Since he's a criminal defense lawyer, the case actually crossed his desk at the firm early on. My husband said it only took reading the preliminary evidence for it to be clear that the ex-girlfriend was completely unhinged. I mean, without wanting to be rude, of course!" She stopped herself quickly, covering her mouth with her hand upon realizing she had perhaps said too much to the guy's employee.

"Don't worry," Ilya reassured her with a light wave. "I haven't researched deeply into the lawsuit because it's none of my business, but, from the little I interact with the shadow of Liam's mother, she really doesn't seem like a good person. Actually, those moms back there were just gossiping that she made up absurd things about Shane in court."

"The story that he neglected the boy because of his career?" she deduced.

"Yes. And, look, in my line of work, I see a lot of rich fathers who are cold and completely detached. But Shane? This guy almost cried this morning just because he had to travel and leave the boy at home to go play," Ilya shared, and the woman broke into a sweet, empathetic smile.

"I understand well what that's like. My husband tries to be present, but the firm simply consumes him. Or... well, I prefer to believe it's just the work. I don't really like thinking about it," a flash of fleeting melancholy crossed her face.

"Does Bash miss him a lot?" Ilya asked, shifting the focus gently.

"If he does, he can't tell me." She clicked her tongue, watching her son give an awkward laugh next to Liam on the turf.

The woman's gaze, trained by years of observations, doctors, and therapies, focused on the mannerisms of the dark-haired little boy playing with Bash.

"How long ago was Liam diagnosed?" she asked with complete naturalness.

Ilya blinked twice, caught off guard. There was a second of dense silence between the two. Her eyes widened and she covered her mouth with both hands.

"Oh my God. He doesn't have a diagnosis at all, does he?"

"*Gospodi*, I thought I was going crazy and was the only one noticing it!" Ilya let out his breath in a long sigh of relief, throwing his head back.

Nora let out a nervous laugh, mortified.

"I swear the question slipped out by accident! My 'radar' went off on its own. It's just that Liam has some behavioral traits so incredibly similar to Bash's characteristics on the spectrum, that I simply assumed he already had therapeutic support. Oh, God, how embarrassing."

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about. I've been noticing these same signs since my first week on the job here," Ilya explained, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. "The problem is that, as you might imagine, conversations about neurodivergence and diagnostic investigation are a minefield to navigate with a father who just got out of a crushing legal trauma. Any mention of 'something different' with the boy can sound like an attack."

"Well, if you managed to notice it so quickly and still won the boy's trust in two months, I'm sure you'll know the right time and the right way to talk to his dad." She smiled, comforting. "Err... I'm sorry, I told you my whole life story and didn't even ask your name."

"Ilya."

"Nora." She finally held out her hand, and the Russian shook it firmly, feeling he had just gained a valuable ally in those bleachers.

[...]

During the second half of practice, Ilya was still engaged in a pleasant conversation with Nora. On the field, the kids were now lining up to practice shooting on goal. Suddenly, the Russian saw Liam wave excitedly at someone outside the fence; turning his head, he came

face to face with Shane walking heavily up the bleachers, still wearing the tailored suit he had on at the airport. He had obviously driven straight from the runway.

"How was the flight?" Ilya asked as Shane dropped onto the metal bench beside him, letting out a pained groan. "Uhm... that good, huh?"

"The flight was fine. The problem is my idiot friends," Shane rubbed his eyes with his fingers, looking exhausted. "I'm never going out drinking on a Wednesday night again. Liam didn't watch the fight during the game, did he?"

"He did, but he thought it was hilarious. And let's be real, it wasn't exactly a 'fight'," Ilya described, amused. "Kent pushed you, J.J. stepped in to break it up, Kent pushed him too, and then J.J. landed a single punch to his nose and the guy dropped. End of fight."

Shane let out a tired, nasal laugh, and Nora couldn't help but laugh along at the Russian's surgical description.

"Ah, I see you managed to escape the clutches of the Fantastic Four, huh?" Shane commented, stealing a disguised glance over his shoulder at the upper steps, where Christina, Marianne, Rosalie, and Erika were still whispering.

"Barely," Ilya nodded, leaning back. "But I think talking to Nora served as a great shield to keep all four of them at bay."

"Oh, my God, how rude of me. I'm sorry." Shane finally turned his body and held out his hand to the woman. "Shane."

"Nora." The woman with curly hair shook his hand with a friendly smile. "Let me guess... those are the famous school moms who throw themselves at the other students' dads?"

"Those exact ones," Shane confirmed slowly. He looked at the Russian. "Did Erika try to flirt with you? My bad, Ilya. I should have warned you not to get too close to her line of sight."

Ilya laughed, shaking his head.

"I'm on the clock, Shane, don't worry about it. Not to mention she's very happily married. Not that she herself seems to care much about that little detail."

Shane laughed and nodded, while Nora had to cover her mouth with both hands to keep from laughing too loudly at Ilya's brutal honesty.

"And how is he playing?" the captain changed the subject, his eyes fixed on his son, who was waiting in line at practice.

"Already scored two goals," Ilya shared with a proud smile, which almost instantly mirrored on Shane's face. "And he made a friend. Bash. That's Nora's son."

"Is that so? He mentioned to me that he'd met a really cool boy in his new class." Shane turned to Nora with a genuine and approachable smile. "Look, if you want, we can exchange numbers and set up a playdate for them some time."

"That would be amazing! Bash loves going to the playgrounds," Nora agreed, excited and visibly relieved that her son had solidified a friendship outside of the school environment.

When the final whistle blew ending practice, Shane didn't care one bit about giving his son a tight hug, even though the boy was drenched in sweat. While Ilya gathered the backpack and the lunchbox, the boy was already chattering excitedly about every detail of his day.

"Come on, let's go home. We both desperately need a shower." Shane held his hand out to his son. "Say bye to your friend."

"Bye, Bash! See you tomorrow!"

Nora gave her son a gentle, encouraging pat on the back. Bash waved back, although without looking directly, and Nora returned the wave with a smile before they headed together toward the other exit of the sports complex.

"He's really nice. And he plays well," Liam commented, looking at his dad. As soon as the two of them passed Ilya, the boy reached out his free arm and, with the greatest naturalness in the world, grabbed the Russian's hand as well. "In science class, he told me he really likes dogs. But his dad is allergic, so they can't have one. Why don't we have a dog, Dad?"

"Because you never asked me for one," Shane replied, raising an eyebrow. He was completely oblivious to the fact that the three of them were walking hand in hand off the field, forming a picturesque family image that immediately drew stares and whispers from the "Fantastic Four" moms.

"So I can have a dog?! Or are they not allowed in our apartment? Dogs need a lot of space, right?"

"We own the building, Liam," Shane laughed, reminding his son of that minor detail.

Ilya turned his neck slowly, staring at his boss with an expression of pure disbelief. The Canadian pressed his lips together, suddenly embarrassed by his own accidental flexing.

"Yeah... I own the whole building," he confirmed, clearing his throat.

"Wow," the blond murmured. "And did you come in your car, or...?"

"I took an Uber. Asked the driver to drop my suitcase off with the building's doorman on the way here. I was going to call another one now for us to go back."

"You can cancel it. You're riding shotgun today," Ilya declared, letting go of Liam's hand to fish for the keys in his hoodie pocket. When the Russian unlocked the alarm, Shane recognized the all-black Jeep Renegade he had already noticed parked nearby his penthouse several times. His deductions had been correct.

"Dog!" Liam insisted, pulling on the hem of Shane's jacket, refusing to let the subject die.

"We can discuss this later, at home." Shane raised his hands in surrender, opening the back door of the Jeep and helping his son climb in. "Put your seatbelt on."

"Ilya, do you like dogs?" the boy fired away.

The Russian settled his six-foot-three frame into the driver's seat, turning the key in the ignition, while Shane buckled his seatbelt in the passenger seat.

"I have a dog, a girl," the Russian replied, adjusting the rearview mirror.

Shane analyzed the situation for a moment and felt a twinge of weirdness at being there, relaxed in the passenger seat of his son's nanny's car. It was a curious role reversal, but he quickly pushed the thought away, grateful for the ride.

"You do?!" Liam leaned his torso forward, squeezing into the space between the two front seats, shocked and amazed. "What's her name? What breed is she?"

"Her name is Anya. And she's a mix of Weimaraner and Golden Retriever." Ilya pulled his phone out of his pocket before putting the car in gear. He opened his gallery, looked for a recent photo, and turned it backward. In the image, Ilya was holding the dog in his lap like a baby... a furry, hundred-pound baby.

"She's all caramel-colored!" Liam took the phone from Ilya's hand carefully, laughing, enchanted, allowing the Russian to finally pull the car away. "She's mixed! Just like us, Dad!"

Shane let out a genuine burst of laughter, caught off guard by the comparison. Ilya had to cover his mouth with the back of his hand to contain his own laughter. Neither of them had expected that one.

"W-What do you mean, Liam?" Shane asked, still laughing.

"Well, Grandpa doesn't look like us. He has blue eyes, and we have Grandma Yuna's dark eyes. And Mommy has green eyes and red hair. We're all mixed."

Shane couldn't do anything but agree. In the end, under childish—and genetic—logic, the boy was absolutely right. Ilya continued to hold in his laughter as much as he could until he composed himself, focusing on the traffic.

"Look, the worst part is he's not wrong," Ilya commented, shooting an amused look at Shane.

"Tell me about it," Shane sighed, laughing once more, and reached back to grab the phone from his son.

The boy handed it back carefully. Before passing the device back to the Russian, Shane took a brief look at the photo glowing on the screen.

There was, however, a detail in the image that had obviously been irrelevant to Liam. In the photo, Ilya was wearing only swim trunks. The angle showed off not only the Russian's absurdly toned thighs, but also a thin, dark line of hair that ran down the center of his defined abdomen, disappearing straight under the waistband of the fabric and... maybe going much further.

Shane felt a sudden heat rise up the back of his neck. He locked the phone screen almost aggressively and shoved the device upside down into the cupholder of the center console. *Why the fuck did I just think about how far down his happy trail goes?!*, he cursed mentally, alarmed by his own brain.

"She is... she's pretty cute." Shane swallowed hard, feeling the urgency to say anything about the damn animal to cover up his short-circuit.

"And who does she stay with when you're working here at our house?" Liam asked, swinging his short legs in the backseat.

"I leave Anya at a friend's house. It's right near a huge dog park, so she loves it. My friend not so much, but since she's the one who gave me the dog as a gift, now she has to deal with the consequences," Ilya explained with a sly smile.

Chapter 5: Make it count

Chapter Notes

sorry if there's any translation mistakes, my brain is fried over studies and hudcon in toronto

The dreaded and highly anticipated Wednesday finally arrived. Shane had already done his homework: he booked a table at a sophisticated French bistro, with intimate decor, dim lighting, and an impeccable autumn aesthetic. But, that morning, reality was just the usual chaos of the penthouse.

While Liam finished putting on his sneakers in his bedroom for school, Shane paced back and forth in the living room, already dressed in his morning practice clothes. At the kitchen island, Ilya methodically checked the boy's backpack, aligning the insulated lunch box next to the notebooks.

"Uhm... hey." Shane approached the counter, taking a nervous sip of his protein smoothie from his thermos.

Ilya looked over his shoulder.

"I'm going to be late coming back from practice today. I mean, not from practice exactly, but... I'm going out for lunch afterwards, so..."

"I'll pick Liam up from school, no problem," Ilya finished the sentence, nodding with the greatest naturalness in the world and zipping up the backpack.

"Okay. Thanks a lot, Ilya."

The Russian laughed softly through his nose, shaking his head.

"Shane, you are fully aware that I work for you, aren't you?" he raised an eyebrow, turning to his boss. Shane nodded, taking another sip of the smoothie. "Then why do you keep thanking me as if I'm doing you a huge favor by doing my own job?"

"I don't know, it's just... automatic. I spent the last few years solving everything on my own or begging my parents for help. I still haven't gotten used to the wonderful idea of having someone constantly helping me with him," the captain shrugged, sighing. "And I thought it best to let you know off the record, because I didn't write anything on the schedule board in the living room. You know... I don't want Liam to know exactly where I'm going today."

Ilya's hands stopped on the counter. He analyzed the player's tense posture.

"Going out with someone?" The blond raised his eyebrows.

Shane felt the back of his neck get hot and nodded restrainedly.

"Uhm, okay, Captain..."

The veiled teasing in the Russian's tone made Shane roll his eyes and rub his free temple.

"Liam has never seen me go out with anyone in his life, and I honestly don't even know how today is going to play out... Being completely honest with you? I'm probably having an internal freak-out and not even realizing it. I must be in a pure state of denial about how anxious I am," Shane poured the words out like a machine gun, gesturing frantically.

"You can discard the denial theory. It's perfectly clear and evident to anyone in this room that you're anxious," the Russian countered with placid calm, crossing his broad arms over his chest and observing the other man's despair. Shane let out a puff of air, defeated. "It's just a date, man. It's fine that Liam has never witnessed this, but it shouldn't be uncharted territory for you."

"Except for the minor detail that it is, indeed, completely uncharted territory." Shane swallowed hard. "I don't go out with women, Ilya. Like... never. I spent the last few years using my hockey routine as an excuse; while most of the guys on the team use fame to drag women into bed, I used it to push them away. And, on top of that, I used the hell of the custody battle as a shield. I don't know what to do, man. The last time I actually had a real date... was with Liam's mom. When I was eighteen."

The Russian froze. Ilya's unshakable stoicism faltered for the first time. He opened and closed his mouth, absolutely incredulous.

"It's been almost a decade since you've gone out with absolutely anyone?!"

Shane nodded slowly, feeling like a high school virgin all over again.

"*Gospodi...*" Ilya murmured, massaging the bridge of his nose as if he felt a headache just from absorbing that information.

"I have no idea what that means in Russian, but, yes. That's it. Pray for me."

Shane's internal freak-out was interrupted by the sound of quick, little feet tapping against the wood. Liam was coming down the stairs, skipping steps two by two in a hurry. The Canadian, whose mouth was full of smoothie, tried to swallow quickly to scold him, but Ilya was much more efficient.

"Hey!" the Russian's deep voice whipped the air, needing only one syllable to establish order.

In the middle of the staircase curve, the boy froze. He shot a look at the nanny and, obediently, started taking the remaining steps one by one, at a safe and civilized pace. Shane shot a relieved look at Ilya and nodded in a silent thank you. The blond returned it with a short nod.

"Go on, say goodbye to your dad," Ilya instructed, handing the backpack to the boy. "Because as soon as I pick you up from school today, we have an appointment. You're going to meet someone very special."

"Who?!" Liam's eyes widened, his curiosity instantaneous.

"Anya." The Russian cracked a sly smile, and just hearing the dog's name was enough for the boy's face to light up with pure euphoria.

"Bye, Daddy!" Liam sprinted to Shane, colliding with him and hugging his waist tightly.

Shane leaned down, planting a lingering kiss on his son's dark hair.

"Make sure you behave at school today, you hear me? And later with Anya too. Be gentle with her."

"Okay!" Liam promised, already turning his back and running back to the entrance hall.

Ilya fished his Jeep keys from his hoodie pocket. Shane also had his on the counter, but he still had a few minutes to spare before needing to leave for the arena and preferred to finish his breakfast in peace.

"I love you!" Shane called out, watching the boy walk through the door accompanied by the Russian.

"I love you too!" Liam's little voice echoed down the hallway, already on his way to the elevator.

Before pulling the handle and closing the door completely, Ilya peeked through the crack. The Russian locked his blue eyes on Shane's for a second longer than strictly necessary and, with an insolent half-smile, gave a slow, charming wink to his boss before disappearing from sight.

A dull thud echoed through the penthouse when the door closed.

Alone in the vastness of the living room, Shane felt a sudden, undeniable, and stupid butterfly in his stomach. He blinked, disconcerted by his own physical reaction to that playful flirtation thrown to the wind. Letting out a low, nervous laugh, the captain shook his head at himself, trying to shake off the feeling as he finished downing the rest of his smoothie.

[...]

Ilya watched Liam disappear through the school gates and, even before turning around, was already pulling his phone from his pocket to send a message to Svetlana.

[Direct Message]

Ilya: I need you to take Anya to that park near the school where we usually run. Today.

Sveta: A "good morning, best friend" to you too.

Sveta: And why? Aren't you going to be babysitting the hottie's son this afternoon?

Ilya: That's exactly why I want you to take the dog. Hollander is going out for lunch today and I need a distraction good enough to keep Liam occupied for a long time.

Sveta: WAIT. HOLLANDER IS GOING TO FUCK SOMEONE AND THAT SOMEONE ISN'T ME??

Sveta: THE UNIVERSE HATES MEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

Ilya: Yes, you are the great victim in all of this story.

Sveta: Glad you are aware of that. 🙄

Sveta: What time?

Ilya: 12:00 sharp.

The Russian simply replied with a photo: a selfie giving a thumbs-up and a crooked smile, still sprawled in bed and wearing a satin bonnet on her head to keep her red curls perfect.

"Ilya? Hey! I didn't know you were bringing Liam today."

The Russian locked his phone screen and turned around upon recognizing the voice. Nora was walking toward him, coming from the parking lot. In the distance, Ilya saw Bash wave shyly before being swallowed by the flow of children and disappearing inside the building.

"Shane has practice at the arena early today, so the school driver duty fell to me," the Russian explained, greeting her with a nod.

"Bash woke up all excited today, babbling about how he and Liam were going to pair up for French class. I had completely forgotten that the language was a mandatory subject here in Quebec."

Nora tucked one of her loose curls behind her ear and pulled the collar of her sweater closer to her neck, shielding herself from the freezing wind. The biting autumn weather was already starting to nip at the skin, and dry leaves in vibrant shades of orange and red rolled across the sidewalk.

"French homework is the only thing I can't help Liam with," Ilya confessed, letting out a nasal laugh. "Learning English was already hell on Earth. French is asking too much of my brain."

"Tell me about it! Bash is learning from absolute zero right now. But at least Liam already knows the basics and can help him. My husband speaks Spanish, I can scrape by a bit too, but French definitely wasn't on our horizons back in California," she complained with an

exhausted smile, drawing another laugh from the Russian. Nora tilted her head slightly. "By the way, have you lived around here for a long time? In North America, I mean."

"Since I was eighteen. I moved here with my best friend, who has American citizenship. I got my work visa not too long after. The initial plan was for me to pursue a professional hockey career, but I blew out my knee in an ugly injury and the dream ended right there."

"Oh, you're kidding... I'm so sorry," Nora placed a hand on her chest, empathy overflowing in her eyes. "But look on the bright side: hockey didn't end up being too far from your life, since you work for one of the biggest players in the league."

"And it's not the first time," Ilya commented, gesturing to one of the wooden benches in the square across from the school.

The two walked over there and sat down to escape the wind for a few minutes.

"Before moving to Montreal, I spent years taking care of Cliff Marleau's nephews—he's the captain of the Boston Raiders. Currently, besides Liam, I'm also the caregiver for Elise, J.J. Dagenais's little girl," the Russian explained, stretching his long legs out in front of the bench. "It was J.J. who made the connection and blindly recommended me to Hollander when the custody came through."

"So you are, basically, the official and exclusive caregiver for NHL royalty," Nora commented, letting out a crystalline laugh that formed a small cloud of vapor in the cold air.

"Something like that. Let's say it's a very lucrative niche market that requires a lot of discretion," Ilya replied, leaning back against the bench and stretching his arm along the wood, which subtly shortened the distance between them. "Hockey players have chaotic lives. Someone needs to make sure the kids don't set the house on fire while their dads are knocking each other's teeth out on the ice."

Nora shook her head, still smiling, but the look she gave the Russian lingered a second longer than normal. She evaluated his profile: the strong jaw, the broad shoulders that filled out the sports hoodie, the incredibly relaxed and confident posture.

"You know, I still find it surprising," she murmured, her voice dropping to a slightly lower, more confidential tone. "It's rare to find a man with your... physical presence, who has so much patience, so much sensitivity with kids. Especially kids who need a more attentive eye, like Bash."

"Attention is just a matter of choice, Nora," Ilya countered smoothly, turning his face to look directly at her. The Russian's blue eyes locked onto hers with a calm intensity. "Most men simply choose not to pay attention to the details. I prefer to observe."

Nora swallowed hard. The autumn air suddenly didn't seem so biting. She looked away for a moment, playing with the hem of her own sweater. Ilya's comment had hit a sensitive spot, an invisible wound she had been carrying since the move to Canada.

"It's true..." she sighed, a slightly more melancholic smile appearing on her lips. "My husband, for example, is brilliant in court, but lately the firm has become his only priority. He spends fourteen hours a day in that office. Montreal is a beautiful city, but it can be quite lonely when your only conversations of the day are with a seven-year-old boy."

Ilya didn't look away. He tilted his head slightly to the side, studying her face. The rebellious curls framing the olive skin, the sharp intelligence in her eyes, the posture of someone holding everything together on her own.

"He must be an extremely distracted man," Ilya said, his deep voice vibrating in an almost velvety note.

"What do you mean?" she asked, holding her breath without realizing it.

"To prefer spending fourteen hours locked in an office surrounded by papers, when he could be at home with a woman like you," Ilya finished, letting the words float between them in the cold air. "If it were me, I guarantee you work would be my absolute last priority."

Nora's cheeks gained a rosy tint that definitely wasn't the fault of the Quebec temperature. She let out a nervous but genuinely flattered laugh, and instinctively fixed her hair, tucking a curl behind her ear.

"You know exactly what to say, don't you?" She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, her lips curving into a dangerous smile. "You must be an absolute menace with the moms from that PTA. The 'Fantastic Four' can attest to that."

"I'm strictly professional, Nora," Ilya countered with a sly smile, his eyes dropping quickly to her lips before meeting hers again. "I'm paid to solve problems and be invisible. What kind of menace could I be?"

"Oh, sure. A giant, Russian ex-athlete who understands child psychology, cooks organic snacks, and notices when a woman changes her hairstyle. Practically imperceptible," she teased, leaning slightly toward him, playing along. "It's a miracle the husbands of Montreal haven't demanded your deportation yet."

Ilya let out a low, husky laugh.

"Good thing your husband is a lawyer, then. In case I get arrested for being too attentive, I already know who to call." He paused, his smile dimming into something more intimate. "But seriously... if you ever need a companion who isn't seven years old to grab a coffee and complain about the cold, you know where to find me."

Nora held his gaze. The flirtation, which had started as a simple joke to stroke an ego, had just crossed a fine line, turning into a real invitation.

"I'll remember that, Ilya," she murmured, her voice soft, before standing up from the bench with a calculated slowness, adjusting her bag strap on her shoulder. "Have a good afternoon with Liam."

"I will. See you later, Nora."

Ilya watched the woman walk back to her car, admiring the sway of her hips until she got inside the vehicle. When the car disappeared down the street, the Russian let out a long sigh, running a hand through his blond hair, fully aware that he was playing with fire. And enjoying the feeling.

[Direct Message]

Ilya: Would you hate me if I wanted to fuck someone married?

Sveta: You already have. More than once. Including your sister-in-law.

Sveta: Are you trying to bang someone's mom?

Ilya: Maybe. Husband works too much, new to the city...

Sveta: Sometimes I forget you aren't my queer best friend all the time and underneath the bisexuality there is still a man. 🙄

Ilya: Maybe I'll sleep with the husband too. Boss and employee 😏

Sveta: If I were you, I'd try to get with my own boss.

Ilya: I already got that you think Hollander is handsome.

Sveta: HE IS WAY TOO HOT

[...]

Shane stepped out of the shower, put on his boxer briefs, and threw the towel over his head, creating the classic "privacy tent" he always used when he wanted to type something without the team vultures reading over his shoulder. He was replying to a message from Rose, who was letting him know she was leaving the hotel, confirming that he was also about to leave the arena.

Upon returning his phone to the locker shelf and pulling the towel from his face, he was mercilessly flanked. Hayden and J.J. appeared out of nowhere, glued to each side of him like two hungry falcons.

"Is it today?" they asked in unison.

"Is today the day the great Shane Hollander finally ends a nearly decade-long dry spell?!"
Hayden shook his friend's shoulder, his voice thick with fake emotion.

"I'm going out to lunch with the girl. For the love of God, control yourselves," Shane grumbled.

"Gonna pay Ilya overtime to stay with Liam while you live life on the edge?" J.J. teased, rolling his hips in a sensual dance move so exaggerated it made Shane wrinkle his nose in a grimace of pure disgust.

"It's just a lunch!" the captain repeated, exasperated.

"I already told you, hold the condom wrapper up to the light before you use it," Hayden gave him a paternal pat on the back. J.J. walked away cackling, while Shane rolled his eyes hard and went back to getting dressed.

This time, he had brought very carefully thought-out clothes, in addition, of course, to a good imported cologne. A very rare event, considering his post-practice protocol usually consisted of rushing and aerosol deodorant.

In the parking lot, wearing a fitted black turtleneck and a dark brown leather jacket, Shane tossed his equipment bag into the trunk. In the distance, he saw Hayden and J.J. walking to their respective cars, laughing loudly and making obscene gestures in his direction. Shane just flipped them the bird in response, getting into the driver's seat.

Before he started the engine, his phone buzzed. Seeing Ilya's name light up the screen, his chest went cold in a conditioned reflex of paternal panic. But as soon as he opened the notification, relief washed over him.

[Direct Message]

Ilya Rozanov: We are at the park near the school. His last class was canceled because the math teacher caught a cold.

Ilya Rozanov: [Photo: Liam sitting on the grass, pulling a rope toy in a fierce tug-of-war against a tail-wagging Anya]

Shane Hollander: Perfect. I think I'll be back by two in the afternoon.

Ilya Rozanov: Make it count to guarantee a second date, Captain. 😊

Shane let out a breathy laugh and relaxed his shoulders, dropping his phone in the center console and starting the car.

It was a short drive to the bistro. The radio turned on automatically via Bluetooth, and he soon recognized the beat of one of the Chappell Roan songs Rose had recommended. It was *Good Luck, Babe!*.

The song escalated to the intense, explosive bridge: *"When you wake up next to him, in the middle of the night, with your hand in his hand, you're nothing more than his wife. And you think about me, all of those years ago, you're standing face to face with 'I told you so'."*

Shane tapped his fingers on the leather steering wheel to the rhythm of the music, but the raw, dramatic lyrics suddenly made him uneasy. It felt like a weird omen. And when the next track began—an autumn indie anthem singing *We Fell in Love in October*—Shane's anxious brain reached its limit.

He decided he didn't need cosmic signs or musical metaphors before a date. To avoid attracting bad omens and overthinking, he turned the radio off with a quick smack to the button. Silence was safer.

Five minutes later, the player parked near the restaurant. Upon stepping out of the car, he swept the street with a sharp gaze in an almost automatic instinct, checking for hidden camera lenses, but the sidewalk seemed quiet and free of paparazzi.

Until a low, provocative whistle cut through the cold autumn air.

Shane turned his neck quickly. Rose Landry was shutting the door of an Uber a few feet away. She wore an impeccable terracotta winter dress. The long-sleeved turtleneck fit her body perfectly, matching the red tone of her hair in an absurdly good way. A cascade of thin gold necklaces fell over her chest, completing the stunning look.

"Mr. Hollander? All dressed up just for a casual lunch?" she teased with a crooked smile, drawing an immediate, relieved laugh from the player.

"I could say the exact same thing about you, Miss Landry."

Shane indicated the door of the bistro with a polite gesture, and Rose walked ahead of him, lightly adjusting her hair with her fingers. Walking right behind her, the Canadian was hit by a sweet, floral, and intoxicating perfume.

It was incredible. Almost incredible enough to make him forget the cold sweat of nervousness covering the palms of his own hands.

After giving his name at the host stand, the maître d' guided them to a more private table in one of the corners of the dining room. It was away from the large windows facing the main avenue, but still received pleasant natural light. The bistro's decor heavily utilized earthy tones and dry foliage, fully embracing the autumn aesthetic. There were soft aromatic candles scattered strategically and small ceramic pumpkins—a whimsical touch for the approaching Halloween, without turning the place into a gaudy window display.

"How was practice?" Rose asked. She pushed a strand of red hair behind her ear and settled gracefully into the upholstered chair.

"Same as always." Shane shook his head slightly. "The coach wanted to take it easy today because of our short road trip this week."

"Be gentle with my Detroit tomorrow, please," Rose joked, pointing her index finger at him.

The gesture made Shane notice the actress's nails, which were meticulously painted. He spotted the tiny drawing of a pumpkin wearing a witch's hat.

"Is it themed?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Rose broke into an excited smile and held both hands out over the table so he could see better. The background was a chic reddish-brown tone, and each nail featured a different design: small pumpkins, spider webs, black cat silhouettes, candy, and brooms.

"Wow, they look really nice," Shane complimented, leaning in to look.

"Thank you! I stopped by the salon on Monday. Since the weather is finally cooling down, I can film wearing gloves with no problem. That way it won't be weird for Rhea Darkthorn to show up with Halloween nails in the middle of the movie's closed universe," she explained, drawing a laugh from the player.

"Not to mention Rhea almost always wears tactical gloves to hide the fact that she's a mutant and keep from showing her shedding scales," Shane pointed out with utmost naturalness, revealing that he knew the character's backstory deeply.

Rose snapped her fingers and pointed at him, impressed, conceding the point. The two laughed together, and, almost like magic, the tension in Shane's shoulders and the cold sweat on his hands began to disappear.

"You know, considering your excellent level of knowledge about the franchise... maybe I'll include you on my VIP guest list for the movie premiere? I can even include Liam in the quota," she suggested, batting her beautiful dark blue eyes, adorned with flawless lashes.

Shane felt a comforting warmth in his chest. A gorgeous woman including his son in her plans was, by far, the best scenario a single dad could ask for on a date.

"I'm absolutely sure he would lose his mind," the captain agreed slowly, a goofy smile slipping out. "He still finds it very surreal that his dad knows Rhea Darkthorn personally."

"And he's still at school at this time, isn't he? I hope I didn't steal you away from your pickup duty." Rose's tone mixed a joke with a slight, sincere concern.

"No, don't worry. He's with his nanny," the player reassured her, leaning back in his chair. "Ilya picked him up, took him to the park near by school, and even brought his dog along so they could spend the afternoon playing."

"Ilya? What a beautiful name." Rose stopped suddenly, processing the sentence. "Wait a minute, you said 'his'? Ilya is a guy?"

For the next five minutes, between ordering drinks, Shane detailed his own trajectory of having had that exact same initial reaction. He talked about J.J. Dagenais's insistent recommendation and how, nowadays, if you asked Liam who his favorite adult in the world was, there was a huge chance the boy would answer "Ilya" without blinking.

"It's really nice to have a professional support network when you have the means for it. My parents hired an incredible woman to take care of me and my siblings for years, at least until

John was old enough to watch all of us on his own," Rose commented, fully engaged in the subject.

Talking to her was incredibly easy. So natural that Shane didn't have to measure his words or think twice before speaking; the dialogue simply flowed, safe and comfortable. Almost unconsciously, he realized that the feeling was very similar to when he got into a conversation with Ilya in the penthouse kitchen.

The dynamic with the Russian almost always revolved around Liam, of course. But, every now and then, they slipped into other casual topics: hockey, cooking, and especially the gym. Shane, disguising his curiosity, had already probed about the Russian's heavy back and leg routine—a physique he secretly admired—and received excellent tips. But it stopped there. Everything Shane knew about Ilya's personal life came straight from Liam's mouth. The kid interrogated the nanny without the slightest mercy, and the blond, surprisingly patient, answered everything.

The Canadian realized then, sipping his sparkling water, that he needed to be careful not to let slip in his daily life any information he had learned through his son, so as not to sound intrusive and make Ilya uncomfortable. And he was pretty sure the concern had to be mutual. After all, knowing the chatterbox son he had, if Liam talked about the nanny to his dad with so much enthusiasm... he absolutely poured all of Shane's secrets out to Ilya during their LEGO builds.

[...]

Ilya sat on the park lawn, watching Liam use all his child-strength to throw the rope toy as far as possible, only for Anya to dart like lightning and bring it back in seconds. Svetlana was sitting cross-legged right next to him.

"Now I understand what you talk about so much. This boy is a cutie," the redhead commented in Russian, watching the scene. "A little weirdo, because he got shy and hid behind your leg the minute he saw me, but still, a cutie."

"Watch your mouth, Sveta. I'm almost certain he's on the spectrum," Ilya scolded her in a low, serious tone. The redhead widened her eyes and covered her mouth with her hand. "I'm still in the observation phase. I haven't been taking care of him long enough to spell it out, but the signs are there."

"Well, you nailed Marleau's nephew's ADHD diagnosis in a week," she shot back, defending herself.

"That's because that kid was the reincarnation of the Tazmanian Devil. Liam is different." The Russian pointed subtly with his chin toward the boy, drawing a laugh from Svetlana. "He has a clear hyperfocus on marine animals. Sharks, specifically."

"Oh, swear? I didn't even notice. The shark backpack, the sneakers, the socks, the hoodie..." she quipped, counting casually on her fingers, which made the Russian roll his eyes.

"He also has safe foods. A lot of them end up going unnoticed because they blend in with Hollander's own athlete diet, but the rest are always meals with highly predictable textures and tastes, like plain pasta. But that's not a conversation for right now. The agency guidelines recommend we wait at least six months of interaction before suggesting or raising any clinical suspicion to the parents," Ilya explained, shaking his head. His gaze softened as he watched the boy let out a genuine burst of laughter when Anya started running in circles, teasing him to try and get the toy back.

"If you say so, Dr. Rozanov." The girl shrugged, adjusting her legs on the lawn. "Anyway, remember that guy I told you about?"

"The photographer who thinks he's an artist or the one who livestreams playing video games?"

"The photographer," she rolled her eyes and promptly began to update her friend on her love life. Or, more specifically, her sex life.

It was tremendously lucky that they were talking in Russian, because Svetlana frequently forgot that Ilya's job involved the constant presence of children when she started detailing the minutiae of her casual hookups. She assured him the guy was "nothing special" for a serious relationship, but that she had accepted a second date anyway. He was of Russian descent on his father's side, but his mom was Canadian and he had lived in Montreal since he was thirteen.

After venting, she dropped a piece of information that finally hooked Ilya's interest for real.

"Oh, and I also got a text from Sasha early today. He said his agency is doing a fashion campaign here in Montreal." She cast a sideways glance at Ilya, her tone of voice laden with insinuation.

Sasha. The son of Ilya's old high school hockey coach. And, not coincidentally, the first boy Ilya had ever hooked up with in his life. They had bad, clumsy, and terrifying experiences at first, hiding in the locker room and scared to death, but also very good nights as they learned together to explore their own bodies and understand who they were.

Just as Svetlana had once been Ilya's uncomplicated friend with benefits in the past, Sasha also occupied that same blurry space of friends with benefits. And if Sveta was bringing up his name like that, with a smug little smile, Sasha had definitely already told her to set the stage.

Nowadays, Sasha lived in France, making a living as a model. He had also fled Russia, the same way Ilya had needed to flee his father and older brother. The two were bound in flesh not just by attraction, but by trauma. The weight of carrying their bisexuality as a secret in a country like Russia, being the sons of conservative and ruthless men, was an anchor that almost drowned them. Ilya's situation was slightly more dangerous, since his father and

brother were cops; but Sasha's dad was a youth hockey coach and a former KHL defenseman. A man with giant fists known for being heavy.

"When does he arrive?" Ilya asked, feigning disinterest.

"Tomorrow." Svetlana broke into a wide smile, shimmying her shoulders, loving playing cupid. "Right around the time you have exactly four days off from work. Isn't the universe just incredible?"

Ilya laughed through his nose, rolling his eyes. The timing was indeed perfectly convenient. Shane had given him a long weekend off because Liam would be under the care of Yuna and David—the grandparents were going to drive from Ottawa to Montreal to stay with their grandson at the penthouse, ensuring everything ran smoothly while Shane faced a stretch of away games with the Metros.

Liam let out a burst of laughter when Anya, fast as a furry torpedo, shot toward Ilya and jumped with both front paws on his chest. The impact made the giant Russian tip backward, falling flat on his back on the grass with a dull thud. The boy came running right behind her, stopping next to them.

"Does she know any tricks?" Liam asked excitedly.

"She pretends she doesn't," Ilya replied, trying uselessly to push the dog's snout away from his own face. Anya panted on top of him, her tongue out and her tail wagging so hard it swept the dry leaves off the ground.

Svetlana pulled her bag close, taking out a thermos and a collapsible silicone bowl. With a short, sharp whistle, she caught the animal's attention. Anya froze and immediately trotted over to her.

"*Pit'*," the redhead gave the command in a firm tone, pouring the fresh water into the little bowl. At that exact moment, the dog lowered her head and began drinking noisily.

"She only responds to commands in Russian," Ilya explained, finally managing to sit up and brush the grass off his hoodie.

The information made Liam's eyes shine. The boy seemed to take that as a personal challenge he couldn't refuse.

"And how do you say 'sit'?"

"*Sadit'sya*," Ilya replied, the pronunciation flowing naturally.

"Sadisya," Liam tried to imitate, tangling his tongue. The jumbled attempt drew simultaneous laughs from the two Russians.

"Almost. It's Sa-di-tsa," Ilya corrected patiently, breaking the word down syllable by syllable to make it easier.

"Sa-di-tsa." Liam tested the sound again, focused, and the blond nodded in approval. Immediately, the boy turned to the dog, puffed out his chest, and deepened his little voice, trying to sound authoritative: "*Sadit'sya*, Anya!"

The dog pricked up her ears, took two small steps back, and sat nicely on the lawn, waiting for her reward.

"Anechka, *vorochat'*," Svetlana joined the game, testing a more advanced level and using the dog's affectionate nickname.

Anya didn't think twice: she stood up, threw her body weight onto the ground, and rolled from side to side on the grass, with her paws clumsily in the air.

"How did you say it?!" Liam jumped in place, enchanted.

"Vah-ro-ch-at," the redhead pronounced very slowly, gesturing with her hand.

"Vah-ro-tiat!"

"Almost there," Ilya laughed, propping his body weight on his arms, amused by the boy's interest.

Liam whirled around to him in a jolt, grabbing the fabric of the nanny's hoodie, his eyes wide in pure excitement, forgetting the dog for a second.

"Will you teach me how to speak Russian, Ilya?! Please, pretty please!"

[...]

Around four in the afternoon, they returned to the penthouse. The air was already starting to get chilly, and Svetlana had to leave, letting them know she had a meeting at six. Liam said goodbye to the redhead still a bit shyly, but with Anya it was a party: he let the dog give him dozens of licks on the face until he got tired.

Upon opening the apartment door, Ilya's eyes swept the entrance hall almost by instinct. There were Shane's shoes, perfectly aligned, and in the ceramic jar on the console table, the key ring. The Russian cracked a half-smile; the boss was home.

"And how do you say... uhm... 'sky'?"

"Nebo," Ilya replied, untying his own sneakers.

"Nie-ba?"

"That's it." The blond laughed, proud.

From the curve of the kitchen hallway, Shane emerged, wearing comfortable clothes and holding a container of natural yogurt.

"What's all this chatter about?"

"Ilya is teaching me how to speak Russian!" Liam ran to his dad, his eyes shining. "I already know how to say thank you, hello, blue, shark, sky... and dog commands!"

"Practically fluent," Shane laughed, ruffling his son's dark hair and pulling a loose blade of grass out from between the strands. "My God, you're filthy. Go straight to the shower, you little pig."

"How is 'pig' in Russian, Ilya?!"

"Svin'ya," the blond replied, grabbing the boy's school backpack off the floor.

"Svi-nya," Liam repeated. He was already turning around and climbing the stairs two at a time, whispering the new words softly, like a spell, so he wouldn't forget.

Shane laughed, following his son with his gaze until he disappeared upstairs. Ilya walked to the kitchen island, opened Liam's backpack, and took out the insulated lunch box to wash. Shane felt the energy radiating from the Russian—Ilya was clearly dying to know the details of the date, but his professionalism would never allow him to ask first.

"You're itching to ask, aren't you?"

"Da, but I won't," Ilya agreed shamelessly. He rolled up the sleeves of his hoodie, opened the plastic containers, and tossed them into the sink.

"It was cool." Shane gave in, shrugging. He sat down on one of the high stools and took another spoonful of the yogurt with fruit.

"Good... Did you get back long ago?"

"About half an hour," Shane answered, a soft, relaxed smile breaking through his ever-stoic expression.

"Half an hour..." Ilya repeated. The Russian's quick math seemed to reach a conclusion, and a predatory smile appeared on his lips. Shane couldn't help a stifled laugh, and Ilya joined him. "Long lunch, huh?"

"The conversation flowed well." Shane rested his elbow on the stone counter. "Well enough to secure a second date."

Ilya let out a loud, genuine laugh that echoed through the kitchen as he scrubbed Liam's thermos. Shane covered his face with his free hand, feeling the back of his neck and ears burn with sheer embarrassment, though he was also laughing. Ilya's laugh was deep, intoxicating.

"Made it count, Kapitan," the Russian teased, shooting a mischievous look over his shoulder. Shane swallowed hard, suddenly very focused on taking another spoonful of yogurt.

"We scheduled the next one for the first. It's going to be a dinner this time, so..." Shane made a vague gesture in the air, already building the request.

"I work for you, Shane."

"I know! But still, I feel like I have to ask the right way. Can you watch him for the evening, until I get back? Sunday's game is during the day, against the Ottawa Centaurs. You guys can even go to the arena and watch, it would be cool to have Liam in the audience."

"Deal. I'll take him to the game and roll right into night duty until you get back." Ilya nodded slowly, his voice dropping an octave. "Or don't get back."

Shane laughed through his nose, looking away toward the bowl.

"Shut up, man."

"I'm just saying... Make a third date worth it."

"Oh, is that what you do, huh? Keep pushing to make new dates worth it?" Shane inquired, his tone playful and slightly accusing.

"Usually, people are the ones begging for more dates with me, so I never have to push to make anything worth it." Ilya flashed a charming, cocky wink. Shane snorted out a laugh at so much presumption, finishing scraping the bottom of the ceramic bowl.

"Give me that," Ilya asked, reaching his hand across the island.

"Uhm? No, leave it, I'll wash it later."

"I'm already at the sink dealing with water, Shane. Hand it over."

Shane gave in and handed over the bowl. In the brief millisecond of the exchange, their fingers brushed. The electric contrast of Shane's naturally warm hand against Ilya's large, damp, and cold fingers sent a quick shiver running up the Canadian's spine.

"Is the girl nice?" Ilya asked, breaking the sudden silence.

"She's funny. And she knows her hockey well, which makes talking to Rose even easier."

"Uhm... Rose," Ilya repeated. The guttural way the Slavic accent rolled the "R" in the back of the blond's throat drew a second shiver, completely involuntary, from Shane's neck.

"You know what? I was surprised no one saw me there." Shane changed the subject quickly to clear his own mind. "With everything that's happened, I always feel like someone's watching me."

"And maybe they are." Ilya shrugged, soaping the yogurt container with a frightening tranquility. "Did you know there's a specific phobia for that? Anatidaephobia. It's the irrational fear that, somewhere in the world, no matter what you're doing, there's a duck watching you."

"What?!" Shane let out an incredulous laugh, the tension evaporating completely. "There are no ducks watching people out there, Ilya."

"And how are you so sure?" The Russian raised an eyebrow, feigning extreme gravity. "You don't know how ducks operate in the shadows, Shane. They're treacherous animals. Every quack is a very well-articulated Morse code."

"I am seriously starting to reconsider the idea of letting you take care of my son," Shane narrowed his eyes.

The next second, the two burst out laughing together, the light, uncomplicated sound filling the penthouse.

Chapter 6: Fever

Chapter Notes

I hope you guys like, and on saturday and sunday, I'll be off, so no chapters, because it's my birthday hehe

but I'll be nice and feed you guys some healings before traveling

Ilya tapped his cigarette ash into the glass ashtray on the nightstand, his face twisting into a grimace upon seeing the Metros' disastrous play against Detroit on TV. Beside him, Sasha let out a raspy laugh. The two were lying down, with only the crumpled sheets covering them from the hips down. Sweat was still drying on their bare skin, and the dense smell of nicotine slowly filled the room.

"Didn't you say you took care of this captain's son?" Sasha asked, bringing his own cigarette to his lips.

"Da," Ilya agreed, his voice deep. "Shane is a good player."

"Doesn't look like it," the model mocked, a wheezy laugh escaping along with the smoke.

Ilya rolled his eyes and took a deep drag, watching the Metros fight for their lives on the ice in an almost pathetic way.

"And to think Detroit is having a pretty mediocre season. Weird," Ilya noted.

"The Metros' offense is too open, and the defense isn't managing to cover the holes. Detroit is organized, centralized. Your captain clearly has his head somewhere else," Sasha analyzed, gesturing with his cigarette toward the screen, the red ember glowing in the dimness of the room. "Wife problems?"

"He's not married. Far from it."

"Uhm... is he gay, then?" Sasha teased. The brunette turned his face to catch the blond's eye, breaking into a wicked smile. "*Chto?* (What?)"

"He's seeing a girl now, but he hadn't dated anyone since his son's mother. And, from the little I hear of the woman's shadow, it makes perfect sense that he locked the door to romance for so long."

"Uhm... the classic crazy ex."

"She swore in court that Shane committed parental alienation to push the boy away, when, in reality, she was the one doing it," Ilya dropped the information with disdain.

The model raised his eyebrows, half surprised, half pitying.

"And here I was thinking my mother was crazy..." He took a slow drag, blowing the smoke toward the ceiling. "Speaking of mothers..."

"No." Ilya tried to nip the subject in the bud, but he knew from personal experience that this never worked with Sasha.

"Are you going to Russia for the winter break?" The brunette turned his face to him, his large greenish eyes blinking with calculated care.

Ilya took a deep breath. He tapped his finger against the cigarette, pondering with a tense pout on his lips.

"I don't want to see Alexei... but I want to see Nika," he grumbled. The image of his eight-year-old niece immediately invaded his mind. She was the same age as Liam, had a very similar curious personality, and the same fascination with Uncle Ilya. "And I definitely don't want to see my father."

"What about visiting your mother's grave?" Sasha softened his voice, his usual "arrogant bitch" pose melting away little by little. "We can do what we did every year. I'll go with you. I visit my brother, you visit your mother, we come back home and everything is fine."

"Except that, this year, everything is not going to be fine."

Ilya remembered with painful clarity the call he had received from Alexei months ago, minutes before going up to Shane's penthouse for the first time. His older brother had sounded scared on the phone—and a scared Alexei was enough to make Ilya's blood run cold. His brother told him that, that morning, Grigori hadn't recognized him. The old man looked at his own son and asked who he was.

His father was losing himself inside his own mind. And Ilya refused to look at him. He refused to see the man he so feared and despised now reduced to a helpless, scared, and confused old man. Grigori had caused him irreparable damage, and now dementia seemed to be granting him the ultimate absolution, guaranteeing him the right to forget what he had done. All the cruel words, the screaming, the beatings, the... accidents. Everything wiped from the abuser's mind, while the victim still carried all the memories.

"My dad told me he still remembers you," Sasha commented, in the same cautious tone.

"Because he likes to torture me to the very end." Ilya snorted, dragging hard on his cigarette, his jaw tight. "Of course he was going to remember me. Why wouldn't he?"

"We can go, and you can stay straight at my apartment. You won't even have to step foot in your old house."

"And Nika?"

"Sveta can talk to your sister-in-law, make up an excuse... I don't know. We always manage to figure something out, Ilya."

Ilya let out a heavy sigh through his nose and focused his eyes back on the TV, in an attempt to quiet his own head. Finally, the red light went on behind the net: the Metros had scored their first goal in the second period, although they were still trailing by two.

"Finally," Sasha grumbled.

Without saying a word, Ilya put out his own stub in the ashtray and pulled the cigarette that was still burning between the model's fingers, crushing it into the glass as well.

"Hey!" Sasha complained.

"Shut up," the blond murmured, his voice husky. He threw the heavy covers aside and straddled Sasha's hips, digging his knees into the mattress. He needed a distraction, and he needed it now.

"Uhm, for this, fine. I'll shut up." Sasha flashed a lethal smile, willingly spreading his legs so Ilya could fit perfectly there. The model stretched his arm to the drawer, fishing out a second square condom wrapper in the dark and handing it to the blond.

[...]

Back in the hotel room in Michigan, Shane had no headspace to look at anyone's messages. There were two notifications from Rose glowing on the screen, but he had zero energy to reply; he just opened his contacts, searched for his mom's name, and hit the call button. Yuna picked up on the second ring.

"How is he?" Shane asked directly, his voice tired.

"Still feverish, but his temperature went down a bit," Yuna answered in a cautious tone, probably so as not to scare her grandson.

Shane's nightmare had begun in the morning. The instant he said he was going to the airport for a four-day trip, and Liam saw his grandparents walk into the penthouse with their suitcases, the boy burst into copious tears. Shane had to walk out the door with tears in his own eyes, his heart heavy as an anvil in his chest. He didn't understand what he had done wrong, nor what had changed so suddenly. His son had been behaving so well on away game days up until then, staying home calmly with Ilya.

The crying was so intense and exhausting that David and Yuna thought it best not to even send him to school that Thursday. During the afternoon, the fever hit. As a result, Shane's performance on the ice was disastrous. His mind wasn't in the arena in Detroit; it was miles away, stuck on his sick, incessantly sobbing son.

"I don't know what's wrong, Mom," Shane murmured, sitting on the edge of the hotel bed and burying his face in his free hand. In the bathroom, the sound of water indicated that Hayden was in the shower—or maybe he was just pretending not to hear the conversation to give his friend some privacy. "He was so fine every other day I traveled. I don't know what happened."

"Staying with us was never a problem before..." Yuna sighed, sounding just as confused as her son. "Liam was always wonderfully fine with us when you went to play far away. Even back when that bitc—"

"Mom!"

"Yuna!" David's voice echoed in the background of the call, perfectly synchronized with Shane's reprimand.

"Even when his *biological mother* was still in the picture," Yuna corrected herself grudgingly, the venom still dripping from every syllable.

"Is he nearby?" Shane closed his eyes, letting out a shaky breath.

"He's lying on the couch, hugging his stuffed shark and a coloring book," the older woman replied, and Shane could hear the sound of her footsteps walking to the living room.

"Sweetie? It's Daddy on the phone. He wants to talk to you."

Shane held his breath, bracing his heart.

"D-Daddy?" Liam's little voice sounded weak, raspy, and thick from constant crying.

Shane's eyes welled up instantly. A knot tightened in his throat.

"Hi, my love." He swallowed hard, fighting to hide over the line that he was crying too.

"Daddy's game was kind of bad today, wasn't it?"

"U-Huh," Liam agreed, and a deep sob escaped. Every little hitch in the boy's breath was a cruel stab to Shane's core.

"I'm sorry, Li. I really, really wanted to be there with you, okay? To take care of you through this fever... You were doing so well yesterday. What happened, my love? Why did you get so sad?"

There was only the sound of soft sniffing for a few long seconds. A lone tear slid down Shane's face.

"Y-You... you didn't tell me Ilya wasn't coming," the boy finally confessed, in a hurt whisper.

Shane covered his eyes, rubbing his face hard.

"H-He's supposed to t-take care of me w-when you t-travel, Daddy."

"I know he is, baby. But on long trips like this, we agreed you were going to stay with Grandpa and Grandma, remember? Ilya has his own life too, his own house, and he needs a few days off to rest," Shane tried to explain with the gentlest, most comforting voice he could manage.

Despite the rational words, his mind was already working a mile a minute, mentally drafting the desperate text he would send the Russian as soon as he hung up. He needed to beg Ilya to spend at least one little hour at the penthouse to calm the boy down.

"B-But I want I-Ilya..." Liam whined, his little voice breaking as the crying started up again.

[...]

Ilya was taking his morning shower. Or, at least, trying to. In truth, he had given up on any hygiene at least five minutes ago; he was much more interested in fucking Sasha's mouth. The pleasure radiated through every muscle in his body as the hot water beat hard against his back, washing away the trails of saliva running down the model's chin. Kneeling on the shower floor, Sasha's eyes were rolled back just as far as the Russian's own.

The rhythm became erratic, urgent, until Ilya finally came with a hoarse, prolonged groan that echoed off the tiles. Sasha also came seconds later, into his own hand, and the two finally called the shower done.

Ilya walked to the closet with a towel wrapped around his waist, while the model went straight to the sink to brush his teeth and gargle vigorously. While the blond picked out his clothes for his morning run in the park with Anya, he heard the muffled voice coming from the bathroom.

"Il'ya, your phone is ringing!"

"Who is it?"

"It has a school name!"

Ilya bolted from the closet, grabbing the device off the nightstand and answering at the last second.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Rozanov? You are listed as a contact for student Liam Hollander. My name is Olivia, I'm calling from the school office. Liam was absent yesterday and today, so we're calling to check if everything is alright. We know Mr. Hollander is traveling with the team, but it's very rare for Liam to miss classes because of that."

Ilya blinked slowly, the water from his hair dripping onto his bare shoulder, and let out a sigh.

"I am Liam's caregiver, indeed, but I am off duty during Mr. Hollander's trip with the Metros. Liam is under the care of his paternal grandparents, Yuna and David," he informed her. His voice sounded strictly professional, although an undeniable pang of worry was already squeezing his chest.

"Ah, yes, I understand perfectly. We will call his grandparents, then. I apologize for bothering you on your day off. Have a good weekend."

"You too."

Ilya hung up and immediately opened his contacts list, scrolling until he found Yuna's number. He had saved it since his first day on the job, but had never needed to use it.

[Direct Message]

Ilya Rozanov: Mrs. Hollander, good morning. This is Ilya Rozanov, Liam's caregiver. The school just called me letting me know he didn't go to class yesterday or today. Is everything alright over there? Did he get sick?

He kept staring at the screen, biting his thumbnail anxiously. Sasha came out of the bathroom and found the Russian planted in the middle of the bedroom, static and tense. The model decided not to interrupt, walking to his own suitcase to pick out the outfit he would wear for his photoshoot today.

Yuna Hollander: Good morning, Ilya. David is on the phone with the school right now. Since Shane left the house yesterday morning, Liam has been very sulky and, in the afternoon, ran a fever. We thought it best not to send him to school. I'm so sorry they called you on your day off.

Ilya Rozanov: It's no problem at all. Did he catch a bad cold? We went to the park on Wednesday, but it wasn't that cold, and he wore a hoodie the whole time.

Yuna Hollander: It's not a cold. Liam is deeply upset because Shane didn't give him advance notice that we would be the ones taking care of him on this team trip. Last night he had a crying fit on the phone with his dad, saying he wished you had stayed with him.

Ilya Rozanov: I can stop by the apartment after my run, if that will help calm him down.

Yuna Hollander: There's no need, it's your day off, Ilya. Rest.

Ilya Rozanov: Which means I don't have much to do with my day anyway, right?

Ilya Rozanov: I usually run in the park right next to his school. Today I'm going to bring my dog. Maybe if he sees Anya again, he'll cheer up and forget about the fever a bit.

Yuna Hollander: I still think you shouldn't work on your day off.

Ilya Rozanov: I insist. It's the least I can do.

After managing to convince Yuna to bring Liam to the park, he tossed his phone on the bed. Passing by the full-length mirror, he noticed an obvious purplish mark at the base of his collarbone—a hell of a hickey left by Sasha. Which meant he would absolutely be wearing a high-necked sports shirt today.

Already changed and with Sasha scrolling on his phone waiting for the Uber that would take him to the studio, Ilya clipped the leash onto Anya and grabbed his backpack with the dog's essentials.

"Everything alright with one of your royal brats?" Sasha asked, without taking his eyes off the screen. The "arrogant bitch" posture was already operating at full steam after breakfast.

"Liam spent the night with a fever and crying because Shane messed up and didn't give him proper notice that he'd be staying with his grandparents and not me," Ilya explained, adjusting Anya's harness.

"How dramatic. And if I cry from missing you, do you run to save me too?" Sasha looked up with his green eyes, shooting him a provocative look and a wicked smile.

Ilya's jaw locked, his expression darkening.

"Don't joke about my kid, Sasha."

The model sensed the territorial and dangerous tone of the Russian and quickly raised both hands in a gesture of surrender. Instantly, a ride notification lit up on his phone.

"My cue," the brunette announced. He walked up to the blond, looped his arms around his neck, and joined their lips in a lingering, hot, and possessive kiss. "See you later."

"See ya." Ilya gave a slight nod, watching him walk out the front door. When he looked down, he was met with Anya staring at him in a fixed, judgmental way. "*Chto?*"

Anya let out a long, drawn-out whine of pure disapproval.

"I know you don't like Sasha, Anya. You don't have to rub it in my face," Ilya grumbled. She whined again, turning her face to the door. "Come on, let's go for a walk."

Putting Anya in the backseat of the Jeep and meticulously clipping her harness to the seatbelt, Ilya drove to the park that was right next to Liam's school. The high-pitched, chaotic sound of children at recess echoed through the cold air. The school building was already boasting themed decorations in the windows, which reminded the blond of an important detail: Liam hadn't stopped talking about how he wanted to dress up as Aquaman for his class's Halloween party.

Since there was a huge specialty costume shop on the main avenue right across from the park, it wouldn't hurt to take a look. Ilya got out of the car, tied Anya's leash securely to the bike rack on the sidewalk, asked her to wait, and pushed the glass door of the store open.

The bell rang, announcing his entrance. He went straight to the superhero section. The racks were packed with Marvel costumes and dozens of annoying cartoon characters—shows that

Ilya hated having to watch, but of which, over his years of childcare, he had memorized every line, song, and plot.

"Can I help you?" a female voice, soft and with a thick Quebecois accent, sounded behind him.

Turning around, he came face to face with a girl who couldn't have been older than twenty. When she laid eyes on the six-foot-three of muscle and Ilya's calm expression, she swallowed hard almost audibly. Her cheeks gained a rosy tint instantly.

"Do you guys have anything for Aquaman?" he asked, in his usual deep tone.

The girl blinked several times in a row, seeming to need to reboot her brain for a second, before shaking her head and letting out an awkward laugh.

"W-We do, it's right this way." She pointed the way to the back of the aisle. "What size would it be?"

"For an eight-year-old boy. He's kind of short for his age," he replied, walking relaxed behind her, his hands shoved into his pants pockets.

"Classic comic book version or the movie version?" She pushed some hangers aside, showing the pieces hanging up. They were impressively well-made, with padded muscles and golden tridents included in the sealed package.

"I highly doubt he's ever touched a comic book in his life," Ilya commented, grabbing the hanger with the movie version, which drew a much looser giggle from the clerk. "How much is it?"

"Since the holiday is right around the corner, prices have gone up a bit. This one is going for one ninety. But..." She bit her lower lip, shooting him a look from bottom to top. "Since my boss isn't in the store today, I can do one fifty for you."

"Deal. I'll take it," Ilya nodded, instantly getting the dynamic.

The girl gave a proud little smile and pointed to the register at the front. Ilya followed closely behind her and, purely on instinct, let his eyes drop to the sway of her hips as she walked. He wasn't technically working, after all.

"Would you like it gift-wrapped?" she asked, taking the hanger from his hands when they reached the counter.

"Please," he replied, pulling his wallet out of his pocket to take out his card.

Ilya noticed, with mild, contained amusement, that the clerk puffed out her chest subtly before stepping out from behind the counter to fetch the wrapping paper from the bottom shelf. She squatted down with calculated slowness, knowing perfectly well that the Russian's gaze would follow the movement—which he did, without any Christian guilt.

She did a great job on the package, using a vibrant blue paper patterned with bubbles and little fish. Handing over the bulky bag along with the receipt, Ilya noticed there was a small piece of paper slipped strategically inside.

"Have a good day," she wished him, her mischievous smile overflowing with hope.

Ilya gave a slow, charming wink as he took the bags, turning his back to leave. Out of the corner of his eye, he could almost see her hold her breath, excited to have her flirting reciprocated so successfully.

Once on the sidewalk, he unfolded the small note. It was her Instagram: *@Sophi_Lacroix*. Ilya smiled through his nose and shoved the paper into his pocket. Checking out the profile later definitely wouldn't kill anyone.

He unlocked the Jeep, settled the present in the trunk, and finally unclipped Anya's leash. With the dog wagging her tail frantically beside him, Ilya adjusted his pace and set off for his run on the park trail.

[...]

In the boarding line for Chicago, Shane blinked in disbelief at his phone screen. He had been exchanging tense messages with his mother about Liam's health, until Yuna simply sent a photo as a reply. The image showed the boy in the park, clinging to Anya's neck, with Ilya sitting on the grass right beside them.

[Direct Message]

Shane: What is Ilya doing there?!

Mom ❤️: The school called him before they called us. I let him know Liam was unwell, and he offered to spend a little time with the boy after his workout. So, we came to the park to meet him.

Mom ❤️: He is a truly very polite young man, Shane. And Liam got better the exact second he saw him arriving with the dog.

Shane: My God, Mom, but today is his day off. He wasn't supposed to be there; it's not his obligation to take care of Liam right now.

Mom ❤️: Believe me, I told him exactly that. But, besides being polite, he is a ridiculously smooth talker.

Shane: Did Liam really get better?

Mom ❤️: The fever is gone and he finally stopped crying.

Mom ❤️: Look, honey... we never needed to use nannies with you, but the big difference is that you had both of us, me and your dad, in your life the whole time. Liam didn't have that. He had two parents fighting in court. Now, he's finally with the side of the family that truly loves him, and he got attached to having Ilya around. He is his safe haven when you're not there.

Mom ❤️: Maybe Ilya should stay with Liam every day. Not a full shift on these trips, maybe just part-time or a few hours. Because I am absolutely sure that, the next time you travel, this is going to happen again.

Shane: I can't make Ilya's life revolve around my son, Mom. He needs to live his own life too.

Mom ❤️: It's just a suggestion. He really likes Liam. And he speaks his language.

Shane: I know he does. And, to be honest, I envy him for it. I wish I understood my own son the way he does.

Shane: Tell Liam I love him very much. The line is moving, I need to board the plane.

Mom ❤️: Have a good flight. Your dad and I love you.

Shane: I love you guys too.

With a heavy sigh, Shane put his phone in his pants pocket and took a step forward, following the flow of his teammates at the boarding gate. Hayden was right behind him, dragging his carry-on luggage—a black designer suitcase entirely covered in shiny children's stickers stuck on by the twins.

"So? Is Liam feeling better?" the blond asked, noticing the change in his friend's posture.

"Yeah," Shane nodded, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Thank God, man," Hayden thanked the heavens, relieved. "What did your parents do with him?"

"They gave him the only medicine that was going to work: Ilya." Shane shrugged, letting out a tired little laugh, still in disbelief at the Russian's attitude.

"That guy is some kind of wizard, seriously. I might even hire him to help out at home when Amber is born," Hayden pointed out with a nod.

It was then that Theriault, the head coach who was a few steps ahead finishing a call, widened his eyes, turned sharply, and let out a piercing whistle in Hayden's direction.

"Me?!" Hayden pointed to his own chest.

"Pike, you're staying! Step out of line!"

"What?!" Hayden, Shane, and J.J., who was two steps behind, frowned in unison.

"Your mother-in-law just called the team manager! Your wife went into labor! We're putting you on the next flight back to Montreal!" Theriault spoke hurriedly, already gesturing for one of the assistants to rush with the tickets.

Hayden instantly grew paler than he naturally already was. The color simply drained from his face.

"Oh, my God." Immediately, he broke into a cold sweat. He dropped the handle of his suitcase, spinning on his heels, completely lost for a second.

The guys on the team nearby realized what was happening and started clapping and cheering. Hayden finally laughed, his eyes shining with adrenaline, and pulled his sticker-covered suitcase out of the boarding line.

"You guys better win this fucking game tomorrow without me, you hear?! Win it for Amber!" he yelled, already running through the concourse toward the airline counter.

"Pikey, Pikey, Pikey!" the team started chanting in a deafening, unison chorus in the middle of the airport, clapping each other on the back as they watched their teammate run off to meet his new daughter. Shane broke into a wide smile, the worry finally making room for joy for his best friend.

Once settled into first class on the plane—and now enjoying the extra room, since his usual seatmate was on a desperate flight back to Canada—Shane pulled his iPad out of his backpack. To kill time, he decided to watch a few episodes of a show that, in a casual kitchen conversation or two, Ilya had recommended with some insistence.

The choice of the day was a frantic drama about first responders and firefighters in Los Angeles.

The opening scene was narrated by one of the characters, telling a bit of her own story. A significant part of her plot involved being the sole caregiver for her mother, who suffered from advanced-stage Alzheimer's. That dramatic detail caught Shane totally off guard right in the first few minutes. Dementia was a cruel, terrible monster, and the exhaustion in the character's eyes poured through the screen, feeling all too real.

Next, the episode cut to the woman's tense routine as a 911 dispatcher. The first emergency call was distressing enough to immediately trigger Shane's paternal instinct: a boy who had hit his head on the edge of a pool and lost consciousness underwater.

But it was during the frantic rescue scene that one firefighter, in particular, caught the Canadian's attention.

The main character who took over CPR to save the kid was tall, broad-shouldered, blond, and had very piercing light eyes. He also had a posture of unshakable confidence that bordered on arrogance. The profile and aesthetic resemblance was very hard to ignore.

Shane raised an eyebrow slightly, a subtle, almost unconscious smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He adjusted his wireless earbuds, leaned back comfortably in the leather seat, and

continued watching the episode with suddenly renewed interest as the aircraft gained speed on the runway and took off toward Chicago.

[...]

Shane arrived at the penthouse in the early hours of Sunday, desperate to collapse in his own bed, since he had a home game against the New York Admirals at one in the afternoon. While riding the elevator up, he scrolled through his phone screen, looking at the dozens of photos Hayden was endlessly sending to the team group chat. Amber had finally gotten out of the NICU and was already in the room with her parents, wearing a little Metros wool beanie that was clearly massive on her tiny head.

The team had won Saturday's game against Chicago three to one, fueled by a hat trick from Shane. In the heat of the victory and the birth, some of the guys on the team started pestering Hayden in the group chat to make the baby's middle name "Shay," in honor of the captain. Shane shot the idea down immediately, because he knew his friend's impulsivity and knew that, with the right amount of pressure, Hayden would be crazy enough to actually register the child like that.

Upon opening the apartment door in the dark and taking two steps inside, Shane jumped in a way worthy of a heart attack.

As if he had suddenly gone back to being seventeen years old, the click of a switch broke the silence and the light of a lamp turned on in the corner of the living room, illuminating his mother sitting in the armchair. It was the exact same scene from when she used to catch him sneaking back from Jessica's house in the middle of the night.

"Fuck, Mom!" He placed his flat hand over his chest, feeling his heart beating in his throat.

"I was waiting for you to get home." Yuna stood up from the armchair, wearing a fluffy winter robe and with her dark hair tied up in a loose bun. "Don't get mad at your parents, but... Ilya came by earlier to put Liam to bed."

Shane huffed, throwing his head back and closing his eyes.

"I know, I know. I told him not to come, but he insisted a lot on doing it," Yuna explained, walking over to him and holding her son's broad shoulders. "And nice win today! I mean, yesterday... or today? I don't know, it's past midnight and I haven't slept yet, so technically it's still Saturday in my biological clock."

Shane laughed, the sound coming out raspy and exhausted, and accepted his mother's touch. He let his head fall forward, resting his forehead on her shoulder. Yuna hugged him back firmly, comforting him.

"And Hayden? I noticed he didn't play."

"Amber was born," Shane mumbled, his voice muffled by the fabric of the robe.

"Seriously?! And are she and Jackie doing okay?"

"Yeah, he's already flooded the group chat with pictures." Shane pulled back a little, unlocked his phone, and handed it to his mother.

Yuna took the device and immediately placed her hand over her heart, melting.

"I miss you being this size so much... but then I remember how much of a crybaby and how dramatic you were as a newborn, and the urge to have another one goes away instantly."

"Is that why I'm an only child?"

"Basically." Yuna handed the phone back and adjusted the collar of her son's jacket. "Go take a hot shower to wash that heavy airport energy off your body. Are you hungry?"

"I'm exhausted, I'm starving, I feel dirty... and, above all, I just want to stand still staring at nothing and just exist," he complained, his shoulders slumping.

Yuna laughed softly.

"Go wash up. I'll make a real sandwich for you."

"Where's Dad?"

"Dead to the world. Passed out at ten." Yuna rolled her eyes.

Shane laughed and started heading up the stairs, skipping steps two by two, while the older woman headed to the kitchen.

Before going to his own bedroom, the first thing Shane did was carefully open Liam's door. The boy was sleeping soundly, hugging Mr. Bubbles. However, a torn blue wrapping paper with little fish on the desk caught the captain's attention.

Walking in his socks to avoid making noise, he went in and got closer. It was a brand-new, detailed Aquaman costume. Next to the plastic trident, there was a small card. Shane squinted in the dimness of the room, lit only by the decorative fairy lights strung on the headboard.

"I have found a home in a few hearts that I have had the privilege to call friends. You are already one of them, Aquaman. – Ilya."

Shane blinked, surprised, and felt a warm, absolutely genuine squeeze in his chest. He slowly returned the note to the desk and looked at Liam. The Canadian slowly approached the pillow, gently ran a hand through the boy's fine hair, and left a lingering kiss on his temple, before finally leaving the room in silence and heading to his own bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, with wet hair and wearing gray sweatpants and an old t-shirt, he came back down. There was a generous sandwich cut diagonally on the kitchen island, next to a

glass of cold ginger ale. Yuna was sitting on one of the stools, with her reading glasses on the tip of her nose, frantically scrolling on her phone screen.

"Did Ilya give Liam a costume?" Shane asked before he even sat down.

"He did. Liam mentioned he wanted to go as Aquaman to the school's Halloween party, and Ilya showed up with the present earlier today. Did you see the little note he wrote? Liam was so happy when he read it, he almost jumped on his neck."

"I saw." Shane sat down, a goofy, grateful smile slipping out without him being able to stop it, and picked up the first half of the sandwich. "And I will never, in my entire life, admit to J.J. that he was right about the recommendation."

Yuna laughed, shooting a sideways glance at her son.

"Oh, don't worry. Knowing Dagenais, he'll never let you forget it anyway." The two laughed. His mother turned her eyes back to the phone. "By the way, I'm taking a look at his Instagram profile. Ilya knows some pretty famous people, he's very well-connected."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at this. There's Svetlana Vetrova, the daughter of that retired Russian goalie, Sergei Vetrov. She's a fitness influencer and model. He also has several photos with this guy Sasha Ivanov, who is a runway model in Paris. And Cliff Marleau, the captain of the Raiders himself, likes all of his photos."

"Yeah, Mom. I checked Ilya's social media and background before I put him in charge of taking care of my son," Shane replied, trying to sound obvious while chewing.

"Do you think this Svetlana is his girlfriend?" Yuna ignored her son, completely immersed in the investigation. "She's always commenting on his profile, and he on hers... there are several photos of them running together."

"Mom, for the love of God, stop stalking my employee's personal life." Shane narrowed his eyes.

Yuna sighed, turned off her phone screen, and left it on the marble counter, pushing her glasses to the top of her head. She folded her hands on the table and broke into a questioning smile.

"Alright. Speaking of girlfriends..."

"Go back to stalking my employee, please. His Instagram is fascinating." Shane shrank immediately, hiding his face behind his glass of soda and pretending he wasn't the subject.

"I'm not saying you have to do it tomorrow morning, but... you could start seeing someone, I don't know," Yuna started again, summarily ignoring her son's plea to change the subject.

"Mom..." Shane groaned, dragging both hands down his face. He didn't want to enter that territory. Not at one-something in the morning, and definitely not as exhausted as he was.

"What?! Are you going to blame me for being a mother who wants to see her son happy, sharing his life with someone?"

"The last person I tried to share my life with turned out to be completely unhinged, hiding diagnoses, refusing treatment, and orchestrating a methodical plan to try and trap me with a pregnancy," Shane fired back. The bitter memory cut through the light mood. "I think that justifies my total lack of rush to find a girlfriend."

Yuna pondered the undeniable argument for two seconds, but just shook her head.

"But not every woman in the world is like that, Shane," she argued, adjusting her posture on the stool. "You are a very handsome man. And I don't just say that because I'm your mother and I birthed you! *Time* and *People* put you at the top of the list of the most handsome players in the league this year. In *Vogue*, you tied with Scott Hunter... Which I actually think is fair, considering that boy's jawline, but at the same time absurd, because you have way more charisma. Anyway! My point is: you're handsome, smart, rich... you're a catch."

Shane started to dissociate completely in the middle of the conversation.

While mechanically chewing his sandwich, he began to focus his attention on the fascinating and abstract complexity of the dark veins in the noble wood of his kitchen island. Yuna kept listing, like a machine gun of arguments, the reasons why the women of Montreal should be falling at his feet.

And the worst part is that they actually were. But they were falling at the feet of Shane Hollander, the untouchable captain of the Metros, the NHL star with a model's face. None of those women were interested in Shane, the exhausted single father of an eight-year-old boy who needed routine, care, and constant attention.

"I went on a date on Wednesday, Mom," Shane blurted out suddenly, his eyes still fixed on the wood.

Yuna froze. She shut up instantly, cutting off mid-sentence a detailed thought about a single Swedish princess who was supposedly going to be at a Rolex event next month in London.

"Oh..." She blinked, caught off guard. Her eyes quickly shone with intrigue and undisguised maternal pride. "With who?!"

Shane looked up at her, sighing.

"Do you promise not to tell absolutely anyone?"

The older woman raised an eyebrow, assuming an almost offended pose.

"I'm your mother, Shane. It's clear and obvious that I'm not going to tell anyone. Spill it."

Shane swallowed the piece of his sandwich and cleared his throat.

"I went out with Rose Landry."

"Oh..." Yuna said, surprised, blinking a few times. "And how was it?"

"It was nice, she's nice. And we set up a dinner date again, for the first."

"Oh..."

"Can you say anything other than 'oh'?"

"Sorry, I'm digesting the fact that a Hollywood actress went out with you." Yuna leaned back in her chair, letting the information settle.

"Weren't you, two seconds ago, trying to set me up with a princess?!"

"Yeah, okay, good point." Yuna shook her head. "Do you want us to stay with Liam or..."

"No, I already asked Ilya to stay with him. They're going to watch the game and Ilya is going to put Liam to sleep before I get there. It's all set. Now can I finish eating and go to sleep?"

"Okay, I'll stop talking." Yuna laughed lightly, fixing Shane's hair, while her son continued to eat his sandwich.

Chapter 7: (Un)happy Halloween

Chapter Notes

I tried my best to depicture what I had in my head for this chapter, so be nice because is frustrating not being able to just open your brain and dump your ideas on the keyboard

By the time Shane finally crossed the threshold of the penthouse, exhausted after the flight back from Calgary, Liam was already fully dressed as Aquaman in the middle of the living room. The boy proudly held a tote bag patterned with sharks, ready for the candy haul. However, what caught the captain's attention was Ilya's absence from the room.

"Daddy, look at the bag Ilya brought!" Liam ran toward Shane, who dropped his suitcase in the hall while untying his shoes.

"It's awesome, buddy. Goes perfectly with your costume." Shane smiled, receiving his son's tight hug around his waist. "Where's Ilya, Li?"

"On the balcony, talking on the phone with someone. In Russian." Liam answered, the last part in a dramatic whisper.

"Ah, okay. Must be something important then, he never uses his phone when he's working." Shane ruffled his son's hair. "Just give me half an hour to take a quick shower and change clothes, and then we'll go to the party, deal?"

Liam nodded excitedly and ran back to the couch, where *Hocus Pocus* was playing on the TV.

It was then that Shane looked through the glass doors of the balcony. He blinked, caught off guard. Ilya was in costume. Or rather, "in costume" was a relative term, since the only actual Halloween prop was a Ghostface mask pushed up to the top of his blond head. The rest was pure visual appeal: black cargo pants, an incredibly tight black t-shirt that accentuated every muscle in his arms, fingerless leather gloves, and a fake knife, smeared with stage blood, strapped to his belt.

Shane swallowed hard. Seeing the Russian's arms so defined by the t-shirt, he felt a sudden pang in his chest—maybe it was envy of that absurd physique. It had to be envy. He blinked hard to shake the trance and went up the stairs to the shower.

He didn't plan on dressing up. Most parents didn't do it, and the school didn't require it. The party basically consisted of a walk through the school's neighborhood, trick-or-treating or collecting donations for orphanages. Shane had already instructed his accountant to buy a

massive amount of useful supplies and have them delivered directly to the school. Hayden had done the same and would also be there with his twin daughters.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Shane pulled out his phone.

[Group: Front Line]

Shane: Do you guys have any extra masks I could borrow today?

J.J.: I thought you weren't going to dress up 🤪

Hayden: I think, emphasis on *think*, there's a Ghostface one lying around in the garage. I'll take a look, but what made you change your mind? Did Liam beg you not to be a stick in the mud?

Shane: Ilya is in costume.

J.J.: As what?

Shane: Okay. "In costume" is a strong word. He's wearing a Ghostface mask and an all-black outfit.

J.J.: Oh, shit. And here we go, my ex-wife is going to be in my ear all night talking about how hot this Russian is, and that if he wasn't our nanny, she would definitely jump him.

Shane: WTF????

J.J.: Yeah, man. I hear that every time Ilya posts a picture at the gym or showing even the slightest bit of muscle. If I were a little more insecure and Simone was still my wife, I'd throw myself into a lake.

Hayden: We're in Canada, there's no shortage of lake options.

Shane: Seriously. And if your mask is a Ghostface one too, Hayd, never mind, I'll just go without it. It's silly.

J.J.: And what's the problem with you going as Ghostface too? Put on an all-black outfit and go like half the world that celebrates Halloween. And take the opportunity to wear a tighter shirt to show off those muscles, Cap.

Hayden: True, you don't need much to seduce the little old ladies living near the school. 😏

Shane: I hate you guys.

Shane dropped his phone on the bed, rolling his eyes, and walked into his closet. He put on black jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt, also fitted to his body. It was nothing special. With a mask, he'd be a lazy Ghostface; without it, he'd just be a dad wearing black.

Upon going down to the first floor, he saw that Ilya was already back in the living room. The Russian swept his eyes up and down Shane and blinked, slightly surprised by the outfit—perhaps he hadn't noticed when his boss arrived.

"I got here while you were on the phone," Shane explained, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, my bad. I had to take it." Ilya seemed a little tense, checking his wristwatch. The mask on top of his head bobbed slightly. "And what are you going as? A black cat?"

Shane let out a nasal laugh and shook his head.

"I wasn't going to dress up as anything, but then you decided to go all out on the production, so..." Shane gestured to the Russian, who gave a restrained smile. "Hayden is bringing a mask he has over there, it might be a Ghostface one too."

"Half the people dress up as that. I didn't want originality, I wanted an easy and practical outfit so I could move around and watch kids." Ilya spread his arms, moving his waist. The fake knife swung, and Shane's gaze dropped involuntarily to the Russian's hips before he swallowed hard again. "Even though I'm not taking care of Elise tonight, instinct speaks louder."

"Yeah... I get it." Shane looked away quickly, focusing on his son. But he could still feel Ilya's blue eyes fixed on him. "Li, ready to go? If we get there earlier, we get the better candy."

"Okay!" Liam jumped off the couch and turned off the TV, but before running to the door, he picked up a sheet of paper from the coffee table. "Look, Daddy! The teacher asked us today to draw what our Halloween was going to be like."

Shane took the drawing and felt a deep, sudden twinge in the middle of his chest. It was a stick-figure boy holding a trident. He was holding hands with a tall man wearing a blue and white shirt with the number 24, and, on the other side, holding the hand of another big man in black clothes, blond hair, and blue eyes. In the corner of the paper, there was a caramel-colored dog.

"I didn't want to leave Anya out, even though she isn't going to get candy with us today," Liam explained his artwork with the greatest innocence in the world.

Shane stared at the paper for a few more seconds, feeling his throat tighten, before blinking and snapping out of his trance.

"It looks very beautiful, champ." He broke into a tender smile, fixing the collar of his son's costume. "Go get your trident and your bag."

While Liam ran to the kitchen island, Shane looked up at Ilya. The Russian just shrugged, with a soft expression. To him, it didn't seem unusual at all. Liam adored him, and Shane had already made it clear they would be getting candy together. That certainly wasn't the first time the nanny was included in the "family" drawings.

"Let's go, let's go, let's go!" Liam rushed them, bouncing on his feet.

Shane left the drawing carefully on the table and patted his pockets to check for his wallet and phone. In the entrance hall, he reached out to grab his car keys from the ceramic jar, but Ilya's fingers were faster and snatched the key ring first.

"Let me drive."

"No, I'll drive. I don't know, it's weird letting you drive when I'm going to the places too. You're Liam's nanny, not our private driver," Shane countered firmly, pulling his own coat off the rack. But when he went to reach for Liam's coat, Ilya's hand bumped into his again.

"Then let me do my job of taking care of Liam," Ilya retorted with the same firmness, pulling the small children's coat.

Shane sighed, defeated by the blond's stubbornness, and gave in.

"And you're not going to grab a coat? It's getting cold outside."

Ilya adjusted the mask on top of his head, opening the front door.

"I'm Russian." He shook his head, as if that were the only necessary answer in the world to justify his immunity to the cold, and walked out into the hallway.

[...]

"ILYAAAA!" Elise came running at full speed, dropping her parents' hands to throw herself against the giant Russian's legs.

Ilya let out a deep laugh and hoisted her into the air with absurd ease, settling her in his arms. The little girl was dressed as Princess Tiana, sporting a voluminous green dress and a shimmering crown that almost fell off with the jolt.

"Hello, Princess Elise." Ilya returned the tight hug, holding her carefully.

Meanwhile, Shane fist-bumped J.J.—as if they hadn't just seen each other less than two hours ago at the airport arrivals—and gave Simone a friendly hug.

"*Pourquoi une telle tentation?* (Why such a temptation?)" Simone murmured in French, low enough for only the two players to hear. Her eyes were fixed on Ilya's figure all in black, his muscular arms outlined under the tight shirt as he held their daughter. Immediately after, she blinked, cleared her throat, and returned to her usual elegant posture, playing dumb.

Shane's eyes widened in shock, and he turned his face to J.J. His teammate just returned an exhausted look that screamed, "I warned you how it was going to be."

Ilya set Elise back on the ground gently and adjusted his Ghostface mask, which remained strategically pushed to the top of his head so as not to scare the smaller children all the time.

"Ilya, have you seen Bash yet? He said he was going to come as Black Panther today," Liam called for attention, intertwining his little fingers with the Russian's hand almost possessively. The boy subtly pulled Ilya a step back, distancing him from Elise, who had already returned to J.J.'s legs. The territorial jealousy over his caregiver was clear.

"Haven't seen him yet, *Akula*," Ilya replied, sweeping the crowd of parents and children with a watchful eye, looking for Nora. The affectionate nickname in Russian—which meant "shark"—slipped out so naturally that Liam didn't even blink, perfectly accustomed to answering to it.

"Is Hayden here yet?" Shane asked, shoving his hands into his pants pockets to escape the cold and watching the movement.

"He should be on his way. But he's freaking out again, acting like Amber is their first baby, and not their fourth," Simone mocked with a good-humored eye roll. Shane laughed, shaking his head. "Not even we acted with such desperation when Elise was born."

"That's only because your older sister already had four kids at the time and practically moved into our house to help us survive," J.J. argued promptly. Simone huffed, immediately defeated by the facts. "And because, right after, we hired that guy over there."

J.J. pointed his chin at Ilya. The Russian heard the mention, let out a weak laugh, and shook his head, but quickly returned his attention to Liam, pointing over the cars.

"Nora just parked. Look at her car over there," Ilya indicated. He bent down, bending his knees to be exactly at the boy's eye level. "So, master of routes, which direction are we going to want to go first?"

Liam frowned and made a deeply thoughtful pout, as if Ilya had just asked him the meaning of the universe and not just the candy route. The boy looked critically at the different streets of the residential neighborhood, mentally calculating which block would yield the best chocolate bars.

Watching their perfectly synchronized dynamic, Shane couldn't help himself. A soft, involuntary smile took over his face.

The group finally gathered on the sidewalk. Hayden arrived a few minutes later, bringing Ruby and Jade. The twins were dressed as SpongeBob and Patrick Star, and Hayden had clearly made a last-minute effort to try to be Mr. Krabs: he wore a bluish dress shirt, dress pants, and had improvised crab eyes hanging from a headband on his head.

The candy squad was formed: Liam as Aquaman, Elise as Tiana, Ruby and Jade from Bikini Bottom, Bash as Black Panther, and a little friend of the twins named Bayley, who was dressed as Skye from Paw Patrol.

That was the exact cartoon that Ilya hated with all the strength of his being. He never let the kids watch it unless they already had the terrible habit before he was hired. Luckily for him, Liam also couldn't care less about dogs on pointless tactical missions and preferred shark documentaries.

The adults walked considerably behind, giving the children space to knock on doors. If there were donations, the parents would step in to carry them.

"Good thing I wasn't the only adult who came in costume," Nora joked, walking next to Ilya and looking at him and Shane.

Hayden really had brought the Ghostface mask with fake blood details, and Shane wore it pushed to the top of his head, in the exact same lazy vibe as Ilya. Nora also didn't have a super production; she wore black, feline ears, and fake nails, calling herself Catwoman.

"Best last-minute costumes," Ilya replied, and the woman laughed in agreement.

They stopped on the sidewalk when the flock of children ran to the first house. Ruby rang the doorbell. Seconds later, a woman dressed as a witch threw the door open with a loud, theatrical laugh, drawing little screams of fright and giggles from the little ones.

"Well, well... mischievous children!" The woman acted, holding a plastic cauldron overflowing with candy. "I'll give a piece of candy to each of you, but only if you solve my riddle!"

"What is it?!" Bayley and Jade yelled in unison.

The witch cleared her throat, building suspense.

"If I have it, I shouldn't share it. Because if I do, I won't have it anymore. What am I?"

The sentence caused an immediate and complete short circuit in Ilya's bilingual brain. He processed the words, but the riddle in English simply didn't make sense fast enough in his head. If Liam came to ask for help, the unshakable Russian would have absolutely no idea what to say.

"Fuck, I'm so dumb," Hayden grumbled next to them, frowning, thinking way too hard.

Liam turned his back to the door and ran toward Ilya.

"Do you know the answer?" the boy whispered, hopeful.

Maybe Ilya would know. If the damn riddle were in Russian.

"The answer is 'a secret'," Shane whispered quickly, leaning in close to his son, saving the day.

"A secret?" Liam confirmed, and the captain nodded. The little Aquaman ran back to the porch. "You're a secret!"

"Very well done, Aquaman!" The witch laughed, handing out the candy.

Shane shot a quick, amused look at Ilya. The blond stayed quiet, his ego slightly bruised for not having been the boy's walking encyclopedia that time, but he didn't complain.

At the next house, they were greeted by a werewolf. At the following one, by a couple dressed as Cosmo and Wanda. And at the house after that, a man opened the door first, complimenting the costumes, until a second man joined him with the candy bowl. They handed two pieces to each child, and the second man made a little joke about twins to Ruby and Jade. They were clearly married.

Ilya noticed almost immediately that Liam's gaze changed. The boy observed the two men with silent curiosity, processing the image, but said nothing and continued with his friends to the next sidewalk.

"Brat," Hayden called out, and Ruby stopped walking. "Got anything with peanuts in there? I'm starving."

"Jade does!" Ruby darted back to the other kids, swapped her own pumpkin bucket with her sister's without permission, and fished out a peanut candy to hand to her dad.

"Thanks, sweetie." Hayden patted the girl's hair, and she ran off again. It was then that he felt the weight of the confused and judgmental stares from all the adults on him. "What? I'm hungry!"

"How did Ruby know 'brat' was meant for her?" Simone frowned, incredulous.

"Have you seen how Ruby acts?" Hayden raised his eyebrows, tearing the wrapper open with his teeth savagely. "She's a gremlin. An agent of chaos who asked me this morning when the newborn was going to stop being useless so she could play with them."

Nora had to hold her breath to keep from laughing out loud.

"My biggest fear of having another child is Bash asking me something like that, because it's totally his style," she confessed, letting out a laugh.

"Yeah, the games that usually end up with someone bleeding or needing a bandage are always Ruby's idea," J.J. conceded the point to his friend. Hayden chewed the stolen candy with an expression full of vindication.

After a few blocks, the group ended up scattering a bit, each parent matching their own child's pace. Nora had to step away to take a call from her husband, leaving Shane and Ilya alone on the sidewalk, watching Liam and Bash knock on the door of a house heavily decorated with spider webs.

"Liam is acting weird today," Shane murmured, his hands stuffed into his jacket pockets almost the whole time.

"I noticed," Ilya agreed. A gust of freezing autumn wind cut through the street, and the Russian rubbed a hand over his exposed arm, shivering.

Shane watched the movement out of the corner of his eye and locked gazes with him.

"I thought you were Russian."

"And I am. That was just a breeze," Ilya shot back dryly, maintaining his unshakable pose. Shane laughed softly.

The door opened. A woman dressed as Princess Bubblegum appeared, holding a massive plastic pumpkin and squatting down to the boys' level so they could choose. Right behind her, a second woman emerged on the porch, smiling openly and dressed as Marceline.

Shane saw Liam blink, the same observant, curious expression crossing the boy's face upon seeing the two, but he remained quiet. The boys said thank you for the chocolates, and the woman dressed as Marceline walked down the steps holding two heavy cardboard shopping bags.

"There are some warm clothes and toys our kids don't use anymore in here," she said, holding the donations out to the two men on the sidewalk.

"Thank you." Ilya took the handles, offering a soft, polite smile. "Have a good Halloween."

"You guys too!" Princess Bubblegum waved from the porch, smiling amiably at the two of them. "And your kids are so cute!"

Shane opened his mouth. The automatic instinct to correct the woman, to explain that he was the dad and Ilya was just the nanny, rose to his throat. But the words died right there. He closed his mouth, gave a curt nod of thanks, and turned around, guiding Liam and Bash to the next house, without saying absolutely anything.

Ilya noticed immediately. Suddenly, Shane was just as weird and quiet as Liam. But, just like the boy, the Russian chose to pretend nothing happened.

Like father, like son.

[...]

It was almost ten at night when they finally returned to the penthouse. Liam had crashed in the backseat of the car, and Shane rode the elevator up carrying the limp, sleeping boy in his arms, while Ilya walked right behind, carrying the heavy bag of candy and the plastic trident. Liam's deep, warm breath beat against the captain's neck, who headed straight to the second floor to put him to bed.

In the kitchen, Ilya left the bag on the dining table next to the trident. In silence, he began rummaging through the fabric, pulling out the empty wrappers of the candy the boy had already devoured on the way, crushing them in his hand to throw away.

Shortly after, Shane came down the stairs. He finally pulled the Ghostface mask off the top of his head, tossing it onto the kitchen island with an exhausted sigh.

"I'm going to pay you for these three extra hours you stayed with us, okay? I know you probably had much better things to do on a Friday night than walk around in the cold with a bunch of kids," the Canadian said, resting both hands on the back of one of the stools.

"Sure. Because I work surrounded by kids all day, but my nightlife is undeniably crazy and happening," Ilya mocked without looking up. He walked around the island and tossed the wrappers in the trash.

"Still, I'm going to pay you for the hours. Sorry for trapping you here."

"No problem." Ilya shrugged. He grabbed Liam's school lunch box, which had been forgotten on top of the sink since the afternoon, and turned on the faucet.

"No, Ilya. Your shift is over. Leave that there." Shane took a step toward him, but the Russian was already soaping the little containers and staring at the boss with unshakeable presumption. Shane stopped, shaking his head with a half-smile. "I talked to J.J. today. He definitely doesn't know this Ilya when you take care of his daughter."

"Different parents require different personalities," Ilya replied casually, his attention fixed on the foam on the sponge.

"Really? And with Nora, what's your personality? Because she was clearly flirting with you all night." Shane crossed his arms, leaning his hip against the marble counter.

"She's married." Ilya shook his head negatively. "As much as no saint I am, and God knows that very well, I wouldn't do anything. She's very pretty, yes, but she's the mother of Liam's best friend. A line I don't cross."

"Are you religious?" Shane raised an eyebrow, genuinely surprised.

As an answer, Ilya pulled a thin gold chain from inside the collar of his black t-shirt. The crucifix design was different, featuring three horizontal bars, which caught Shane's eye immediately.

"Ah, right... in Russia the church isn't the same, is it?"

"Da. It's not Apostolic Catholic, it's Orthodox." Ilya nodded, rinsing the containers and already grabbing the boy's juice bottle.

"And have you ever hooked up with married women?" Shane asked, Ilya's first sentence finally processing in his brain. But the second the words came out, he narrowed his eyes and backed off. "Forget it. None of my business. This talk is way too weird to have between boss and employee, my bad."

"You really are very Canadian. Apologizing all the time." Ilya laughed lightly, a deep vibration in his chest. He washed the soap off the bottle, placed it on the drying rack, and grabbed a kitchen towel to dry his large hands. "And yes, I have."

"You didn't have to answer, I was... intrusive."

"Shane, I know about your date." The blond shrugged, turning to face him. "We spend a considerable amount of time together under the same roof. Conversations like that happen."

"It's just that... you're always so professional. You don't touch your phone on shift, you don't swear around the kids... to be honest, I'd find it weird to hear a swear word come out of your mouth even now. And today, a good chunk of the single moms—and married ones—were all over you out there in front of the school, and you just ignored all of them."

"I even ignore the absurd comments Simone makes about me right to my face. Other moms? That's easy." Ilya shook his head, and Shane widened his eyes.

"Wait, you know?"

"Of course I know what she says. She forgets that five-year-olds are parrots who repeat absolutely everything they hear."

"Oh, my God, Elise told you?!" Shane had to bite his lip to hold back a laugh. Ilya laughed along, nodding. "What did she say?"

"She said, in no uncertain terms, that Mommy thought I was 'very handsome' and that it was a pity I worked for them. But as soon as Elise didn't need nannies anymore, she'd make her move."

"Yep... I can hear Simone's voice saying exactly that." Shane nodded. He reached over to Liam's bag and stole a chocolate bar. As he tore the wrapper open, his expression softened, and the smile faded. "I still don't get what made Liam so weird for the rest of the night, though."

"The gay couples," Ilya answered with absolute naturalness, crossing his arms over his chest.

Shane choked dryly on the chocolate.

"And you also got all tense, locked up, after that couple of women mistook us for a family," the Russian pointed out, his sharp blue eyes studying the boss's reaction.

"I just... I just thought it wasn't going to make a difference to correct the woman," Shane argued, his voice cracking slightly as he swallowed the lump forming in his throat. He didn't know why he hadn't corrected her, and debating it terrified him. "And I don't think it was because of the gays that Liam got like that. I never said anything to him about it."

"Maybe that's exactly why. He probably didn't even know that was an option." Ilya shrugged.

But seeing Shane look away, tense, shifting his weight from one leg to the other, a cold shadow crossed the Russian's face. The light mood of the kitchen evaporated that very second.

"Shane?"

The Canadian blinked, looking down at his own hand.

"Shane, look at me." Ilya's voice lost any trace of humor. It was hard, calculating. "I grew up in Russia and spent my entire life in the toxic environment of hockey. Don't make me jump to my own conclusions about what you believe, before I actually know."

The warning was clear. To Ilya, that topic wasn't a casual debate; it was survival. It was the difference between working in a safe environment or needing to shield himself even more than he already did.

"What? What do you mean?" Shane blinked, genuinely confused by the sudden drop in temperature.

"Gays," the Russian spoke clearly, the word cutting through the air.

"I-I never said anything about it to him. I don't think even Jessica did. We just... didn't bring it up," Shane stuttered, lost in his own defensiveness, failing to realize the gravity of how his words sounded to Ilya's ears.

Ilya held Shane's startled gaze for three long seconds. The Russian's safety reading was done, and the concrete wall went up instantly.

"Uhm. *Okey*. Got it."

Ilya uncrossed his arms, straightened his posture rigidly, and turned his back. He walked with long strides to the living room, grabbing the coat he had left on the back of the sofa.

Shane followed the movement with his eyes, his heart beating fast in his chest. The suffocating sensation that he had just messed everything up took over his body, but he didn't even know what he had done wrong.

"I'm heading out," the Russian announced from the entrance hall, his voice monotonous and freezing as he quickly slipped his sneakers on. He pulled the heavy wooden door open and shot one last polished look over his shoulder. "Good night, Mr. Hollander."

"Good..."

Shane barely managed to let out the first syllable before the door closed with a dull click.

Silence swallowed the penthouse. The Canadian stood static in the middle of the kitchen.

Mr. Hollander?

Since his first week on the job, Ilya had called him just Shane, Captain when he wanted to provoke him, or Hollander when he was impatient. But Mr. Hollander was a brutal distance. Professional. Cold.

The feeling in his chest that he had made a terrible mistake tripled in size. Shane walked over to the dining table and picked up the drawing Liam had made. He, his son, the nanny in black clothes, and the caramel dog. A weird family drawn with crayons.

Shane ran his thumb over the paper. There was nothing wrong there. Liam saw Ilya as a fundamental piece of the family, and, in some invisible way Shane tried not to analyze too much, he really was.

With a heavy sigh and a shake of his head to try and shake off the unsaid panic, Shane walked to the kitchen, stuck the drawing to the fridge door with a Metros magnet, and walked up the stairs *in the dark*.

Chapter 8: Topics to discuss

Shane had left for Boston about two hours ago, sending a text letting him know he was boarding a few minutes ago. At the penthouse, Ilya was finishing cleaning up the mess in the kitchen after giving in to Liam's requests to test a Halloween-themed cookie recipe that Nora had strongly recommended.

The cookies were in the oven, spreading a sweet smell of vanilla and butter through the apartment. Liam was sprawled on the living room couch, totally immersed in children's horror classics and watching *Corpse Bride*. Ilya checked the TV screen every now and then, while wiping a damp cloth to pick up the flour scattered across the marble island.

When the Russian had arrived for his shift earlier, the tension in the air was palpable. It became clear that Ilya had erected a barrier of concrete and ice after the previous night's conversation. In the Russian's mind, it was also clear that Shane simply lived in a bubble where he ignored the existence of people outside the heteronormative standard. To survive, Ilya's instinct dictated it was better to stay quiet, be strictly professional, and not leave room for any mannerisms—even if he himself fit into a more fluid zone of the spectrum.

"Ilya?" Liam called out suddenly. The boy got on his knees on the couch cushion, resting his arms on the backrest to look into the kitchen.

"Speak, *Akula*," the Russian replied, rinsing the cloth in the sink and turning his face to him.

"Yesterday, when we went trick-or-treating... those two guys who gave us the best chocolates, why did they live together? They didn't look like brothers," Liam formulated the question with the utmost caution his childish mind allowed.

Ilya took a deep breath and continued wiping the counter.

"Because they were very likely married." The answer came out with absolute naturalness.

"Two men?"

"Uh-huh." The blond nodded. He crumpled the dirty cloth in his hand and, with a perfect throw, hit the laundry basket in the corner of the utility room, returning to wash the last few bowls in the sink.

"I didn't know you could do that," Liam confessed, sincere, resting his chin on his crossed arms on the back of the couch.

Ilya couldn't help a small involuntary smile. Liam's purity always disarmed him.

"Of course you can."

"And how does that work, do you know? Married boys?"

"Well... sometimes, a boy only likes to date boys. Or a girl only likes to date girls. And that's okay, there's absolutely nothing wrong with that," he explained in a calm and educational tone.

"Oh, I get it. I like Bash and he's a boy!" Liam exclaimed, thinking he had solved the riddle.

Ilya let out a genuine laugh, shaking his head.

"Like as in... the way your grandparents like each other," the Russian specified gently.

Liam opened his mouth in a long "Oh...", finally understanding the difference.

"People like that are called gay. Men who only fall in love with men. And women who only fall in love with women are lesbians, like those nice ladies who gave us the clothes, the ones dressed as Princess Bubblegum and Marceline."

"Girls can date girls?!" Liam widened his big brown eyes, shocked by the discovery of a whole new world, which made Ilya nod, laughing. "And is there a name for who is normal...? No, not normal. If everyone can do it, then it's normal for everyone... You know what I meant!"

The immediate self-correction and the child's impeccable logic drew another warm laugh from the Russian.

"I know what you meant. People who only like the opposite gender are called straight. Boys who only like girls, and vice versa."

"And are there, I don't know... people who like both? Boys and girls?"

"There are. Those are bisexuals." The Russian rinsed a glass bowl as he spoke, the water running freely. "They like both men and women. Sometimes they like one more than the other, sometimes with the same intensity... it depends on the person."

"And are people born like that?"

"Exactly. That's why, as you just said yourself, it's normal." Ilya turned off the faucet and dried his hands, leaning against the sink to look the boy in the eyes. "You can't change the fact that you have beautiful freckles scattered across that face of yours. In the same way, a person can't just change the direction their heart points to."

Liam nodded slowly. His eight-year-old brain processed the information, accepting and understanding diversity with much more ease and respect than the overwhelming majority of adults Ilya knew.

It was a pity, the Russian thought. That was why he infinitely preferred the company of children. They weren't born prejudiced; hate was something meticulously taught. And if Ilya could influence Liam even just a little bit so that he'd become a better man in the future, he would.

Ilya knew it wasn't exactly Shane's "fault" for being rigid. The captain grew up immersed in the toxic culture of hockey locker rooms, an environment where the slur "faggot" was thrown around as if it were worse than insulting someone's mother. But, on the other hand, it *was* the responsibility of Shane, now a full-grown adult, to make an effort to evolve. The Russian wouldn't give him a free pass on that.

"It must be pretty cool to be bisexual, because then you think everyone is pretty," Liam murmured, the innocent realization being said more to himself than to Ilya.

The Russian burst out laughing. The boy wasn't entirely wrong.

"It's an advantage. But look at it from the other side, *Akula*: if you like both, your chances of getting rejected double too!"

Liam laughed at the joke, finally sitting up straight on the couch and turning his attention back to the movie. There was still plenty of time on the oven timer, so Ilya finished putting the dry dishes away and walked into the living room, sitting comfortably next to the boy.

The two watched in silence for a few minutes until Liam turned his face again.

"Ilya... and how do you know if you're gay or bisexual?"

"That also depends on the person," Ilya replied, his tone of voice softening. "Some know from a very young age that they are different. Others take a whole lifetime to be able to accept who they are. Because there are bad people in the world who think it's wrong, and they end up leaving a very strong sense of fear in the air. A fear that traps a person."

Liam furrowed his eyebrows, confusion written all over his innocent face.

"But... if it comes from the heart, why would it be wrong?"

Ilya gave a soft, melancholic smile, reaching out his arm to lightly ruffle the boy's dark hair.

"That is the million-dollar question, *Akula*."

The movie kept playing in the living room. The cookies were finally done, filling the penthouse with a thick, comforting aroma of vanilla and melted sugar. Ilya arranged a few still-warm cookies on a plate for the two of them to share and returned to the stove to make Liam's hot chocolate.

That was when he felt his phone buzz in his pants pocket.

While the milk was heating up in the pot, he pulled out the device. It was a notification from Sophie Lacroix, the costume shop clerk he had been casually—and not so casually—texting over the past few days.

[Direct Message]

Sophie L.: How is your Halloween going over there?

Ilya: Fueled by fresh-out-of-the-oven cookies, *Corpse Bride*, and hot chocolate.

Sophie L.: No trick-or-treating out on the street? I thought you were the type who likes to go out.

Ilya: I already filled my quota last night. Went trick-or-treating with Aquaman.

Sophie L.: Aww. Did the costume fit him well?

Ilya: Perfect. How about your Halloween?

Sophie L.: Fueled by caramel popcorn and a *Scream* marathon on the couch.

Sophie L.: Are you doing anything tomorrow night? I don't work on Monday, so I'm free.

Ilya: I'm probably going to stay late taking care of Aquaman. His dad is going out on a date.

Sophie L.: 🙄 That sucks. How late? I'm a night owl, I don't usually go to sleep early.

Ilya: After 10 PM.

Sophie L.: I'm down for that time. If you're up for it, of course.

Ilya: I'll text you when I'm leaving here.

Sophie's reply didn't come in text. The screen lit up with a notification of a received image.

Upon opening it, Ilya was met with a selfie of her sprawled on the couch. She was wearing a black satin pajama set that hugged her skin in an almost criminal way, her shoulders partially covered by a heavy blanket. In the dim light of the bedroom, she made a charming and highly suggestive pout at the camera, her eyes shining with clear ulterior motives.

Ilya blinked firmly, the screen illuminating his blue eyes. The flirting, which until then had been a light game of words, had just crossed the line into a direct and physical invitation.

Controlling his own breathing, he let out a heavy sigh through his nose, locked the screen, and left the phone face down on the marble counter. Pulling his attention back to reality and to the stove, he focused entirely on stirring the pot, making sure the boy's hot chocolate didn't boil over.

He would have all the time in the world to deal with satin-clad night owls the next day.

[...]

The next morning, Ilya woke up early, around six. Coming down the stairs, the subtle sound of clinking dishes warned him that he wasn't alone in the penthouse. Shane, who had arrived from his trip in the middle of the night, was already up, leaning against the kitchen island and having his breakfast with an enviable tranquility.

"Good morning," Shane waved his steaming mug. "Want some coffee?"

"Good morning," Ilya replied, his voice hoarse from sleep, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. "Sure. I need it."

Shane grabbed a second mug from the cabinet and generously served the Russian. While Ilya took his first sip, feeling the caffeine wake up his brain, Shane took the opportunity to ask how the previous night had gone. Ilya summarized the cozy night in: he told him they had made Nora's cookie recipe, watched children's horror movies, and that Liam had passed out on the couch before nine o'clock.

It wasn't long before the sound of tiny footsteps echoed down the stairs. Liam came down in his pajamas, with severe bedhead, and ran straight to give Shane a tight hug around the waist.

While Ilya moved around the kitchen to prepare the boy's breakfast, Liam started chattering, recounting the previous night from his own enthusiastic perspective. At one point, Ilya froze. He felt Liam was one second away from telling him about the sexuality and relationships lesson they had had on the couch, and the Russian braced himself for chaos. But the subject didn't even cross the kid's mind; the boy was much more focused on narrating the plot of *Corpse Bride* in detail and trying to hum the songs from the movie. Ilya let out a breath he didn't even know he was holding.

Finishing his coffee, the Canadian went over the schedule for the day. He explained to his son that he would be leaving for the arena shortly, as the Metros had a home game at one in the afternoon. At night, Shane was going out for dinner, so Ilya would be responsible for putting him to bed again. Liam didn't make a single objection; in fact, he loved it when the Russian took charge of his bedtime routine.

It had been a very, very long time since Ilya had stepped onto the bleachers of a professional hockey arena. Even back when he looked after Cliff Marleau's nephews, he avoided going to the Raiders' games.

Being there again, feeling the chill of the air conditioning and the characteristic smell of freshly cut ice, forced him to think about the past. It was impossible not to wonder what his life would have been like if he hadn't been irreversibly injured. Maybe he would be on the ice right now, playing as well as Shane. Maybe they would be worthy opponents, division rivals, battling for the puck along the boards. It was painful and hard to know.

Reality took its toll as soon as the Russian sat down in the VIP seats, worthy of tickets reserved for the franchise captain: the surgical pins in Ilya's knee gave a dry, audible pop as he bent the joint.

Liam was radiant, wearing a child-sized Metros jersey with Shane's number 24 on the back. Ilya, on the other hand, preferred not to wear any team merchandise, dressing only in casual

and discreet winter clothes.

While the players warmed up on the ice, he and Liam took a selfie on the bench. Ilya opened Instagram to post the photo on his Stories and, as usual per the strict privacy policy he maintained regarding the children he cared for, he covered Liam's face with an emoji. Obviously, it couldn't be anything other than a shark. He carefully adjusted the sticker and tagged Shane's profile in tiny letters in the corner of the image, sending the photo privately to his boss right after.

"Dad plays center, Uncle Hayden plays left wing, and Uncle J.J. is one of the defensemen," Liam started to explain the tactical formation, pointing his fingers toward the ice as if it were the first game they were watching together, and not the millionth. "The right wing is Josh Berkes, and the other defenseman right there is Viktor Andropov. He's also Russian, just like you!"

"Yeah, I've heard of Andropov," Ilya nodded, watching his compatriot glide across the rink. "He's also from Moscow, but we never crossed paths in the rinks over there."

The boy turned his face to him, his big brown eyes blinking with genuine curiosity.

"Did you play hockey? Why did you stop?"

Ilya swallowed hard, shifting his gaze from the ice to the child.

"I played throughout my childhood and my whole adolescence. But I hurt my knee really badly, and the doctor said I had to stop."

Liam blinked, surprised, and the tactical excitement on his face gave way to an expression full of empathy and very sincere pity.

The players from both teams glided onto the ice for the pre-game warm-up, their skate blades cutting the surface with a loud, harsh sound. Liam practically glued himself to the protective glass, waving frantically until Shane noticed. The captain smiled openly and returned the wave with his glove. Hayden also skated past them, giving the acrylic a little tap with his stick to get a laugh out of the kid.

The horn sounded, and the clash between the Montreal Metros and the Ottawa Centaurs began.

With his trained eye, it didn't take long for Ilya to realize that this was the perfect game to have brought Liam to in person. The Centaurs were disorganized and defending poorly, which meant the boy would have the chance to see his dad dominate the ice and shine without much difficulty. Shane was probably already counting on that advantage.

As soon as the captain won the opening face-off, Liam stood up on his seat. Seconds later, when Shane broke away and scored the game's first goal with lethal precision, Ilya had to grab the boy by the back of his coat; he genuinely thought Liam was going to roll down the bleachers, he was jumping and cheering with his little arms in the air so much.

The Canadian's performance was absolute. In the first period, Shane nailed two goals. In the second, he buried the puck in the net once again, completing a spectacular hat trick that made dozens of hats rain down onto the rink in celebration. In the third period, the captain took his foot off the gas and assumed the role of strategist, giving a perfect assist for Hayden to score, closing the scoreboard at a comfortable four to one.

On the way out, the arena corridors turned into a chaotic sea of euphoric fans. Without a second thought, Ilya picked Liam up. The ideal for both of their safety was that no one recognized them and approached the boy, so the Russian asked, in a whisper, for Liam to hide his face against his neck.

Using his own wingspan and unshakeable posture to force his way through, Ilya easily cleared a path through the crowd, carrying the boy safely until they reached the arena's private underground parking lot, where access was restricted to players, management, and close family members.

They didn't have to wait long near the Jeep. Soon, the heavy double metal doors opened with a muffled thud, and the athletes began pouring out into the parking lot, carrying their heavy equipment bags and wearing their impeccable and luxurious custom-tailored post-game suits.

As soon as he laid eyes on his dad, Liam broke loose and bolted. The boy ran nimbly between the other suit-clad giants and jumped with everything he had onto Shane. The captain dropped his bag on the floor, caught the kid mid-air with absurd ease, and perched him on his hip, the exhaustion of three periods of hockey evaporating instantly as he planted a loud kiss on his son's cheek.

[...]

Ilya was filling a pot with water at the sink. He and Liam had made a non-negotiable agreement that they would have pasta for dinner—and the Russian, let's admit it, never turned down a good plate of carbs. In the living room, the boy was lying on his stomach on the rug, already dressed in his pajamas, coloring in a notebook with crayons and markers. He kicked his feet in the air and peeked at the cartoon playing on the TV every now and then.

The sound of firm footsteps coming down the stairs made Ilya look up from the faucet. And, in that exact millisecond, he hated himself.

Something very primitive and untimely that lived inside him—the same idiotic and irresponsible part that loved to torture him with instincts when he wasn't on the clock—decided that this was an excellent moment to bloom. In his entire career, Ilya had never, ever looked at his bosses through any lens that wasn't strictly professional. But it was almost impossible not to swallow hard when he saw Shane step onto the bottom stair.

The captain wore a black button-down shirt that molded to his broad shoulders, perfectly tailored dress pants held by a leather belt with a gold buckle, and carried an impeccably cut

navy-blue suit jacket over his arm that, under the warm light of the living room, looked almost black.

It was undeniable that Shane Hollander was an objectively beautiful man.

And objectively a hockey player, Ilya reminded himself harshly, reality crashing down like a bucket of cold water. He took the pot to the stove, lit the burner, and forced himself to stop staring.

"Hey... uhm... I'm heading out," Shane announced, stopping near the entrance to the kitchen, seeming to hesitate to invade the space. "If anything happens, just text me and..."

"Enjoy your date, Mr. Hollander," Ilya cut him off. The Russian's voice sounded polite, icy, and perfectly flat. He didn't even turn around, focusing only on salting the water that was starting to boil.

Shane blinked, feeling the same painful twinge hit his chest. There it was again. Exactly like on Friday night, Ilya had put up that impenetrable concrete wall and called him "Mr. Hollander".

The Canadian swallowed the sudden knot in his throat and put on his jacket.

"I'll let you know when I'm on my way back." He cleared his throat and looked away toward his son. "Hey, don't stall going to sleep today, okay? You have school early tomorrow."

"Okay, Daddy," Liam replied, without even lifting his face from the paper.

Shane walked over to the rug, crouched down, and left a lingering kiss on the boy's dark hair.

"See you tomorrow."

Liam nodded, completely absorbed in his colored markers. Before walking to the front door, Shane simply couldn't help himself and looked at the kitchen one more time.

Ilya remained inflexibly with his back to him, measuring the portion of pasta with surgical concentration and ignoring his presence entirely.

When Shane crossed the hall and the front door clicked shut, the oppressive feeling that he had ruined everything and done something very wrong returned to hammer in his chest with full force.

The bad feeling accompanied him all the way to the sidewalk. Shane settled into the backseat of the Uber, greeted the driver with a restrained nod in the rearview mirror, and pulled out his phone. He sent a quick text to Rose, letting her know he was on his way to the restaurant, and soon received confirmation that she was also arriving.

To try and quiet his own head, he opened Instagram. There was the normal chaotic flow of mentions about the afternoon game and fans sending congratulatory messages, but a specific Story mention notification caught his attention.

It was Ilya's profile.

Shane opened it. There was the photo of Ilya and Liam sitting in the arena bleachers. The Russian wore that rare, soft, and genuine smile that the Canadian only saw appear when he was focused on Liam. Shane already had the original photo saved to his camera roll, sent privately without the shark emoji covering his son's face, but seeing it posted publicly made him smile. On an impulse, he liked the story and hit the button to repost it to his own profile.

Which was enough to incite chaos.

In less than thirty seconds, Shane's phone started vibrating non-stop. Dozens of reactions and direct replies started popping up. Followers were in an uproar asking who the "blond man" with the boy was. Most obviously deduced that the hidden child was Liam, since the captain used his social media strictly professionally and rarely posted any glimpse of his personal life.

Skimming the DMs, Shane noticed something that made him frown. There were several people dropping cheeky comments and claiming they had hooked up with Ilya in the past. However, what genuinely surprised the Canadian was noticing the considerable amount of male profiles saying that.

And then, a message request from a verified profile bumped to the top of the list.

@Ivan_Sash. That European model Yuna had investigated and mentioned.

The message sent by Sasha in response to Shane's story was short, direct, and somewhat unexpected: just a white heart emoji.

Curious and frowning, Shane clicked on the profile picture. Sasha's feed was a showcase of haute couture campaigns, runways in Paris, and incredibly conceptual photos. But it was one of the pinned posts at the top of the grid that made Shane's heart stop.

The image showed Sasha smiling openly in the middle of an LGBTQIA+ Pride Parade in France. He was wearing a ripped black tank top with the phrase: "I put 'bi' in bitch, bilingual and bisexual". And right below, in the highlighted comments, was Ilya's profile, having left just three fire emojis on the model's photo.

Suddenly, Shane's mind made a deafening click. The puzzle assembled itself before his eyes.

"My God in heaven..." he murmured in the silence of the backseat, the blood draining from his face.

That was why. That was exactly why Ilya was acting so coldly and putting up concrete walls.

There was a massive chance—based on what Shane had just seen in exactly two minutes of investigation—that Ilya was part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and that Sasha was, very possibly, his boyfriend.

The conversation in the kitchen on Friday night came back to bite Shane in the jugular.

"The gay couples."

"I grew up in Russia and in the toxic environment of hockey. Don't make me jump to conclusions about what you believe..."

And Shane, like a complete idiot, had stuttered, gotten defensive, and said he never talked about it with his son, sounding terrified of the subject. He hadn't just been ignorant; he had sounded like the perfect stereotype of the prejudiced and untouchable "hockey straight guy", making his employee and friend feel unsafe under his roof.

A wave, a veritable tsunami of shame and guilt hit Shane so overwhelmingly that he wanted to dig a hole in the floor of the Uber and bury his head in there forever.

Arriving in front of the restaurant, Shane stood on the sidewalk and took three deep breaths. He used the breathing techniques he had learned to push away the spiral of chaotic and guilty thoughts about Ilya, forcing his mind to anchor in the present moment and focus entirely on his date with Rose.

As he walked up the front steps, a subtle, mischievous whistle sounded behind him. Turning around, he saw the actress approaching. Her dark hair was pinned up in an elegant bun, and she wore another of her impeccable winter dresses—this time, a deep burgundy model covered by a structured black overcoat. Shane felt his heart stumble slightly in his chest.

"Wow." The word escaped his lips before he could stop it.

Rose laughed, her eyes sparkling.

"I say the exact same to you, Captain."

Shane chivalrously offered his hand to help her with the final steps due to her high heels, and the two entered the lobby together.

"I watched a good chunk of the game today. And man, you guys gave the Centaurs a historic beating," she commented.

"They are, statistically, the worst team in the league. It's almost like beating up a blind kid," Shane replied, drawing a loose laugh from the actress.

He gave his name to the hostess, who promptly assigned a waiter to guide them to their reserved table. The decor of the place was intimate, immersed in an elegant and dimly lit autumn aesthetic, but without any of those exaggerated decorations that hinted at Halloween.

"And how was your holiday? Did you get to spend it with your son?" Rose asked. She slipped the overcoat off her shoulders and draped it over the back of the chair. Shane did the same with his own suit jacket before sitting down.

"Yeah, we went trick-or-treating around his school's neighborhood. My friends from the team came along, brought their daughters, it was actually pretty fun," Shane shared, resting his chin on his closed fist on the table. "What about yours?"

"Miles, my best friend, dragged me to a club that was having a themed night. And, obviously, it being Miles, it was a gay club. And look..." She leaned forward slightly, gesturing. "I swore our cast makeup artists were unbeatable, until I saw the drag queens at that party up close. There was a Queen of Hearts, a Mad Hatter, someone perfectly dressed as Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*... I was floored. I felt completely out of the dress code."

The mention of a "gay club" made Shane's brain jump a little—the irony of the universe rubbing the subject in his face once again that night—but he maintained his unshakeable posture.

"And what did you dress up as?" he asked, with an intrigued laugh.

Rose pulled her phone from her designer bag, unlocked the screen, and turned the device to show a picture taken with Miles. She was dressed as Tinker Bell, with delicate, shiny little wings, and Miles was dressed as Captain Hook.

Shane's eyes, however, instantly fell on Miles's defined and fully exposed chest in the image. The man's dark skin shone under the club lighting, clearly oiled up with some kind of body oil or highlighter to mimic fairy dust, while he made a relaxed pout for the camera next to Rose.

Shane swallowed hard, processing the image for a few milliseconds longer than would be strictly necessary for a man who called himself straight.

"It was... it was a really beautiful costume," Shane complimented, belatedly realizing he had barely looked at the details of Rose's outfit in the photo.

She smiled, grateful and oblivious to the slight short-circuit in the Canadian's head, and put her phone back in her bag.

"What about you? Did you dress up?"

"I put a borrowed, last-minute Ghostface mask on top of my head and hoped for the best." Shane shrugged, a resigned smile on his face, and the two laughed together, the light atmosphere of the restaurant successfully masking the captain's internal whirlwind.

The waiter approached silently, breaking the brief moment of relaxation to leave the dark leather menus on the table. They ordered two glasses of red wine to start, and as soon as the employee walked away, Rose tilted her head, a charming, lopsided smile playing on her red-painted lips.

"The classic zero-effort from men on Halloween," she teased, drumming her manicured nails on the stem of her water glass. "But, to be fair to you, Shane, it would be a heinous crime to hide the face voted the most handsome in the NHL behind a five-dollar plastic mask."

Shane felt his ears heat up slightly. He let out a deep laugh, leaning back into the soft upholstery of the chair and holding her gaze.

"I'll accept the compliment and ignore the judgment on my costume," he replied, playing along. "But the truth is, my paternal instinct speaks louder. I needed full peripheral vision to make sure Aquaman wasn't going to hijack all the candy in the neighborhood."

"A dedicated and modest father. Noted." Rose winked, taking a sip of water without taking her eyes off him. "And how long did you get to be off before returning to the reality of the ice? Today's game seemed exhausting, despite the beating you guys gave them."

"Enough to recharge. The season is very demanding, but having Liam around and..." Shane swallowed hard, the image of the Russian in black clothes flashing in his mind for a second before he forced himself to focus. "And having a good support network at home helps a lot. What about you? How is filming going? Miles works on the same set, right?"

"Yes! We're on the same show. He plays the arrogant prosecutor who's always butting heads with my character in court," Rose explained, her eyes lighting up as she talked about her work. "Filming has been intense. We practically live in those trailers, which means my free time is a luxury item lately."

"Which makes me feel even more flattered that you're spending that luxury item on me on a Sunday night," Shane flirted, his voice dropping a tone, softer and huskier.

The actress smiled widely, a pretty blush rising on her cheeks. The waiter returned at that moment, pouring the red wine into their glasses before taking their main course orders.

When they were alone again, Rose raised her glass, proposing a silent toast. Shane tapped the crystal rim of his against hers with a soft clink.

"Don't get me wrong, Shane. I love my job, I love Miles and the crew, but stepping out of the Hollywood bubble and all that manufactured drama is refreshing," she confessed, resting her chin on one hand. "And, to be completely honest, the company of a Canadian gentleman, who opens the car door and knows how to have a conversation without looking at his own reflection in the silverware, is a wonderful change of pace."

"Is the bar really that low with the guys in LA?" he joked, swirling the wine in his glass.

"You have no idea. If you don't have a podcast or an existential crisis about your green juice diet, they don't know what to talk about on a first date," Rose rolled her eyes with humor. "With you, it's different. You're grounded. You know what you want."

Shane swallowed a sip of wine. He thought he knew what he wanted. He wanted stability for Liam, he wanted to win the Stanley Cup, he wanted an incredible partner like Rose. She was funny, stunning, smart, and affectionate. The chemistry was there, dancing between them in the subtext of the conversation and the knowing smiles.

But as the night progressed, and the main courses arrived exuding incredible aromas of truffles and herbs, a small and persistent electrical current ran down the base of the captain's spine. It wasn't a flaw in Rose. It was him. There was background noise in his head—the memory of Miles's shiny chest in the photo, the tsunami of shame for the stupid way he

treated Ilya, and the oppressive feeling that there was a locked door inside himself that he was too terrified to try to open.

Still, he smiled back at Rose, leaned over the table, and focused intensely on her, determined to be the grounded, perfect guy she saw, leaving his own ghosts locked up at home.

The dinner went perfectly. The chemistry between the two was natural, the conversation flowing effortlessly. When it was time to leave, Shane insisted they share the same Uber so she wouldn't have to go back to her hotel alone, just as he had absolutely insisted on paying the restaurant bill, ignoring Rose's good-natured protests that she had been the one to invite him.

Now, in the backseat of the car gliding through the night streets of Montreal, the two were sitting close, almost shoulder to shoulder, leaning slightly toward each other. The warmth of the wine—three glasses, to be exact—had loosened Shane's restraints, and he found himself venting about the only thing that had been consuming his mind for the last twenty-four hours.

"And, I don't know, it's just really good having Ilya around. In general. Helping me, taking care of Liam... but I want to die of frustration every time he does something that isn't strictly related to his job description," Shane confessed, rubbing the back of his neck, his tone of voice mixing exhaustion and fascination.

"Like what?" Rose asked, amused by the seemingly harmless dilemma.

"He cleaned my entire kitchen yesterday before he left. I didn't say anything, because I knew it wouldn't do any good. He would just look at me with that smug, unshakable Russian face of his." Shane gestured in the air, maybe a little goofy from the alcohol, drawing a warm, genuine laugh from the actress. "He's a good guy, a really good guy. But... holy shit, Rose, I was a complete asshole to him on Friday night and I didn't even realize it at the time."

Rose's smile wavered to make room for full attention.

"What happened?" She slid her hand, resting it naturally on Shane's knee in a silent gesture of comfort.

The touch sent a pleasant jolt down the Canadian's leg, but the confession was stuck in his throat and needed to come out.

"When we were out trick-or-treating with the kids, some of the houses in the neighborhood belonged to gay couples. I had never brought that up with Liam, because... I don't even know why, we just never touched on the subject. But when we got back home, Ilya brought it up, pointing out how awkward the whole situation was. And I acted like a defensive idiot. He told me that, since he grew up in Russia and around hockey locker rooms, he didn't want to just judge me without actually knowing what I believed... and I froze. I didn't say anything. Ever since then, he's acting totally different with me. Stopped calling me Shane, or Captain. Now it's just 'Mrr. Hollanderr'"—Shane imitated Ilya's drawn-out, formal accent at the end of the sentence, making Rose let out an empathetic sigh, perfectly understanding the weight of that change in treatment.

"And is he gay?" she asked, her voice gentle, processing the story.

"I don't know, maybe..." Shane sighed heavily, resting his head back on the upholstery. "Earlier today, a guy who follows him on social media liked and replied to my stories. A Russian model living in Paris named Sasha Ivanov. I went to check out his profile. They have photos together, and Sasha has a photo at the top of his feed, at a gay pride parade in France, with a comment full of fire emojis from Ilya underneath. What it looked like to me, putting two and two together, is that they're boyfriends. And I practically acted like a shitty homophobe in front of a half-open door he gave me."

Rose widened her eyes slightly, her hand still resting on his knee, and leaned a millimeter closer.

"But you aren't... right?"

"What?! No! Of course not!" Shane rushed to say, running a hand agitatedly over his face. "I don't give a damn who people love. But it's that thing... the biggest and most used insult inside a hockey locker room is being called a 'faggot'. The sport's culture is garbage in that sense. I ended up sounding exactly like one of those guys."

Rose observed him for a long moment. Her expression was soft, her dark eyes overflowing with understanding, without the slightest hint of judgment. She gave Shane's knee a comforting squeeze, her thumb subtly stroking the fabric of his pants, which drew his anxious gaze back to her face.

"Well, my advice to you is pretty simple, Captain: when the opportunity arises to apologize, do it." She broke into a gentle smile. "Just be honest with him the same way you're being with me right now. He's not just your employee, he's important to your son. It's going to be okay."

[...]

It was ten past ten at night when Shane finally walked through the penthouse door. The muffled sound of the TV being on caught his attention, but as soon as he recognized that the audio didn't belong to any cartoon, his shoulders relaxed a bit. He dropped his shoes in the entrance hall and walked in his socks to the living room.

Ilya was sitting on the couch, his long legs stretched out under the coffee table, watching some random cooking show on mute with the subtitles on.

"Hey," Shane greeted, his voice coming out soft, and he pressed his lips together, feeling the anxiety return in full force.

"He just fell asleep," Ilya replied, his tone strictly professional. He reached for the remote and turned off the TV. As he stood up, the Russian's injured knee decided to participate in the

interaction, popping with a loud, dry sound in the quiet living room.

When the blond turned to grab his backpack, he stopped. His blue eyes swept over Shane's face, an eyebrow slowly arched, and he let out a soft, nasal chuckle. Shane almost let himself sigh in relief, thinking, for an illusory fraction of a second, that things had gone back to normal.

"What is it?" the Canadian asked.

"You have lipstick on your mouth."

Shane widened his eyes. Instantly, he pulled his phone from his pocket and opened the front camera, rubbing his thumb over the remnants of Rose's red lipstick—clear evidence of the kiss they had shared in the backseat of the car before she went up to her hotel.

"You said you were going out with some girl named Rose. I just didn't imagine it was *the* Rose Landry," Ilya commented, unlocking his own phone.

The Russian turned the screen toward him. While frantically wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Shane stared at the crisp photo on one of the country's biggest gossip pages: him and Rose leaving the restaurant together, arm in arm and smiling.

"Oh, wonderful." Shane let out a long, exhausted sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose.

It was at that exact moment that the phone in his hand started vibrating frantically. It was a call from Hayden. The captain answered, already knowing perfectly well what awaited him.

"YOU LUCKY SON OF A BITCH!" Hayden's shrill yell almost burst Shane's eardrum.

"Hayden, watch your mouth around the girls!" Jackie's voice reprimanded him in the background.

"Hi, Hayden." Shane pulled the device away from his ear, massaging his temple, as he watched Ilya start grabbing his coat to leave.

"ROSE LANDRY?! *GOLDEN GLOBE* ROSE LANDRY?!" the left winger demanded, completely beside himself. "YOU BASTARD, HOW DO YOU HIDE THIS FROM ME?"

"Man, I literally just stepped inside the house and you're going to see me early tomorrow at practice. Can we leave the FBI interrogation for tomorrow?" Shane tried to cut the conversation short, the urgency to end the call burning in his veins. He needed to take advantage of being alone with Ilya to apologize. The opportunity was right there.

"Did you kiss her?!"

"Hayden!" Shane grumbled, losing his patience as he saw Ilya slinging his backpack strap over his shoulder.

"Argh, fine! But get ready, because everyone on the team has probably seen it by now. And if they haven't, they're going to see it right now, because I'm sending the link to the group chat!"

Kiss, bye, love you!" Hayden ended the call before Shane could tell him to go to hell.

Shane tossed his phone onto the kitchen island.

"See you tomorrow, Mr.—" Ilya began, walking toward the exit.

"Ilya, wait," Shane cut him off.

The Russian stopped in the hall, his large hand already resting on the front door handle, and turned his face to look at him. Suddenly, Shane's mouth went as dry as sand. However, the residual effect of the three glasses of wine combined with the courage from a successful date—his first kiss in almost a decade—gave him the necessary push.

The Russian waited, as unshakable as an ice statue.

"I'm sorry," Shane blurted out all at once, his shoulders slumping.

Ilya frowned slightly.

"For what, exactly?"

"For Friday night. For... freezing up when you talked about the... gay couples."

"The same way you're hesitating to say the word right now?" the blond pointed out surgically, crossing his broad arms over his chest. "This isn't something we need to discuss, Mr. Hollander. My personal opinions don't affect my work and..."

"Yes, they do! They affect it because you've been calling me 'Mr.' and treating me like a stranger since Friday!" Shane raised his voice, closing the distance between them. Ilya didn't retort, but Shane saw the Russian's jaw clench hard. "I'm not homophobic, Ilya. I swear I'm not. But, yes, it was my fault for never having brought this topic up with Liam at home, and I admit my mistake. I admit I shouldn't have acted so defensively like that. I realized it offended you, and that's why I'm here apologizing."

Ilya held Shane's desperate gaze for long seconds before letting out a tired sigh.

"Liam asked me about it. About the gay couples," the Russian revealed, his voice dropping to a softer but firm tone. "I explained everything to him. And he understood it perfectly, on the first try. He even corrected himself right away when I said it was something normal, and that no one chooses to be that way, people are just born like that."

"And I understand that, I swear to you." Shane took another step toward him, his hands sweating. "It's just... in the locker room, things are different. You said yourself you grew up in there, you know how sick hockey culture is. Since I never cared about anyone's personal life, I simply... stayed quiet."

"I know." Ilya nodded, and an expression of cold indifference crossed his face, which began to make the Canadian desperate. "I just find it curious, and a bit pathetic, that an eight-year-old boy manages to have more emotional intelligence than a bunch of full-grown men with beards on their faces. But I'm genuinely glad to know you aren't actively homophobic."

"What do you mean?"

Ilya stared at him with the hardness of someone who had already taken a lot of beatings from life for being who he was.

"Shane, if you've been in a locker room your entire life listening to all kinds of garbage and never spoke up against it... your silence was already an agreement."

The sentence hit Shane like a direct punch to the stomach. The air escaped his lungs, and his chest felt as heavy as lead.

"If it's not a problem for you, I don't want to touch on this subject anymore," Ilya finished, turning the doorknob. "And, to rephrase my sentence: my personal life does not affect my work. Good night, Mr. Hollander."

The Russian walked out, pulling the door behind him. The metallic click echoed through the empty hall, leaving Shane alone in the dark, feeling a million times worse, smaller, and dirtier than before he tried to apologize.

Chapter 9: Happy (?) Holidays

When December definitively settled into the calendar, Shane kept the tradition and invited Rose to spend Christmas with him and Liam at the cottage. It had been a while since the proper official introductions. Liam, as always, remained impeccably polite in her presence, but the excess of childish politeness couldn't hide his lack of enthusiasm. Behind that contained facade, Shane had no idea what the boy really thought of the relationship, which gave him a permanent knot in his stomach whenever he announced that Rose would be attending a family event.

Having just returned from an exhausting sequence of road games with the team, Shane needed to focus on buying presents. Thus, he and Liam walked through the decorated downtown streets, braving the biting wind on a mission to find something for Yuna, David, and Rose.

"And Ilya?" Liam asked suddenly, squeezing his father's hand.

Shane blinked, tearing his eyes away from the shop windows to look at his son.

"He didn't come with us today."

"Ilya is on vacation, Li. I told you, remember? He's only coming back after Christmas," the older man replied softly, his gloved thumb stroking the back of the little boy's hand.

"But we can still give him his present later," Liam argued, adamant.

Shane let a small smile slip.

"Alright, we can look for something for him, yes." The smile widened when Liam's face instantly lit up. The boy's freckled cheeks were red from the intense cold; an exact reflection of his own father's cheeks at that moment.

Before entering the store where Shane was going to buy the dress Yuna had been "casually" mentioning for two months—a prior and secret agreement made with David—they made a strategic pit stop at a coffee shop. Shane ordered a steaming hot chocolate for his son and a double black coffee for himself. They settled at a discreet table in the corner. While Liam devoured a Christmas cookie, Shane pulled his cell phone from his pocket.

The colorful Instagram icon caught his eye. It was a story from Ilya. A tap on the screen confirmed that the Russian had indeed returned home. The photo showed a vibrant night market, all decorated for Christmas, with the unmistakable architecture of a Moscow castle in the background, under a thick layer of snow. In the image, Ilya was flipping off the camera while downing a glass of a clear liquid—which, judging by the bottle on the table, was pure vodka. Beside him, the model Sasha held an identical glass and a wide smile, with his arm around the shoulders of a girl kissing his cheek, showing off a beautiful engagement ring.

The caption was in Cyrillic. Prompted by pure and genuine nosiness, Shane took a screenshot and ran the image through a translator. The result made him snort a laugh: *"Sasha: finally settling down and ready to marry an amazing girl. Ilya: Rozanov."*

"Shane Hollander?"

Shane's head snapped up, and he found himself facing a man flanked by two boys wearing coats with the Metros logo.

"My God, it really is you!"

"It's me," Shane replied, already getting to his feet and leaving his cell phone face down on the table. His rigorous media training took over, prompting him to steer the interaction away from Liam, protecting his son's space. The boy simply kept chewing his cookie, watching the scene in silence, right as the waitress served their drinks.

"Sorry to bother you on your day off, it's just that my sons are huge fans," the man explained, already holding his device.

"A picture, then?"

"Please!" The older one, about thirteen, gave an excited little jump, while the younger one nodded frantically. "It would be the best Christmas ever!"

Shane smiled naturally, crouching down to the boys' eye level while the father snapped a series of pictures.

"Thanks, Shane!" The younger boy surprised him with a quick hug. Shane laughed, immediately returning the gesture. "Good luck on Tuesday's game!"

"Thanks, Cap!" the teenager added, beaming.

"Thank you so much, Shane. Happy holidays," the father extended his hand for a firm shake.

"No problem. Happy holidays to you too," he nodded, maintaining the trained smile, and sat back down.

"Have you thought of anything to buy for Ilya?" he asked, focusing back on his son.

"Uhm..." Liam pursed his lips, sporting a flawless chocolate mustache. "He really likes dogs... Maybe something that reminds him of Anya?"

"That could be a great idea," Shane agreed, picking his cell phone back up. "Finish eating so we can go hunting."

As soon as he unlocked the screen, Instagram refreshed, showing a new post from Ilya. Curious, he clicked on it. This time, the image showed the Russian holding a little girl in his lap. She had blonde curls identical to his, and the two were touching noses in an affectionate, playful way under the street market lights. In the bottom corner of the photo, a tiny, discreet purple heart.

It was a devastatingly cute picture. And instead of simply swiping to the side, Shane's traitorous thumb accidentally double-tapped the screen. The heart flew up.

A sudden, brutal heat rushed up the captain's neck. His immediate urge was to bury his head in a hole—or inside his cup of scalding coffee.

In retaliation against his own idiocy, Shane abruptly closed the app, tossed the device onto the table, and took a long, bitter sip of his drink.

Since their tense post-Halloween conversation, Shane had been religiously respecting Ilya's space, avoiding any mention of sexuality. And, acting impulsively, he had made a substantial donation to a foundation that sheltered homeless LGBTQIA+ youth who had been kicked out of their homes and were in extreme vulnerability. A considerable amount that the sports media, focused only on the rinks, let slip by, but which ended up going viral on larger news portals.

"THE VOICE FOR QUEERS IN HOCKEY? Understanding Shane Hollander's donation to the Queer Life Foundation."

That was the headline that had popped up on his phone mornings ago. The title didn't bother him. In fact, helping out there had brought him a much greater sense of peace than his usual donations to children's hospitals. Rose herself had sent him a surprised and proud message, highlighting the enormous impact of his action.

Ilya, however, hadn't peeped a word about the subject, even though Shane had caught a glimpse of the article open on his phone. The silence ate away at Shane. Did the Russian think he was just doing it for damage control? A pathetic attempt to erase a reputation of homophobia by association? The Canadian couldn't explain why he craved a reaction from Ilya so badly. It felt like the same deafening desperation as when he tried to impress Jessica in high school—a need for validation that invariably left him feeling like a complete moron.

"Where did Ilya go for his vacation?" Liam's voice suddenly cut through his daydreams. *(Note: Adjusted from 'Where is Ilya?' to fix the continuity error, since Shane had already established he was on vacation).*

"He went back home, to Russia," Shane replied, blinking to chase away his thoughts.

"Do you think he went to spend Christmas with his parents?" Liam pondered, curious. "He mentioned seeing his mom once. He really loves her. Did you know that little gold chain he wears around his neck was hers? He told me."

"Maybe that's exactly it, Li." Shane offered a weak smile, pulling a paper napkin. He leaned over the table and gently wiped the chocolate mustache off his son's face, drawing a crystalline laugh that, at least for a second, lifted the weight off his shoulders.

Warmed by their drinks, father and son left the coffee shop to check off the next items on their list. Their first stop was the boutique where they picked up Yuna's coveted dress, taking the opportunity to add a delicate necklace of sparkling stones to the package. For David, the mission was already accomplished: Shane had contacted his Rolex representative and ordered

one of the models from the new collection, which was scheduled to arrive at the building at any moment.

The big problem, however, was Rose. Liam hadn't offered a single guess or suggestion on what to buy for her, leaving Shane completely stranded. Out of options, he pulled out his phone and sent an SOS to the group chat he shared with Jackie, Simone, and the guys to set up playdates for the kids.

Jackie, ever pragmatic, suggested that since Rose seemed to love jewelry, that would be a safe route. Simone, on the other hand, was much more direct. According to her, the ideal Christmas gift was already in Shane's possession.

[Group: Playdates]

Simone: Dick.

J.J.: HAHHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

Hayden: 💀

Hayden: I almost dropped Arthur's bottle.

Jackie: Hayden is rolling on the floor laughing here.

Shane: Simone!

Simone: What?! You asked for gift ideas, I suggest you give her a good fuck for Christmas, duh.

J.J.: THAT'S IT! BY SEPTEMBER NEXT YEAR, LIAM IS GOING TO HAVE A LITTLE BROTHER OR SISTER!

Shane: It's perfectly clear why you two were married... You think exactly alike.

Simone: That was the exact reason for both the marriage and the divorce. But my point stands: sleep with her.

Jackie: Ignore Simone. Get her a nice necklace, or a pair of elegant earrings.

Simone: Give her the 🔥

J.J.: AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

J.J.: Simone, come back to me, Mon Dieu!

Jackie: Hayden is turning purple from laughing so hard next to me, help.

Hayden: [Voice message] AHAHAHFLFANSJBASLGKLA IMNOTOKAY

Shane: I am not giving her my ass. My God, we've been dating for a month and a half!

Simone: It's an excellent Christmas present. Super exclusive.

Jackie: Speaking from personal experience, girl?

J.J.: I don't like this change of subject. The main focus here is mocking Shane.

Hayden: [Voice message] AAAAAAAAAAH, WHAT DO YOU MEAN, JEAN-JACQUES?!

Shane: I hate all of you.

Shane shoved his phone back into his pocket. He was shaking his head and laughing, his ears burning with embarrassment in the middle of the sidewalk. For the sake of his own survival, he decided to follow the suggestion of the only sensible person in the group: Jackie.

Upon entering a jewelry store, Shane's eyes were drawn to a collection of necklaces whose pendants corresponded to the gemstone of each month of the year. He didn't even know such a thing existed. A second later, a pathetic realization hit him square in the chest: he had no earthly idea when Rose's birthday was.

Swallowing hard and driven by a sharp pang of guilt, he pulled his phone out again and Googled the actress's name. March 27th immediately flashed on the screen. Relieved, Shane bought the March necklace. The stone was a delicate and translucent aquamarine, a shade that conveniently mirrored the color of Rose's eyes.

Finally, there was only Ilya's present left, and for that one, Liam was overflowing with ideas. They walked into one of those giant toy stores where you can build your own stuffed animal. Liam took charge of the operation with the enthusiastic help of a clerk, handpicking every single detail. They walked out of there holding a plush dog that looked incredibly like Anya. The finishing touch, demanded by Liam, was a golden collar chosen specifically to mimic the chain the Russian wore around his neck.

Later, back at the apartment, peace reigned. Liam was on the first floor, sprawled on the couch watching TV, while Shane tried to focus on his yoga routine in the studio. However, the silence only made room for Simone's chaotic messages to echo in his mind.

He and Rose still hadn't slept together. Shane used the mental excuse that he had a young son at home and that he would feel like a terrible father (and a terrible boss) if he asked Ilya to stay overnight just so he could go out and get laid. But the truth was deeper—and much more terrifying.

Eight years. That was the exact count of how long it had been since Shane had last had sex. And that last time had been the night Liam was conceived. His few sexual experiences with Jessica had been awful, cold, and mechanical, and he had carried the belief his entire life that it was the fault of his own inexperience and clumsiness. Just the thought of being in the same bed with Rose threatened to crush him with nervousness. He was terrified of being a failure again. He thought it was unfair to her. Rose was dating the captain of the Montreal Metros, the so-called "best player in the NHL," and by this point, she would certainly expect a performance worthy of all that pomp.

And, worse still, there was the part involving... his own ass.

Shane's traitorous brain forced him to remember Jackie's message asking if Simone was speaking from personal experience, and J.J.'s comical desperation trying to change the subject. He blinked hard. He definitely didn't want to picture the sex life of one of his best friends, but the damage was done. Shane didn't even know how that sort of thing worked in practice.

Realizing he had been sitting cross-legged on the mat for five whole minutes, staring into the void and breaking out in a cold sweat over his own paranoia, Shane let out a muffled curse. He abandoned his yoga pose, grabbed his phone, and marched stiffly to his own bedroom, locking the bathroom door right after.

It wouldn't hurt to do a simple search just to understand how things worked.

In an incognito tab, of course.

Shane's initial searches naturally led him to pornographic websites. The fact that he hadn't had sex in eight years didn't mean he lived in absolute abstinence; he took care of his own needs when his body demanded it. Sitting on the cold edge of the bathtub, nervously biting his thumbnail, he hit play on the first video. The scene showed a heterosexual couple where the woman, mid-act, started teasing and fingering her partner.

Shane's reaction was... absolutely nothing.

He frowned, his face frozen in a confused expression bordering on apathy. Thinking the problem was the lack of chemistry in that specific video, he closed the tab and clicked on another. The result was the same: complete emptiness. Truth be told, Shane didn't even know what kind of spark he was expecting to find, but the coldness with which he watched those images bordered on clinical.

The monotony broke when the algorithm, reading his search patterns, suggested a threesome. Two men and one woman. Without thinking much about it, he opened the link.

Almost instantly, a visceral shift occurred. Shane felt the skin on the back of his neck prickle, and a thick heat began to rise up his neck, radiating in slow, heavy waves through his body. On the screen, while one of the guys was fucking the woman, the other man kissed him urgently, his fingers already working inside his partner. However, what truly destabilized Shane was realizing that his own eyes had entirely deleted the woman from the equation. His attention was magnetic, irreversibly pinned on the interaction between the two men.

When the dynamic on the screen changed and the tattooed guy penetrated the other, completely ignoring the female presence, Shane's breath hitched. In an almost involuntary reflex, his hand slipped into the waistband of his sweatpants. He gripped his own member, already stirring into semi-rigidity, and let out a hoarse sigh that echoed off the bathroom tiles. Seeing the power, the tense muscles, and the raw surrender between those two, a thought cleared his foggy mind: *that*, indeed, looked interesting.

For the first time in years, Shane was run over by the undeniable punch of what it felt like to be genuinely horny.

The next video on the sidebar had no women. It was just two guys.

Shane didn't hesitate. In moments, his cock was already out, dictating a firm and steady rhythm as his eyes devoured the image of a blonde man taking his partner possessively. The low sound from the phone filled the tiled bathroom with breathy moans, whispered curses, and the thud of moving bodies. The intoxicating sight consumed Shane completely. He bit his lower lip hard, his heart hammering frantically in his ears, as he increased the stroke of his hand faster and faster, surrendering defenselessly to a hunger he didn't even know existed.

[...]

Shane left his son's room with silent steps, light as feathers, and headed straight for his own refuge. He closed the door behind him, the click of the lock sounding like a seal of privacy. Ever since his quick jerk-off session before his shower, an uncomfortable restlessness had lodged in his mind, and the image from that video—two men, bodies intertwined in raw surrender—gave him no rest.

On the bed, the laptop waited like a window to the unknown. On the nightstand, an almost full bottle of lube looked accusatory. Shane leaned back against the headboard, the mattress sinking under his weight, and hesitated for a moment before typing into an incognito tab: "*gay porn*". There was no more room for self-deception, for the old excuse of clicking on straight videos and skipping ahead until, by chance, two men appeared. This time, he was searching with intent. With a courage that surprised him, he chose one of the highest-rated videos and hit play.

The laptop rested on his right thigh, while his left remained half-uncovered by the comforter, his skin goosebumped by the cold air of the room. Shane's hand rested inert near his navel, a prelude to something he didn't yet allow himself to name.

The video was almost comical in its artificiality, an absurd story about the owner of a gleaming mansion with a pool who, by some scripted magic, ended up sleeping with the pool boy. But Shane had never really imagined what sex between two men would be like. And, unlike the times he fantasized about women, this awakened an unexpected sensation in him: it seemed fun, free from a script he already knew by heart.

On the screen, the homeowner knelt down, knees against the wooden deck, and wrapped his mouth around the pool boy's cock. Shane wrinkled his nose, an involuntary grimace. But he forced himself to shift the image: he imagined it could be him receiving that pleasure. Not from a man, but just a blowjob. The thought met fragile resistance. It had been eight years since his last time having sex; an experience that had been terrible, mechanical, and empty. However, when his fingers slid, hesitantly, along the outline of his own cock and he felt the

blood pulsing beneath the skin, hardening it, Shane realized his attention had passed the point of no return. He was completely focused on the video.

The sounds the homeowner made were obscene: wet smacks, guttural moans muffled by skin. Shane wet his hand with the lube, the cold gel contrasting with the heat of his skin, and began to masturbate while still inside his underwear. His sighs escaped heavier and heavier, rhythmic, as his hips moved in sync with the scene.

It was then that the homeowner turned the pool boy around, bending him over a striped lounge chair, and began to open him up with his tongue. The act was surrendered, almost devout. Shane felt his stomach tighten in a mix of shock and arousal.

"Holy shit..." he murmured, his hoarse voice breaking the silence of the room.

His hand sped up, and he pulled his cock out of his underwear, eager for more freedom. The fabric gave way, and the cold air touched his exposed skin. Shane was no longer thinking about justifications. In that moment, there was only the rhythm, the heat, and the image of those two men who, without knowing it, were unveiling a desire he had spent his entire life trying to ignore.

When the video showed the homeowner positioning himself behind the pool boy, Shane felt the air escape his lungs in a trembling sigh. His right hand began to move in a frantic rhythm, stroking up and down with growing urgency. He twisted his wrist at the most sensitive head, concentrating the pressure there, and a low, contained moan vibrated in his throat. The sound escaped through his clenched teeth, a careful noise—he couldn't wake his eight-year-old son sleeping at the end of the hall, and he prayed silently that the acoustics of the room, with its plush rug and heavy curtains, would be his accomplice.

With his free left hand, Shane slid his fingers in a slower and more calculated touch, playing with the weight of his own balls. Most nights, those videos merely served as indistinct background noise; he would close his eyes and lose himself in his own fantasies until the climax arrived almost mechanically. But not now. His gaze was glued to the laptop screen, the bluish glow illuminating his tense features of desire. He was truly watching, absorbing every detail, every sound, allowing the scene to feed his pleasure in a new and intense way.

"Uhm-hm..." Shane's breath suddenly hitched, a panting gasp as a wave of dense heat began to build in his groin, spreading in pulsing waves through his contracted abdomen.

On the screen, the dynamic had changed. The pool boy was now riding the homeowner with desperate abandon, his hips moving in wide, fast circles, chasing his own orgasm like a madman. His moans intertwined with his partner's in a hoarse, animalistic duet, the sound of the bodies' contact filling Shane's room. He didn't even realize it, but his own hand followed that erratic rhythm, his breathing becoming an echo of the moans he heard, a private, muffled chorus in the solitude of the night.

The pulse throbbed now at his fingertips, and Shane bit his lower lip hard, using the minimal pain as an anchor so as not to lose himself completely in the whirlwind of sensations. His hips began to move involuntarily, small upward thrusts that met his closed fist, creating a delicious friction that drew out sighs that were increasingly difficult to silence. Sweat beaded

on his forehead and rolled down his temples, physical proof of the effort he was making to stay quiet while the pleasure climbed dangerously higher.

In the video, the pool boy threw his head back, the muscles of his back flexed into a map of tension, and let out a louder moan, almost a choked scream. The homeowner gripped his hips tightly, fingers digging marks into the tanned skin, and accelerated the rhythm from the bottom up, meeting the other man's movement with animalistic precision. The ambient sound was raw: the squeak of the cushion, the wet slap of bodies, the loose, obscene words they exchanged between pants. Shane absorbed everything with almost devout attention, feeling his own body respond as if he were part of the scene, as if he were right there, on the video's pool deck, participating in that mutual surrender.

He slid his left hand up, leaving his balls to trace his own tense abdomen, feeling the muscles contract under his sweaty palm. His fingers climbed to his chest, finding an already hardened nipple, and Shane gave it a light pinch, drawing out a deeper groan from himself that escaped before he could stop it. "Shh, shh..." he whispered to himself, the sound almost inaudible, the awareness of his son sleeping nearby acting as a precarious brake that only intensified the taboo of the situation.

On the screen, the climax was approaching for both men. The pool boy was moaning with no control now, broken sentences that Shane barely processed, and the homeowner answered with hoarse grunts, the pace becoming erratic and fierce. The exact moment when the pleasure became unbearable for both of them was visible, the edge of the abyss appearing in tightly squeezed eyes, in mouths open in silent exclamations. Shane recognized that limit because he felt it in himself too, rising like a tide that was already licking at his feet and threatening to swallow him whole.

His fist sped up even more, now without technique or subtlety, just a blind chase toward the peak. His hand on his chest moved down again to grab the sheet, twisting the fabric as if he could anchor himself there while his entire body arched, his heels digging into the mattress. His vision on the screen blurred for a second—the pool boy hitting orgasm with a hoarse cry, his body trembling in spasms, and the homeowner immediately following suit, holding him tightly as he unloaded inside him with a prolonged, guttural groan.

It was the final spark needed. Shane felt the heat concentrate into a single point and then explode in hot waves that ran through his entire body, from his groin to his chest, shooting up his spine until it tore out a muffled groan that he smothered against his own shoulder. His hand continued the movement for a few more seconds, extracting every last drop of pleasure while his body trembled in smaller spasms, his eyes finally closing in complete surrender.

When he found the strength to open them again, the video had already ended. The screen only showed the replay icon, floating over a frozen thumbnail of the two men still entangled. Shane took a deep breath, his chest rising and falling in a rhythm that slowly returned to normal, and he felt the sweat cooling on his skin. The silence of the house was now filled only by the computer's panting fan and the distant hum of the city outside. His son continued to sleep, untouched by the night.

With a slow and still trembling movement, Shane grabbed a tissue from the nightstand and cleaned himself up, avoiding looking in the wardrobe mirror across the room. The guilt

would come later, as always, but for now, there was only the heavy relaxation of his muscles and a dense drowsiness that was beginning to cloud his thoughts. He closed the laptop without bothering to clear the history, pulled the comforter over his naked body, and rolled onto his side, turning his back to the hallway door. Within minutes, he was asleep.

[...]

The next morning, Shane woke up with an unusual lightness, stretching comfortably under the sheets. The peace lasted exactly until his eyes landed on the laptop tossed beside him on the bed. The memory of the early hours hit his forehead like a runaway truck. He had just had one of the best and most intense orgasms of his life watching a video where "the mansion owner fucked the pool boy." Once again that week, Shane's immediate urge was to throw the balcony door wide open and throw himself off it.

The moral hangover clung to his skin, viscous, weighing him down with the bitter taste of betrayal. After all, he was dating. He was dating Rose Landry. Golden Globe winner, Rose Landry.

Minutes later, standing in front of the bathroom sink, he brushed his teeth with a mechanical violence, making absolutely sure not to look up. He ignored his own reflection in the mirror, afraid that the glass would expose just how "dirty" and lost he felt. To escape his own mind, he unlocked his phone with his free hand. At the top of the Instagram screen, the colorful ring around Ilya's photo announced a new story.

Shane tapped the screen. A second later, he nearly inhaled his toothpaste foam, choking violently and having to spit it all into the sink.

The innocent voice of Liam echoed in his mind like a funeral bell: *"He said something about seeing his mom... That little gold chain he wears was hers."*

The photo filling the phone screen wasn't of a traditional Russian supper or a cozy family gathering. It was a photo of a tombstone. An imposing dark granite stone, flanked by a solitary vase holding a bouquet of freshly cut flowers, contrasting with the snow around it.

At the bottom corner of the image, there was a discreet message in Cyrillic. With a slightly trembling hand, Shane took a screenshot and ran it through the translator, even though his stomach had already guessed the worst. The app returned the exact phrase he had imagined: *"Merry Christmas, Mom."* Ilya's mother didn't live in Russia awaiting her son's visit for the holidays. She had passed away.

Shane zoomed in on the image of the tombstone. The numbers of the dates were the only universal thing there that he could immediately understand. The mental math was quick and relentless: she had died fourteen years ago. Since Ilya was the same age as Shane, that meant the Russian had lost her when he was only a twelve-year-old boy.

Driven by a morbid urgency, Shane used the translator's camera directly on the letters carved into the stone. The phrase that appeared superimposed on the screen sealed the suffocating tightness in his chest:

"Here lies Irina Stepanovna Rozanova — Beloved daughter, wife, and mother — You will be forever missed."

When Shane calculated the gap between Irina's birth year and the year she passed away, the weight became suffocating. She had died at a mere thirty-one years of age. That meant she had gotten pregnant with Ilya at eighteen or nineteen. And, remembering that loose detail about Ilya having an older brother with a four-year age difference, the final math was even more bleak: Irina had her first child around fifteen or sixteen. A tragically short life, marked by responsibilities from a very early age.

From one fraction of a second to the next, the sexual panic and the pool boy video completely evaporated from the Canadian's mind. The shame of his own desire was crushed and replaced by an aching empathy. Shane stood there, leaning against the edge of the sink, absorbing in absolute silence that tragic fragment of Ilya's life—a fundamental piece of the Russian's puzzle that he had only discovered because of a fleeting story and his own nosiness in translating an unknown alphabet.

Walking down the stairs to prepare Liam's breakfast, Shane imposed an impossible mission upon himself: to empty his mind. He desperately needed to focus on anything other than his humiliating late-night epiphany or the crushing weight of Ilya's family tragedy. Thinking about the next day's game against the Centaurs seemed like a much safer route.

Like divine intervention, his phone buzzed on the marble counter. It was a group video call started by Hayden, including J.J.

"Six-thirty in the morning, Hayden..." J.J.'s voice sounded dragged out, deep with sleep. On the screen, his room was pitch black, his crumpled face illuminated only by the bluish glow of his own phone.

Shane let out a snort of laughter, cracking the first egg on the rim of a glass bowl.

"I have four kids, my man. 'Early' is a very relative concept." Hayden, in stark contrast, looked like he'd been wired on 220v for hours. He was pacing around his own kitchen balancing Arthur in a baby sling, who was nursing vigorously, while in the background the twins could be seen focused on their bowls of cereal. "I have exactly two free hours in my day today, and I'm going to use them to buy the missing presents: the ones for your kids. So, answer quickly..."

Hayden threw a cautious look over his shoulder. He brought his face closer to the camera and covered little Arthur's ears with one hand, as if the baby could pass the gossip along.

"*Croient-ils encore au père Noël?*" he whispered in French, ensuring Ruby and Jade wouldn't understand the question about Santa Claus.

"Never believed," Shane answered promptly. Liam had never been the kind of kid to believe in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or the Tooth Fairy, and neither he nor Jessica had pushed it.

"Yes," J.J. grunted, rubbing his eyes miserably and dragging himself across the mattress. "Alexa, open curtains."

Gradually, J.J.'s camera was flooded with morning light, finally revealing the defenseman's exhausted face.

"Elise still believes. Buy it and drop it off here. I'll hide it in my office and put it under the tree later."

"Alright," Hayden nodded. With agility, he pulled the empty bottle and took Arthur out of the sling to burp him over his shoulder. "Does Liam want anything specific, Shane?"

"Shark," the captain replied, tossing the omelet mixture into the hot frying pan. The sizzle of melting butter filled the call's audio. "A plastic shark, a plush one, a coloring book, a shirt... literally anything that has a shark on it."

"Noted," Hayden confirmed, focused. "And Elise, Jean? Does she still want that weird doll?"

"No, Ilya already gave her the doll as a present before he left for Russia," J.J. replied casually, walking through his own house.

Shane looked up from the frying pan and cast a quick glance at the screen, but kept his mouth shut. It made sense. Ilya had been taking care of Elise for almost two years; their connection was solid and established. With Liam, it had only been four months. Even if, in Shane's experience, it already felt like much more than that.

"Speaking of which, Shane, he also left a present for Liam here at the house before he left. I'll give it to you tomorrow in the locker room," the defenseman added with a mild smile, propping his phone on the kitchen counter to start making his own coffee.

On the other side of the screen, Hayden set Arthur down on the floor and asked the twins to take him to the playpen in the living room and watch TV very quietly so as not to wake him. As soon as the coast was clear, Hayden's smile transformed.

"Jean-Jacques... what was that talk in the group chat yesterday, huh?" Hayden pressed his face to the camera, a mischievous smile stretching from ear to ear.

The French-Canadian looked away immediately. He fled the frame like a fugitive, pretending to inspect the back of the fridge.

"Don't run away, you piece of shit!" Hayden cackled.

"Man, I'm going to strangle Simone," J.J. grumbled, returning to the screen. With the skill of years of practice, he cracked two eggs simultaneously, one in each hand, straight into the frying pan. Shane let out a genuine laugh at his friend's frustration. "Hey! God put the prostate there for a reason!"

Hayden threw his head back, letting out a laugh so thunderous he almost lost his balance. Shane leaned over the kitchen island, laughing out loud along with him, feeling his chest finally light after the tension of the early hours.

"Tu ris parce que tu ne sais pas à quel point c'est bon d'avoir un orgasme grâce à ta prostate!" J.J. yelled, defensive, pointing his spatula threateningly at the phone camera. *"Et j'étais marié, c'était ma femme qui le faisait, il n'y a rien de mal à ça, c'est juste du sexe, un bon moment coquin!"*

"Je n'aurais jamais pensé qu'une de mes amies pourrait aimer se faire flatter pendant un rapport sexuel..." Hayden managed to articulate, slowly catching his breath. He was red as a bell pepper from laughing so hard. Shane wasn't far behind.

"Eh bien, j'imagine que les couples expérimentent des choses," Shane shrugged, his shoulders shaking.

It was then that, in Hayden's square, Jackie appeared. She was holding little Amber nestled in her arms, already in the middle of her own breakfast.

"Oh, no. Are you three speaking French at six-forty in the morning? You're talking a lot of nonsense, aren't you?" the blonde deduced immediately, narrowing her eyes at her husband.

"Good morning, Jackie," Shane and J.J. said in unison, their voices suddenly well-behaved.

"On parle de doigts dans le cul," Hayden answered, whispering with a devilish smile.

Jackie didn't hesitate and delivered a crisp smack to her husband's shoulder, which only made him laugh even harder.

"Ignoring these two... What did you buy for Rose, Shane?" the blonde asked, offering a small, affectionate smile.

"A necklace with the March birthstone, which is her birthday month," Shane replied, sliding the perfectly golden omelet onto a plate and pushing down the toaster lever.

"Aww! I bet she's going to love it, sweetie," Jackie sighed, excited. And then, she turned her face slightly toward her husband, her tone of voice suddenly sharp and lethal. "A super thoughtful and beautiful gift, don't you think, Hayden?"

Hayden shut his mouth instantly. He turned his head in slow motion toward his wife, swallowing so hard that the sound almost came through the microphone, and nodded repeatedly, without daring to say a single word.

[...]

In the early hours of the morning on December twenty-third, Shane parked the car in front of the hotel where Rose was staying with the rest of the cast for the filming of her new series. It didn't take long for him to spot the actress rushing out through the revolving doors, pulling a small, copper-colored carry-on suitcase.

Shane unlocked the trunk with a touch on the dashboard. Rose quickly stowed her luggage and, a second later, opened the passenger door, bringing with her a biting gust of freezing air that clashed head-on with the vehicle's heated interior.

"Hi, Liam!" she greeted, turning around with a bright smile.

"Hi," Liam muttered in response, the monotone voice of someone who hadn't even lifted his eyes from the pages of the little book he'd brought to entertain himself.

Rose didn't let it faze her. She turned back to the front, and she and Shane leaned over the center console to share a soft, affectionate good-morning kiss.

"Am I supposed to pretend I didn't see that mountain of wrapped gifts in the trunk, or...?" she teased, settling into the seat and raising an eyebrow.

"Santa's sleigh hit a pole a few blocks back. Coincidentally, the jolly old man left the exact number of boxes for the people spending Christmas at the cottage," Shane joked, checking the rearview mirror and putting the car back in motion, which drew a crystalline laugh from his girlfriend. "I think you're going to like the cottage. It's super private. The nearest neighbors are about a ten-minute drive away, and in this case, they're my parents."

"Thank you for the invitation," Rose smiled, settling deeper into the leather seat. "It's going to be a million times better than spending the holiday with the production crew and having to listen to Miles whining because I abandoned the single life and left him all alone."

Shane let out a genuine laugh, imagining her castmate's drama.

"And how is Ilya? Off from the agency?" she asked casually, tilting her head to observe the Canadian's profile as he drove.

"Oh, yeah. He traveled to Russia a few days ago. Went to spend the holidays with his family. But he already confirmed he lands back on the twenty-sixth, first thing in the morning."

"Wow, a quick round trip just for supper," Rose commented, slightly surprised. Then, she subtly lowered her voice and volume. "And... that conversation with him? Any news on the subject, or...?"

"Nope," Shane sighed, keeping his eyes glued to the road. "But, you know that second person I mentioned before? It wasn't what I thought. Sasha is engaged. I saw it on Instagram yesterday."

"The supposed...?" Rose let the word hang, invisible, in the air.

The actress had an impeccable ability to communicate in half-sentences and between the lines to throw off Liam's attentive presence in the backseat. Shane found this fascinating and,

honestly, a huge facilitator for his life.

He nodded slightly, confirming the redhead's silent suspicion. Rose broke into a pleased smile.

"That's good. That's cute. Engagements are always cute," she pondered, agreeing with her own logic. "And he's the fiancé of...?"

"Lydia, a girl," Shane completed promptly.

Rose nodded once more, satisfied with the resolution of the mystery. Seconds later, their eyes met and the dam broke: they both burst out laughing. The herculean and ridiculous effort of having to police and chop up every sentence just to gossip about other people's lives in front of an eight-year-old child was pathetically funny.

The two-hour drive to Ottawa seemed to drag on. Through the rearview mirror, Shane watched the backseat: Liam was fast asleep, his face buried in the soft fabric of Mr. Bubbles. On his lap rested the coloring book, now almost entirely filled in—ironically, one of the first presents Ilya had given him.

When they finally parked in front of the cottage, Rose stepped out of the car and her jaw dropped momentarily, admiring the view of the snow-isolated property. There was a second vehicle parked there; Shane's parents had already arrived to get a head start on the preparations. As soon as Liam recognized his grandparents' car, his sleepiness evaporated. The boy threw the door open and bolted.

"Liam, don't run in the snow!" Shane yelled, the warning coming too late.

In that exact moment, the boy's boot slipped badly on the frozen stones of the driveway. Shane grabbed the side of the car, his heart stopping in his chest, already anticipating a ruined holiday in a hospital waiting room. But David was faster. With impeccable reflexes, the grandfather caught his grandson mid-air by the arm.

"Gotcha! Hold on tight, big guy!" David laughed, lifting the boy off the ground in a tight hug.

Liam burst out laughing, completely oblivious to the near-disaster, while Shane let go of the car and put a hand to his chest, forcing his own heart to start beating again. His breathing still unsteady, he narrowed his eyes as he noticed Liam pull on the collar of David's coat and whisper something secretly in his ear before being set down.

Through the huge glass windows on the facade, Yuna could be seen waving from the kitchen.

"Rose, it's a pleasure to finally meet you," David walked up to the actress, extending his hand with a welcoming smile.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Hollander," Rose replied politely, returning the greeting.

"Please, call me David," he insisted gently. "Go on in, make yourself at home. Shane and I will unload the trunk. Yuna is in the kitchen. Li, show Rose around the house, buddy."

Liam was already waiting at the top of the steps. Rose walked up to him, offering a restrained smile, wiped her boots on the doormat, and went in right behind the boy.

With the coast clear, Shane walked around the vehicle and opened the trunk. His father approached from the other side.

"What did Liam whisper to you just now?" Shane fired off the question immediately.

David let out a long, heavy sigh, a white cloud of condensation escaping his lips in the cold. Shane could already guess the gist of the answer.

"It was about Rose, wasn't it?"

"He said Christmas is only for family, and well... Rose isn't family," David pressed his lips into a thin line.

Shane closed his eyes and firmly pinched the bridge of his nose, letting his own bag slide into the snow at his feet.

"Relax, Shane. He just hasn't gotten used to her yet," David reasoned, his voice carrying the mildness of someone who had seen a lot of life. "Liam doesn't say it openly, but he misses Jessica. And, honestly, you starting to date another redhead didn't really help..."

"Rose dyes her hair!" Shane countered in an almost childish reflex, but had to concede the point to his father right after. "It's just that... he gets monosyllabic and tense around her, but when he met Ilya, they became best friends that same minute."

"Well, in the boy's defense, Ilya doesn't go around kissing his dad," David pointed out with a mocking smile.

Shane let out a puff of air that sounded like a dry laugh. He silently prayed that the sudden cold dropping into the pit of his stomach at that comment was solely to blame on the sub-zero temperatures. Without another word, the two grabbed the bags and the presents and marched inside.

The thermal contrast was instant. The house smelled of firewood and good food.

"...and I love a restaurant in Mexico City called El Matador. Their food is simply unreal!" Rose's voice echoed cheerfully.

The conversation between the actress and Yuna had the easy cadence and intimacy of longtime friends, even though they had met less than five minutes ago. Shane blinked, genuinely surprised. He left the presents piled near the fireplace and approached the kitchen island.

"Wow, did you guys already know each other and not tell me?" he joked, planting a loud kiss on his mother's cheek.

"No, but your girlfriend actually likes to travel, just like your father and me," Yuna replied, pleased with her new ally. "David! For Valentine's Day, we are going to Mexico again!"

"Yes, ma'am!" David promptly accepted the order, passing by them to take Liam's bags downstairs. Since the house was built on the slope of a hill, the front door was technically on the second floor; the bedrooms were down on the first floor, accessible by a wooden staircase next to the fireplace.

"Where's Liam?" Shane searched with his eyes until he spotted the smart TV turned on. The boy was sprawled on the couch, mesmerized by a cartoon, but safely within the line of sight of the open-concept living room.

"And how is Ilya? Did he go home for the holidays?" Yuna asked casually, going back to organizing the spices on the marble counter.

"He did, yes. But he let us know he's coming right back on the morning of the twenty-sixth. And then, a certain someone over there in the living room will stop pouting," Shane indicated his son with his chin.

"Wow, so he's literally going to board a plane on Christmas Day, then?" Yuna quickly did the time zone math, frowning. "Is he close to his parents?"

The mention of Ilya's mother hit Shane like a dull blow to the chest. The image of the cold tombstone and the bouquet of flowers flashed in his mind. He swallowed hard, keeping the Russian's secret.

"I don't know," Shane lied, shrugging and leaning his hip against the island, right next to the stool where Rose was sitting.

"Well, if his mom is fine with her son visiting and leaving at the speed of light just for the holidays, maybe they aren't that close," Yuna babbled, oblivious to the weight of those words. "Because if you ever pulled a stunt like that with me, Shane Hollander, I'd make sure to show you that if it was easy to bring you into this world, it's even easier to take you out of it!"

She pointed the sauce-covered spatula toward her son's face, narrowing her eyes threateningly. Shane's eyes widened and he raised his hands in surrender.

"Mom, I live a two-hour drive from here! Ilya lives on the other side of the planet!" he argued, trying to save his own skin.

"IT WAS EASY TO BRING HIM INTO THE WORLD?!" David's indignant yell echoed from the first floor, floating up the stairwell. "You broke two of my fingers in the delivery room, woman!"

"WIMP!" Yuna yelled back at the top of her lungs, without missing a beat, going back to stirring the pot.

Shane turned his head slowly. He cast an apologetic look of pure embarrassment toward Rose. The actress had both hands covering her mouth, her whole body shaking as she fought desperately to hold back a fit of laughter.

[...]

Because it was the holiday season, Shane made an exception and let Liam stay awake until his eyes grew heavy. The boy was downstairs with David and Yuna, sprawled in the video game area watching *Home Alone*. Shane, on the other hand, was physically and mentally exhausted. He had already retired to his own room, and Rose had accompanied him.

They would sleep together in the same bed. They were dating; it was the natural step. But for Shane, the simple idea felt overwhelming, coated in a silent, paralyzing anguish that he couldn't decipher.

"I have the slight impression that Liam isn't exactly a fan of mine, even though I'm literally his favorite superhero," Rose commented in a light tone, stepping out of the en-suite bathroom with her red hair tied in a loose bun.

"Rose..." Shane sighed, rubbing his tired face. Sitting on the edge of the mattress, he stood up, walked over to her, and gently held her hands. "He just needs time. Liam has never seen me with anyone in his life. Jessica and I had already broken up before he was even born, and we spent the last few years wanting to rip each other's heads off. It's not personal against you."

"Jessica Dubois, right?" Rose said the name cautiously. She rarely mentioned the ex, respecting the fact that Shane hated touching on the subject. The Canadian nodded slowly. "She sent me a message."

Shane's blood ran cold in his veins. He blinked, the muscles in his back instantly tensing. She violated the restraining order. Again. It was the second time Jessica had crossed the line indirectly—the first being the leak to the media about hiring Ilya as a nanny.

"I know it's a weird request... but can you send me a screenshot of that?" Shane's voice came out tense, a dry bitterness taking over his throat. Rose raised her eyebrows, surprised by the drastic change in his posture. "She is legally forbidden from contacting me or anyone directly connected to me."

"My God... is it that serious? I thought full custody was just a difficult agreement."

"She accused me of physical assault while we were dating and of parental alienation. When I proved in court that it was all lies, the judge issued a restraining order. She can't come within a two-hundred-meter radius of me or Liam," Shane explained, letting out a trembling, exhausted sigh. "That's why I never dated, Rose. It's pretty hard to try to move on when your first girlfriend turns your life into a legal hell for almost a decade."

"I'll send you the screenshot right now," Rose assured in a whisper, sliding her hands down his arms in a soothing caress. "I'm not Jessica, Shane."

"I know... I know you're not." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Maybe Liam is terrified of that too."

"And I'm not here to replace his mother," she stated firmly, shaking her head. "And for the record, Jessica didn't threaten me or anything like that. She just said... some things about you. Things that I decided to ignore."

"What kind of things?" Shane's defensive instinct flared.

"Things about..." Rose's gaze drifted subtly toward the king-size bed, followed by a meaningful shake of her head. She waited for him to connect the dots. And he did.

"Wonderful..." Shane murmured, running a hand roughly through his hair, humiliation crawling under his skin.

Rose let out a low, comforting laugh and pulled him by the waist, pressing their bodies together.

"Hey, hey, look at me. It's okay. I don't give a damn about what she said," Rose stated, diving her gaze into his eyes. "Besides, I'm absolutely sure it's all lies."

"Maybe it isn't..." Chronic insecurity leaked into Shane's words before he could stop them.

"Well, there's no way for me to know, is there?" Rose shrugged, her tone adopting a suggestive mischievousness. The environment was perfectly set: the door was locked, the heavy blackout curtains covered the glass windows from end to end, isolating the room in a dark, soundproof cocoon. "Or is there?"

"No..." Shane whispered. His gaze traveled over Rose's pretty features, lingering on her lips before meeting her eyes again. "There isn't."

Rose took the initiative. She leaned in and pressed her lips to Shane's in a soft kiss that gradually gained urgency. He returned it out of pure reflex, cradling the redhead's face in both hands as she slid her arms up his shoulders, tangling her fingers in his dark hair. Both of their breathing accelerated, the kiss becoming increasingly eager.

Navigating blindly, the two stumbled to the edge of the bed and collapsed onto the soft mattress. Rose nimbly slid her hands under Shane's t-shirt. Her touch on his back sent a shiver through the Canadian's body, but not in the expected way. When the actress's manicured nails scraped lightly against the skin of his nape, Shane's muscles locked up. The tactile sensation made him instantly tense, as if his body wanted to reject the contact.

Focus. Concentrate, he ordered himself in silent panic. *Rose is your girlfriend. Everything is fine.*

Fighting the instinctive urge to pull away, Shane slid his hand under her pajama top. The skin on Rose's stomach was warm and absurdly silky. However, the strong, floral scent of the lotion she had just used after her shower invaded his nostrils. The sweet, dense scent, thick in the air, mixed with the overwhelming anxiety in his chest, leaving him dazed—nauseated, actually. The atmosphere, which should have been intimate, suddenly felt claustrophobic.

Shane's breathing grew shallow. The air felt thin, as if the spacious bedroom walls were suddenly closing in around the bed. He tried to focus on Rose's lips, on the heat of the moment, but his mind was a storm of static. The touch, the delicate texture of her skin, the floral fragrance... everything felt wrong. Not just weird, but fundamentally out of sync with how he felt; suddenly, he was seventeen again, with Jessica.

Suddenly, the visual memory of the previous night—the rhythm, the tension, the absence of the very element present with him now—flashed across his mind like lightning.

Shane froze. The shock of that realization hit him with the force of a punch to the gut. He wasn't just locking up because of Jessica's ghost or the weight of eight years of inexperience. The paralyzing truth was that his body simply didn't want to be there; Shane wanted to flee.

"Shane?" Rose murmured against his lips, noticing the sudden stiffness in her boyfriend's shoulders. She pulled back a few inches, resting her hands on his broad chest. Her eyes tried to decipher the captain's pale, stunned expression in the dim light. "Are you okay?"

He swallowed hard, jerking his hand out from under her shirt almost as if he'd touched a hot stove. His heart hammered painfully against his ribs.

"I... I can't," his voice cracked, coming out in a hoarse whisper torn with guilt. He retreated to the edge of the bed, sitting with his back to her and burying his face in his trembling hands. "I'm sorry, Rose. I'm so sorry."

The silence that hung over the room was thick and suffocating. Rose sat up slowly, adjusting her silk top. Instead of the annoyance Shane expected and was certain he deserved, he felt her delicate hand rest in the middle of his back in a comforting gesture.

"Hey... look at me," her voice sounded soft, devoid of any trace of judgment. "We don't have to do anything, Shane. You're exhausted, the trip was long, you had a game last night, and all this mess with your ex definitely brought a heavy emotional toll. Don't be so hard on yourself, okay?"

Shane nodded blindly, his face still hidden in his hands, completely lacking the courage to look at her. Rose's understanding words were like sharp knives shredding his conscience. She was wonderful, understanding, and mature; the partner any man would wish to have by his side.

And in that moment, Shane felt like the biggest fraud on the planet.

"Come lie down. Let's just sleep. Okay?" she called softly, pulling back the covers.

He obeyed on autopilot, slipping under the sheets and keeping a safe distance from her body. Rose nestled facing the opposite direction and didn't take long to find the slow, steady rhythm of sleep. But Shane... Shane spent the rest of the night wide awake, staring into the darkness of the ceiling, while the texture of that touch and the scent of the floral perfume echoed in an asphyxiating loop inside his own head.

Chapter 10: Just an act

Chapter Notes

I never laughed so hard as I did reading the comments of last chapter, and I agree shaney, honey, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

get yourself together, woman - williams, hudson.

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

Ilya was finishing throwing his clothes haphazardly into his suitcase, the zipper almost bursting. There were only a few hours left before his flight, and the plan to stay at Sasha's house had worked perfectly. He didn't have to set foot in his own house. He didn't have to face his brother Alexei, his stepmother Polina, or his father, Grigori. And, thanks to Svetlana's negotiation skills—who convinced her sister-in-law to let him see little Danika without his brother present—he had managed to spend an evening with his eight-year-old niece. The escape was almost complete.

"Ilyushka," the voice sounded behind him.

The blonde looked over his shoulder. Sasha was standing in the doorway, his broad shoulders tense, twisting the engagement ring on his finger over and over.

"Chto? (What?)" Ilya turned around fully, instinctively crossing his arms.

"Polina called," the taller model blurted out, and Ilya's jaw locked with an audible pop. "She said your dad asked to see you."

"And who opened their mouth to tell him I was here?" Ilya raised his eyebrows to his golden curls, irritation already boiling his blood.

"Nika..." Sasha pressed his lips together, apologetic. "Lidiya and I can go with you, if you want..."

"I'm not going."

Ilya turned his back and went back to stuffing clothes into his suitcase.

Half an hour later, he was walking up the stone steps of his childhood home, his expression locked in a mask of pure fury. Sasha and Lidiya had stayed in the car, engine running, waiting. Svetlana, however, linked her arm with Ilya's and walked through the front door by his side, acting as a silent anchor.

"Well, look who decided to show up," Polina's drawling voice greeted them as soon as they stepped into the hall, the stepmother's eyes fixed on their linked arms. "Are you finally going to make it official, or are you just going to keep stalling? And don't you think your father deserves to have his head 'here' to see both his sons get married?" she punctuated the sentence by tapping her index finger against her own temple, indicating her husband's dementia.

If Ilya didn't already have an ulcer, one had definitely just opened and burst in his stomach.

"Where is my dad, Polina?" he cut in, short and blunt, not wasting energy on a comeback.

The blonde scoffed and pointed to the adjacent room: the old music room.

Irina's ghost haunted that space. Ilya still remembered sitting there on the rug to listen to his mother play the piano. He also remembered the only time Grigori had sat in the armchair with a glass of whiskey, in absolute silence, just listening and humming the melody along with his wife.

Now, Grigori was sitting on the same sofa, reading a newspaper with his glasses slipping down the bridge of his nose. He was wearing thick flannel pajamas and had a harmless glass of water within reach. The serene expression on his wrinkled face erased any trace of the feared and ruthless police detective he had once been; the man with powerful contacts in parliament who had always imposed terror under his own roof.

"Dad," Ilya called out. His voice came out stiff, mechanical, devoid of any affection.

Svetlana subtly stroked the back of his hand, letting go immediately to step back and lean against the wall next to Polina, reluctantly.

"Uhm?" Grigori looked up.

His eyes didn't carry the same icy, vibrant blue as Ilya's eyes—a genetic gift from Irina. For a long second, staring at that confused old man, Ilya's chest threatened to shatter. Grigori frowned, his gaze wandering over his own son's face as if trying to recognize a stranger who had invaded his living room.

Slowly, the old man took off his glasses and folded the newspaper in his lap.

"Your hair has grown," he pointed out, genuinely surprised.

Ilya let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and nodded slowly.

"Yes, Dad." It had been over a year since they last saw each other. Ilya's hair had grown and been cut dozens of times since then.

"Sit down," Grigori pointed to the armchair next to him. Ilya obeyed, keeping his posture achingly straight. "How are the games?"

Ilya shot a panicked look at Svetlana, his eyes begging for help, praying she would invent an excuse and drag him out of there. Near the door, Polina brought a hand to her chest in a

gesture of genuine sadness. As detestable, gold-digging, and cruel as the stepmother was, she had inevitably developed some attachment to the man, and witnessing the decay of his mind took a toll even on her.

"I don't play anymore, Dad. I got hurt on the ice, remember?" Ilya replied, forcing his voice to come out smooth and controlled.

Grigori furrowed his white eyebrows, digesting the information with difficulty before nodding slowly.

"Oh, that's right... how long ago was that?"

"Almost nine years," Ilya answered. His back ached from the extreme tension. Sasha had better have a bottle of vodka in that car, because Ilya wasn't leaving that house sober. He wouldn't be able to.

"And what are you working with now, over there in America?"

"I take care of kids. And I live in Canada now," he explained with contained calm.

Grigori raised his eyebrows, surprised, and a small smile appeared on his lips.

"Your mother gave you that. She loves children," Grigori murmured, turning his head to search the room for Irina, until his eyes landed on the dust-covered piano. "And she plays so well, doesn't she?"

"She *played*," Ilya emphasized the past tense, his throat closing up.

Grigori kept staring at the untouched keys.

"Mama died, Dad."

"Today is Christmas, isn't it?" the old man changed the subject abruptly, ignoring the correction. He looked down at his own hand, staring at his wedding ring with Polina, not Irina's.

"Yes, it is," Ilya agreed, exhausted.

"Forty... five years, right? That's what your mother would be today," the old man guessed the math. Ilya just nodded. Irina's birthday was on Christmas Eve, December twenty-fourth.

Grigori's gaze returned to the wooden instrument.

"I remember her playing... You used to sit right on her lap," he pointed out, his voice bathed in an affectionate nostalgia. And then, he turned to his son: "And when are you going to have your own kids?"

The real answer screaming in the back of Ilya's mind was: *With any luck, never. I'm not passing these damn cursed genetics on.*

"I already work with kids all day, that's enough for me," Ilya limited himself to saying, accompanying it with a stiff nod. His father was no longer looking at him; his attention had returned to the piano. "I need to leave now. I have a long flight to catch."

"Merry Christmas," Grigori murmured, without taking his eyes off the empty bench, as if he were actually watching his wife play.

In that second, Ilya wanted to die. The hatred bubbled up, acidic and violent. He wanted to kick the coffee table, smash the keys, scream at that damn old man. The greatest injustice in the world was that his tormentor—the monster who haunted his life, who terrorized the house, who yelled, beat, and drove Irina to suicide—was now just a helpless old man, whose sick mind had the audacity to erase his own sins and retain only the good memories of the woman he destroyed.

"Merry Christmas, *Papa*."

The response came out in a hollow murmur. Ilya turned his back and walked out with hard steps, passing Svetlana and completely ignoring Polina.

He descended the front steps as if fleeing a fire. He pulled open the back door of Sasha's car and threw himself inside, slamming it shut hard enough to shake the frame. Instantly, without a word, Lidiya reached into the back, holding out a silver metal flask. Ilya grabbed it. Next, she offered a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

"Drink and smoke, or make a Molotov cocktail," Sasha grumbled from the driver's seat, casting a heavy look of pure empathy through the rearview mirror.

Svetlana hurried in through the other door, and the car finally pulled away, tearing down the dark street. Ilya shoved a cigarette between his trembling lips and lit it, rolling down the window to let the freezing wind in. It didn't matter that everyone in there smoked; he needed air. He felt caged inside his own body, wanting to evaporate, to cease existing, to erase the memories that his father now had the privilege of forgetting.

Ilya didn't shed a single tear. He locked the crying in his throat, turned the pain into embers, and swallowed it whole along with the burn of the vodka from the flask.

[...]

The airport concourse was immersed in that monotonous hum typical of early morning transit. Svetlana rested her head on Ilya's shoulder, her thumb swiping lazily through her Instagram feed. In the seats just ahead, Sasha and Lidiya shared the same sprawled posture, waiting for the board to flash with the boarding call.

"What?!" Svetlana choked out a sudden, nasal laugh, breaking the group's silence. She bolted upright with a jerk and shoved her phone screen almost into Ilya's eye. "Look at this!"

A post from a gossip page displayed a clear photo of Shane and Rose Landry sharing a kiss inside a car. The sensationalist headline claimed that the newest couple was already spending their first Christmas together.

"Haven't they been dating for, like, less than two months?" she asked, disbelief plastered across her face.

"Who?" Lidiya raised her dark eyes, sniffing out the gossip. Svetlana spun the device toward their friend's fiancée, whose jaw immediately dropped. "Okay, Sasha and I don't really have the moral high ground to judge other people's rushing, but..."

"That's a lie! We've known each other for three years, casual? yes, but still, Lidiyshka," the model defended himself, feigning indignation, which made the brunette laugh and nod. "But this guy's thing is just crazy. Not that I'm the biggest fan of Christmas traditions and all that, but he totally looks like the type who takes it super seriously. And bringing a girlfriend of less than a month into the house for supper? *Gospodi*."

"Did you already know about this?" Svetlana turned her face to Ilya, investigative.

"He mentioned in passing that he was going to invite her. I didn't say anything, it's not my place," Ilya shrugged, a rehearsed gesture of disdain that masked the slight discomfort crawling in his stomach. "My only concern in the middle of this whole story is Liam."

"I saw a TikTok video the other day summarizing this Hollander's legal battle with his ex-girlfriend. Wow, it was hell on Earth," Lidiya commented, letting out an impressed huff. "Right at the beginning of the process, the woman accused him of domestic violence. She said he hit her while they were dating and used his hockey aggressiveness to back up the lie."

Ilya's apathy evaporated in that exact second. He raised his eyes from his own phone slowly, his previously relaxed posture suddenly growing tense, like a bowstring about to snap.

"Shane is not violent." His voice sounded deep, sharp, leaving no room for debate.

"Exactly. His lawyers proved it was a lie in less than a week," the brunette agreed quickly, noticing the sudden shift in mood. "But there was another moment where she swore that if he had to choose between his son and hockey, he would choose his career without a second thought."

"Another ridiculous lie," Ilya cut in, his expression hard and fiercely protective. "Shane can be a complete idiot in several aspects of his life, but his number one priority is, and always will be, that boy. Maybe..." He hesitated, his gaze drifting to the flight board, losing the force of his anger. "Maybe he got involved with Rose so quickly because, unconsciously, he's trying to put her in Jessica's place."

Ilya swallowed hard, his voice dropping to a hoarse, pained murmur.

"No one deserves to grow up without a mother."

The sentence dropped into the middle of the group with the weight of an anvil. The air seemed to thicken and freeze among the three friends who, unlike Ilya, still had their mothers alive and present. Sasha's mother might be controlling, but she was a good woman. Svetlana crossed the country to Boston twice a month just to visit hers. Lidiya had paid for her own mother's move to Paris, supporting her nursing career.

Ilya, on the other hand, had just left a bouquet of frozen flowers at the foot of a granite tombstone.

"Are you going straight to his house after we land?" Svetlana broke the silence with all the care in the world. Her voice sounded soft, and she laced her fingers with his in a firm, anchoring grip.

"I need at least one full hour where I don't have to think about my own fucking life. One hour where my single biggest concern is sorting LEGO pieces by color," Ilya confessed, exhaustion finally leaking from his pores. He let his head fall back, resting the nape of his neck against the metal pillar behind the row of seats.

"Then you'd better sleep this entire flight, Ilya Rozanov," Svetlana ordered, in a tone of faux threat overflowing with affection.

He laughed, a loose sound dragged out by exhaustion, and simply nodded slowly, closing his eyes and letting himself be swallowed by the darkness of his own eyelids.

[...]

Ilya parked in front of the dog daycare. As soon as the caretaker opened the double doors bringing Anya on her leash, the dog let out a piercing yelp that quickly evolved into a howl of pure euphoria. With the brute strength inherited from her Weimaraner and Golden Retriever mix, she practically dragged the poor employee through the lobby, her paws skidding on the smooth floor until she finally reached her owner.

Ignoring the animal's size and weight, Ilya lifted her off the floor as if she were nothing and carried her in his arms to the Jeep, depositing her in the passenger seat. During the entire drive home, Anya kept her heavy head resting on his thigh, receiving continuous and reassuring pets.

As soon as they entered the apartment, Ilya collapsed onto the couch. Anya didn't hesitate: she jumped onto the upholstery and sprawled entirely over his chest.

Like magic, the dog's warm, constant weight worked as an anchor. The crushing anxiety, the toxic memories of Russia, and the tense buzzing in the Russian's mind silenced almost instantly beneath the dog's steady breathing.

"I missed you too, *malyshka*," Ilya murmured, scratching the soft fur behind her ears. Anya's response was a tail wagging so fast it looked like a helicopter rotor, whipping his legs mercilessly. "Alexa, set an alarm for ten o'clock."

The virtual assistant confirmed the alarm for three hours from then. The Russian turned on his side, settling the dog against his body, and allowed himself to pass out.

When the shrill ring of his cell phone pierced the silence at ten in the morning, Ilya opened his eyes and noticed that Anya had already moved to the rug. He dragged himself off the couch, took a quick, hot shower to wake up his muscles, packed his work backpack, and pulled out his phone to let Shane know.

[Direct Message]

Ilya Rozanov: Arriving in thirty minutes.

Shane Hollander: Thank God. Can you stop at the pharmacy and bring fever medicine and one for a cough? Liam caught a bad cold and he's out of his fruit syrup. I'll send you a picture of the packaging, he's picky and only takes this one.

Ilya Rozanov: I know which one it is. You got it.

With Anya back in the Jeep, he made a quick stop at Svetlana's house. Knowing his friend was probably exhausted and sleeping after the flight, Ilya used his own copy of the key, silently left the dog in the hallway, and locked the door on his way out.

The stop at the pharmacy took no more than ten minutes. Soon, the Jeep was parking in the garage of Shane's penthouse. Crossing the glass doors of the lobby, Ilya greeted the doorman, who offered a wide smile beneath his thick, gray mustache.

"Back to the grind already, Mr. Rozanov? Good thing. The little boss upstairs is crying and whining like you wouldn't believe, the cold really knocked him down," Mr. Johnson commented, shaking his head compassionately.

"I came prepared. Brought reinforcements," Ilya gave a tired half-smile, lifting the pharmacy bag slightly as he pressed the button to call the elevator.

While riding the elevator up, Ilya secretly hoped that the marine biology book he had given for Christmas would serve, at least, as some comfort for the boy's cold. It was a huge, richly detailed atlas that broke down all of Liam's favorite shark species, as well as whales, dolphins, and giant squid.

Just like the Black doll he had bought for Elise—covering a deadline Simone had missed and leaving both her and J.J. beaming—Ilya liked to hit the mark with presents.

Pulling his own keychain from his pocket, he selected the penthouse key and unlocked the double doors with the two methodical turns Shane always demanded. The first thing his eyes caught upon entering the private hall was a pair of elegant women's shoes lined up at the entrance.

Rose was there.

She wouldn't be the first celebrity he'd met in his life, obviously. Unfazed, Ilya just took off his boots and walked into the house.

"Argh... Thank God you're here," Shane emerged from the kitchen.

The captain looked like he had aged five years in a single night. He was ground down by exhaustion, which was a terrible sign considering he had an NHL game in a few hours.

"He's in his room. A thirty-eight-degree fever and coughing up a storm."

"Is Rose here?" Ilya asked casually, dropping his backpack on one of the chairs and taking the syrup bottles out of the pharmacy bag.

"She's taking a shower so she can head back to the hotel. We aborted the trip and came back from the cottage last night because of his flu," Shane rubbed his face with his hands, paternal guilt visibly weighing on his shoulders.

"Does he have the thermometer?"

"I left it on the desk so it's easier to check after he takes his medicine," Shane agreed, but suddenly stopped. His gaze fixed on the Russian's face, his eyebrows furrowing slightly.

"What is it?" Ilya inquired, pausing with the medicines over the kitchen island.

"Your... your accent. It's much stronger."

"I spent the last four days opening my mouth only to speak Russian. The real miracle is that I'm not butchering English grammar right now," Ilya countered, ready to step back into the hall to hang up his coat, but Shane held out his hand.

In a silent, perfectly synchronized exchange, Ilya handed over the coat for the Canadian to put away, grabbed the medicine, and headed straight to the second floor.

As he turned the corner in the hallway, Ilya stopped. His ears caught an unmistakable sound coming from Liam's room: hurried, stealthy little steps against the carpet, followed by the telling creak of mattress springs.

He narrowed his eyes. He knocked on the door twice and turned the knob, instantly met by a dry, exaggerated cough coming from the bed.

When the door opened, Liam's eyes went wide at seeing the Russian.

"Ilya?!" the boy exclaimed. His voice sounded vibrant, high-pitched, and with zero trace of feverish lethargy.

The blond's investigative instinct kicked in immediately. His eyes swept the room. The thermometer wasn't on the desk like Shane had said; it was left on the nightstand, dangerously close to the hot lamp of the bedside light. The bedroom curtains were thrown

wide open, bathing the room in cold morning light, and on the study desk, the marine biology book rested open to the first few pages.

"Liam..." Ilya sighed, solving the entire riddle in less than ten seconds.

He used his heel to push the door shut. He walked over to the desk, left the untouched medicine next to the book, and turned to the boy, who was now staring at him with the blankets pulled up to his nose.

"You're not sick at all, are you, Akula?"

Liam didn't answer, just blinked his big, guilty eyes. Ilya sat on the edge of the bed and pressed the back of his hand against the boy's forehead. His skin was cool. Perfectly normal temperature.

"Who taught you that holding the thermometer against a lightbulb makes the temperature go up?" Ilya asked, crossing his arms.

"Ruby," Liam admitted, his voice coming out in a thin whisper.

"And all this dry coughing is because you haven't drank water in how long?"

"Since yesterday afternoon..." The boy fully assumed the expression of someone caught red-handed.

"And why are you forcing your dad to cancel the trip by pretending to be sick?"

Liam let go of the blanket and crossed his little arms, his brow furrowed in a stubbornness identical to Shane's.

"Rose wasn't supposed to be there with us at the cottage. It was supposed to be you." He gave the Russian's thigh a light nudge with his foot, under the covers.

Ilya felt his chest tighten in a strange way. He let out a long sigh, reached out, and gently messed up the boy's brown hair.

"Do you not like Rose?"

"I don't like or dislike her," the boy shrugged, too mature for his age. "She was a lot cooler when she was just Rhea Darkthorn on TV, and not my dad's girlfriend in my living room."

"There's an old saying that we should never meet our idols up close," Ilya shook his head, validating the child's frustrated feelings. "And, if you want to know the truth, I would have loved to spend the holiday with you guys. Even if it was just to see your face opening the present I left at J.J.'s house. Did you like it?"

"Uh-huh! A lot!" Liam's facade of stubbornness crumbled instantly. He jumped out from under the covers and threw his little arms around Ilya's neck. "Thank you, Ilya!"

"You're welcome, Akula," the Russian murmured, returning the hug tightly, closing his eyes for a second.

And in that moment of peace and the smell of kids' shampoo, there were no cruel Russian fathers, ghosts from the past, or famous girlfriends. There was only the flawless safe haven that the two had found in each other.

"Okay, listen to me," Ilya pulled back enough to break the hug, holding the boy's shoulders to look him in the eyes. "I completely understand that you're not ready to have Rose around, but sabotaging your dad's plans isn't cool, Akula. What you're feeling is super valid, but that's not how we fix things. If something bothers you, you have to talk to your dad. Your family is never going to change: at the end of the day, it's always you two. You guys need to talk so you can understand each other."

"And you too," Liam shot back, his expression taking on a seriousness unusual for a child. "You're family to me."

Ilya had to clench his jaw not to show the blow. Those words hit him with the force of a punch to the gut, stealing his breath for a millisecond.

"But Rose has a much more central role now. She's dating your dad. Girlfriends are important people," the Russian tried to argue, his voice slightly hoarser.

"But you're the one who helps Dad be with me!" Liam crossed his arms, his childhood logic working at full steam. "He always says I'm the most important thing in the world. So, if he lets you be with me, that means you're more important than her."

Ilya was losing a logical argument to an eight-year-old boy. The situation would be incredibly comical if the subject weren't so heavy. Outside, a brutal gale began to blow, the sharp whistle of the wind hissing against the penthouse's heavy acoustic windows.

"You're right about one thing: your dad trusts me a lot, and I'm very grateful for that," Ilya changed his approach. "But do you remember our conversation on Halloween? About how matters of the heart aren't exactly black and white?"

Liam nodded, paying attention.

"Well. Your dad and Rose's hearts aren't black and white. But your dad, in a very clumsy way, is trying to simplify things way too fast."

"It would be much easier if it was you," the boy murmured, adamant.

Ilya let out a long sigh, giving up on debating that stubbornness.

"Let's make a deal. As soon as Rose leaves for the hotel, you're going to go downstairs and tell your dad the whole truth. You know very well that lies have consequences, so you're going to accept the punishment he gives you like a big boy. But I promise I'll stay by your side and help you explain why you did it. Deal?"

"Deal," Liam agreed in a tiny voice.

The two stayed in the room, flipping through the colorful pages of the marine biology book together. About fifteen minutes later, the dull thud of the front hall door echoed through the apartment. Rose had left. Ilya shot a meaningful look at the boy and gestured with his head, leading the way downstairs.

Shane was sitting on one of the kitchen island stools. His posture was slouched, his brow furrowed with exhaustion as he typed frantically on his phone.

"Shane," Ilya called out, stopping at the foot of the stairs.

"Damn it. Looks like this windstorm blocked the streets around the Guardians' hotel with snow. They're predicting a heavy blizzard all afternoon. The game is canceled," the captain murmured, his voice hoarse, speaking more to himself than to the Russian. Only then did he look up. "Did his fever go down?"

It was in that moment that Shane saw Liam finishing his descent down the stairs right behind the nanny. The boy wasn't sneezing, wasn't coughing, wasn't shivering. He was perfectly fine.

Shane froze. The phone slipped from his fingers, clattering against the marble of the island. A stern expression, a mix of frustration and disbelief, took over his face.

"Liam. You have something to tell your dad," Ilya crossed his arms, taking on the role of mediator, and waited.

"I faked it."

"*Really?* I hadn't noticed," Shane tried to swallow the sharp sarcasm that leaped off his tongue out of anger, but failed miserably.

"I didn't want to spend Christmas at the cottage with Rose," Liam fired back, his voice trembling but maintaining his defensive posture. "She just got here, it's not fair. Ilya has been with us for way longer and he... he takes care of me! He has a way bigger job than hers. You always say I'm the most important, so it's not fair that she gets to go and he doesn't!"

Shane blinked, stunned. The anger in his eyes melted almost instantly, replaced by a tired understanding. He shook his head slowly.

"Got it." The player stood up from the stool with a heavy sigh and walked toward his son.

Liam, intimidated, took two tiny steps to the side, almost trying to hide behind Ilya's leg. But Shane didn't scold him. Instead, he crouched down, literally sitting on the cold wooden floor in the middle of the apartment, making himself smaller than the boy.

"Come here, Li." Shane reached out his hands. The boy approached reluctantly, and his dad held his little fingers firmly. "I'm sorry, okay?"

Shane's chin trembled slightly, betraying the control he was fighting to keep.

"Look at me. Do you know how long it's been since I dated anyone?"

Liam shook his head.

"Nine years."

"But I'm only eight," the boy frowned.

"Exactly. My last girlfriend was your mom," Shane murmured, adjusting the collar of his son's pajamas affectionately. "And do you remember when she said I don't know how to act around girls? Your mom was absolutely right. I suck at it. Most of the time, I make some pretty big screw-ups. I get an idea in my head, think everything's going to work out, and end up not really thinking about the consequences. But I never mean any harm, I swear to you. And you're completely right... You are the most important thing in my life. I only want what's best for you, but sometimes, Dad has absolutely no idea what 'best' is."

"You should think twice, then. Just like you always tell me to do before I try something dangerous... like when I wanted to aim the snowball at Anthony's head," Liam suggested with a child's innocent and brutal honesty.

The comparison drew a wet, genuine laugh from Shane. He lowered his head, nodding.

"You got me there. Sometimes I forget to think twice before doing things." Shane squeezed the boy's hands. "I'm going to talk to Rose so we can take things slower. We've both realized that shoving her into our Christmas was a terrible idea in practice. You don't have to worry. I really wanted you to like her, because I like her a lot, big guy. But I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that she is never going to replace your mom."

"Yeah, I don't want another mom," Liam mumbled, pressing his lips into a thin line.

"So we have a deal on that?" Shane raised an eyebrow. Liam nodded. "Alright. But now comes the other part: don't ever lie to me like that again, Liam Hollander. Every time you get sick, I get sick with worry. You almost give me a heart attack. Don't do that anymore, understood?"

"Okay," Liam whispered.

Shane opened his arms, and the boy threw himself into them in a bone-crushing hug. The father buried his face in his son's neck, letting out a shaky breath he'd been holding for minutes. Over Liam's shoulder, Shane cast a look of pure gratitude toward Ilya, who was watching the scene in silence, leaning against the glass railing of the stairs.

"Go up to my room and get Ilya's present. It's on the reading chair. I'm going to talk to him real quick," Shane instructed, ruffling the boy's hair as he stood up from the floor.

Ilya blinked, genuinely surprised to hear the words "Ilya's present." Liam didn't waste any time; he bolted up the stairs, skipping steps two at a time.

"Steps!" Shane and Ilya scolded in perfect synchronization, which only earned a childish giggle from the curve of the hallway.

"Present?" the Russian asked, crossing his arms again.

"He got it in his head that he wanted to buy you one." Shane shoved his hands into his sweatpants pockets. The dark circles under his eyes looked deeper in the morning light; he carried the world on his shoulders. "I'm seriously considering keeping you captive in here. Because the second you turn your back for a few days, I start making these messes."

"I noticed." Ilya took the cue to hand back the scolding. "Inviting your girlfriend of a month and a half to Christmas Eve dinner at the cottage, in the middle of your family? Seriously, Shane?"

"I wasn't thinking straight..."

"Clearly," the blond retorted ruthlessly. "When you said you had no experience, I didn't imagine the level was this precarious. A month and a half would be the acceptable timeframe just to introduce her to Liam over a casual lunch. Not on a holiday."

"Argh, my head is completely messed up," Shane groaned, tugging hard at his own hair. "The season is driving me crazy at the rink. My love life is driving me crazy at home. And my... sex life is making me almost suicidal."

Ilya raised both eyebrows, the scolding forgotten instantly.

"Is it *that* bad?"

Shane's face was overtaken by a violent shade of red. He collapsed into one of the dining table chairs and hid his face in both hands.

"And this is definitely not a subject we should discuss. My bad. Forget it. I'm just... way too tired."

"Man, if you can't talk about this even with your best friends, you need to talk to someone on the outside. A therapist, I don't know," Ilya suggested, his voice losing its irony and adopting a serious tone. "Have you stopped to think that you're trying to get over the trauma of an eight-year insane legal war against your son's mother, while raising a boy alone, captaining an NHL team, managing a household, and, out of nowhere, trying to shove a highly publicized relationship in the middle of all that?"

Shane placed his hands flat on the table and looked at Ilya for long seconds, processing the reality check.

"Maybe I really should keep you captive. Stop saying things that make so much sense, for your own good."

The sound of fast footsteps in the hallway cut the moment short. The conversation had to pause, but Ilya had the distinct feeling that Shane wouldn't touch on that subject with anyone else.

Liam came down the stairs almost dragging something that was his own size: a massive plush dog.

"Merry Christmas, Ilya!" the boy panted, stretching out his arms to lift the stuffed animal. "It's Anya!"

Ilya's world stopped spinning. His stomach dropped into an abyss, and a brutal cold radiated down his spine.

The last time someone had given him a Christmas present, he was eleven years old. Fifteen long years ago. It had been a professional hockey stick and a new pair of skates; a Herculean effort from his mother so he could compete in the youth games. Irina was always in the bleachers, freezing, smiling, and cheering for him. Until she wasn't anymore. And, suddenly, Ilya started playing to the void.

He knew Irina loved dogs. She would have been in love with Anya. But Grigori hated animals. The monster detested anything that brought joy to the house. The memory, toxic and clear, slashed through Ilya's mind like a blade: one of the worst fights. The screaming shattering the early hours of the morning. Grigori bellowing with hatred that he didn't need a dog because "he already had a bitch in that house, and it was Irina."

Ilya wanted to rip out his own eardrums to have never heard that. But he did. He and Alexei, huddled at the top of the stairs in the dark, crying in absolute silence, just waiting for the blows to stop so they could run to their mother's bruised arms. And then, the day came when Ilya started crying alone on the steps, because even Alexei had grown cold after Irina was gone.

"Thank you, Akula."

Ilya's voice cracked harshly. He took the plush, his long fingers sinking into the soft fabric, until his eyes landed on a detail: a shiny golden collar wrapped around the dog's neck.

"It's to copy your necklace! The one your mom gave you," Liam pointed out, smiling proudly.

The air vanished from the Russian's lungs. A sharp, ragged, and trembling gasp escaped his lips. He clenched his jaw so hard his teeth hurt, fighting a physical, desperate war against the thick knot crushing his throat.

From the chair, Shane noticed instantly. He saw the Russian's Adam's apple bob up and down frantically. He saw his blue eyes well up with tears. The captain's instinct took control.

"Li, do me a favor? Why don't you go upstairs and check out those new pages in your book? Ilya and I are going to try to whip up something really tasty here in the kitchen for us to eat," Shane intervened, his voice calm and firm, offering an escape route.

The boy agreed immediately, excited by the prospect of devouring his present.

"Okay! Call me when it's ready!" he yelled, already running back up to the second floor.

As soon as the bedroom door clicked shut upstairs, Ilya's defenses crumbled.

He dropped the plush onto the couch as if it burned. He brought both hands to his face, rubbing his eyes with an almost violent force, his palms shaking uncontrollably as he tried, in vain, to choke back the tears that finally escaped.

"I... I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm s-sorry," Ilya stuttered, his voice choked up, hating himself for falling apart.

"No. It's okay. It's okay, Ilya," Shane murmured.

The Russian didn't have the courage to look at him. He turned his face toward the glass balcony doors, focusing on the violent wind and the thick snow obscuring the city, trying to mirror the cold inside himself.

"I'm so sorry too. Not about the plush. About... about your mom," Shane took a careful step, like someone approaching a wounded animal. "I saw your Instagram stories."

Ilya swallowed hard, his chest rising and falling erratically. He didn't run, but his blue eyes, now red, overflowed with an ancient pain.

"It's been fifteen years... fifteen years since I got anything for Christmas. She was the one who gave me my last present," the confession tore from the Russian's throat, raw and unprotected. He pressed his lips together, fighting the sobs.

Shane didn't try to fill the air with useless platitudes. He just closed the space between them, raised his hand, and placed it firmly on Ilya's shoulder. A dense, warm, and silent grip from someone who was there, holding the line.

"Believe it or not..." Ilya took a deep breath, wiping his face aggressively with the back of his hand. "I would a thousand times rather deal with the mess of your drama than mine."

"Dealing with an impulsively idiotic guy who freaks out over a lack of sex, and who just makes one parental screw-up after another with an eight-year-old son?" Shane raised his eyebrows, forcing a trace of irony into his voice to try and anchor his friend back to reality.

Ilya let out a short, broken laugh that sounded more like a lament, but he didn't pull his shoulder away from Shane's touch.

"Infinitely better than having to deal with my abusive dad, who now has dementia and simply forgot every horrible thing he ever put me through."

The silence that followed was dense, heavy with the magnitude of that confession. Shane blinked slowly, absorbing the horror of the situation, and realized that any attempt at advice or words of pity would sound pathetically empty. So, he did the only thing left.

"Can I give you a hug?"

Ilya's neck tensed and he turned his face away.

"No... you don't have to do that." The words came out trembling, squeezed from his throat. But, crucially, the Russian didn't step back a single millimeter. His blue eyes, clouded by

tears, remained fixed on any point in the room that wasn't Shane's face.

"I know I don't have to," Shane replied, his voice gentle but unwavering. "But I *want* to."

The blond granted an almost imperceptible nod. Shane closed the distance between them in one smooth step, raising his arms to wrap the man in a firm, secure hug. The instant the warmth of Shane's body anchored him, Ilya let out a crushed breath and finally gave in. His arms wrapped around the Canadian's shoulders, gripping the fabric of his shirt as if it were a lifeboat.

The embrace lingered, extending far beyond casual contact. Shane's mind traveled to an old piece of advice his father, David, had given him years ago: never be the first to let go of a hug when someone is crying. Let the person decide when it's time to break contact.

And that was exactly what Shane did. He stayed there, motionless as a supporting pillar in the middle of Ilya's storm, his hand sliding in slow, calm circles across the middle of the Russian's back. Ilya's dams finally broke, and the tears flowed, soaking the shoulder of the captain's sweatshirt. Yet, it was a devastating cry: a weeping of absolute silence, conditioned by years of terror under Grigori's roof, where learning not to make a sound while in pain was a matter of survival.

A few long minutes passed until the tension gradually left the blond's shoulders. He finally pulled back, breaking the hug hesitantly. Immediately, he brought his shirt sleeve to his face, wiping his cheeks with rough movements, shame screaming in his stubborn refusal to look up.

"Feeling a little better?" Shane risked asking. His voice was nothing more than a murmur, contained by the raw intimacy of the proximity they still shared.

Ilya gave a minimal nod, his breathing still rugged, but his features less rigid. And then, with silent synchronicity, the two took a step back, restoring the usual physical space between them—but leaving in the air the weight of that new, unbreakable connection.

[...]

The game was officially canceled shortly after lunch. Outside, the blizzard wasn't just a meteorological threat; it was a howling white wall that promised to punish the city for at least two days, blocking streets and freezing everyone's routine.

Inside the penthouse, the climate was different. In the TV area, Liam was lying on his stomach on the couch, mesmerized by a children's series Ruby and Jade had recommended to him—something about mermaids who got legs to look for a boy who accidentally turned into a merman.

In the kitchen, however, the atmosphere between Shane and Ilya floated in a strange limbo. It wasn't exactly bad, but, to say the least, the boundaries of the boss-employee relationship had dissolved in those hugs and confessions. Shane had already told Ilya to go home and rest after the crying episode, but the snow-blocked streets made the order impossible to follow.

After cleaning the kitchen in absolute and cautious silence, Shane couldn't take the quiet anymore.

"Want a beer?" the captain offered, stopping in front of the open fridge.

"I'm on the clock," Ilya replied in a monotone, leaning against the island.

"I gave you the day off about two hours ago, you're the one who ignored me," Shane countered, fishing out two cold longnecks and sliding one of them across the marble toward the Russian.

Ilya accepted. He popped the cap and took a long sip right away. Shane walked around the island and sat on one of the stools, strategically leaving an empty seat between them.

They drank in silence for a few minutes, the distant sound of the children's show opening theme serving as the only background, until Ilya decided to drop the bomb.

"Did you say '*sex life*'?" the blond inquired, turning his head to look at his boss sideways.

Shane felt his face heat up instantly. Suddenly, the label on his own beer became the most fascinating piece of art on the planet, worthy of study.

"Like I told you earlier... I haven't dated in nine years," the Canadian cleared his throat, picking at the label with his thumbnail. "And... I don't have sex."

Ilya's expression shifted to pure horror. The Russian processed the information as if Shane had just confessed to a heinous crime. He could never fathom the idea of going almost a decade without sex. That bordered on involuntary, torturous celibacy.

"You should have joined a monastery, not the National Hockey League," Ilya poked, incredulous.

Shane let out a nervous laugh, shaking his head.

"It's not like I..." the captain lowered his voice drastically, casting a paranoid glance toward the TV room. "It's not like I don't do *anything*. But... it's always alone. And I have a young son at home, so the logistics are complicated. I'm terrified of getting caught in the act."

"Shane, if a person doesn't witness something traumatic in childhood that makes them look at their parents in a weird way, it's going to happen in adulthood. And they say that in adulthood, the trauma is a thousand times worse," Ilya pointed out, taking another sip.

"Did you happen to see something?"

"No. I *was* the trauma," Ilya flashed an evil, dark smile.

Shane choked on his own saliva, coughing out a laugh.

"Remember that time I mentioned I'd hooked up with taken women?" the blond continued, twirling the bottle in his hand.

"I remember...?"

"It was my sister-in-law," he shrugged, with terrifying nonchalance.

Shane's jaw dropped to his chest.

"And your brother...?"

"Opened the door and walked in right on time," Ilya reported, his eyes gleaming with a sick, vindictive pride. "The bastard deserved it. At the time, I even felt sorry for the disgusting way he treated my sister-in-law. But since she decided to stay with him even after everything, I don't give a damn about her anymore either."

A part of Shane's brain beeped, dying to use the opening to ask about the picture of the little blonde girl on Ilya's lap he'd seen on Instagram. But he didn't want to ruin the truce by being too invasive. He preferred to keep the conversation on his own turf.

"I'm pretty sure my dad heard something when I was a teenager, but thank God he never opened his mouth to mention it," Shane confessed, making Ilya laugh. "And no, I'm not going to get caught by my son. I have maximum paranoia levels. My bedroom has soundproofing in the walls. A grenade could literally go off in there and nobody outside would hear it."

"Wow..." Ilya raised his bottle in an ironic toast. "All that architectural investment just to *not* have sex. Incredible."

"It's not like it's my fault!" Shane hissed, offended.

"Shane, you were literally voted the hottest guy in the entire league by like two different magazines this year. Do me a favor and take a look in the mirror," Ilya threw in his face unceremoniously.

Shane covered his mouth with his hand, feeling the back of his neck combust.

"To this day, I'd like to understand what the hell TIME and People's criteria are for putting together that ranking," he changed the subject, gesturing with the bottle. "I'm in first place, followed by Scott Hunter. Fine, I agree that Hunter is a really good-looking guy. The guy has a chiseled jawline, perfect hair to be jealous of, plus a huge, extremely sexy smile. But he's also another guy who is almost never seen with women and hasn't dated publicly in years, so it doesn't make sense—"

"So, anyone with two working eyes could confirm that Hunter is incredibly hot. Even if he is old," Ilya interrupted, raising his eyebrows at the excess of specific compliments his boss had just fired off about another man.

Shane laughed, surprised and slightly defensive.

"He's not old, Ilya! He's thirty. We're twenty-six," Shane shot back.

"Old," Ilya decreed, unyielding.

"Alright. Then explain to me why Cliff Marleau is in third place? You've met him in person."

"Marleau exudes that sweaty, sexy lumberjack energy," Ilya shrugged, recalling the time he took care of the player's nephews for his sister. "Not my type at all, but a lot of people drool over that style."

"The worst part is that he really does look like a lumberjack in the playoffs with that beard..." Shane agreed, and the two laughed together.

"TIME's fourth place was fair, at least. It's J.J. And he is undeniably handsome," the blond pointed out.

"I'll second that," Shane shook his head, agreeing. "But there's the problem: J.J. is handsome, incredibly charming, has a dangerous smooth talk... and is useless for a serious relationship."

Ilya let out a rich, amused laugh, getting into the mood of gossiping about his other boss.

"I've lost count of how many different women's names he's dropped while we were chatting around the apartment," the blond shrugged.

Shane's eyes widened.

"You talk about women with J.J.?"

"I do, yeah. I just don't talk to you, because you were the one who never opened the door to the subject," Ilya countered, taking the last sip of his beer.

"I didn't talk because I thought you were strictly professional!"

"And I am. Like I told you before, boss: different parents require different personalities."

"So you mean to say that this version of you..." Shane pointed the neck of the bottle toward the blond. "Isn't the *real* Ilya?"

"Nope," the Russian popped the 'p' with his tongue, a subtle, charming tic. "The real Ilya isn't exactly appropriate for the age rating of eight-year-old kids."

Shane let out a genuine, relaxed laugh.

"I completely understand. I have two basic personalities: inside and outside the rink. It's exhausting... it feels like I have to perform something all the time to please others."

Ilya shook his head slightly, following his train of thought as he took another sip of his beer.

"Perform what, for example?"

"Ah, I don't know..." Shane gestured in the air with his free hand. "In front of the cameras, everything is a big act. It's stiff. The press conferences are scripted. Behind the reporters, there's always our PR manager dictating, with his eyes, what I need to answer, how I should answer, and what I must never mention."

"Well, you're an excellent actor. Maybe that's how you captivated the Golden Globe winner," Ilya poked with a smirk, drawing a nasal laugh from the player.

"Yeah, maybe... The thing is, all of this is just in hockey. And I do absolutely nothing else in my life besides playing hockey," Shane's smile faltered. He rubbed the damp label of the bottle, his gaze dropping. "And sometimes, I wonder... what if?"

Shane looked up and pressed his lips together, staring into the Russian's blue eyes.

"What if I really get hurt? Your whole life plan was to pursue a career in professional hockey. And then, out of nowhere, you blew out your knee."

"True," Ilya agreed, the 'r' of his accent purring in a drawl in his throat. "But don't go thinking that taking care of kids was my Plan B from the start. Like I said in my interview, I seriously thought about becoming a coach for a while."

"And why didn't you pursue that?"

"Because I couldn't step onto an ice rink anymore," the admission came out cold and direct. "Just getting close to one gave me the chills. An infernal dizziness. My brain sent signals that my knee was being crushed again with every step. And, since I've always liked kids, I ended up stumbling upon Lily-Jane's Agency. I got lucky that the boss liked my face and, well, I made a life for myself."

The information dropped like an anvil on Shane. He blinked, his eyes widening slightly as his brain connected the dots.

Ilya took Liam to a hockey game weeks ago. He walked into the arena, sat in the stands near the ice, and didn't say a single damn word about his own trauma. The Canadian felt his chest tighten with gratitude and guilt, but chose not to point the fact out loud so as not to embarrass the Russian.

"You, at least, have a natural ease and a gift with kids. I... I'm only good at hockey," Shane let his shoulders drop, defeated. "And half of my fame wasn't even because of my talent in the game, but because of that sick legal battle with my ex. My lawyers called me this week saying there's a production company wanting to make a documentary about the case."

"Like the Jack Sparrow and Amber Heard case?"

"The actor's name is Johnny Depp, Ilya," the captain corrected, and the duo couldn't hold back, bursting into laughter.

"You knew who I meant," the Russian waved his hand. "Jack Sparrow, Edward Scissorhands, Willy Wonka... same difference."

"Yes, I understood. But the thing is... there isn't going to be any documentary because there's a minor involved in the process. And, honestly, it's a kind of attention I hate. I never wanted to sue Jessica for custody... But she knew that hockey was the only thing I was good at. I was never a genius in regular school subjects, but on the ice, I was exceptional. And she... she tried in every way possible to rip that away from me to destroy me."

"But you *are* exceptional," Ilya locked eyes with Shane, his voice taking on an immovable weight. "You are absurd at hockey. And even with her trying to make your life a living hell, you won more than one Stanley Cup, won MVP awards, filled an entire room with trophies... And Jessica? She won absolutely nothing. And she still lost what should be the most important thing in the world: her own son."

Shane pressed his lips together. He turned his face toward the living room. In his field of vision blurred by the dim light, he could only see the TV flashing the blue tones of the mermaid series, and Liam's little foot covered by a shark sock resting on the back of the couch.

"I focused my whole life so much on hockey, Ilya, that if one day the sport is taken away from me, I don't think I'd know what I had left."

"That boy's father," Ilya answered without hesitating a millisecond. "His number one hero. That's what's left."

"I think, at this point in the game, the two of us are competing pretty fiercely for that hero spot in his head," Shane joked, in a light, nostalgic tone.

Ilya shook his head, adamant.

"No, we're not. I always make it very clear to the kids I work with that their family is the priority. When the family structure is chaotic or distant, then yes, I have to take on the role of the 'thing that doesn't change'; their safe haven. But that's not the case here, Shane. Your family is tiny, just the two of you, but you get along incredibly well. Liam is literally your miniature version, man."

"Is that why you know how to handle the two of us so well?" Shane raised his eyebrows, leaning subtly over the island.

Ilya let out a light laugh through his nose and took a generous sip of his beer. It was the only way to swallow, along with the bitter liquid, the fact that Shane hadn't even realized that phrase sounded dangerously ambiguous—at least in the Russian's head.

"Can I ask you a serious question?" Shane broke the silence.

"Shoot," Ilya nodded, spinning his bottle.

"I'm really lost when it comes to Rose."

An absurd irony crossed Ilya's mind. He was, without a shadow of a doubt, the worst person on planet Earth to give any romantic advice. He had never had a real romantic relationship.

His experience boiled down to casual sex. Svetlana. Sasha. And several other people over the years. Zero romance.

"You like her. That's an indisputable fact," Ilya began, feeling out the terrain and trying to do his best. "But what I think... and, look, this is the view of someone looking at the mess from the outside, okay? What it looks like to me is that you are, unconsciously, trying to use Rose to supply what you think is missing in Liam's life. A maternal figure. And he already made it crystal clear today that he doesn't want one. You need to take about twenty steps back and rethink all this urgency, Shane."

Shane followed the reasoning with his eyes fixed on the wood of the counter. He let out a deep sigh.

"Yeah... I think you also have a great point regarding the therapist thing. The social worker who handled our case recommended putting Liam in therapy a while ago, but I shelved it. I didn't have the time or the headspace to go evaluating child psychologists in the city."

"I can look into that for you. I know some really good ones from the agency," Ilya offered right away.

Shane let out another tired puff of air, but this time, a lazy smile appeared on his lips.

"I'm really going to lock you up in captivity in this apartment, Ilya. I'm serious."

"Well..." The Russian raised his bottle toward the giant glass windows of the penthouse. Outside, the blizzard roared, forming white whirlwinds that swallowed the neighboring buildings. "The world is falling down out there. By the looks of it, I'm not going anywhere anyway."

Chapter End Notes

and well, liam said he doesn't want a new mom... but said nothing about second dad 🤔

Chapter 11: Late nights

Chapter Notes

Shane has some work to do, guys

Liam was absolutely fascinated by his new television discovery. The boy had gone upstairs to take a hot shower and decided to hole up in his own room, devouring back-to-back episodes of a series Hayden's twins had recommended—something about mermaids who got legs and came to land to look for a boy who accidentally turned into a merman.

Ilya had even offered to keep him company, but the boy assured him he was fine and just wanted to binge-watch the show. As a result, the Russian ended up left over, slightly out of place, in the living room.

Shane had commandeered the big TV, tuning into a random game from the other conference. All that was left for Ilya was to settle on the opposite end of the same giant couch, immersed in a peculiar silence. He absentmindedly ran his fingers over the soft ears of the plush dog he had gotten from Liam. The afternoon dragged on in this quiet dynamic, while outside the huge glass windows, the blizzard roared mercilessly, showing no sign of letting up.

Ilya pulled his phone from his pocket and opened the chat with Svetlana.

[Direct Message]

Ilya: And my daughter?

Sveta: Drooling up a storm on my couch.

Sveta: Did you manage to arrive at the Hollander house alive?

Ilya: Yep. And now I'm trapped here by the storm.

Sveta: Oh my God, what a huge tragedy... You're trapped in a luxurious apartment with a tremendous hottie. 😞😞😞

Ilya: Liam faked a fever to force his dad to come back from Ottawa early. He didn't want to spend the holiday at the cottage with Rose.

Sveta: HAHAAHAHAHAH, I love this kid's mind!

Sveta: But it's totally understandable, right? Hollander has been with the woman for, like, a month and a bit. How did he react to the fake-out?

Ilya: I made Liam own up to the lie, and the two talked and worked it out. Oh. And Liam bought me a Christmas present.

Sveta: Holy shit, now I feel terrible for not getting you anything. But we agreed we would never give each other presents for Christmas! Christmas is just a headache for us.

Ilya: I know, Sveta, it's okay. He gave me a huge plush dog that looks like Anya. And made sure to put a gold collar on it to match my little chain.

Sveta: Ilya 🙄

Ilya: I wasn't expecting that, obviously. I ended up crying a little. In front of Shane. And he hugged me. It was... weird. It's been years since I cried in front of anyone. Since her funeral, I think.

Sveta: Why was his hug weird? You're a super physical touch person, your love language is literally touch, you dork.

Ilya: "Love language." Am I loving Shane now by any chance, Svetlana?

Sveta: Not loving the big Hollander (yet), but loving the mini-Hollander. Tee-hee 😊

Ilya: I didn't like that "yet" one bit.

Sveta: Listen here, this blizzard is going to last at least a couple of days. The Metros' games have been suspended. You're going to be locked up in there with Hollander. The least you two can do is become real friends, and not just act like weird boss and employee.

Ilya: I don't know how to make friends while sober.

Sveta: Then get wasted on beer.

Ilya: Not in front of Liam, damn it!

Sveta: Argh, you're unbearable. Always coming up with excuses for my genius solutions. 🙄

Ilya laughed softly through his nose and rolled his eyes, sending the same middle finger emoji back to his friend. However, with the trained corner of his eye from a lifetime of watching restless kids, he caught a movement.

Shane was staring at him.

"What is it?" Ilya asked, lowering his phone and turning his head abruptly.

Shane looked away at the speed of light, fixing his attention on the TV screen, where the players were skating on the ice.

"Nothing."

"I saw you looking at me."

"It's none of my business."

"Want to know who I was talking to?"

"Like I said, none of my business."

"It was Svetlana. My best friend," Ilya ignored his boss's resistance and told him anyway. "She's a huge fan of yours, by the way. Always bugging me about wanting to meet you."

Shane raised his eyebrows, the facade of indifference dropping.

"Is that the redhead with several pictures on your profile?"

"That's her. Her dad also played in the NHL a while back, he's..."

"Sergei Vetrov," Shane completed automatically, and immediately after brought a hand to the back of his neck, scratching his skin in a clear gesture of embarrassment. "I... might have done a little light stalking on the people who show up on your feed. Svetlana, Sasha..."

"Ah. So the boss is actually a stalker," Ilya teased, a lazy smile breaking out while, entirely unconsciously, he hugged the plush dog to his chest.

Shane wouldn't admit it out loud under torture, but the scene was absurdly cute. The contrast of Ilya, a giant guy dressed in black from head to toe, cuddling a little plush dog with such care, shattered any trace of toughness the Russian tried to project.

"I already warned you that I'm paranoid," Shane shrugged, defending himself, and the two laughed lightly.

The relaxed mood was interrupted by the short buzz of Shane's phone on the upholstery. The captain picked up the device and checked the notification. Ilya noticed, almost immediately, that the boss's features hardened. The lightness evaporated.

"Something wrong?" the blond inquired.

Shane blinked rapidly, looking up and shaking his head.

"No. It's just Rose. Sending some memes on Instagram," he forced a smile, but there was an undeniable tension around his eyes. The weight of the relationship clearly bothered him.

"You're a terrible liar," Ilya countered, impassive.

"But it *is* Rose, look!" On the defensive, Shane turned the phone screen toward the Russian to prove that the actress's name was right there in the notifications.

Ilya barely read the name at the top of the screen. His attention was instantly captured by the device's background: a very well-taken photo of Liam, smiling from ear to ear, running and playing with Anya in a park.

"Your wallpaper is my dog?" Ilya raised his eyebrows, surprised and slightly amazed.

Shane yanked the phone back in a sharp reflex, as if he'd completely forgotten what was plastered on his own home screen, his cheeks flushing.

"My son is in the photo too, man!"

"My daughter too!" Ilya pointed a finger at his own chest and then at the plush dog on his lap. Shane let out a genuine laugh, the embarrassment giving way to humor.

"It's a really cute picture, alright?!" Shane continued his argument, trying to justify the choice.

"Obviously it is. Anya is in it. She totally gets her good looks from her dad," Ilya declared with theatrical arrogance, running his fingers dramatically through his own golden curls, which drew another laugh from Shane.

"Well, Liam is in the picture too, and *he* definitely gets one hundred percent of his good looks from his dad," the Canadian shot back in the same tone, pointing his thumbs at his own chest with a smug smile.

"Don't even try. Liam got your freckles, that's for sure," Ilya pointed out, narrowing his eyes.

Shane let out a long, frustrated groan. He rubbed his face with both hands, running his fingers over the bridge of his nose and under his eyes, exactly where the little spots were concentrated.

"Man, I hate these freckles."

"Why?" the blond frowned, finding the complaint absurd.

"Ah, I don't know. People used to make fun of me a lot in high school because of them and... well, because of a lot of other things back then," Shane mumbled, lowering his voice. "But it would be almost impossible for Liam not to be born with them. I'm covered in them, and his mom is too, so..."

"Well, those people at your high school were a bunch of dumb idiots. Freckles are beautiful," Ilya stated, maintaining sustained and intense eye contact, without a drop of hesitation.

Shane stopped breathing for a whole second.

He tried to rationalize quickly: *He just talked about the freckles on Liam's face. He thinks it's cute on Liam. Not on me.* But the logic failed miserably to stop his stomach from doing a

sharp, dangerous somersault, sending a wave of heat shooting straight to the back of his neck.

"Yeah. I agree," Shane whispered, his voice coming out a little more cracked than planned. He cleared his throat, trying to shift focus before his brain short-circuited. "You... you're covered in moles, too."

"In the summer, when I take my shirt off, Marleau's nephews used to love connecting the moles on my back with colored markers, as if they were constellations," Ilya shared, a nostalgic smile breaking the intensity of the moment, which allowed Shane to breathe again and laugh in relief.

"Be careful not to mention that around Liam. He'll definitely want to steal the idea and try to draw the silhouette of a great white shark on your back," Shane warned, the silly smile still shaping his lips.

The winter darkness descended on the city earlier than usual, swallowed by the lead gray of the blizzard outside. When the kitchen clock hit five-thirty, hunger spoke louder, and Shane declared it was time to start dinner.

The dynamic in the kitchen was, at the very least, curious. Shane was the captain, dictating the directions for a creamy pasta with chicken and a parmesan crust—the classic comfort dish for cold days. Ilya, at almost two meters tall and dressed in black, took on the role of sous-chef, washing his hands and grabbing the sharpest knife from the block to slice the vegetables with a surgical precision that bordered on intimidating.

The rhythmic sound of the blade hitting the wooden cutting board filled the comfortable silence between them.

"She wants to do a video call later," Shane dropped suddenly, his voice muffled as he seasoned the chicken breasts on the counter next to him.

Ilya didn't stop slicing the onion.

"Rose?"

"Yeah. To see if Liam got better and how the storm is." Shane let out a sigh, wiping his hands on the dish towel and leaning his hip against the sink. "And I'm breaking out in a cold sweat just thinking about it."

"It's just a call, Shane. You've given live interviews to millions of people after taking an elbow to the face," the Russian pointed out, pushing the chopped onion to the corner of the board and pulling over the garlic cloves.

"It's different. On TV, I'm Captain Hollander. I know exactly what the reporter wants to hear. With her... I feel like I'm reading a script I haven't quite memorized," Shane confessed, rubbing the back of his neck. "I don't know how to be a normal boyfriend. I don't know what the right balance is between being attentive and being suffocating."

Ilya smashed the garlic with the side of the knife, the dull thud echoing off the island.

"Actors love talking about their own work, about their routine. Just ask if she liked the script, if her annoying castmate stopped complaining about life... Let her steer the conversation. You just need to listen."

Shane watched Ilya's profile for a moment. The Russian exuded an unshakable calm, as if relationships were the most logical, mathematical thing in the universe. But Shane's truth was infinitely messier. The memory of Rose's floral perfume suffocating him in bed, the physical panic, his body locking up at her touch, flashed in his mind like a red warning sign.

He wanted to speak. He desperately wanted to vent about how broken he felt for not being able to return the touch of an incredibly beautiful and kind woman. But his throat closed up. The fear of being judged—or, worse, the crushing confusion of not understanding his own desires—silenced him.

"What if... what if I'm just not good at this?" Shane hesitated, choosing his words carefully, scratching only the surface of the problem. "What if I'm too broken to give what she expects?"

Ilya stopped cutting. The Russian put down the knife, wiped his hands, and turned to face Shane. His blue eyes, intense and unfathomably mature, locked onto the Canadian.

"You're not broken, Shane. You're out of practice and traumatized. Those are completely different things," Ilya corrected, his voice firm and protective. "Rose seems like a decent person. If she really likes you, she'll have the patience to deal with your pace. And if she doesn't... then she's not the right person to be in your house, let alone near your son."

Shane swallowed hard, processing the weight of those words. Ilya's validation was dangerous; it disarmed him in a way he couldn't control. To escape the vulnerability that exposed him too much, Shane did what he knew best: he threw the ball back into the other court.

"You speak with a lot of authority for someone who swears up and down that he runs from relationships," Shane teased, a weak smile breaking the tension. He crossed his arms. "You and Svetlana... have you guys never tried anything?"

Ilya let out a nasal laugh, short and almost mocking.

"*Gospodi*, no. When we were teenagers, yeah, we hooked up, but it never went past that. She went on with her life and I went on with mine, we stayed friends."

"Right. But... no one, ever?" Shane insisted, ignoring the internal alarm that said he was walking into a minefield. "We're the same age. You're smart, incredibly loyal, make good money, have a giant heart, despite that face of someone who's going to murder someone in an alley... Why just stick to casual sex? Don't you want to have someone waiting for you at home?"

It was Ilya's turn to freeze.

The blond's posture stiffened almost imperceptibly. He turned back to the cutting board, his broad shoulders suddenly tense under the black fabric of his shirt. The knife went down against the wood again, but the rhythm was now faster, more aggressive.

"Relationships demand parts of you that I simply don't have to give," Ilya replied in a monotone, the wall of ice immediately rising around him.

"Like what?"

"Another..." Ilya began, but his voice caught. He let out a harsh sigh, slowing down the knife. "Another reason why I like working with kids is to try to give them what I didn't have. A safe place. No one was there to protect me when I was a kid, Shane. My parents... they had a huge age gap when they got married. They were always fighting. And he was cruel to her on purpose. And I..."

"You're afraid of being like him?" Shane completed delicately, noticing the exact moment the Russian's voice cracked.

Ilya shrugged, a tense gesture that served as a silent agreement.

"How old is your dad today?" the Canadian risked asking.

"Seventy-one," the Russian answered, dryly.

Shane's mind did the math in a fraction of a second. If Irina were alive, she would be forty-five. A twenty-six-year difference. Grigori was a grown, middle-aged man when he married a girl who was barely out of her teens. The horror of that power dynamic hit Shane like a punch to the gut. He blinked, shocked.

"Jessica accused me of being abusive to her," Shane blurted out suddenly, the need to share a wound in return speaking louder.

"I know about that. And I also know you wouldn't hurt a fly."

"But do you want to know what the worst part of that whole story was? The league backed me up," Shane frowned, the old disgust distorting his features. Ilya stopped cutting to look at him. "Roger Crowell, the NHL commissioner, didn't even call me to ask if the accusation was a lie or not. They simply issued a statement supporting me and covered it up. It became very clear to me that the story could even be true, and they would still stay on my side just to protect the poster boy of hockey. That made me sick for months."

"And why the surprise? You play against Dallas Kent every season. The guy is openly a bastard, homophobic, and racist, and the league pretends not to see it," Ilya pointed out, as if citing a basic fact of nature. Shane nodded, frustrated.

"How do you know about Kent's bullshit, really?"

"Marleau," the blond shrugged. "He always wanted to grind Kent's face into the ice whenever he heard a homophobic comment. Cliff's younger sister is a lesbian, so... understandable."

"Totally understandable," Shane murmured in agreement.

The silence that fell over the kitchen grew slightly thick, almost palpable. While stirring the sauce in the pan, Shane's mind wandered. He thought about the massive donation he'd made to the queer youth charity right after Halloween—a silent attempt to atone for his own guilt for having been a passive homophobe in the locker rooms for years. Neither of them had ever touched on the subject of the donation, but lately, Ilya had been making looser comments about hooking up with both men and women. And Shane, terrified, always avoided engaging in the topic.

And then, to complicate what was already chaos, there was the irrefutable fact that, just earlier that week, Shane had experienced the most intense orgasm of his life watching a gay porn video. The whole thing was overwhelmingly weird. And annoyingly confusing.

A snap of fingers sounded near his face.

"You're overthinking again. You're going to burn the chicken," Ilya warned, anchoring him back to reality.

Shane blinked, shaking his head, and turned his attention back to the stove.

"My bad. I just... was thinking about our argument. On Halloween."

"Shane..." Ilya let out a sigh that sounded like a 'don't go there' warning.

"I know you don't want to bring it up, but listen to me," the Canadian insisted, turning to the Russian. "Every time I think about that, I remember situations where someone cracked a rotten joke in the locker room, people laughed... I laughed. But I'm not like that, Ilya. I swear I'm not homophobic."

"Man, I know that. If you were, I would have already quit and vanished from your house the next day," Ilya shrugged, going back to gathering the chopped onion with the blade.

"Wouldn't be the first time."

Shane froze. The spatula stopped mid-air.

"Hold on, what?" his eyes widened. "You've been fired from a house for being...?"

"Bisexual? Yeah. I have," Ilya confirmed with a nonchalance that bordered on apathy. "It was a very rich family. Rich and extremely religious. The mother saw my Instagram profile one day after I went out with Sveta to a Pride Parade. The next morning, she sent me a mile-long message saying I didn't need to come back to work anymore."

Shane's jaw dropped.

"And guess what? She even made a point to say she would pray for me, so that Jesus would save my soul from eternal damnation," the Russian dramatized the end of the story, rolling his blue eyes with sarcasm. "That's life, Shane. To a lot of people, who ends up in my bed matters way more than my resume or how I take care of their kids."

"That's sick. I don't think that," Shane fired back, his voice loaded with a fierce, protective indignation. "What you do or who you hook up with changes absolutely nothing about the incredible professional you are."

Ilya stopped. He looked at the captain's flushed face of indignation, and a genuine, relaxed smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"That's exactly why you're one of my favorite bosses," Ilya decreed, grabbing the wooden cutting board. "Along with J.J., of course. He's completely crazy, sometimes he blurts out weird questions out of nowhere, but deep down, he's a great guy too."

When dinner was finally ready, Ilya went upstairs to get Liam. The dynamic of the three of them eating together could have been weird, but in practice, it flowed with surprising naturalness. Liam seemed radiant. Sitting across from the Russian, with his dad at the head of the table, the boy talked a mile a minute about the plot of the new series. He described the mermaids' names, their individual magical powers, and how amazing it was to watch the scenes of them swimming through the coral reefs.

"In the summer, we could plan a trip to really go scuba diving. We'll pick a place with a really cool beach, clear water, and go," Shane suggested, bringing his fork to his mouth.

Liam almost jumped out of his chair, his eyes shining with pure euphoria. Ilya laughed at the boy's excitement, keeping a relaxed posture while eating. However, under the wooden table, the reality was different. Ilya's knee was perfectly pressed against Shane's knee. It wasn't an accidental bump that pulls away right after. It was a light, constant, and warm touch that radiated a silent electricity neither of them had the courage—or the desire—to break.

After they cleared their plates, the division of tasks was automatic: Ilya went up with the boy to ensure teeth brushing, and Shane took over the sink to handle the dishes. Minutes later, the Russian reappeared at the top of the stairs, leaning on the glass railing.

"What is it?" Shane asked, sponge in hand.

"Aquaman has a special request for tonight. He demanded the presence of both of us to put him to bed," the blond let out a sigh of fake exhaustion, pointing his thumb down the second-floor hallway.

Shane dried his hands, laughing at his son's audacity.

"Okay, okay. But only because the true King of Atlantis asked."

The captain put down the dish towel and followed Ilya to the bedroom. Liam had already done his own engineering in the room: he dragged his desk chair right next to the bed and jumped onto the mattress, getting settled in a hurry.

Shane approached and repeated the usual ritual for those ruthless winter nights. He tucked the sides of the blankets firmly under his son's body, creating a tight, toasty cocoon that the boy loved—a legacy of affection David used to do for Shane when he was a kid.

"Alright. Which story do you want today?" Ilya asked, already evaluating the options on the boy's bookshelf.

"It can be any of them!" Liam shook his head, perfectly settled with Mr. Bubbles hugged to his chest.

Shane sat on the edge of the bed, the mattress sinking under his weight, while Ilya pulled a random book off the shelf and took his place on the desk chair.

"But you two have to read the lines together and do the voices for the dialogue. It'll be way more fun," the boy laid down the rules, a mischievous smile on his face.

"Aquaman is getting pretty demanding, don't you think?" Shane mocked, casting a knowing look at the Russian.

Ilya raised an eyebrow, mirroring the exact same falsely offended expression as his boss, which drew a crystalline laugh from Liam before the story even started.

It was a silly book, one of those easy, predictable stories about a princess being saved by a prince. But the dynamic of the reading took on other proportions. Ilya deepened his voice to read the lines of a troll, and the tone came out so deep and resounding that Shane's skin got goosebumps instantly, a heatwave rushing up the back of his neck. Liam, on the other hand, burst out laughing. Shane was put in charge of the prince and princess's lines, while the Russian brought all the other magical creatures to life—complete with squeaky and theatrical voices—until the boy finally fell asleep.

Shane smoothed the brown hair on his son's forehead, pressing a soft kiss there, and left the book on the nightstand. Ilya stood up in absolute silence and, moving his massive frame with the lightness of a ghost, closed the door behind them without making a single squeak.

"Nice magic fairy impression," Shane teased in a whisper in the hallway.

"Years of professional practice," Ilya countered with a wink. "Are you going to bed already?"

"I don't think so, I'm not that sleepy yet..." Shane stretched, popping his back.

"Cool. Since he's out, if you still want to talk about that Rose thing, or... anything, we can talk now without having to whisper," Ilya suggested, stuffing his hands into his sweatpants pockets. "But first, I desperately need a shower."

"You know where the bathroom is. But I think it's out of towels today, I'll grab some for you. Anything specific you need?"

"No, just the towel is fine," Ilya agreed, heading down to the first floor to grab his backpack and take it to the guest room.

Shane went to the master suite. He opened the closet and, in an almost unconscious reflex, ignored the regular towels and chose a dark gray, plush, hundred-percent cotton set—the softest ones, his favorites. He grabbed the bath and hand towels and walked to the hallway bathroom.

The sound of shower water was already hitting the floor hard. Shane knew the layout of his own apartment with his eyes closed: the door opened inward, and the glass shower stall was strategically hidden behind it, forming a blind angle for anyone walking in. He gave two warning knocks and opened the door upon hearing the Russian's grunt of permission.

"I left them right here on the sink, okay?" Shane announced, his back perfectly turned to the shower area.

"Thanks," Ilya's voice echoed over the noise of the water.

And then, Shane's brain made a fatal error: he looked straight ahead.

He had forgotten a crucial architectural detail of his own house. The entire wall above the sink was covered by a colossal mirror. And, since the steam from the hot water hadn't yet had time to completely fog up the glass, the reflection was crystal clear.

Shane saw the Russian's bare back.

The perfect outline of the musculature tensed under the water. The absurdly broad shoulders. The sculpted biceps. The exact slope of his waist leading down to... *God in heaven. His ass.*

Shane had never fled a room so fast in his entire life.

He slammed the door and leaned against the hallway wall, his heart hammering in his throat. He showered in the locker room next to twenty other giant, sweaty guys almost every day of his life. He saw his teammates' asses and dicks all the time, with zero impact. It was just anatomy. So why the fuck was he panicking, almost having a heart attack, because he'd seen that specific guy's ass?!

His mouth went dry as the desert. The image seemed to have been branded with a hot iron onto the inside of his eyelids. And, wow... Ilya's ass was really something. Outrageously round and plump.

"Stop. Stop, stop, stop..." Shane whispered frantically to himself, stumbling down the stairs almost blindly, on a direct collision course with the fridge.

His hand reached for the metal handle, but he hesitated mid-movement.

No. A beer isn't going to cut it.

Changing his route, Shane marched over to the apartment's climate-controlled wine cellar. He pulled out the first bottle of red wine he saw, without even reading the label. His gaze was completely hollow, glazed over in the void as the ghost of that damn reflection kept spinning on an asphyxiating loop in his head. He yanked the cork out haphazardly, filled half a glass, and downed the drink in two long, desperate gulps.

The liquid burned on the way down. Shane slammed both hands flat onto the cold marble counter of the island and lowered his head, his knuckles turning white.

"Oh, fuck..." he murmured to himself in the dim light of the kitchen.

[...]

Ilya's second glass of wine set the pace for the night, while Shane was already halfway through his third. Settled on opposite ends of the immense living room couch and wrapped in thick blankets, they let the blizzard roar against the glass windows. The fireplace crackled, casting warm shadows in the apartment's dim light, while the TV played muted, irrelevant images.

"Okay, but tell me the truth: how old were you when you had your first kiss? I need real parameters to psychologically prepare myself for Liam," Shane asked, his voice already slurred and giggly from the alcohol.

Ilya let out a wheezing laugh, the sound vibrating in his chest, and shook his head.

"I'm definitely not a good measuring stick for that."

"Just tell me, come on."

"The first innocent kiss? Ten. The first *real* kiss? At thirteen," Ilya revealed. Shane nodded slowly, as if taking mental notes. "And you, Captain?"

"Sixteen." Shane hid his face behind the rim of his glass, letting out a genuinely embarrassed laugh. "Like I said, I'm a terrible parameter too. But I think... it's almost acceptable that it was at thirteen. Everyone has that dark, weird phase at thirteen."

"And how was your dark phase?" the Russian asked, swirling the wine in his glass.

"Totally emo. I wouldn't leave my room, wore bangs, and hated everything and everyone. But it didn't last long, by fourteen I had already returned to regular programming," Shane shared, taking another long sip. "And yours?"

"Mine involved industrial amounts of weed, packs of cigarettes, cheap alcohol, disappearing from home for days and coming back as if nothing had happened," Ilya replied, his tone perfectly casual, as he brought the glass to his lips. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, Shane's eyes widen. "I was thirteen, had just lost my mom the year before, and my own home was the last place in the world I wanted to be."

"Uhm. Shit. My bad... I forgot the dates," Shane covered his face, the flush of embarrassment mixing with the flush of the wine.

Ilya waved his free hand in the air, a gesture of total unconcern.

"It's fine."

"Okay... and, I don't know, when was your first time?"

"Sex?"

"Yeah, duh."

"Fourteen," Ilya answered. Shane's eyes widened twice as much. "My rebellious phase lasted a little longer than a single year of emo bangs, Shane. It lasted about five."

"Fourteen..." Shane repeated, stunned, processing the information. "And was it with..." he let the question hang, the division between men and women implied.

"Girls. Later, at fifteen, with guys too. It was my escape valve. The massive injection of endorphins, dopamine, and every possible hormone was great so I didn't have to think about reality: that I had to go back home and look at the faces of my dad, my brother, and my new stepmother." Ilya gestured with his glass, his eyes fixed on the flames in the fireplace. "And, honestly, I really liked the danger of hooking up with guys in secret."

"Yeah... it must be pretty complicated there, huh? In Russia. For people..." Shane stammered, stumbling over his words.

"You can use the word queer, Shane."

"My bad..." the Canadian rubbed the back of his neck, awkward. "It's really complicated for you guys over there, isn't it?"

Ilya nodded, his expression hardening slightly.

"And what... what would happen if you were caught?" Shane asked, his voice dropping to a cautious tone.

"If I were caught by my dad or my brother... I like to have the illusion that there would still be some shred of humanity left in them and that they wouldn't do anything physical to me, especially since they're both cops. But, if I were exposed by anyone else, I would probably be arrested. And... well, I don't like to think about what would come after prison," Ilya confessed, his thumbnail scratching the base of the glass in a nervous tic.

"They don't know, then?"

"Nope. And I want it to stay exactly like that. My brother already calls me a 'faggot' pejoratively without even knowing the truth. If he knew... fuck, if he knew, maybe he would finally cut ties and leave me alone for good. But that peace would cost me my niece."

"That little blonde girl you posted on Christmas?"

"Wow, you really stalked my profile over the holiday, huh?"

They laughed together, the heavy tension dissipating a bit. Shane nodded, guilty.

"What's her name?"

"Danika. She's the exact same age as Liam. Eight years old. Loves skating, is addicted to reading, loves the color purple and anything with glitter, and is terrified of ducks."

"Oh! Is she the one with that weird phobia of thinking she's being watched by a duck? Anati... anadae... ah, whatever the name is. I remember you told me that once."

Ilya laughed, genuinely surprised that Shane had stored such a minuscule detail in his memory.

"Yes. She has a phobia of ducks in general, but specifically, she's afraid there's a duck hiding, watching her." A small, almost melancholic smile tugged at the Russian's lips.

"Did you get to spend a lot of time with her over the holiday?" Shane asked sweetly.

"Not enough." Ilya let out a heavy sigh, downed the last bit of wine left in his glass, and placed it on the coffee table.

Shane watched him in silence. Suddenly, the realization hit him: Ilya was incredibly centered, with impeccable posture and perfect diction, while Shane's living room felt like it was tilting about five degrees to the left. He started laughing at himself, his shoulders shaking.

Ilya raised his eyebrows.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I'm such an idiot to think I could go drink for drink with a Russian. I'm officially drunk, and you, with absolute certainty, would pass a breathalyzer unharmed right now," the captain pointed with a limp index finger, throwing his head back against the couch.

"Well, I have thirteen years of experience drinking to forget my problems. It's an unfair advantage," Ilya shrugged.

Shane stared at the ceiling for a few long moments. The only sound in the room was the irregular rhythm of his short nails tapping against the crystal of his nearly empty glass. The alcohol tore down the last barriers of his self-preservation.

"If I say something out loud, do you promise not to laugh?" Shane's voice sounded low and absurdly vulnerable.

"Of course I do," Ilya replied instantly.

Shane lifted his head slowly, meeting the Russian's eyes.

"Jessica was my first kiss. And my first time. And, most likely, Liam was conceived the second time we had sex. Because, being brutally honest... the first time doesn't even really count as the first. Because I... I couldn't do it. I couldn't make it to the end."

Shane held his breath, expecting, deep down, to see some trace of mockery or pity on his friend's face. But he found none of that. He saw only a deep and unshakably attentive gaze.

"And the next times... I obviously didn't know she had poked holes in the condom that night, but... it was always so..." Shane gestured vaguely in the air, frustration taking over his face for not being able to find the word that defined his trauma. "I don't know. Every time it happened, I felt like, literally, any other place on planet Earth would be more interesting to be than right there, in that bed with her."

"Shane, have you ever in your life had a good sexual experience?" Ilya translated the anguish between the lines with surgical precision.

The player shook his head slowly, dragging the movement.

"Never, at all?" Ilya insisted, shocked.

"I just wanted it to be over quickly. I didn't want to be there. Not that the physical sensation was totally bad or painful, but it wasn't... it wasn't for me. I don't know, Ilya. I'm too drunk to be able to form complex sentences. In five minutes, if I try to explain this, I'm going to start slipping French words in the middle of my sentences without realizing it..."

"Okay, now I am absolutely sure we need to find a therapist for you. Urgently," Ilya stated, but softened his voice immediately after to make sure his boss heard him. "Listen, not liking sex doesn't make you broken. Sometimes, it's just not for you. And that's okay. But do you... feel the desire to have sex?"

Shane pulled his lips into a sad smile and shrugged, lost.

"Like I said, the physical sensation itself is fine. But... taking the initiative, concentrating on the act, having to pretend I'm one hundred percent present... it's too much work. It's exhausting. Isn't there a clinical name for that? Asexual? Sexless?"

"Asexual is the term for people who don't feel sexual attraction, or feel it at very low levels. It's a spectrum," Ilya explained patiently.

"I keep thinking that... maybe the problem was just Jessica. That maybe, now, with Rose, it'll work. The gears will turn. And I want it to work out, because... ah, fuck it, who am I trying to fool?" Shane rubbed his bare face aggressively, the ugly, raw truth finally escaping his throat. "I like the feeling, Ilya. The problem is that it's almost as if I need to disconnect from myself, step out of my own body, to actually be able to enjoy anything."

"Well... sex is one of the moments when you are most vulnerable with another person," Ilya began, his deep voice taking on a calm tone, accompanied by fluid, vague gestures in the air. "You two are literally naked, stripped of any social armor, and completely at each other's mercy."

Shane swallowed hard, listening in silence.

"It's supposed to be fun, Shane. It can be peaceful and affectionate, if that's what both of you want, but it can also be intense, wild, insane. It's that exact moment when you discover a connection with the other person that you didn't even know existed. You feel every touch on the surface of your skin, your breathing changes, it feels like you're simply going to explode

with lust. And when the climax hits, when you see stars... you don't want to run away. You stay there, with the person. Relaxing, feeling the weight of the other's body, sharing the same space and enjoying the afterglow. The before and after are just as fundamental as the act itself. Foreplay is essential, and aftercare is mandatory."

Shane was paralyzed. He stared at Ilya with his mouth slightly open and his eyes glazed over, wearing the exact same expression of someone trying to decipher a quantum physics thesis delivered fluently in Russian.

Vulnerability? Connection? Staying to relax? The words ricocheted in the captain's mind without finding a single anchor point. He had never, in his entire life, experienced even a fraction of that. To him, sex was just an anxious timer counting down to an escape.

Reading perfectly the silent, drunken panic plastered on his boss's face, a sly, relentless smile tugged at the corner of Ilya's lips.

"And I'll tell you more, my dear Captain," the blond crossed his arms, leaning against the back of the couch. "As you may know, women have the incredible physiological capacity to have multiple orgasms. Being such a well-mannered gentleman, it would be expected, at the very least, that you make Rose have at least three before you even think about calling it a night."

The color drained completely from Shane's face. He stared at the Russian with pure terror, before lowering his eyes to the bottom of his own wine glass.

"You know what? I'm heavily reconsidering the idea of moving to that monastery you mentioned," Shane murmured, his voice sounding thin with desperation.

He brought the glass to his lips and tilted his head back, draining the last, solitary drop of wine left in the crystal, which drew a hoarse, genuinely amused laugh from Ilya in response.

Chapter 12: New Reason

Chapter Notes

I had so much fun writing Simone having a big family, so I hope you guys enjoy as well and once again, Shane has no idea what he's doing with his life

+ idk if the colors in new year's is a thing everywhere, but it is here, so I wanted to include a little bit of it; white is for peace, yellow for prosperity, red to passion/sex, pink to love and romance, green for money, black is the one that think it's BS to do that - I'm always in black for new year's hihi

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Shane got to experience the taste of having genuinely peaceful days, where constant anxiety didn't dictate the pace of his thoughts. Those two days isolated from the rest of the world, just watching the snow fall, were the best in a long time. And, ironically, it was all thanks to Ilya.

Having him locked in the apartment by the blizzard was one of the most therapeutic experiences Shane had ever had. They talked deeply into the early hours of the morning; the barriers fell and, organically, they became friends. Shane was historically terrible at making friends—to this day, he couldn't explain exactly how Hayden and J.J. had entered his life, suspecting the two had just decided to adopt him without asking permission. But with Ilya, the process flowed differently. Easily.

Well, almost completely easily. Shane was fully aware of his new, confusing reality. He had almost managed to repress the bathroom door "incident", but all it took was for his brain to relax a little too much, or for him to think too much about the Russian, for the high-definition image of that broad back and that ass under the shower water to ambush him. When that happened, Shane literally had to drop everything and stare into the void—as if looking into an "invisible camera," in true *The Office* style—for a few long seconds, just waiting for his brain to reboot.

Since Ilya had spent two straight days at the penthouse, Shane decided to give him a break. He didn't call him in to take care of Liam during that week's trip, a quick round trip to New York for a game against the Admirals. Luckily, Simone was on vacation and had demanded to host a giant slumber party, bringing together Liam, her daughter Elise, and Hayden's twins, whom he and Jackie had obviously shipped off at the speed of light to get some peace.

The actress sent a photo to the group chat: her and the four kids sprawled on the rug, all wearing matching Christmas pajamas, devouring popcorn and watching a movie at lunchtime. Shane offered a soft smile as he looked at his phone screen. Beside him, in the

airport departure lounge seats, Hayden was completely dead to the world, with his hoodie pulled up to his nose, snoring softly.

"Okay, we need to get this out of the way right now so we know if we're going to fight or not," J.J. appeared suddenly, throwing himself into the empty seat next to Shane. The defenseman cracked open an energy drink can with a loud pop and frowned, vibrating with his usual chaotic energy. "What are you doing on New Year's Eve?"

"I'm heading to my parents' house right after the game," Shane replied, shrugging without taking his eyes off his phone.

"So you're not planning on calling Ilya?"

"No?"

"Thank God!" J.J. cheered, taking a generous gulp of his energy drink. "Simone and I are throwing a massive New Year's party at her house. Her family is coming in full force, mine too, and basically all the adults are going to be completely drunk before ten at night. Myself included. And you know Elise is terrified of the sound of fireworks. So, I wanted to hire Ilya to be there specifically to protect and distract her, in a way that I can pay attention to my relatives without freaking out. But, if you and Sleeping Beauty next to you want to, you are more than invited to spend New Year's with us. You can bring Rose too."

Shane blinked slowly, his brain processing the avalanche of words J.J. had fired off in under ten seconds.

"Take two steps back," the captain requested.

The French-Canadian laughed, holding the cold can between his knees. "New Year's Eve. Simone's house. Lots of family, lots of booze. Elise is afraid of fireworks. I know myself and I know my cousins are going to drag me to the bar, so I won't be able to keep a hundred percent of my eyes on her. I want Ilya there to be her bodyguard. You and Hayden are invited. And you, obviously, can bring your girlfriend. Do you get it now?"

Hayden, on the other side of Shane, pulled his hood back just enough to free his mouth and scoffed. "I wish, brother. But New Year's is at my house this year. Jackie's entire family lands this afternoon. I'm going back to a packed house with my three brothers-in-law testing my patience to the limit," Hayden grumbled in a pained tone, pulling the hood back over his face to try and resume his nap on Shane's shoulder.

"You should go, man," J.J. insisted, poking Shane's arm. "It'll be really cool. There are several kids Liam's age in my family so he can run around the house, Ilya is going to be there... You bring your girlfriend, we party, you guys have that movie kiss at midnight, someone is definitely going to get an accidental champagne shower, and it will very likely be my cousin Marie-Jeanne..."

"I don't know, man," Shane hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck. "If I go, it might not be with Rose."

J.J.'s eyes bugged out of his head. Hayden ripped the hood off his face in that exact millisecond, suddenly very awake.

"Nothing happened! We're fine, hold your horses," Shane hurried to correct, raising his hands defensively until the two relaxed back into their seats. "I just think it would be nice, if I do go to the party, for it to be just Liam and me. It's the first New Year's Eve where I don't have to psychologically prepare myself to return him to Jessica's house by the second week of January. I wanted to focus just on him."

"See?! Double the reason to go! It'll be fun!" J.J. flashed a wide smile and gave his friend an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "Alright, then I'm going to text Ilya right now, asking him to come."

Shane frowned, a pang of concern hitting him. "Isn't it kind of mean to drag the guy away from a holiday celebration to put him to work?"

"Not at all. Lily-Jane's Agency has a very clear system. The nannies have profiles that specify whether they are inflexible or not on holidays." J.J. pulled out his own phone, opening the agency's website that was eternally saved in one of his browser tabs. He turned the screen to Shane. "Look. If you hire one with the red badge, know that you won't get any help on any holidays, period. The ones with the yellow badge are the ones where you can negotiate time off and extra pay in advance. The ones with the green badge are the ones who simply don't care about holidays and you can call them whenever. Ilya is a massive green badge. But the agency makes it clear that if the employee asks for time off on the holiday in advance, preference is given to them, obviously."

"Obviously," Shane agreed, watching as his friend switched apps and started quickly typing a message to Ilya, securing the Russian for New Year's Eve.

[...]

The sweet smell of vanilla and melted sugar filled the warm kitchen air.

"The batches of cookies will take about twenty more minutes to be ready," Simone announced, craning her neck over the island to peek at the four little rascals sprawled on the living room rug, mesmerized by the TV. She turned to the Russian and smiled. "Good thing you have infinite tolerance and don't get sick of kids."

Ilya let out a nasal laugh, finishing scrubbing the mixer attachments under the faucet.

"The sparkle in Liam's eyes when I opened the door is what makes it all worth it," he replied, giving a wink.

The woman with braids let out a loud, affectionate laugh. She walked over, gave two friendly pats on the blond's broad shoulder, and grabbed a clean dish towel to start drying the dishes

he was piling up.

"Seriously now: thank you for agreeing to come work on New Year's Eve too. Saved my life," Simone thanked him, before adopting a conspiratorial tone for gossip. "And I'm telling you right now to mentally prepare yourself. Just ignore my younger sister, Beatrice. She is, without a doubt, the black sheep of the family."

Ilya laughed, raising his eyebrows, genuinely curious.

"Black sheep in what way?"

"She has a questionable preference for dating insufferable white guys," Simone revealed, shaking her head in disapproval.

The Russian couldn't help it and burst into loud laughter along with the actress.

"I'm serious! Look at the track record: my older sister found an amazing Nigerian man to marry, who is a wonderful brother-in-law. I married Jean, who has Haitian roots and grandparents. Do you know who Bea's last ex-boyfriend was? A Beverly Hills preppy who wore polo shirts with the collar popped," Simone described with a perfect mix of mockery and pure disdain, making Ilya laugh even louder. "All my male and female cousins married Black people. Beatrice is the only one obsessed with this project to lighten the family tree."

"Well, to be fair... you also gave it your 'try' with J.J.," Ilya joked about her ex-husband's lighter skin tone.

"Oh, shut up!" Simone laughed, hitting his arm with the dish towel as punishment. "Jean still served to give me a beautiful, green-eyed Black daughter, for my total defense!"

She pointed the freshly dried spatula at the Russian's face before tossing it into the utensil drawer.

"But speaking of relationships and ignoring my sister... I told you to ignore her advances, but just in case you want to..."

"I don't date, I don't hook up, and I don't go out with relatives of the families I work for, Monnie," Ilya cut the insinuation off in the same second, shaking his head. He placed the clean mixer bowl in the dish rack and pulled over the smaller bowls, still dirty with colored frosting.

"That level of professionalism of yours deeply annoys me," she narrowed her eyes, keeping the playful air. "Changing the subject: did Shane pay you for the two extra days you were stuck there in the blizzard?"

"He did. Even with me insisting that he didn't need to, since I was there by accident," Ilya shrugged, attacking the dried frosting with the sponge. "But I took the money from the transfer and forwarded it to the daycare where Anya stays. They needed funds to buy new thermal blankets for the dogs in the winter and renew their stock of destroyed toys. Shane's money was enough to cover it all."

Simone stopped drying dishes for a second, looking at the Russian with a mix of admiration and affection before getting back to work.

"Did he tell you anything about Rose? And please don't take this the wrong way. I adore her to pieces, we already knew each other from red carpets and industry events way before all this. But I also know Shane. For those two to become the tragic combination of lighter and gasoline and show up engaged in February, it wouldn't take much. Shane catches feelings too fast."

"Catches feelings like a sapphic couple?" Ilya joked without missing a beat, referring to the famous U-Haul on the second date joke.

Simone covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes wide in comical shock.

"I didn't say that. You did!"

"But you thought exactly that."

The two burst into laughter together, the sound echoing through the kitchen and mixing with the joyful yelling of the kids in the living room.

There was a subtle, yet undeniable, difference in Ilya's dynamic as a nanny depending on which child he was caring for. When the job was with Elise, the reality was that he spent much more time talking to Simone or J.J.—depending on whose house the shift was at—than actually entertaining the five-year-old girl, who was fiercely independent. With Liam, on the other hand, the scenario was the opposite: he spent one hundred percent of his time immersed in the boy's world, while Shane kept himself as a distant, reclusive figure.

At least, that was how it was before the snowstorm forced them to become friends. Remembering that, Ilya gave a restrained smile, swallowing his own lie that he could only make friends if he was completely drunk.

He knew very well that Simone talked about him behind his back—J.J. had already let slip his ex-wife's less-than-subtle comments about how she thought her daughter's nanny was "absurdly gorgeous." Still, Ilya loved her company. As the excellent actress she was, Simone possessed a magnetic charisma and such fun energy that it was humanly impossible not to like her.

The kids finished devouring the cookies fresh out of the oven exactly as game time approached. Ruby, the biggest hockey fanatic of the kids' group, hurried to grab the remote and tune into ESPN. On the screen, the pre-game commentators were heatedly debating the regular season statistics, focusing on the relentless race for the MVP award. The dispute was polarized around three heavy hitters: Shane Hollander, Scott Hunter, and Troy Barrett.

"Can I tell you some gossip?" Simone leaned over the couch and whispered conspiratorially, while the four kids formed a pile of blankets on the living room's plush rug.

"You must," Ilya turned his head instantly, his eyes shining with interest, which made her chuckle.

"I heard... a little bird told me..." she began, gesturing in the air with perfectly manicured nails. "That, a while ago, an actor I've worked with, Adrian De La Cruz—a sweetheart, super talented—was seen leaving a charity event in the early hours of the morning. This little bird of mine saw Adrian getting into the same car as Troy Barrett. And, by a twist of fate, this same person was staying at the same hotel as them. When she went back to her own floor, she clearly saw Barrett sneaking into Adrian's room. And, minutes later... rhythmic sounds of bed springs squeaking."

Ilya stared at her with a perfectly neutral expression.

"It was you who saw it, wasn't it?"

Simone collapsed, covering her mouth with both hands as her shoulders shook in a silent fit of laughter, confirming the deduction.

"Well, only those who don't want to see it, don't," Ilya gestured, with a slight touch of mockery in his voice.

"Wait, you already knew?!" her eyes widened.

"Look at his face on TV, Monnie!" the Russian laughed, pointing to the screen where a highlight of Barrett was playing. "I knew Ryan Price was gay way before he came out about his relationship with Fabian Salah, just by the way he looked. Troy? It's the exact same thing. The day he gets his act together and gets rid of that toxic friendship with Dallas Kent, he'll come out of the closet real quick."

"Uhm, I don't know about that..." Simone sighed, her tone turning a bit more serious and realistic. "For any of these boys to come out and try to keep playing in the NHL, it's going to take an absurd amount of courage. Barrett doesn't even have the courage to drop that damn Kent, imagine..."

"SWEAR JAR!"

Elise's high-pitched yell cut the conversation short. The five-year-old turned around on the rug, pointing an accusing finger directly at her own mother.

Simone's eyes went wide; she was caught red-handed and threw both hands up in a sign of surrender.

"Okay, okay, you got me!" she laughed, getting up from the couch to go hunt for a dollar bill in her purse to put in the glass jar in the living room.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Ilya reached down and gave Elise a crisp high-five, which earned him a mischievous giggle of victory, proud of having enforced the law in her own house.

As soon as the referee blew the whistle to start the game and the puck hit the ice on the TV screen, the dynamic in the room shifted. While the three girls stayed focused and sprawled on

the floor, Liam untangled himself from the pile of kids. Dragging his fluffy blanket like a heavy cape, the boy climbed onto the couch and sat right up against Ilya.

The Russian didn't need a single word to understand. He realized right away that the boy had left the rug on purpose, exclusively seeking his company. Without making a fuss, Ilya just adjusted his own posture on the upholstery and opened one of his arms, offering a silent invitation. Liam didn't waste a single second: he nestled against the blond's broad chest, shrinking under the blanket with his eyes glued to the TV to watch his dad play.

Returning from the kitchen with a full glass of red wine in one hand, Simone stopped in her tracks when she witnessed the scene. The Russian dressed in black and the boy tucked safely under his arm formed a domestic image too adorable to ignore.

With an affectionate smile tugging at her lips, the actress pulled her phone from her cardigan pocket. She snapped a quick, silent picture of the duo and, with a few quick taps on the screen, sent the image straight to the parents' group chat.

[...]

In the locker room, the intermission between the first and second periods was a chaotic mix of heavy breathing, the smell of ice, and sweaty equipment being adjusted. Shane sat on his bench, took off his gloves, and fished his cell phone out of his backpack on pure instinct. A notification from the parents' group chat glowed on the screen.

Upon opening the photo sent by Simone, Shane's stomach did a violent flip.

In the image, Liam was completely nestled against Ilya's side on the couch. The Russian's massive hand rested on the boy's head, his fingers buried in the brown hair in an unassuming petting motion while both watched the game on the living room TV. Shane had no idea that Ilya was working that day. The most likely scenario was that, when Shane mentioned he was giving the Russian the day off, Simone had rushed to hire him. And, inevitably, like a magnet, Ilya ended up serving as Liam's safe haven anyway.

[Group: Playdates]

Jackie: What absolute cuteness! 🥰🥰🥰 Oh, seeing kids being cute like this makes me so sentimental.

Simone: Make a fifth kid, then.

"Jean-Jacques, look at the audacity of your ex-wife!" Hayden yelled from across the locker room, lifting his head from his own phone.

J.J., who was finishing a bottle of water, choked and let out a wheezing laugh as he read the notification on his own screen.

[Group: Playdates]

Shane: Liam is acting in this photo like he didn't see Ilya THIS MORNING before I left.

Simone: The worst part is he really is. And, look, not meaning to speak ill of your spawn, Hollander... but he is shooting a death glare at my daughter every time Elise dares to talk to Ilya. Your boy is quite jealous.

J.J.'s laugh died in the exact same second. The defenseman's eyes widened at his phone.

"AT MY BABY GIRL? How dare he?!" J.J. yelled, turning his head to shoot daggers at Shane through the row of lockers. He pointed two fingers at his own eyes and then at the captain, in a clear "I've got my eyes on you" gesture. Or, in this case, on his son.

"Man!" Shane threw his arms open, indignant at the theatrical threat. "He's eight years old!"

"And my daughter is five! A gentleman does not shoot death glares at a lady!" the taller man argued, gesturing with his water bottle.

"What is this crazy talk?" Mitty, the starting goalie, asked while adjusting the straps of his heavy leg pads, laughing at the confusion.

"Monnie is hosting a sleepover with our kids over at her house," Hayden took on the role of narrator, speaking loudly for the rest of the team to hear. "Turns out J.J. and Shane share a nanny. And, apparently, mini-Hollander is dying of jealousy seeing his nanny give attention to J.J.'s daughter."

The guys on the team burst out laughing, the sound echoing off the locker room's metal walls.

"And here I thought it was scientifically impossible for Liam to be more like Cap," Andropov commented from the back, tying his skates with a cheeky smile on his face.

The locker room erupted in whistles and laughter of agreement. Shane felt the back of his neck heat up.

"I am neither jealous nor possessive," he grumbled defensively, frowning and scowling in a way that only proved Andropov's point.

"Oh, of course not. Imagine if you were," J.J. scoffed, rolling his eyes with extreme mockery before focusing back on his phone screen.

Shane rolled his eyes at J.J.'s mockery, chuckling lightly, but the sound died in his throat when the device buzzed again in his hand. Expecting another tease in the parents' group, he unlocked the screen. In that exact instant, a thick, icy chill ran down his spine, draining all the fun from the moment.

It was his lawyers' group chat.

[Group: Crisis Management – Legal]

Chloé Renault: I just contacted the judge handling the case. I myself just saw Jessica driving by, very slowly, in front of Simone's house. We live in the same neighborhood and I recognized her. I managed to take pictures of the license plate and have already attached them to the file.

Chloé Renault: With this direct violation of the protective order, it is almost certain that an arrest warrant will be issued in January, right after the judicial recess.

Shane Hollander: They're going to arrest her?!

François Moreau: Possibly, yes, Shane. For a month or two, which will probably be converted into community service later, so don't expect anything too radical. But the fact is that Jessica is digging her own grave. First posting indirect messages about you, then stalking Rose, and now prowling around the house where Liam is??? Being very honest, I am considering asking the judge for a psychiatric commitment order or forced therapy.

Chloé Renault: It wouldn't be crazy to ask for that.

Shane Hollander: *She's* crazy. She went after my son at the door of someone else's house?! God in heaven.

Chloé Renault: Do you want me to send a message to Simone? Just so she locks the doors and is aware.

Shane Hollander: No, let me warn my team myself. Thank you guys, and I'm sorry for making you work in the middle of your holiday break.

François Moreau: Don't mention it, Shane. It's our job. Focus on your game and let us hold down the fort over here.

Shane Hollander: Okay. Au revoir.

Chloé Renault: Au revoir, mon cher.

The air seemed to have vanished from the locker room. Shane tossed the phone into his backpack with trembling hands and rubbed his face aggressively. He grabbed his bottle and squirted a jet of ice-cold water into his mouth, trying to force his heart rate to drop.

"Everything alright over there, Cap?" Hayden asked, noticing the sudden shift in energy as he massaged the sole of his foot on the bench next to him.

"Yeah. It was just my mom texting," Shane lied with the ease of someone who had spent the last eight years masking panic.

He pulled his phone back out of the backpack. His hands were still sweating a bit, but he opened Ilya's chat immediately.

[Direct Message]

Shane Hollander: My lawyer lives in Simone's neighborhood and just saw Jessica driving slowly by there. It's a violation of the restraining order. The judge has already been notified and they will very likely have her arrested. Keep an eye out.

Ilya Rozanov: Breathe, Shane. Liam didn't go to the front yard at any point. He and the girls were playing in the backyard building snowmen. I highly doubt he saw the car or anything. Everyone is safe in here.

Shane Hollander: Thank God. That's good. I don't want her craziness ruining his holidays. No more than I already did myself.

Ilya Rozanov: You didn't ruin anything. Liam is already doing great and resolved with the whole Rose situation. Obviously, the golden tip is just don't invite her to show up for New Year's Eve and everything will be peaceful.

Shane Hollander: Funny guy.

Ilya Rozanov: 🤪

Shane Hollander: Are you going to spend the night there at Simone's with the kids?

Ilya Rozanov: I am. You can imagine that Liam was absolutely devastated by this terrible information.

Shane Hollander: Completely 😂

Shane Hollander: The intermission is almost over, I need to get back on the ice. Tell him I send a kiss.

Ilya Rozanov: You got it, Captain. Go out there and win the game.

Shane locked his phone screen and let out a long, deep sigh.

It was almost magic. The paralyzing anxiety and the terror of knowing Jessica was prowling around his son seemed to evaporate into the thin air of the locker room, replaced by a small, genuine smile tugging at his lips. Ilya's pragmatic tranquility was the perfect antidote to the chaos of his life.

And, as he retied his skate laces for the second period, Shane realized that being friends with the Russian was the easiest, safest, and most terribly fun thing that had happened to him in years. But Shane didn't know exactly why he also didn't say that he would probably go to the New Year's Eve party at Simone's house. But he didn't.

[...]

The surroundings of the actress's imposing house were packed with cars. J.J.'s Bugatti occupied a prominent spot right in front of the garage—the untouchable privileges of an ex-husband—but Shane's eyes almost instantly focused on Ilya's black Jeep parked a little further ahead.

With Liam's small hand firmly held in his, the captain walked up to the entrance. Even before they rang the doorbell, the sound of loud music, laughter, and welcoming chatter was already leaking through the cracks.

The one who opened the door was Jean-Marc, J.J.'s brother. As massive as the defenseman, sporting perfect braids in his curly hair, he greeted Shane with a bone-crushing handshake and a quick hug. Liam got a crisp high-five from the giant and burst out laughing when Jean-Marc joked, doing an exaggerated bow, saying no one had warned him the "Royalty of Montreal" would be making an appearance at the party.

The inside of the house was buzzing. In the main living room, J.J.'s parents were chatting animatedly with Simone's parents and uncles. The actress's maternal family was Jamaican: extensive, absurdly loud, and tight-knit. Watching the scene, Shane felt a bittersweet pang in his chest; he would love to have that level of chaotic unity in his own life. But David was an only child, Yuna was too, and visits to his maternal grandparents in Toronto were too sporadic and quiet.

"Capitaine!" J.J. emerged from the crowd, his smile wide and his eyes already slightly glassy from the alcohol. It was only eight in the evening. "Liam, big guy!"

"Hi, J.J.!" the boy smiled.

"I brought reinforcements," Shane held up the bottle of premium champagne he was carrying.

"*Mon Dieu*, give me that, let me hide it from Marie-Jeanne before it turns into a mess," J.J. confiscated the bottle immediately, making room for them to fully enter.

Shane genuinely loved hanging out with their families. The Dagenais didn't mess around: there was everyone from Remy, a cousin who was a professional tennis player, to Marie Esther, who taught psychology at Oxford.

"Liam, come play!" Elise's high-pitched voice echoed from the back deck, which was covered and climate-controlled.

Shane let go of his son's hand, and the boy shot off like a rocket to join the girl and her army of cousins. Gradually, Shane made his way through, greeting familiar faces, until he accepted a glass of beer from Amani, one of Simone's cousins who was manning the grill on the deck. Amani was a tank: a colossal weightlifter, with long braids and an unusual Hello Kitty tattoo on the back of his hand—an absolute demand from his youngest daughter, Kathy.

"You guys absolutely crushed Buffalo today. Me and the guys almost broke a living room chair when you nailed that goal in the second period, right in the top corner," Amani commented, gesturing with the meat tongs.

Shane laughed, shaking his head modestly.

"Let's be honest, Buffalo has a terrible team this season," the captain pointed out, taking his first sip of cold beer while sweeping the deck with his eyes. The twelve or fifteen kids were all there, running around, but there was no sign of Ilya.

"They were only any good because of Price. The big redhead retired and bam! Buffalo went to shit," Amani exclaimed.

"AMANI!" his mother's authoritative voice whipped out from inside the house, scolding his language over the music.

"Went to sleep!" the giant corrected himself immediately, covering his mouth with his free hand and watching the kids burst out laughing. "Nobody here heard a thing, huh! Or the next piece of meat on the grill is going to be snitch fillet!"

The circle of kids cackled, going back to focusing on their chaotic game of "duck, duck, goose."

"And changing the subject to something that broke the internet this past week, huh, Shane?" Kaven, Amani's brother, who was sitting on a cooler next to the grill stealing little pieces of meat, started the interrogation. "Rose Landry? Seriously? Are you two together?"

Shane laughed, dipping his head slightly as the brothers hissed and whistled in teasing.

"Yeah, we're getting to know each other. She went to a party with her castmates today, we were just texting," Shane explained, running a hand through his hair.

That was when he saw it.

Ilya's silhouette appeared on the outside of the house, his body braving the biting cold as the Russian stubbed out the end of a cigarette in the accumulated snow. He quickened his pace and pulled open the heavy glass door to enter the climate-controlled environment of the deck.

The visual impact was immediate. Ilya was wearing tailored black dress pants with a matte leather belt, but what stole the show was his wine-red satin shirt. The fluid fabric hugged the broad span of his shoulders and chest with tailored perfection. Shane noticed out of the corner of his eye that J.J.'s and Simone's cousins, who were standing near the glass door, stopped talking in that exact moment to check the Russian out from top to bottom.

And Shane didn't blame them. He himself was having a hard time looking away.

Ilya tossed the butt in the trash can and, focusing on the kids, blinked, surprised, stopping in his tracks.

"ILYA!" Liam yelled, breaking the game circle and running toward the blond.

"Hey, Akula!" Ilya broke into a radiant smile, crouching down to pick the boy up effortlessly. His blue eyes scanned the room, finding Shane sitting on the wicker sofa near the grill. "I didn't know you guys were coming!"

"And I didn't know you were going to be here!" Liam replied, beaming.

Ilya walked over to Shane, still holding the boy.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"You're on the clock for J.J., not me. Didn't want to get in the way," Shane shrugged, sipping his beer. Ilya let out a soft laugh and put Liam back down.

"Are you going to come play with us now?" the boy pulled on the Russian's wrist, insistent.

"I'll be right there, just give me a minute, okay?" Ilya affectionately straightened the collar of Liam's shirt, and the boy ran back to the circle, satisfied.

The Russian turned his attention back to the captain, analyzing his outfit from top to bottom. Shane was wearing a dark red wool sweater and impeccable black jeans. Shane's woody cologne mixed with the subtle scent of nicotine and cologne emanating from Ilya.

"You're not wearing white," Ilya noted, raising an eyebrow at the break in New Year's tradition.

"Neither are you," Shane countered, pointing at the satin shirt.

"Want a beer, Roz?" Kaven offered from the cooler, holding a bottle up toward the nanny.

"I'm working," Ilya declined politely, with a restrained smile.

"Oh, you're working, huh? But not working hard enough to turn down sneaking a smoke outside with my aunt and grandma!" Amani teased, using the meat tongs as a microphone.

Ilya laughed out loud, throwing both hands up in absolute surrender.

"Is Janice smoking again? Didn't she swear she'd quit?" Kaven asked his brother, shocked.

"Quit. Same way J.J. quit drinking last year," Amani scoffed.

Shane let out a loud laugh, remembering perfectly J.J.'s fateful promise to never touch alcohol again after waking up hugging the toilet bowl and discovering, on his phone, that he had made an absurd fifty-thousand-dollar purchase on random auction junk in the middle of the night.

Ignoring the brothers' uproar, Ilya leaned casually against the arm of the wicker sofa where Shane was sitting. The red satin gleamed under the deck's warm lights.

"And Rose?" the Russian asked, his tone dropping to something more private.

"She went out with the core cast of her show. They're at a bar downtown that closes for New Year's Eve parties," Shane explained, his eyes drifting down once again, almost unintentionally, across the dark buttons of the Russian's shirt. "Red is the color of love and passion on New Year's Eve. But you keep saying you don't date."

Ilya let out a low, deep, and dangerous laugh. He tilted his head slightly toward Shane.

"I don't. Pink is the color of love. Red... red is the color of sex."

With a quick, bold movement, Ilya reached out and gave a light tug on the fabric of Shane's red sweater. Without saying another word, he turned his back and walked toward the group of kids.

Shane remained static. His suddenly dry throat forced him to swallow hard. With no options to hide his internal panic and the heat that rushed up the back of his neck, he simply raised his glass and took a long, desperate gulp of beer.

[Direct Message]

Shane: How's the party over there?

Rose Landry ❤️: We're snacking on some appetizers, and Miles already found a kitten to play with.

Shane: That's great 😊

Rose Landry ❤️: And how are things over there with J.J.'s family?

Shane: They are amazing. Simone's cousins and I were just talking about yesterday's game, but right now someone is almost getting stabbed at the grill for stealing pieces of meat.

Rose Landry ❤️: Argh, I wish my family was lively like that. It's always so boring with them.

Shane: At my house too, but that's because we are a tiny family. Simone's mom has six siblings, all married, all with kids and grandkids.

Rose Landry ❤️: My God 😱

Shane: Relax, when the stories about them start coming up, I'll help you remember who's who.

Rose Landry ❤️: Thank goodness, but I think I can handle it. I'm good with names.

Shane: We'll talk later. xoxo

Rose Landry ❤️: 🙄

Shane slipped his phone back into his jeans pocket and looked up.

In the center of the deck, Ilya was sitting on the floor, surrounded by the circle of kids. The Russian spun the colorful wheel of a Twister mat, calling out colors and limbs while the little

rascals contorted, fell over each other, and laughed nonstop. Under the room's lighting, Ilya's red satin shirt gleamed, contrasting with his golden hair.

The glass door opened abruptly. From inside the house emerged Naomi, the cousin Simone used to call her "twin". They had been born on the exact same day and month, but Naomi was exactly one year younger than the actress. As a beauty influencer and part of Simone's makeup team for gala events, she was stunning. Naomi was wearing an extremely tight white lace dress, with a strategic neckline that showed off the edge of a tattoo drawn just below her breasts.

"I am going to commit murder. I am going to hit Uncle Daryn," she announced with a terrifyingly irritated calm, marching over to her cousins near the grill.

Kaven let out a tired sigh.

"Here we go. What is the old man doing now?"

"You guys know very well that, by now, Patrick has come out as Patrice, Monnie's new hairstylist," Naomi began to explain, gesturing in the air with her flawless, white-painted acrylic nails. "And Uncle Daryn is making an active, disgusting effort to call Patrice a man in front of everyone. It's driving me completely crazy."

She said all of this maintaining a frozen smile on her face, which clearly indicated she was a millimeter away from a nervous breakdown. Amani grumbled, pulled an ice-cold longneck from the cooler, and handed it to his cousin.

"Fucking annoying old man," the giant with braids cursed. "Just wait for Janice to finish smoking and go inside, she'll put him in his place real quick."

"Aunt Janice is smoking again?!" Naomi raised her eyebrows, shocked, stopping the bottle halfway to her lips. Amani nodded. "Look at that sneaky old lady..."

Naomi shook her head and turned to Shane.

"So, Hollander? Have you stopped to thank God today that your family is small and isn't this insane asylum?"

Shane laughed, genuinely entertained by their dynamic.

"I give thanks every day that yours is giant. It's pure entertainment just standing here in the corner, watching."

Naomi let out a laugh and agreed. She turned to check on the kids on the mat, but her eyes, fatally, glued themselves to the man spinning the wheel.

"Me-ow," she whispered, biting her lower lip. "Good heavens, what a piece of eye candy is that?"

Kaven widened his eyes and threw his arms open, indignant.

"Hey, hey, hey?! Are you going to turn into a traitor to the nation like Beatrice now? Are you going to start dating white guys, Naomi?"

"And who said anything about dating, darling?" Naomi scoffed, without taking her eyes off the Russian. "Guys, and that deep, drawling accent he has... oh my. *I want that...*"

Amani gave a proud little smile.

"The guy is Russian. Why do you think I told Ruth to stay inside in the living room? I am absolutely not letting that undercover Calvin Klein model anywhere near my wife."

Hearing the cousins sexualizing Ilya like that made Shane's stomach churn in a strange way. A defensive and irrational instinct took over him.

"He's way too professional for that kind of thing, relax, Amani," Shane intervened, his voice coming out a little sharper than planned. He forced a casual tone as he looked at the girl. "Sorry to throw a bucket of cold water on your plans, Naomi."

She just raised a perfectly drawn eyebrow, took a sip of her beer, and flashed a predatory smile.

"Monnie's old private security guard was also super professional, Shane. An excellent professional at oral sex, actually."

"LALALALA, I'M DEAF! NOT MY BABY COUSIN" Kaven bellowed, sticking his fingers in both ears and squeezing his eyes shut.

Naomi let out a delicious laugh and, ignoring her cousin, began to walk languidly toward the Twister mat, her hips swaying under the white lace, her eyes locked on Ilya.

Sitting on the couch, Shane gripped his beer bottle. Naomi's mocking comment kept hammering in his head, while the back of the captain's neck began to burn with a sudden, possessive, and annoyingly confusing wave of heat.

[...]

It was exactly five minutes to midnight. The collective blood alcohol level was bordering on alarming.

The mothers were more sober to keep an eye on the chaos, the elderly were also maintaining their composure, but the vast majority of the adult men were already tripping over each other. Which, logistically speaking, was a terrible scenario for the group in charge of setting up the fireworks batteries in the backyard, just steps from the edge of the frozen pool.

Shane watched the scene from a distance, leaning against the doorframe of the glass sliding door to the deck. J.J.'s and Simone's cousins were almost coming to blows deciding what the

correct angle for the rockets was. The confusion only ended when Jean-Pierre, J.J.'s father, lost his patience. The patriarch marched through the snow, pushed the grown men aside, and organized the explosives in ten seconds, shooting his sons and nephews a look of pure, silent paternal disappointment.

"Hey."

The deep voice and drawling accent sounded next to Shane. Ilya had just approached, now wearing a heavy jacket over his satin shirt to brave the biting cold of the backyard. Shane gave a slight nod in greeting.

"I've managed to cut the number of active kids in half," Ilya reported, exhaling a small cloud of vapor into the freezing air. "The little ones have already passed out in the beds upstairs."

"Liam shouldn't have eaten that mountain of candy. He's never going to sleep," Shane sighed, pointing with his chin at his son. The boy was running wildly around J.J.'s teenage cousins, who had joined in the game of chasing him through the snow. "And Elise?"

"I'm going to head inside to get her before the noise starts." Ilya shook his head.

The two stood side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder, in silence. Shane noticed that the Russian's gaze was fixed on the warm, noisy commotion of the family in the backyard. The blond's features had fallen. There was a sharp melancholy there, a rare crack in Ilya's posture as an ice wall.

"Everything okay?" Shane asked, his voice dropping in tone.

Ilya nodded slowly and let out a sigh.

"Working as a nanny these past few years has already put me inside a lot of different homes. I've seen every type of family dynamic imaginable," the Russian began, his blue eyes reflecting the garden lights. "And, even knowing that none of them are perfect and that everyone has problems... seeing a big family like this, united this way, still gives me a crushing pang of envy."

Shane swallowed hard. He perfectly understood the weight of that sentence coming from the guy who had lost his mother at twelve and grown up under the fist of a monster. The Canadian felt a sudden, absurd urge to hug him.

"I thought you were going to spend New Year's Eve in Ottawa with your parents," Ilya commented, breaking the thick silence and turning his face to the captain.

"I was. But since J.J. invited me at the last minute... I thought it would be good for Liam to have a bunch of kids his own age to run and play with," Shane shrugged, offering the official excuse, the one he had been repeating to himself all day.

But, as the words left his mouth, the truth hit him like a punch to the gut.

Four days ago, before flying out to New York, he was absolutely certain he would be at his parents' quiet house in Ottawa. But here he was, in the middle of a madhouse in Montreal, in

the midnight cold, fleeing a party with his own girlfriend. And, in the back of his mind, the realization finally dropped: Shane had used Liam's joy as a convenient shield. He had only agreed to come to this party because he knew Ilya would be there.

Shane's terrifying epiphany was shattered by a high-pitched scream coming from the edge of the pool.

"JEAN-MARC, IF YOU DON'T GET OUT OF THE WAY, I'M GOING TO SET THIS ROCKET OFF IN YOUR ASS!" J.J. bellowed, pointing the fireworks tube at his own brother.

The giant gave a teasing little jog, laughing out loud as he backed away.

Ilya shook his head, breaking his own melancholy with a half-smile and returning to his usual dry humor.

"It is statistically impressive how J.J.'s family managed to exhaust almost every possible permutation of the name Jean at the registry office," the Russian joked, counting on his fingers. "We have Jean-Jacques, Jean-Marc, Jean-Pierre, Jean-Luc, Jean-Paul..."

"And don't forget Cousin Marie-Jeanne!" Shane completed the list.

"Lighters! Where are the damn lighters?!" Kaven yelled, spinning on his heel in the snow and pointing directly at his grandmother and Aunt Janice. "Come on, you old smokers, you can hand the contraband over here."

"Watch your respect, boy!" the family matriarch narrowed her eyes, muttering indignantly as she fished a lighter out of the bottom pocket of her wool cardigan.

Aunt Janice, on the other hand, reached unceremoniously into the neckline of her dress and pulled a green plastic lighter from under her bra, holding it out toward her nephew. Kaven took two steps back, faking a theatrical gagging motion, which drew screeching laughs from everyone around the pool.

"Just take the damn thing! I've wiped your dirty ass, boy!" Janice shot back, offended, waving the lighter in the air.

Shane saw, out of the corner of his eye, Ilya lift his right leg. With a fluid and perfectly rehearsed movement, the Russian pulled a silver metal Zippo lighter from inside the shaft of his own military boot.

"Monnie!" Ilya caught the actress's attention and tossed the metallic object through the air.

Simone caught the lighter with an impressive reflex for someone who had already emptied a few glasses of champagne.

"Thank God! A lighter that wasn't in a pair of boobs!" she cheered, laughing out loud as she ran to hand it to the men near the fireworks.

The chorus of voices inside the house and in the backyard began to vibrate in unison. The official countdown had begun.

Ten! Nine! Eight!

Ilya had already stepped into the house and, in a matter of seconds, reappeared at the glass door to the deck. He carried Elise nestled in his arms. The five-year-old girl already had her eyes squeezed tightly shut and her little hands covering her own ears.

With a gentleness that contrasted brutally with his own size, the Russian settled her cheek against the broad chest of his jacket. Then, he used his own massive hands to create a double shell over the little girl's hands, completely isolating her from any noise that was about to come.

Witnessing the scene, Liam didn't hide. Instead, he clung to Shane's leg, his face set in a scowl and his eyes glaring at Elise and Ilya with a fierce possessiveness.

"Hey. Drop that ugly face right now," Shane scolded in a firm whisper, crouching down to pick his own son up and cutting off the boy's eye contact with the Russian.

Seven! Six! Five!

"Ilya is just as much her nanny as yours, Liam. And today he is working for her," the Canadian tried to be the voice of reason, settling his son on his hip.

Liam crossed his short little arms over Shane's chest, his pout perfectly intact, and whispered back:

"He's *my* Ilya, *your* Ilya. *Our* Ilya."

The boy's words hit Shane with the force of a low blow. That stubborn, childish jealousy mirrored, terrifyingly, the exact same feeling of irrational possessiveness that Shane himself had been fighting to repress inside himself all night.

But there was no time to process the panic of that realization. The family's chorus reached its explosive climax.

Three! Two! One!

"HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

The first rocket tore through the Montreal night sky, exploding in a deafening shower of colored sparks over the frozen backyard and illuminating everyone's faces with the promise of a year that would change absolutely everything.

Chapter 13: What a day

Chapter Notes

I'm back!

Heated Rivalry started filming today, and yesterday was my birthday, so it was a great gift for me, hehehe. I was traveling with my family and got back way too late to write anything. I had half of this chapter ready, so if there are some mistakes, it's possibly because of that.

Also, I grieve the Harris we could've had, but I will fight anyone who dislikes the Harris we have now — Harris is still my baby boy, and Charlie Gillespie... I have nothing not horny to say. Wonderful Troy, and my little fangirl ass of JATP is screaming.

Anyway, hope you guys enjoy! <3

J.J. tossed his plush resort towel onto the lounge chair between Hayden and Carter Vaughn, the alternate captain of the New York Admirals, and stretched until his back popped satisfyingly. The morning Florida sun was already relentless over Tampa Bay, setting the perfect mood for the start of the All-Star Game weekend. The East versus West clash promised to be, at the very least, spectacular, especially with Shane and Scott Hunter named as captain and alternate of the conference.

"And how is your daughter, J.J.? Gloria is always raving about the pictures Simone posts of her on Instagram," Carter asked, his voice drawling with pure relaxation. He was sprawled in the chair, his floral button-down shirt completely open, mirrored sunglasses on his face, taking the opportunity to bronze his black skin under the strong light.

"Right at this very moment? Totally annoyed," J.J. laughed, sitting on the lounge chair and adjusting his own glasses. "I was going to bring her with me to enjoy the pool, but suddenly..." He snapped his fingers in the air. "...the girl caught a nasty flu. High fever and everything. She's bedridden in Montreal."

Carter grimaced in sympathy, even without having children of his own.

"And your brats, Pikey?" the Admirals player teased, turning his face to the other side.

"For the love of God, don't you dare talk about that..." Hayden muttered, sprawled in the chair like a starfish. He was wearing absurdly flashy floral swim trunks and sporting a thick, visible layer of SPF 60 sunscreen over his pale skin, refusing to burn. "I am thousands of miles away from home. No one is going to scream 'Daddy' in my ear today. No one is going to wake me up at two in the morning because they had a nightmare. I am a free man."

"Good thing Gloria and I are perfectly happy with our decision not to have kids," Carter laughed out loud, joined by J.J.

The New York player pulled his sunglasses down to the tip of his nose and frowned, looking toward the entrance of the pool area.

"Who's the guy walking with Hollander over there?"

Hayden and J.J. snapped their necks in that direction at the same time.

Shane was walking along the edge of the pool with a towel wrapped around his neck, holding Liam's hand. But the captain's "entourage" didn't stop there. Walking beside him were not just one, but two people drawing the attention of the entire resort: Rose Landry, stunning in a designer beach cover-up, and Ilya Rozanov.

"It's Liam's nanny," J.J. replied, the surprise evident in his voice as he sat up straighter. "I had no earthly idea Shane was bringing Ilya to Florida."

"And apparently, he brought Rose too," Hayden slowly pulled his sunglasses down, wearing a smile loaded with silent mischief.

Before J.J. could formulate a joke about the situation, Shane was already close enough to the group.

"What's up, guys?" Shane greeted, lightly kicking the foot of his best friend's lounge chair.

Hayden broke into a wide smile and took off his glasses completely.

"Liam, big guy!"

"Hi, Uncle Hayden!" Liam didn't waste any time, letting go of his dad's hand and running to give the sunscreen-covered blond a crushing hug.

"Carter, my God, hi!" Rose exclaimed, walking straight toward the New York player. As the boyfriend of Gloria, one of her fellow Los Angeles actresses, the two already knew each other from past events. "Did you bring Gloria with you?!"

"Obviously. She's been holed up in the hotel spa since eight in the morning," Carter stood up, wrapping Rose in a warm hug. He pulled back and gave a gallant smile. "Gorgeous as always, huh, Rosie?"

The redhead let out a crystalline laugh, tossing her hair back, and then turned her attention back to the Montreal Metros duo.

"Hi, boys."

"Hi, Rose," J.J. and Hayden waved in unison, extremely polite.

Without wasting time, J.J. walked past Shane and went straight to hug the Russian.

"My favorite Russian in the world!" the French-Canadian cheered. Ilya laughed, returning the hug with strong pats on the defenseman's back. "I didn't know you were coming, man!"

"It was pure logistics," Shane hurried to justify, perhaps too quickly, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched the interaction. "This way I can focus on the weekend events, the league dinners, and, of course, hang out with Rose, because I know Liam is going to be one hundred percent safe and entertained."

He ran his hand protectively through his son's hair. Liam just offered a bright smile, his eyes sparkling as he looked at the massive resort pool with waterslides. The boy's mind was already racing a mile a minute, calculating the dozens of possibilities and adventures the weekend held for him and his nanny.

"Can we go in the water now, Dad? Can we, please?" Liam begged, pulling on Shane's hand and bouncing in a frantic rhythm of pure childish anticipation.

"Sunscreen first, Liam. Non-negotiable," Ilya intervened in his deep voice, already holding out his hand. The boy didn't hesitate: he hopped with excitement, grabbed the Russian's hand, and dragged him to an empty lounge chair in their row.

"I'm going to go up to the spa and meet Gloria there, okay?" Rose approached, resting her hand delicately on Shane's shoulder. The scent of her floral perfume mixed with the pool breeze. "When you want to grab something to eat, let me know. I'll have my phone in my hand."

"Okay, go ahead. Have fun," Shane leaned in, and the two shared a quick, affectionate peck.

Rose waved from afar to the guys and to Liam. The boy, too focused on the aerosol spray, didn't answer at first. It was only when Ilya gave him a quick, discreet flick on the back that Liam turned around, realized his gaffe, and waved frantically at the redhead.

Shane sat on the edge of the same lounge chair, taking on the task of applying the spray sunscreen on his son, since the boy hated the sticky texture of creamy lotions.

"So, Cap... how are things going with Rose, huh?" Hayden pulled his sunglasses down to the tip of his nose, flashing a sly little smile to fish for details.

Shane shot him a hard, sharp look, discreetly pointing at Liam with his chin, signaling a clear "not here."

"Hollander, don't get me wrong..." Carter spoke up from his chair, his voice loaded with genuine shock. "But I had no earthly idea you had a guy for a nanny."

"Ilya's been working with me for almost six months, Vaughny," Shane let out a soft laugh, shaking the aerosol can.

"Ilya is also Elise's nanny. I'm the one who recommended him to Shane, actually," J.J. commented casually, already holding the laminated pool bar menu in his hands.

Carter turned his face to the child.

"And what about you, big guy? How are things at school?"

"Really cool! We're going on a bus field trip to the museum next week!" Liam shared, super excited, while Ilya held his shoulders firmly to keep him still and apply sunscreen to his neck.

"Is that right? And what's your favorite subject? Back in my day, I only liked English class," Carter kept the chat going.

"Science! Especially when the teacher talks about marine animals and sharks," Liam declared, full of pride.

Ilya signaled with his fingers, and the boy turned to face him.

"Close your eyes," the Russian instructed. Liam obeyed instantly, squeezing his little eyes shut tightly while the blond applied a thin layer of cream sunscreen to his face. "Now rub it in right. Especially on the nose, or else it'll peel."

Liam began rubbing his face energetically.

On the other side of the circle, Hayden offered a small, almost imperceptible smile. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Shane had stopped spraying the aerosol and was staring at the interaction between Ilya and his son. The expression on the captain's face was soft, disarmed... almost enamored? Hayden blinked, surprised. But, thanks to his dark mirrored sunglasses, Shane would never know he was being meticulously observed by his friend.

"Done! Finished!" Liam announced, already jumping toward the edge, where a dozen other resort kids were playing.

Ilya squeezed a little cream into his own palm and began spreading it over his neck and face.

"I think I'm going to order something to eat now. Do you want anything?" Shane asked, his voice sounding a little rushed. "Liam definitely isn't going to want anything because he devoured that whole bag of chips from the airport to here, but you haven't eaten anything all morning."

"I'm good for now, not hungry," the Russian replied.

And, as naturally as possible, Ilya grabbed the hem of the white t-shirt he was wearing, pulled it over his head in a single motion, and tossed it into the waterproof backpack they had brought.

"O-Okay," Shane stammered, clearing his throat abruptly.

In an almost desperate act, the captain brought his hand to his own sunglasses, shoving them onto his face. The sun was strong, yes, but the real utility of the lenses was to hide the panic that widened his pupils. Ilya kicked off his flip-flops, grabbed the shark floatie, and walked after the boy, who was already jumping with impatience.

Shane followed the two with his eyes and, out of the corner of his eye, saw that Carter Vaughn's jaw was dropped, his eyes glued to the Russian's broad back.

"Hold on... was he the actor they cast for *The Pacifier 2* and nobody warned me?" Carter blurted out, stunned. "The guy is a fucking Greek god! He might even be broader than Vin Diesel in that movie."

"Ilya basically does two things in life, Carter: takes care of kids and lifts weights," J.J. listed on his fingers, laughing at his friend's reaction.

Shane forced a laugh to go along with it, but his brain was short-circuiting, agreeing wholeheartedly with the New York player. Shane and Ilya were the exact same height—on a good day, the Canadian was even a millimeter taller—but their physical builds were brutally different. Shane was an explosive athlete, focused on agility on the ice. The Russian was pure dense, sculpted muscle, which showed even under the baggy clothes he usually wore.

It was the first time Shane had seen his friend in swim trunks and completely shirtless in the light of day—excluding, obviously, the fateful bathroom incident in December, where he saw much more than a shirtless Ilya, a detail Shane would take to his grave.

"Who's the guy?" a new voice, loaded with an unmistakable New York accent, appeared behind them.

Shane turned his head, breaking the trance, and found himself face-to-face with Scott Hunter. The West's alternate captain was also shirtless, wearing red swim trunks and designer sunglasses. Scott was four years older than Shane. And, even though he had never lifted the coveted Stanley Cup, he was an exceptional player. Shane knew that very well; it wasn't for nothing that Scott was always breathing down Shane's neck for second place in the league's popularity and MVP polls.

"That's Ilya. Hollander's son's nanny," Carter answered with a sly smirk.

Scott raised his eyebrows and turned to Shane, genuinely surprised.

"Wait a minute. That little boy in the pool with the shark floatie is your son? Man! He's huge!" Scott exclaimed.

Shane was finally able to let out his held breath, letting the irrational tension and petty jealousy caused by Ilya's physique evaporate, settling into his comfortable posture as a proud dad.

"That's him," Shane smiled.

"Wow. I remember when you brought him into the locker room at a game over in New York, about two years ago. It went by really fast."

"Don't even start with that talk. Saying other people's kids grew up fast is just a polite way of calling their parents old," Shane joked.

Scott laughed, making himself comfortable at the foot of Carter's lounge chair. To tease him, the younger player rested his crossed heels exactly on the shoulder of Scott, his team's captain.

"As much as I hate to admit it, Hollander, you're always going to be four years younger than me," Scott grumbled in a dramatic tone of fake offense, drawing laughs from the group.

"That's right, grandpa," Carter poked, since he was also four years younger than his best friend.

"Didn't you bring anyone with you to the All-Star this year, Scott?" J.J. asked casually, waving in the air to get a waiter's attention.

The movement was miniscule. A glitch in the matrix. But Shane, with instincts trained to read any hesitation on the ice, noticed. Scott gave an almost imperceptible start. A slight stiffening of the shoulders.

"No, came alone," Scott answered quickly, his voice a little too smooth. "But, changing the subject, I thought you were going to bring your daughter, J.J.. Isn't she about five now?"

The change of focus was a masterstroke. The French-Canadian took the bait gladly and immediately started talking about Elise's flu and the little girl's antics. Scott relaxed instantly. *Interesting*, Shane thought, recording his rival's reaction.

Shane settled into the lounge chair and ordered an ice-cold Corona. With the bottle in hand, he allowed himself to just watch the pool.

In less than ten minutes, several other resort kids had abandoned their own parents to orbit around the giant blond in the shallow end of the water. Ilya tossed them up, made waves, and pretended to be a sea monster, drawing hysterical laughs from the kids.

The Russian really did have a gift for it. And watching it under the Florida sun, Shane concluded, was an excellent way to spend the morning.

[...]

Ilya closed the door to Liam's room with a soft click, leaving the boy surrendered to sleep. In the common area of the hotel suite, the night had already settled in densely. The afternoon's events had been exhausting, though undeniably fun—the All-Star Game rookies nearly killing themselves on the ice trying to break Shane's speed and accuracy records, only to fail miserably. In the end, Shane himself was the only one capable of beating his own mark, shaving an impressive five milliseconds off his previous time and leaving the rookies huffing in frustration.

But, despite the victory on the ice, the mood in the suite was different. The Russian didn't need a degree in psychology to notice that Shane was radiating a nervous energy. The reason was obvious: he was about to sleep in the same bed as Rose. Again.

"Is everything alright out here?" Ilya asked, stopping in the suite's small hallway.

Shane tore his eyes away from the muted TV and nodded, trying to force a neutral expression. He was a terrible actor.

"Shane," the blond called out, his tone loaded with a friendly warning.

"It was a terrible idea, wasn't it?" the captain yielded instantly, distress leaking through his voice. "Bringing Rose here. I know... I know I did something stupid at Christmas, but we've been together for three months now. Valentine's Day is next month, in less than two weeks, and... we're good, right? Her and I."

Ilya crossed his arms and leaned his broad shoulder against the wall.

"Are you asking me, or are you stating to yourself that you guys are good?"

Shane let out a heavy sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

"Stating," he said, trying to sound confident. Failing. "It's just that... so far, we haven't..."

He let the sentence die in the air. The implication hung heavy between them, but Ilya understood perfectly, which brought a wave of immediate relief to Shane.

"Uhm, okay. Look, there is absolutely no problem with the fact that you've been together for three months and still haven't had sex or anything like that. I think it's a more than reasonable amount of time to get to know each other, but... well, you know I've never had a real serious relationship either, so my parameters aren't the best," the Russian opined, shrugging with his pragmatic tranquility.

Shane just shook his head. His heart was beating so hard he could hear his pulse hammering behind his ears.

Even in the dim light of the room, Shane could notice that Ilya was slightly tanned just from the morning they had spent at the pool. The Russian had rigorously protected his face but had left his shoulders and the rest of his torso at the mercy of the Florida sun. And, indeed, his skin didn't lie: the freckles and moles scattered across his back and abdomen formed true constellations under the light.

"And, like I told you last time... there is absolutely no problem if you simply don't want to do it," Ilya added, his voice dropping to a soft, welcoming timbre. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with you."

Shane opened his mouth to reply, but the words wouldn't come. He just agreed with a stiff nod.

Ilya pushed off the wall.

"I'm going to head to my room, then. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Shane nodded silently, and the blond left, closing the suite door behind him and leaving the Canadian alone with his own chaos.

Rose was still at the resort's indoor bar, accompanied by Gloria and Carter. Shane had used his son as an excuse to escape early, claiming that Liam had insisted that both he and Ilya put him to bed. It was a lie. Shane just desperately wanted to get out of that crowd. He felt like he reeked of other people's perfumes and alcohol. As soon as he found himself alone, he walked straight to the bathroom.

Taking off his shorts in front of the mirror, Shane noticed that he had also gotten a tan line on his thighs—subtle, but present. Nothing compared to Ilya's golden tone, of course.

And suddenly, under the hot water of the shower, Shane's mind collapsed.

He caught himself replaying all the moments of the day when he had seen Ilya shirtless. He tried desperately to convince himself that it was just envy. Envy of that flawless physique. But envy didn't explain why he was memorizing the way the Russian's biceps flexed when he hoisted himself out of the pool, with the water running down his bare chest as if he were the star of a cologne commercial.

Shane lathered his own abdomen and stopped abruptly. He looked down. He was semi-hard.

He swallowed hard. *Because of Ilya's physique? What the fuck is happening to me?*

Letting out a shaky sigh, Shane wrapped his soapy hand around the base of his own member. He made two slow strokes, feeling the friction and the heat, and squeezed his eyes shut. He needed to think about Rose. He tried to focus on the image of her returning to the pool in that navy blue bikini. He tried to think about how her skin glowed under the sun, about how beautiful her thighs were...

But the image in his head began to distort.

Instead of Rose's curves, his mind zeroed in on the surgical scar on the knee he'd seen earlier. On a dense, perfectly sculpted abdomen. On the dark trail of hair that led down, disappearing dangerously into the waistband of his swim trunks. On a broad, firm chest that, without a doubt, would feel incredible to touch.

Shane bit his lower lip hard, tasting the metallic tang of blood.

It's not real desire. It's just for the pleasure of the moment. It's just like the video I watched.

He gave up on fooling himself. He gave up on forcing the image of Rose and let his mind run wild, raw and free, to wherever it wanted to go. And it went straight to Ilya. It circled the Russian's body, bumped into fragmented images of other ripped players who were at the resort, and even a shirtless Scott Hunter.

Shane's mind fabricated excuses while his body took control. He convinced himself that it was just a momentary preference—a visual shortcut merely to reach pleasure, and not a reflection of a real or deep desire.

Protected by this fragile lie, Shane tightened his grip on his throbbing cock. He drastically increased the pace of his strokes, throwing his head back under the stream of hot water and

biting his own arm to muffle the hoarse groans that escaped his throat.

[...]

February had arrived and, with it, the oppressive shadow of the dreaded Valentine's Day.

Shane was completely out of ideas for what to buy Rose. They had been taking things pretty slow since Christmas. With the filming of her series wrapped up, the actress had returned to Los Angeles, but the two kept up the routine of video calling every night before Shane went to bed. The logistics for the holiday were already set: she would fly to Montreal on Monday morning to watch the game against Vancouver, and the two would spend the evening together.

"Greet her at the airport with a beautiful bouquet of flowers," David suggested, pushing the metal shopping cart down the supermarket aisle next to his son.

It was a quiet Tuesday in Ottawa. Shane's parents would be traveling the next day for their traditional Valentine's Day trip, and the captain had made a point of driving down to his hometown to spend some time with them. He always preferred shopping at the smaller markets in Ottawa; it was a much more familiar and less suffocating environment than the giant hypermarkets in Montreal.

"And some high-quality chocolate," the older man added, inspecting a can of tomatoes. "Your mother loves that."

"I know, Dad, but... I don't know. It's our first Valentine's Day together. I wanted to give her something cooler and more impressive," Shane grumbled in frustration, checking the grocery list on his phone as they stopped in the spice section.

"Do you know what I gave your mom for Valentine's Day our first time?" David said, his nostalgic tone catching his son's attention. "A single rose."

Shane blinked, surprised.

"Just one?"

"It was literally all my money could buy back then," David shrugged, smiling at the memory. "My car was broken down at the mechanic, I had spent all my savings to fix it, and on top of that, a pipe had burst at home and I was helping my parents with the renovations. And even though it was just a wilted gas station rose, your mother loved it. Because she knew the feeling was sincere and that, if I could have, I would have bought the entire flower shop for her."

The patriarch patted Shane lightly on the shoulder, exuding that calm and natural romantic instinct he had always dedicated to Yuna.

"Rose will know that your gift is sincere. No matter what it is."

Shane pressed his lips together, holding back a smile that soon turned into a lightly mocking laugh.

"The moral of the story is beautiful, Dad. The only problem is that I have a few million dollars more in my bank account today than you had back then, right?"

"Touché," David admitted, laughing along with his son, who was now tossing little jars of paprika and oregano into the cart. "At least you're taking the girl out to dinner?"

"Yeah, the reservation has been made since last month. It's a really quiet restaurant on a rooftop terrace downtown," Shane shared, crossing items off his phone screen and signaling to move to the next aisle. "I confess I was a little apprehensive about asking Ilya to stay with Liam that night, because he had been posting pictures at various parties during these weeks he wasn't working. I thought maybe he'd found someone to spend the holiday with."

"Uhm. And is he seeing a nice girl?" David asked, his tone genuinely interested. "I like that young man a lot. He's a very good, polite boy."

"I know he is," Shane answered quickly, his eyes fixed on the shelves to hide his expression. "But I don't know anything, he hasn't mentioned it. It's just that Ilya isn't much for dating. He's a much more... casual guy. He hooks up with whoever he wants and that's it."

David stopped the cart and scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"I see. In my day, we used to call that kind of handsome young man a *himbo*."

Shane couldn't hold back and let out a loud laugh in the middle of the canned goods aisle.

"Dad! For the love of God, where did you get that from? And for your information, Ilya is way too smart to be classified as a himbo," the captain argued, getting defensive without even realizing it, while David just laughed, shaking his head.

"Alright, alright. And what about my grandson this holiday?" David changed the subject, resuming their walk. "Does Liam have any cute little girl in his class that he likes?"

Shane turned his neck slowly, shooting his dad a look of severe disapproval.

"I'm kidding!" the older man raised his hands, laughing.

"He's eight years old, Dad. Great white sharks and dinosaurs are still infinitely more interesting to him than any girl."

David shrugged, accepting the childish logic calmly, before firing off with the most natural tone in the world:

"No little boy in his class, then?"

Shane tripped over his own feet, his eyes widening.

"Dad?!"

[...]

"Jewelry," was Ilya's pragmatic suggestion.

The Russian was standing in the adjacent laundry area, folding Liam's clean clothes with surgical precision, while Shane drank his post-workout protein shake at the kitchen island, a few steps away.

"Rose is always wearing lots of accessories. Get her a piece of jewelry."

"I already gave her a necklace for Christmas," Shane recalled, leaning his hip against the marble counter, clearly reluctant.

"Right. Let's recap." Ilya stopped folding one of the boy's t-shirts and looked at the Canadian. "You don't want to give flowers, you don't want to give chocolate, and you rejected the jewelry idea. I don't know, man. Buy some lingerie."

Shane choked violently. The thick liquid of the shake went down the wrong pipe, and the captain started coughing, beating his own chest as his face took on a dangerous shade of scarlet red.

Ilya stopped what he was doing, his lips slightly parted, processing his boss's disproportionate panic. He took a step closer to the kitchen divider and lowered his voice to a cautious whisper, since Liam was in the living room right behind them, mesmerized by another episode of the mermaid series.

"Wait a minute... Have you guys still not had sex?" Ilya asked.

"Nope," Shane shook his head, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, still catching his breath. "I've been dealing with it in therapy. But it's still very new, it was only my fifth session. My psychologist is still analyzing and mapping out my situation... in that sexual realm."

Ilya let his breath out slowly, a mix of surprise and silent pride knowing that Shane was finally seeking professional help.

"*Gospodi...*" the Russian shook his head, his gaze losing any trace of irony to assume a protective posture. "You know that it is absolutely fine if you don't want to have sex, right? You're not obligated to do anything, Shane. And Rose should be aware of that."

"No, I know that. The psychologist told me the same thing," Shane gestured with his free hand, his voice loaded with confused frustration. "But the problem is that I don't know if I *don't* want to. I think I want to try. At least one more time, to see how I actually function without it being a traumatic way."

Ilya analyzed the captain's face for a few seconds before nodding encouragingly.

"Okay. That is very valid," the blond replied, going back to folding the clothes with a small smirk. "It's pure empiricism."

Shane frowned, confusion breaking the vulnerability of the moment.

"It's what?"

Ilya let out a deep laugh, rolling his blue eyes with obvious amusement.

"Sometimes I completely forget that you have an athlete's brain."

"You were an athlete too until a while ago, you idiot!" Shane defended himself in an indignant whisper.

"Yes. But now I'm a nanny," Ilya countered, winking one eye. "Requires a lot more intellect."

After finishing his protein shake in the kitchen, Shane went down to the building's gym and completed the strength circuit he always did after intense days of training on the ice. He took a quick shower and, at exactly three in the afternoon, locked the door to his own bedroom. He sat down at the desk, opened his laptop, and waited for the virtual room to load for his session with Dr. Heather Park.

"Hi, Shane," the middle-aged woman, with short caramel hair and thin-framed glasses slipping down the bridge of her nose, offered a calm, professional smile on the screen.

"Hi, Doctor," Shane greeted back, adjusting his posture in the ergonomic chair.

"How was your ice training today? Feeling ready for the game against Minnesota tomorrow?" she asked casually, the characteristic click of her pen sounding before she turned a page in her notebook.

"It'll be a breeze," Shane shrugged, trying to project unshakable confidence.

Heather wasn't the type of therapist who walked in circles, trying to fish for the subject. She got straight to the point, without beating around the bush or showing pity. Shane really appreciated that about her. Deep down, the dynamic with Heather reminded him a lot of the way Ilya treated him, just with the addition of a psychology degree on the wall—not that the Russian's lack of higher education was a problem, since Shane himself didn't have one either.

"Well, changing the subject, we have a very important holiday coming up this Sunday," she aimed the dart and hit the bullseye without blinking. "Have you bought anything for Rose yet? What's your schedule going to be like?"

Shane leaned forward and began reciting his Valentine's Day plans as if reviewing a game tactic. He was going to pick her up at the airport in the morning, with a yet-to-be-decided gift in hand. They would have a nice breakfast downtown, then head back to the penthouse so she could rest from the flight. In the afternoon, he would take her to a modern art museum he

liked to frequent, and in the evening, they would finish with dinner at the exclusive rooftop terrace restaurant he had reserved.

"That's quite a schedule. Impeccable," Heather praised, her tone of voice perfectly neutral. "And how do you think your night is going to end?"

"Well? I hope..."

"Shane." Heather lowered her chin and looked at him over the rim of her glasses. They both knew perfectly well that hadn't been the real question. "Are you still apprehensive about having intimate relations with her?"

Shane froze. He shifted, suddenly uncomfortable in his chair, and scratched the edge of his eyebrow, looking away from the camera.

"Maybe..." he murmured, his voice losing its firmness. "I know that I can simply *not* have sex with her. You've already told me that, Ilya keeps telling me that... but the thing is, I want to try again. I don't want to let my last sexual experience in life be one that was painful and with Jessica. And Rose is amazing. She's fun, patient, she's beautiful."

"And do you want her?"

"*Sure*," Shane answered a little too quickly. He saw one of the psychologist's eyebrows rise a millimeter. "I mean... yes, I want her."

"Do you want to kiss her?"

"Yes," he answered, his tone a little lower, sounding almost defensive.

"Do you want her to touch you?" the blonde pressed, her voice gentle but relentless.

"In what sense?"

"Not necessarily just in the sexual sense at first, but let's go down that path now: do you want her to touch you intimately, Shane? When you are alone, do you fantasize about her? About her body?"

Shane's brain answered before he could even control it.

No.

"Yes," he lied out loud.

The word slipped through his lips and left a bitter taste on his tongue. He knew it was pathetic and counterproductive to lie to his own therapist, and he felt deep in the pit of his stomach that this lie would come back to bite him sooner or later, but he simply couldn't admit the truth out loud.

"Do you seek her out because you desire her viscerally, or because you like the fact that it is 'easy' and socially acceptable to be with her?" Heather analyzed.

"Easy?!" Shane inquired, his eyes widening, his eyebrows disappearing into his hairline. His defenses went up like a wall. "There is absolutely nothing 'easy' about any of this, Doctor. I haven't even been able to decide on her gift yet, and it's driving me crazy. I'm still very apprehensive about bringing her to the house frequently because of Liam, his adaptation... But she is my girlfriend and I miss her."

"Do you really?"

"Yes! She lives in California and I live in Montreal. The distance is terrible."

"Yes, the distance is terrible," Heather agreed with a slow nod, before delivering the coup de grâce with surgical precision. "But last month, when your team took a long road trip to play in California, you had two full days off between games. And you chose to stay locked in the hotel with your teammates instead of catching a cab and going to visit her."

The silence that settled in Shane's room was deafening. The faint hum of the heater seemed to fill the space as he stared at the laptop screen, his mouth slightly parted, unable to formulate an immediate response.

Heather didn't look away. She just waited, her pen resting on her notebook, giving him the exact amount of time for his own hypocrisy to sink in.

"The West Coast time zone is brutal," Shane tried to argue, his voice coming out weaker than he would have liked. He looked down at his own hands resting on the desk. "We had back-to-back games. I was exhausted, my body aching. The logistics of getting down to Los Angeles and back in time for the team gathering was going to be a nightmare."

"Shane," Heather sighed softly, a tone that mixed empathy with an unwavering frankness. "You are an elite athlete and the captain of your franchise. I've seen you play three full periods with a cracked rib and travel across the continent the same night without complaining. Logistics have never stopped you from doing absolutely anything you really wanted to do."

The Canadian's throat tightened. He leaned back in his chair, rubbing his face with both hands in a gesture of pure mental exhaustion. The wall of excuses he had been building brick by brick was crumbling with half a dozen words.

"What do you want me to say, Doctor?" he mumbled from behind his fingers, his defensiveness giving way to a raw vulnerability. "That I'm a shitty boyfriend? That I'm forcing it?"

"I want you to ask yourself *why* you are forcing it," Heather corrected, adjusting the glasses on her face. "What does Rose Landry represent to you?"

Shane dropped his hands and looked at the ceiling.

"She's amazing. She's kind to Liam. She's patient with my blocks. She's..."

"Perfect on paper?" the psychologist completed, hitting the center of the wound.

Shane closed his eyes for a second and nodded slowly.

"Yes. She is perfect on paper. She's everything a guy in my position should want. I look at her and I see the chance to have a normal life. To give Liam a structured family. To be a regular guy, who goes out to dinner on Valentine's Day and doesn't panic when his girlfriend gets close."

"And do you think being in a relationship that is based on what 'should be' is fair to you? Or to her?"

Shane swallowed hard. The word "fair" echoed in his mind. He thought about the colossal effort it took to psychologically prepare himself for a romantic weekend with Rose. The contrast was immediate and painful: when he knew he was going to spend the day locked in the house with Ilya and Liam, or when he went to a family party at J.J.'s house just because he knew the Russian would be there, it required no effort at all. It was magnetic. It was easy.

Why is it so hard with her?, he asked himself, frustration bubbling in his chest.

"My last experience broke me, Heather," Shane confessed, his voice rough, returning to the safe trauma he knew how to explain. "Jessica made me hate being vulnerable. Maybe the problem isn't Rose. Maybe I'm just too broken to give what she needs."

"Shane, we've already talked about the impact of your relationship with Jessica. The trauma is real, the aversion to control and vulnerability are also real," Heather pointed out with firmness and warmth. "But you cannot use the trauma as a shield to justify a lack of chemistry."

The captain blinked, stunned by the sentence.

"What do you mean?"

"You are assuming that your reluctance to touch Rose, or to visit her, is one hundred percent the fault of your past trauma. But what if it isn't?" the therapist leaned forward slightly, taking up more of the screen. "What if, taking away all the history with your ex-wife, you simply don't desire Rose that way? Not having sexual attraction to a wonderful person doesn't make you 'broken,' Shane. It makes you a human being. Chemistry isn't built solely on gratitude and checklists of qualities."

Heather's words hung in the thin air of the bedroom. Shane felt his heart beat faster. The idea that he wasn't inherently defective, that maybe he was just forcing a puzzle piece into the wrong spot, took a ton of weight off his back—but put another, equally terrifying one, in its place.

If the problem wasn't just the trauma... then what was it? Or rather, *who* did he really desire?

The image of Ilya's broad back under the shower water flashed in his mind with the force of a camera flash. Shane clenched his jaw, expelling the thought before the therapist could read the change in his features.

"We have a whole weekend ahead of us," Shane said finally, his voice cautious, trying to regain control of his own mind. "I want to try. I need to know if it's just a block or if it is... what you said. A lack of chemistry."

Heather smiled with contained gentleness, turning the page of her notebook once again.

"Alright. Trying consciously is the first step," she agreed, beginning to wrap up the session. "But, Shane?"

"Yes?"

"This weekend, stop trying to act like the boyfriend you think she wants you to be. Pay attention to how your body and your mind react organically to her. Without forcing it. Without acting. Just feel where you are."

Shane closed the laptop a few minutes later, the screen going dark and reflecting his own tense face.

The silence of the room felt even heavier now. Heather's "homework" sounded simple in theory, but, for a man who spent almost a decade masking his own feelings to survive, *not* acting seemed like the most impossible task in the world. He sighed, rubbed his eyes, and got up from the chair. He still needed to figure out what the hell he was going to buy for a Valentine's Day present.

[...]

Shane wanted to jump off his own bedroom balcony.

He felt exactly seventeen again. Scared, inadequate, and wanting to disappear.

The irony was that Valentine's Day had started out flawless. The gears had aligned in his favor: J.J. would be alone for the holiday and, to save everyone's schedule, took on the mission of hosting a giant slumber party at his house, taking Liam and Hayden's twins. With that, Shane had the penthouse entirely to himself.

Everything flowed with a terrifying naturalness. He bought the bouquet of roses and the bracelet. Rose was genuinely thrilled with the gifts. Dinner on the terrace was perfect and full of laughs, to the point that Shane's chronic anxiety simply evaporated. When they got to the apartment, the wine-flavored kisses deepened, the temperature rose, and clothes started dropping along the way to the bedroom.

Shane thought, with genuine relief, that he was on the right track. He was doing exactly what Dr. Heather had told him to do: don't force it, just feel it organically. And he did feel it. He enjoyed her soft touches, her warm skin, and even gasped loudly, gripping the sheets when she trailed kisses down his body.

But, at the exact moment the sex was actually going to begin, Shane's system collapsed.

Gradually, his shoulders stiffened. His brain disconnected. His body simply stopped responding, like an engine that overheats and shuts down for safety.

He went soft.

"Shane, hey..." Rose murmured in a soft voice, resting her chin on his shoulder.

Shane was sitting on the edge of the mattress, with his back to her, staring at the glass balcony doors and seriously calculating whether the drop from the top floor would be enough.

"It's okay..." Rose pressed a soft kiss to the bare skin of his shoulder, her warm hand tracing a comforting path across his tense back. "I mean it, honey. It's okay."

"Why are you with me?" Shane fired off, his voice harsh, refusing to believe that everything was okay.

Rose bowed her head and left another kiss there.

"Because I like you. A lot. And one bad experience in bed isn't going to change that."

Instead of relaxing, Shane's shoulders turned to stone.

"So it was bad, right?" he turned his face to look at her, his eyes loaded with frustration.

Rose denied it instantly, her expression serene but firm.

"That's not what I meant, Shane, okay? We had a lot of fun today, don't you think? We laughed at dinner, the date was great. And now... even if the night didn't end exactly as we expected, it's okay." She kept caressing his back, offering reassurance. "We don't have to have sex today. We can try later, tomorrow, next month. I don't mind. What matters is that both people are into it and enjoy the moment."

Hearing those words full of understanding was the trigger. Shane had his painful epiphany right then and there.

He shook his head slowly, making the redhead frown.

"Rose... I'm sorry."

"Hey, no. You don't have to apologize for this. It's your body, it's something that happens with stress, okay? It's not your fault..."

"No, it's not because... because of that," Shane took a deep breath, pulling air in unevenly and avoiding looking directly into her eyes. "I've never been good at this. I've never... I've never felt good having sex. With anyone. And I swear to you that I thought the problem was just the fucking trauma with Jessica. But it's not. It has nothing to do with you, Rose, you're beautiful, you're amazing, but I... I just think this isn't for me."

Rose listened to every word with surgical attention. Her hand stopped moving on his back.

"You don't feel comfortable having sex? In general?"

Shane slowly shook his head. His entire body burned with an acidic shame.

"Okay," Rose said, her voice unwaveringly firm, hugging his shoulders from behind. "Like I told you, both people need to enjoy it. And if you don't want to right now, or if you find out you never want to, that's fine too. We'll adapt."

Immediately, Shane twisted his torso, breaking the hug, and looked at her, terrified.

"No! Rose, that... that isn't fair to you. You deserve someone whole."

Rose laughed softly through her nose, a sad, understanding sound, and took a breath. She pulled back a bit and sat on the bed, hugging her knees to her chest. Having a conversation of that magnitude, at that exact moment, perhaps wasn't the brightest idea in the world. But she knew that she rarely managed to get Shane to open up his armor like that. They were both naked—literally and figuratively. She wasn't going to back down now.

"What turns you on, Shane?" the redhead asked, her dark eyes fixed on him. "Be honest with me."

He swallowed hard. His throat felt like sandpaper. He shrugged, looking away at the floor.

"Shane. We are both literally naked, locked alone in your apartment. You don't need to hide from me. Not now," she asked sweetly. "You can tell me."

He covered his face with both hands. A colossal pressure crushed his chest, stealing his breath.

"I don't know," Shane whispered from behind his fingers. *Lie. Lie. Lie. Lie.* "I don't know..."

"When you're alone traveling with the team... what do you watch?"

Shane's hands began to shake visibly against his own face.

"Rose, please..."

"I'm trying to understand you and help you," she uncrossed her legs, moved forward on the mattress, and firmly grabbed one of Shane's wrists, pulling his hand down to force him to look at her. "Tell me. Or do you not even feel horny alone? Do you not masturbate?"

Shane shook his head and quickly corrected himself, stumbling over the words.

"I... I do. I feel it. But this is definitely not the kind of thing to discuss with..."

"Your girlfriend?" Rose raised both eyebrows, challenging him.

Shane huffed, dropping his head back.

"At any point, since we met, have you ever seen me truly mad at you?" she asked.

"When the waiter put hazelnut syrup in your iced coffee instead of cinnamon," he murmured.

"Okay, in my defense, that was a threat to public safety, everyone in California knows I have a mortal hatred of hazelnut," she countered, the light tone drawing a weak, breathless laugh from Shane, breaking a millimeter of the absurd tension. She squeezed his hand. "But seriously now, Shane. What do you watch?"

The player took a deep breath, his chest rising and falling erratically.

"I never really liked regular porn. It never made me feel anything real," he began, his voice hoarse, dissecting his own intimacy while Rose listened without judgment. "Until... a while ago, I searched for some different things and... ended up watching some videos that had three people at the same time. Two guys and a woman. And seeing that was a little more... interesting than usual for me. And then... and then... gradually..."

Lie. His process hadn't been gradual at all. It was like crashing head-on into a wall at a hundred and twenty miles an hour. But it was the only way he could formulate the sentence.

"...there was no longer a woman in the video."

The words fell heavy on the crumpled sheets. He couldn't look at her face. If there was an award for the best moment in life to jump out of a window, he would give it out right now.

Rose let out a long, slow sigh. But she didn't let go of his hand.

"And you found it more interesting to watch the two guys?" she asked, her voice reduced to a careful whisper, trying not to scare him.

Shane's answer didn't come with words. It didn't come with a nod, nor with an excuse.

Rose felt his hand squeeze hers with a trembling force and saw, in the deafening silence of the room, a single tear escape the captain's eyes, rolling slowly and silently down his face.

Chapter 14: Game on

Chapter Notes

Shane's brain is finally brainng guys

+ doctor park knows ball

In the morning, the pale February light flooded the penthouse kitchen. Shane made coffee in sepulchral silence and poured two mugs. They sat across from each other at the large dining table.

Rose showed no shock, anger, or repulsion, and that indecipherable calm was leaving Shane on the verge of a panic attack. Thinking about the night before, about his pathetic confession, made him physically nauseous.

"I don't know what to say to you," Shane began, his voice harsh, his eyes fixed on the dark liquid inside his mug.

"You don't have to say anything. We're going to talk about this together," Rose replied, her tone soft, devoid of any judgment. She genuinely wanted to help, and even though Shane had no idea how to be helped, he knew he desperately needed a lifeline. "Okay, let's start with the basics: you prefer gay porn to straight porn. Is that it? Correct?"

Shane didn't have the strength to nod. He just took a tiny sip of coffee, mentally praying that his stomach wouldn't turn and make him throw up right then and there.

"Okay..." Rose proceeded cautiously. "When you watch these things, do you... I don't know, do you just see yourself watching as a spectator, or do you imagine yourself as... one of the guys?"

Shane's throat felt instantly tightened by hot iron chains. He couldn't catch his breath.

"I... I don't know."

"What caught your attention about me when we met?" Rose decided to change tactics, taking a step back. The change of subject pulled Shane's gaze from the mug straight to her face.

"You're beautiful, Rose. I like you a lot, I like being around you, your company... I like all of that. I know... I know that this part about sex and pornography is a giant problem, and..."

"Hey, hey, hey. No." Rose stretched her arms over the table and held both of his cold, trembling hands firmly. "It's okay, Shane. Breathe. One thing about you I already know for sure: you're not a porn addict, that's obvious. The other thing is that there is absolutely

nothing 'wrong' or broken about you just because of sex. The truth is that maybe you just don't feel physical attraction to me. And that is perfectly normal."

"I don't know if I've ever felt that for anyone in my life..." Shane poured the words out, sounding as confused and lost as a scared little boy. "I spent almost the entire last decade terrified and worried about other things, because the only person I truly opened up to, who I tried to have that with, stabbed me in the back and destroyed me."

"I understand. But physical attraction isn't just looking and thinking 'wow, that person is hot'. That's just the initial spark. It goes way beyond that," Rose began to explain, adopting a calm, didactic, almost maternal tone. "Physical attraction is when you imagine what it feels like to touch the person's skin. It's wanting to have them close to you on purpose, feeling the heat of their body against yours. You fantasize about being intimate with them."

From the hollow, petrified look on Shane's face, Rose didn't need to ask if he had ever felt anything like that for her. The answer was painfully clear.

"And romantic attraction," the actress continued, squeezing his hands lightly, "is wanting to be emotionally connected with that person. You can't imagine living without them. You want to be together all the time, you don't notice the time passing when you're talking on the couch, you smile to yourself when your phone screen lights up with a message from them... Your heart skips a beat when you hear their voice enter the room."

"I know what romantic attraction is, Rose," he shook his head slowly, trying to process the weight of those definitions. "I think..."

"Then do an exercise with me. Imagine the following scenario," Rose interrupted softly, guiding him. "Five years from now. Liam is already twelve years old. You are at the absolute peak of your career, hanging two more Stanley Cups in your living room collection. Who is the person that can't be missing from this picture of your future? Is there someone special waiting for you at home?"

Shane closed his eyes and let himself imagine.

The image formed with terrifying clarity: him opening the penthouse door after an exhausting practice. Liam sitting at the kitchen island, doing his homework, with Ilya leaning against the counter next to him, helping him with his lessons like he always did. Something cooking on the stove, the smell of hot food and comfort spreading throughout the whole house. The boy getting up and running to hug him. Shane kissing his son's hair and looking up to ask Ilya how their day had been. The Russian's deep laugh filling the room.

Shane's heart gave a violent lurch.

No.

He erased the image of Ilya from that fantasy instantly, locking the door to his own subconscious with seven keys. There was no romantic partner there. He couldn't be imagining his own employee.

"No," Shane opened his eyes, letting go of her hands to shrug defensively, his voice masking his panic. "I didn't see anyone. Just myself."

Rose let out a long sigh, studying his features.

"I'm pretty sure I already know the answer, Shane, but I'm going to ask you this question directly anyway..." She paused, her gaze piercing. "Have you ever hooked up with a guy?"

Shane's heart raced in his chest with an almost lethal force, beating against his ribs as if he had just confessed to a crime. But he hadn't. Rose was literally the second person he had ever kissed in his entire life, aside from Jessica.

The panic of being exposed, of having to face his own identity out loud, took over him.

"What?! No! Of course not!"

"Okay, okay, I just wanted to make sure," Rose threw both hands in the air in a sign of absolute surrender. "But still, Shane... For a while now I've noticed that you see me much more as a friend than as your girlfriend."

"Rose..." Shane whispered, his voice failing miserably. His Adam's apple bobbed sharply, struggling to swallow the knot of guilt and sadness forming in his throat.

"You know, sometimes people just weren't made to fit... we're kind of like... a square peg trying to fit into a round hole," she shrugged. But, the exact millisecond the sentence left her mouth, she processed the terrible connotation of her own words. Rose covered her face with both hands, groaning in embarrassment. "Oh, my God, gross... forget what I just said. How awful."

A weak, watery, and genuinely confused laugh escaped Shane's lips, piercing the bubble of suffocating tension hanging over the table.

"That is, without a doubt, a very interesting way to end a relationship."

Rose lowered her hands, her face still flushed with embarrassment, but with an affectionate smile shaping her lips. She slid her hands across the table again, wrapping them around Shane's. The captain blinked, trying to hold back his eyes that were already shining, wet and tearful.

"These last four months have been truly amazing for me, Shane. Really," the actress began, her tone of voice deepening. "But I've been watching you torture yourself in silence. And I care about you a lot... which is exactly why I can't let you keep doing this to yourself. I don't want to see you mutilating yourself and trapping yourself in an image of the guy you think you need to become just to please me."

Shane let out a trembling breath, unable to look away from hers.

"You don't have to please me. You have to love yourself first, before trying to love anyone else," Rose was surgical. She spoke with a firmness so loving and unwavering that she held Shane's attention body and soul. "And, please... be gentle with yourself in this process."

She squeezed the player's large hands, offering a tactile comfort he desperately needed.

"You are finally getting to know parts of yourself that you've lived at war with for years," Rose murmured, a sad, understanding smile lighting up her face. "I really hope, from the bottom of my heart, that you can make peace with those parts. And that you can reconnect with the Shane you once were... and who you had to abandon along the way just to survive."

[...]

Rose kept her promise that she would still go to the game that night, but she made a point of renting a hotel room. She wanted to give Shane the privacy and space he needed to process their conversation before stepping onto the ice. The breakup had been, against all odds, peaceful and comforting; before walking out the door, the actress even threatened him with a pointed finger, demanding that they remain friends. She genuinely liked him and wanted to help him in whatever way she could.

Shane accepted the threat with a nod and a weak smile. And, as soon as the apartment door closed, he opened his laptop and begged for an emergency squeeze-in with his therapist.

When the video call connected and Dr. Heather Park's face appeared on the screen, the captain got straight to the point:

"Rose and I broke up."

The short-haired blonde raised her eyebrows over the rim of her glasses, leaning back slowly in her chair.

"Alright. And how are you feeling about that, Shane?"

Shane let out a long, deep, shaky sigh. An involuntary smile began to tug at the corners of his lips and, suddenly, he let out a weak laugh, covering his face with both hands. It was one of those nervous laughing fits that attacked him at the most inappropriate times possible, but this time, there was no desperation in the sound.

"Relieved?" he answered from behind his fingers, his voice thick with absolute catharsis. "Light? Like a grand piano was lifted off my chest and I can finally breathe again."

He was tossing the words into the air, testing the weight of each one, and the doctor just nodded, mentally noting the radical shift in his posture.

"If I recall correctly, a few sessions ago, you told me in no uncertain terms that you felt broken," Heather reminded him, her tone analytical but soft. "Do you think taking this step and ending the relationship might have fixed something in you, or is it still too early?"

Shane lowered his hands and rested his chin on his fist. Unlike other sessions, he wasn't locked away in the dim light of his own bedroom. He was sitting openly at the kitchen island,

surrounded by the apartment's natural light. Just the fact that he didn't feel the need to hide already made him feel monumentally freer.

"I don't know... maybe?" the Canadian pondered, tapping his fingers on the cold marble. "I don't think I'm 'fixed'. But it's like I stopped forcing a piece to fit that was going to end up ruining the rest of the engine. I removed the weight before the situation got worse."

"An excellent analogy," the therapist agreed. "And have you told anyone about the breakup yet?"

"No. Rose literally just left and I called you the very next minute... but, I don't know, I'll probably tell Ilya tonight. He's the only guy whose ear I talk off about this stuff." Shane shrugged, letting out a loose, unassuming laugh.

Heather tilted her head a millimeter to the side.

"You trust this young man a lot, don't you?"

"He's my son's nanny, Doctor. He literally spends a third of his day inside my house," Shane justified immediately, as if the employment contract was explanation enough for their intimacy.

"I didn't say otherwise, Shane," Heather threw both hands in the air, disarming the player's minor defensiveness. "But, as your therapist, I observe that you take everything he advises you very much into consideration. You told me that he's never been in a serious relationship in his life, that he runs from commitment. And yet, he is your moral compass and the first person you turn to for relationship advice. Why?"

Shane stayed silent for a few seconds, his blue eyes focused on the void as he dissected his own mind in search of the true answer.

"He has a much more active sex life than mine, and he's totally at peace with who he is," Shane began, gesturing with his hand over the marble, the words coming out slowly. "But... it's not that I want the life he has, Doctor. What I want... what I envy about him... is the freedom. Ilya isn't ashamed of himself. He just... lives. Without apologizing. And I wish I had the courage to be free like that too."

"And what's stopping you from having that freedom, Shane?" the doctor asked, her sharp gaze piercing through the laptop screen.

Shane opened his mouth. Then closed it. The words got stuck at the base of his throat. He didn't know the answer, but at the same time, he knew it perfectly well.

"Myself?" he ventured, his voice coming out low, almost like a confession to himself.

"That is a question I cannot answer for you, Shane," Heather pointed out with her usual frankness. "But, returning to the main reason for our call... do you want to tell me how the breakup with Rose went, or would you prefer to continue dissecting this lack of freedom? You called me for an emergency session because of her, didn't you?"

For the next fifteen minutes, Shane detailed the disastrous night and the revealing morning. He repeated the exact sentences spoken at breakfast, the confession about the videos, Rose's comforting reaction, and the relief that crushed him when she left. On the other side of the screen, the psychologist listened to everything in silence, just nodding and making a few specific notes in her notebook.

When he finally finished speaking, the room fell silent for a moment.

"I believe, Shane, that you have created hermetic compartments in your mind over the years," the doctor began, adjusting her posture in the chair. "On the ice, you act one way. In the locker room, another. With your son, another. And the fact that you are only now going through this phase of trying to figure out what attracts you or not, has everything to do with your teenage fatherhood."

Shane paid extra attention, absorbing every word.

"You were forced to grow up abruptly and violently," Heather continued, her tone empathetic but firm. "You didn't have the privilege of living through this phase of discovery on the 'normal timeline' of most people. And that isn't necessarily a bad thing; it's just my clinical analysis of your history. You locked away any identity crisis outside of hockey, because the rink was your only safe haven. For a scared eighteen-year-old boy, facing a bloody legal battle and discovering he had a newborn depending exclusively on him... there was no room to explore his own sexuality. Survival mode spoke louder. But the point is: now, you are a grown man. With an eight-year-old son who is already grown and stable."

"So I got professionally really good at separating things and shutting down what wasn't useful for my survival?" Shane asked, his eyebrows furrowed.

The blonde nodded gently.

"Exactly."

Shane processed the weight of that information for a long minute. The kitchen island felt quieter now.

"But what... what do I do now, then? The engine is running, but I don't know how to drive."

"Discover yourself. Simply live," Heather advised with a mild smile. "And I completely understand that your massive fame might seem like an insurmountable obstacle. The pressure from the hockey league, the media, the fans... all of that is scary. But remember that they have no control over what happens inside your privacy. You are free to be who you are. For example... if drinking a blueberry smoothie is what truly makes you happy? Then drink it. They won't be able to silence the thousands of other people who also love blueberries and who will support you unconditionally."

Shane frowned, completely lost by the random analogy.

"Blueberry smoothie?"

Heather shrugged, a gleam of pure humor appearing behind the lenses of her glasses.

"Admit that, metaphorically speaking, it sounded infinitely better and less tragic than being 'a square peg trying to fit into a round hole'."

Shane let out a loud, surprised burst of laughter, covering his face with his hands as the tension of months finally began to completely leave his shoulders. On the other side of the screen, the therapist joined him in his laughter. The session was over, and for the first time in a long time, Shane felt that the path ahead wasn't a cliff, but just an open road.

[...]

As soon as Rose stepped into the arena's VIP box, the muffled sound of the fans outside mixed with the childish racket inside. Liam and Ilya were already sitting in their seats, accompanied by Simone, Elise, Jackie, and Hayden's battalion of four kids.

"Hi, little ones!" Rose waved excitedly as she approached.

"Hi, Aunt Rose!" the twins replied in unison.

Jackie laughed, balancing Amber on her lap while trying to adjust her baby bottle.

"Look at that, already promoted to 'Aunt Rose'," Simone teased, winking at the redhead.

Rose smiled sweetly and settled into one of the high chairs. She waved at Liam, but the boy was completely immersed in his book on marine biology. It took Ilya giving a light, affectionate flick to his shoulder for the boy to look up, notice the actress's presence, and wave back.

"Shane mentioned to me that you were going on a date last night, Simone," Rose started a conversation, turning to her braided friend.

Instantly, Simone broke into a radiant smile and tossed her hair back.

"Ah, yes. He's a screenwriter. You know that new teen drama series project that's going on?"

"The one about teenagers dealing with discovering their sexuality? Yes, of course!" Rose joined the conversation enthusiastically. "Is he a writer for the show?"

"Head writer," Simone corrected, snapping her fingers proudly. "It's not the first time we've gone out, obviously. We've been talking for a little while, but, babe... Let me give you some golden advice: I strongly recommend you hook up with bisexual men, because... *Mon Dieu!*"

Ilya turned his head toward her so slowly it looked like slow motion. Simone noticed the movement, remembered who she was sharing the box with, and let out an outrageous laugh, completely forgetting that the Russian present fit the description perfectly.

"Oh, are you going to tell me that the girls you go out with don't beg for a second round?" Simone teased, not missing a beat.

Jackie widened her eyes, shocked at the direction of the conversation, but internally grateful that her daughters were distracted playing dolls with Elise, and that Liam had inherited Shane's bizarre ability to completely tune out the world when the topic wasn't him.

Still, just in case, Ilya covered Liam's ears with his two massive hands.

"Even a *third*," the Russian answered as naturally as could be.

Simone let out an evil, approving laugh. Rose, on the other hand, raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"I knew it!" The redhead pointed a finger at Ilya. "I didn't know exactly which letter you fit into, but I was absolutely certain you weren't straight."

"*Gospodi*, of course not," Ilya made an offended face, making Rose laugh.

"Wait, seriously?" Jackie turned to him, a small smile of surprise on her face as she finished Amber's bottle and tried to reach Arthur's, who was grumbling as he woke up in the stroller.

Ilya didn't think twice.

"Let me get his ready. The kid is already getting fussy," the blond announced, taking Arthur's bottle from her hands easily.

"Ilya, you don't have to. Today you're being paid to take care of Liam," Jackie tried to stop him, without much success.

"Liam is very well taken care of," Ilya pointed his chin at the boy, who was turning the page of his shark book. Jackie laughed, surrendering. "And yes, to answer your question, I am not straight."

"Look, if Jeremy and I don't work out in the future, do you want me to give you his number?" Simone offered, laughing. The Russian shook his head, amused. "Uhm, but, wait a minute... if I'm not mistaken, he mentioned to me that when he hooks up with guys, he's exclusively a top."

"Then keep the number for yourself. It won't do any good," Ilya countered immediately, shaking the formula in the bottle.

The three women burst out laughing.

"I really had no idea our troglodyte husbands were living so closely with a queer person like that," Jackie commented, settling Amber on her lap. "You know what? You really should go over to my house one day to give the guys on the team a reality check. The atrocities I'm forced to hear on that couch..."

"Jean-Jacques knows very well that if he dares make a homophobic joke near me, I'm going to make him brush his teeth through his ass," Simone declared with terrifying and deadly calm.

"Look, it's not exactly just their fault. The hockey locker room is, by itself, an oppressive and inherently homophobic ecosystem," Ilya pointed out, his voice taking on a more serious and analytical tone as he carefully woke Arthur. "When normal guys stay quiet, they're not absolved from being complicit with homophobia, obviously, but at least they're not actively the idiots starting the harassment. The problem is that silence is just as damaging as action. Those who stay quiet validate those who attack."

"I fully agree," Rose nodded slowly, her expression more thoughtful. "And it's bizarre to think that, today, in the NHL, there isn't a single openly gay, bi, or pan player. The locker room culture is so toxic that it kind of shoves anyone who's in the closet to the very back of it, and locks the door from the outside."

"Do you think you would have come out publicly if you had made it to the professional league, Ilya?" Simone asked, her tone philosophical.

"I never even came out 'socially'," Ilya replied, handing the bottle to Arthur. He watched with a small smile as the almost two-year-old boy grabbed the bottle eagerly. "Nobody sits their family down at Sunday dinner to announce they're straight. Why would I have to hold a press conference to come out as anything?"

"Wow, I love you, man," Simone declared with sudden and profound sincerity, drawing more laughs from the group.

"But the truth is, I have no way of knowing how it would be," Ilya added, settling back into his high chair. "I grew up liking everything in secret because of Russia and my shitty family. Now, being here, where I owe absolutely nothing to anyone, I simply do what I want. But, for hockey... Maybe, if I had found someone who was really worth it, someone worth risking my career for... I would."

"Have you never dated anyone seriously?" Jackie asked, curiosity stamped on her face. Ilya shook his head. "What do you mean?!"

"I don't know. I've never liked anyone enough to want to deal with the work of a relationship," he shrugged, his eyes turning to the ice rink below as the stadium began to fill up.

"Ah, well Jeremy better prepare himself, because I'm absolutely not letting that bisexual get away from me! Since you don't want me, Rozanov, I'm going to hunt down another one!" Simone pointed a finger at Ilya.

The Russian let out a genuine laugh and shook his head.

"I have very strict ethics to keep my job, Monnie. Do you have any idea how many people have been fired from Lily-Jane's agency just because they slept with their bosses?" he raised his eyebrows.

"But what if I fire you first...?" she shot back with a predatory smile, making the whole circle laugh again. "But seriously, back to Jeremy... I even feel lighter after last night."

"Is Elise going to get a little brother, then?" Jackie teased her friend. Simone made a face of horror so genuine that the blonde laughed out loud.

"Was it really that good?" Rose narrowed her eyes, curious.

"Look..." Simone looked over her shoulder, making sure all the kids were at a safe distance and completely entertained. She leaned over the table, lowering her voice. "On a scale of zero to ten, I'd give the performance a nine and a half."

Rose and Jackie's eyes widened in expectation.

"And that rating was just for the oral," the actress added with a satisfied smile. "For the rest... *Mon Dieu*. Eleven."

"The tongue is a muscle," Ilya interjected out of nowhere, shrugging with clinical naturalness. "Considering he is a top with guys, but does oral work on both genders... it's pure hypertrophy. Like lifting weights at the gym. You train the muscle."

"Oh, yeah? And is yours well-trained?" Simone mocked, resting her chin on her hand.

In response, Ilya didn't say a word. He just maintained eye contact, winked, and stuck the tip of his tongue out in a quick, agile, viper-like movement, making the three women burst into laughter.

"Look, not wanting to speak ill of my husband in any way, and considering the fact that we have four young children... but, ugh, I miss feeling that sense of lightness," Jackie confessed, leaving the weight of sleep and sex deprivation totally implicit. But it was enough for everyone to understand.

"Hang in there. Soon they'll all be old enough to go to school full-time, and then you and Hayden will finally have your moment to make up for lost time," Rose reassured her, and Jackie nodded, already dreaming of the future. "But, going back to the dating bisexual men thing... with the way I'm cursed with love, I'd be the cure for the guy's straight side and turn him one hundred percent gay."

"Wait, how many of your ex-boyfriends actually ended up coming out as gay after dating you?" Simone asked, frowning as she tried to pull from her memory.

"Four out of five," Rose replied dryly.

Jackie choked. She brought her hand to her mouth to try to hold back a laugh, but her shoulders were shaking.

"Girl..." the blonde murmured with pity. "Good lord. But hey! At least now you have Shane, right?"

"Exactly," Rose gave a sharp, nasal little laugh, loaded with an absolute irony that only she understood.

The sound was enough for Simone to lose it. The actress let out a choked laugh and covered her own mouth with her hand. Jackie frowned, indignant, and slapped the Jamaican's shoulder sharply.

"Arrête de rire de ça, Monnie!" the blonde cursed in French, telling her friend to stop laughing at someone else's misfortune.

"J'ai des soupçons à son sujet!" Simone raised both hands in surrender, her eyes shining as she whispered back in the same language that she had strong suspicions about the Montreal captain.

Ilya and Rose were left completely stranded in the crossfire of French. But there was no time to demand translations; in that exact second, the main stadium lights went out into sudden pitch-black darkness, and the LED cannons cut across the arena, announcing the explosive start of the game below.

[...]

The vibrant echo of the Montreal Metros' five-to-three victory still seemed to buzz in their ears as Ilya, Rose, and Liam went down to the arena's private underground parking lot. The air there was cold and smelled of damp concrete.

"Ilya, can we talk for a second?" the redhead asked, stopping a few steps away from the black Jeep.

The Russian nodded slowly. He pulled the keys from his pocket, unlocked the vehicle with a double beep, and turned to the boy.

"Go to the car, Akula," he gave Liam two affectionate pats on the shoulder. The boy obeyed without question, running toward the car, opening the back door, and settling into his usual spot right behind the driver's seat.

As soon as the thud of the car door echoed through the nearly empty parking lot, Ilya turned his attention back to the actress. As usual, the Russian was using the captain's official parking spot, since Shane always preferred taking an Uber to the arena on game days to maintain his focus.

"Go ahead," Ilya gave the green light, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets.

Rose sighed, the cold air condensing in front of her face, and shoved her hands into the pockets of her cream-colored trench coat.

"I'm not going back to the penthouse with you guys today," she announced, her tone calm but resolute.

Ilya raised an eyebrow, blinking slightly, confused by the break in protocol.

"Shane and I broke up this morning," she dropped the bomb with the same nonchalance as someone commenting on the weather. "I thought maybe he had already mentioned it to you, no?"

The Russian's lips parted slightly. For a fraction of a second, his mask of unshakeable calmness slipped. He blinked, genuinely taken by surprise.

"Shane hasn't told me absolutely anything yet."

Rose's eyes widened and she brought a hand to her mouth, realizing the monumental gaffe.

"Uhm, damn. I thought he would have called you right away," she murmured, shaking her head to shake off the embarrassment. "But look, we're fine. The breakup was super peaceful, we're still friends. My only point is that... well, I don't know how Liam is going to react. If he's even going to have a reaction, of course. Being very honest, I always got the impression he didn't care much for me."

Ilya's expression softened, losing any trace of coldness. He tilted his head slightly to the side.

"That's not it, Rose. Liam likes you," the blond began, his voice taking on the analytical and sensitive tone he reserved for understanding children. "It's just that... Liam made it very clear to Shane a while ago that he didn't want 'another mom'. And seeing the two of you together looked exactly like that in his mind. His biological mother abandoned him and left. Maybe the coldness is just his little way of building a wall. Of not getting attached, afraid that you might end up leaving too."

Rose pressed her lips together, her brown eyes drifting to the dark window of the Jeep where the boy was. The irony of the situation hit her squarely.

"Exactly like I'm doing right now. I get it," she whispered, a sad smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "He's very, very smart for his age. That boy was the baby Shane had no idea he needed to have to save himself."

"Yes. He is," Ilya agreed with a firm nod. "So, just to confirm... are you and Shane really okay? Friends?"

"Yes. One hundred percent friends," Rose assured him. "But anyway... I don't know how Shane is going to tell the rest of the team. I only came to the game because I promised I would, and it would have been a bit weird not to show up."

She shrugged, ready to say goodbye, but stopped and looked deep into the Russian's blue eyes.

"Take care of him, okay? Shane takes your opinion into consideration more than anyone else's. And he's been going through some pretty complicated things internally that he needs to

sort out."

Ilya held her gaze without wavering.

"Yeah... I know a few things," he replied, his voice perfectly neutral.

What Rose had no idea was that Ilya knew much, much more than just "a few things." But she didn't need to know that. And, in that moment, the Russian's silence was the greatest proof of loyalty he could offer Shane.

"See you around," Rose stepped closer, opening her arms.

Ilya returned the quick hug and watched her walk away across the concrete of the parking lot until she got into a waiting Uber on the street. Almost at the same time, the heavy double doors of the arena opened, and a wave of Metros players began pouring out. They were celebrating the noisy victory, most impeccably dressed in tailored suits and holding bouquets of flowers, rushing to celebrate the Valentine's Day holiday a day late.

Shane, however, walked against this festive vibe. He came straight toward Ilya's Jeep, his shoulders tense and his brow furrowed. Surprising the Russian, the first thing the captain asked was:

"Where's Li?"

Ilya shook his head slightly, maintaining a deadly serious expression.

"Sold him for a bagel."

"You hate bagels" Shane let out a nasal laugh, the tension breaking for a second. He rolled his eyes and walked to the trunk. Ilya unlocked the car with the key, and the Canadian tossed his heavy bag inside.

Once settled in the passenger seat, Shane reached his arm back, poking Liam's legs. The boy let out a high-pitched laugh, trying to dodge his dad's tickles as Ilya started the car and steered it out of the arena.

"Did you see Rose leave?" Shane asked quietly, as the Jeep climbed the access ramp to the street.

"I did," Ilya answered. He took his eyes off the traffic for a fraction of a second to look at the captain.

That single, silent look was enough. Shane instantly understood that the Russian already knew everything.

"I was going to tell you when we got home," Shane mumbled, a bit defensive.

"You can explain to me how it went, if you want. Or you don't have to say anything. It's up to you," the blond shrugged, turning on the blinker and merging into Montreal's night traffic calmly.

And that is exactly what they did. As soon as they got to the penthouse, while Liam went upstairs to get ready for bed, the two adults were left alone in the downstairs kitchen.

"I think you were right," Shane sighed, sipping his cold can of Ginger Ale. "About that whole thing about sex not being for me. When things went wrong in bed, I just wanted to disappear from that room and, I don't know, throw myself off the building's balcony."

Ilya was sitting on one of the island stools, following Shane with his eyes after having heard the complete summary of how the night derailed into the breakup.

"And what did Rose say about that?"

"She said it was fine. Dr. Park, on the other hand, threw out the theory that I might be going through a 'late discovery phase'," Shane made air quotes with his fingers, gesturing with the green can. "Because, at the time when I should have been living that and discovering things, I was too busy changing diapers and fighting in court. Which makes total sense, I guess. In high school, I only thought about hockey. And when I got drafted, which theoretically would be the time to... I don't know, hook up with everyone at parties like most rookies do, I was already a terrified single dad."

Ilya nodded slowly, absorbing the information and processing the psychologist's analysis.

"I get it. But answer me this... what exactly catalyzed this whole conversation with Rose? Besides, of course... the detail of you going soft."

Shane wanted, once again, to throw himself off a balcony.

"I..." he choked.

Suddenly, the idea of confessing that he watched gay porn, liked it, and that this was the catalyst for the breakup to a guy who openly practiced gay sex seemed like the most horrendous, embarrassing, and potentially offensive thing in the world. Would it be fetishizing to say that? Would it be invasive? Shane's brain collapsed.

"Oh, God in heaven..." he whined, covering his red face with his free hand.

"Shane, for the love of God, relax. Literally the only thing left for me, at this exact moment in our coexistence, is to see you naked," Ilya shot back with staggering naturalness. "Because I already know practically everything about your love life. Or, in this case, the lack thereof."

Shane's jaw dropped. He lowered his hand from his face, widening his blue eyes at the nanny's absurd audacity.

"I am still your boss, you know?" the captain tried to pull the authority card, sounding absolutely devoid of conviction.

"Are you going to fire me for stating a fact?" the blond challenged, raising an eyebrow and flashing a lethal smirk.

Shane let out an indignant laugh, defeated by the Russian's logic.

"Alright... I'll tell you. But... definitely not with Liam still awake and walking around the house."

[...]

While Ilya tucked Liam's covers into the bed, Shane watched the scene, leaning against the doorframe. It was then that the boy, sinking his head into the pillow, casually asked:

"Where's Rose?"

The Russian looked up at the Canadian. Shane let out a contained sigh and stepped fully into the room. Understanding the cue, Ilya took a step back, yielding the space to the captain. Shane sat on the edge of the mattress, arranged Mr. Bubbles in his son's arms, and spoke in the softest voice he could manage:

"Rose isn't here, buddy. She and I aren't dating anymore."

"No?" Liam tilted his head to the side, genuinely confused. "Why not?"

"Because we realized we work much better as friends than as boyfriend and girlfriend," Shane shrugged, keeping his tone light and calm. "We didn't fight, everything is fine. And she is absolutely still going to send you a really cool birthday present in June."

"Cool," Liam declared, his child's brain instantly bribable by the promise of presents, considering the matter closed.

But immediately after, the boy's little eyes traveled from Shane to Ilya, who was leaning against the dresser, and back to his dad.

"Besides, you and Ilya get along way better than you and Rose do."

Shane blinked, slow and stunned, his brain stopping its spinning for a second.

"What do you mean?"

Liam just shrugged and snuggled deeper under the comforter.

"Just saying."

Ilya cleared his throat, picking up the shark book from the nightstand to break the bizarre mood, but the boy interrupted him right away:

"I don't want a story today. Just this is good enough."

'Just this'? Shane frowned, but neither of the adults had the courage to question the child's logic. The captain pressed a lingering kiss to his son's forehead, and Ilya gave the boy's hair a

gentle tousle. The two left the room in silence and closed the door.

As soon as they stepped into the hallway, they exchanged a look loaded with pure panic and confusion.

"Did he just... insinuate that we...?" Shane pointed his index finger frantically between the two of them.

The tension broke. They both fell into a muffled, incredulous laugh, walking down the stairs to the first floor.

Ilya knew very well that Shane officially dismissed him from his nanny "shift" the exact moment he offered him alcohol. As soon as the captain appeared with bottles of beer, they settled on the penthouse's spacious, modern balcony. The February air in Montreal cut their faces, but Shane needed the cold. And he needed to take long, desperate gulps of beer to gather the courage to talk about the real reason for the breakup.

"Okay..." Shane took a deep breath, his breath condensing into white smoke. "Look. I haven't had sex with anyone since Jessica. But that doesn't mean I didn't... come."

"Jerk off," Ilya shot out. He was one hundred percent in "off the clock" mode, and hearing that kind of raw vocabulary coming out of the Russian's mouth still sent shivers down Shane's spine.

"Yeah. That." Shane swallowed hard, grabbing a cushion from the outdoor sofa and placing it on his lap like a shield. "And a while ago... Simone..."

"Obviously it was Simone," Ilya interrupted, letting out a loose laugh that drew a nervous chuckle from the captain.

"Obviously," Shane agreed, taking another generous sip to try and wash down the knot of shame in his throat. "She told me, explicitly, that I... should give my ass to Rose."

Ilya choked. The Russian coughed violently, choking on his beer.

Shane pressed his lips together, waiting for the other man to recover.

"Yeah, of course it was Simone," the Russian repeated, his voice hoarse, wiping his wet chin with the back of his hand. "Okay. Go on."

"The problem is that I had never even looked up how that worked. How it really went down, you know? And then... oh, fuck, no. Of course you know. Oh, for fuck's sake," Shane got tangled in his own words, his face burning under the freezing night air.

"Yes, Shane. I have anal sex," Ilya nodded with the patience of a monk. "You got curious, you looked it up, okay, and what else? After all, the prostate is up there for an excellent reason."

"My bad..." Shane mumbled, knowing he was pink with embarrassment. "I looked it up. And some porn videos popped up... a couple having sex and the woman using her fingers, some

toys on the guy. That kind of thing. But I felt absolutely nothing watching it. It even seemed uncomfortable at first."

"And it is, if you don't do it right," Ilya agreed. An intrusive and completely unwarranted shiver ran down the back of Shane's neck.

"So I kept skipping from video to video. Until I landed on a threesome video. Two guys and a woman."

Ilya made an instant grimace.

"Tell me the guys fucked each other in the video too, please. Because that kind of threesome where the men don't even look at each other gives me a wretched agony," the Russian grumbled, shaking his broad shoulders with disdain.

"And... t-that was exactly the turning point," Shane stammered, squeezing his beer bottle. "The guys started kissing each other, and suddenly one started fucking the other while the one in the middle fucked the woman... and for me, it was as if the woman wasn't even there anymore. I couldn't look at her anymore. Until the video ended, the next suggested one was just two guys having sex, and I thought... fuck it. Fuck all of this. And I jerked off one of the best times of my life watching a guy fuck the pool boy in a fake-as-fuck house, with the worst acting in the world."

Ilya slowly parted his lips and nodded, processing the intensity of the confession.

Shane felt cornered, dirty, almost offensive. Talking about his own awakening to a guy who was bisexual and openly lived it made him feel like an idiotic fetishist.

"Wow. The classic pool boy video? There are much better ones out there, by the way," Ilya shrugged with his unshakable and incredibly annoying stoicism, bringing his bottle to his lips.

Shane frowned, shocked by his naturalness.

"Okay..." Ilya lowered his drink. "Let me see if I got the equation right: you had traumatic and bad experiences having sex with women, straight porn bores you, you have zero desire for the female body, and you had a spectacular orgasm watching two men fuck. Is that it?"

Put that way, in those exact words, it was a right hook straight to the middle of Shane's face.

"Putting it that way..." the captain moistened his lips, his heart racing.

"Are you curious to have sex with a guy?" Ilya fired off without anesthesia.

Shane's hands started breaking out in a cold sweat.

"Or has your lack of libido gone back to being general for everything and everyone?" the Russian added, noticing the panic.

"I-I... I don't know," the Canadian admitted, terrified.

Ilya nodded with an unexpected softness.

"Then everything is perfectly fine, Shane. Like your therapist said, this could really be a late discovery phase. Your brain is processing information that it blocked out for years. There is absolutely nothing wrong."

"But... don't you think it's weird? Or, I don't know, gross? That I told you I jerked off to two guys fucking?"

Ilya leaned forward on the couch, resting his elbows on his knees, and looked at his boss with a raised eyebrow.

"Shane. I fuck guys. Literally."

Wow, Shane's brain echoed the information, conjuring up unwanted and extremely dangerous images. He blinked hard to chase the thought away.

"It's just that I feel kind of like a fetishist telling you this. I don't know."

"You Googled what that word meant this afternoon, didn't you?"

"Maybe."

Ilya laughed out loud.

"Everyone has their own kinks, Shane. Some are much more common than others. The BDSM world, for example, is a wonderful amusement park," he teased.

Shane made an instinctive face of shock, which only drew an even bigger laugh from the Russian.

"Do you have kinks?" Shane asked, his voice cracking a bit.

"A few," Ilya shrugged, his eyes shining with mischief as he drank more beer. "Everyone does. You're not a fetishist, believe me. You're just discovering what you like."

Shane nodded slowly, clinging to the Russian's validation and words like a lifeboat.

"But what now? I'm completely... lost. I have no earthly idea what to do next."

"Explore your own pleasure, alone," Ilya advised with the naturalness of someone talking about buying bread. "No one is born knowing how to do anything. Sex is instinctive, yes, but pleasure? Pleasure is learned and mapped out."

"Mapped out how? What do I do? Do I... do I buy a dildo?"

Ilya shrugged, letting out a nasal laugh.

"If you think you'll like the feeling, buy one. What exactly is stopping you?" The blond opened his arms. "No one controls your sex life but you, Shane. You have money and the

internet. Buy a dildo, a rubber cock, buy a bullet vibrator, a cockring, a cockcage, glass beads, handcuffs, gags, whips, a fleshlight..."

Shane's jaw dropped gradually as the Russian recited the complete catalog of a high-end sex shop without blinking. The captain felt his throat go dry, desperately wanting to ask if Ilya possessed that entire arsenal in his own home or if he was just naming random things.

"Why the fuck do I let you take care of my son again?" Shane asked, his voice squeaky, completely in shock.

Ilya just threw his head back and laughed, swallowing the rest of his beer under the cold Montreal sky.

Chapter 15: Guilty pleasure

Chapter Notes

be ready, this one is a bomb

if there's any mistakes, it's possibly from my translation, sorry about it <3
as Ilya said: english is too hard

It felt like he was buying hard drugs, committing tax fraud, or smuggling some illegal artifact. But no. Shane Hollander was just browsing online sex shop catalogs at three in the morning, his phone screen on the lowest brightness, while his son slept peacefully at the end of the hall.

After that revealing conversation with Ilya on the balcony, three more intense sessions with Dr. Park, and liters of chamomile tea to calm his nervous system, the inevitable happened. On the morning of March first, the penthouse intercom rang. The doorman announced that some Amazon packages under the captain's name had just arrived at the front desk.

Shane had never left his own apartment so fast in his entire life. He left Liam finishing his breakfast pancakes and bolted for the elevator. Luckily for him, he didn't have ice practice that day; there was a game the next day, and Coach Theriault had had one of his famous "gut feelings" that the team needed to rest. No one dared to question him. Because of this day off, Ilya would only come in the afternoon, tasked with picking Liam up from school.

At the front desk, Shane collected three embarrassingly large cardboard boxes. No one there had the slightest idea what was inside, and the Canadian clung to the certainty that everyone would assume they were just books, since he was an avid buyer of biographies and fiction. No one in their right mind would look at the captain of the Montreal Metros and picture sex toys.

Back in the penthouse, Shane hid the packages in the back of his own closet as if they were evidence of a crime, checking the clock on the wall to drag his little rascal to school on time.

"Finished eating yet, Li?" Shane came back down the stairs, adjusting his shirt collar. "We need to decide on something really nice to buy for Grandma sometime this week. Women's Day is next week."

"And in May?" Liam asked, spinning absentmindedly on the kitchen island stool.

Shane frowned, freezing on the last step of the stairs. He racked his brain. He couldn't remember absolutely anything specific in May, besides the dramatic start of the playoffs, his own birthday, and...

"Mother's Day," the boy filled in.

Shane let out a contained sigh. He walked over to his son, stopping next to the stool and ruffling the boy's dark hair affectionately.

"We can't talk to her anymore, Li. Mom isn't a good person for us," he explained in the gentlest and firmest way he could manage. "But you can also start thinking of a Mother's Day present for Grandma. After all, she is my mom."

Liam swung his legs, processing the information without much drama.

"There's a new girl in my class who doesn't celebrate Mother's Day either. She has two dads. They're married," the boy blurted out the trivia, jumping off the stool and completely forgetting the weight of the "Jessica" topic.

Shane felt the tension in his shoulders dissipate a fraction, caught by surprise by the child's naturalness.

"Is that so? And what do you think about that?"

"Ilya already explained it to me," Liam shrugged, walking over to the couch to grab his backpack. "He said people don't choose what their heart likes."

The simplicity of that sentence hit Shane squarely. He put his hands in his pants pockets, processing the silent, gentle influence the Russian exerted over the boy.

"Speaking of him, Ilya is the one picking you up from school this afternoon, okay?"

Liam broke into a wide, excited smile at the news, and the two headed out.

Thirty minutes later, Shane was back.

Liam would be at school for the next five hours. He literally had five hours in a gigantic, empty penthouse all to himself. It had been a long time since that had happened.

Even though he was completely alone in the apartment, his instinct for self-preservation spoke louder. Shane went into his own bedroom, locked the door with the key, and pulled all the heavy blackout curtains closed, plunging the room into a safe semi-darkness.

He retrieved the boxes from the closet. With a pair of bathroom scissors, he ripped the packing tape with his heart beating in his throat. Opening the cardboard flaps felt like taking an open-handed slap to each side of his face: there, in indiscreet packaging, were the two boxes containing the silicone vibrators he had bought in a burst of courage at three in the morning.

The captain's face began to boil instantly.

"What the hell are you doing, dude?" he murmured in panic, dropping the boxes onto the comforter. He began pacing in tight circles on the bedroom rug, clutching his own hair with both hands, trying to process that the image was real and not a delusion.

Shane rubbed his face aggressively and let all the air out of his lungs in one big breath.

Focus.

He walked back over to the bed and picked up one of the packages. He broke the seal, and the dildo slid out. The Canadian pulled his hand back and didn't touch the object immediately, analyzing the piece on the bed as if it were radioactive or a ticking time bomb.

But there was the reality: all its purple, fifteen-centimeter elegance, sporting a modern USB charging port and a button with an incredible seven vibration intensities.

Overcoming his own terror, Shane reached out and picked up the vibrator. Seen up close, it was made of an extremely soft, smooth, and simple silicone; it barely looked like a real penis, despite the clearly phallic and functional shape. He pressed the power button, just to check if it had any factory charge, and, obviously, it didn't. The first practical step his athlete's brain took was connecting the cable and plugging the object into the outlet. The packaging stated that a full charge would take two to three hours.

While the toy's LED light blinked against the wall, Shane swallowed hard and opened the second box.

That was the second vibrator. The purchase Shane had made feeling an absurd peak of anatomical curiosity—and which now made him feel clinically stupid.

The contraption was complex. The design involved wearing it on one's own penis, strapping down the testicles, and it featured a curved shaft designed specifically to penetrate his body at the same time. But the part that made him feel truly stupid and terrified for having bought it wasn't the shape. It was the fact that the vibrator in question didn't just vibrate. The product description guaranteed that it, on its own, simulated real thrusts. And, looking at the silicone shaft now, Shane had the absolute and desperate certainty that he had no earthly idea how he was going to handle that.

The thrusting vibrator remained exactly where Shane had left it: at the bottom of the box.

The captain blinked twice at the black silicone contraption, his brain calculating the angles and logistics of it with the same dread he felt when facing an entire defensive line of the Boston Raiders by himself.

"Okay. Definitely not. This right here is for the professional league, and I haven't even made it out of the junior leagues yet," Shane murmured to the empty room, closing the cardboard flap and pushing the box away. That would be a problem for future Shane.

He pulled over the third and final package.

This one was heavier. Ripping open the plastic, he found three bottles of premium water-based lube—Google, in his frantic three-a.m. searches, had been categorically insistent on the industrial need for lubrication—and a smaller box containing a beginner's training kit. Three silicone plugs in graduated sizes.

Shane lined up the three plugs on the nightstand next to the bed, next to the purple dildo that was still blinking in the outlet. The sight looked like a profane altar dedicated to his own identity crisis.

He sat on the edge of the mattress, rubbing his face with both hands. His heart hammered against his ribs. His flight instinct screamed for him to throw it all in the trash, delete his internet history, pretend the conversation with Ilya on the balcony never happened, and go back to living his usual safe, sexless life. It was the easiest path.

But he remembered Rose's words. *You've been torturing yourself in silence... you need to reconnect with who you are.*

And he remembered Ilya's deep voice. *Sex is instinctive, but pleasure is mapped out. No one controls your life but you.*

Shane's athlete brain finally took control. He didn't run from workouts, no matter how brutal they were. And this was, essentially, a workout. A practical, empirical exercise in self-discovery.

"One step at a time," he whispered.

The first tactical step was heading to the bathroom. He needed to have at least a basic idea of what to do back there before even thinking about touching himself. Shane took a long, hot shower deliberately focused on relaxing his body's muscles. He let the scalding water beat against his back until the tension in his shoulders melted away. When he stepped out of the shower stall, he dried off slowly and wrapped the towel around his waist.

Returning to the room with the curtains closed, the red light of the purple dildo plugged into the wall had stopped blinking, indicating a full charge. Shane swallowed hard.

He lay on the bed flat on his back. The air conditioning made the room cold, but Shane's skin was burning. With his hands still slightly shaking, he opened one of the lube bottles. The sound of the thick liquid dropping into his palm seemed to echo through the silence of the room. It was cold, slippery, and incredibly real.

Map out your pleasure, he repeated like a mantra, squeezing his eyes shut.

Shane brought his right hand to his own member, spreading the lube with hesitant strokes. He took a deep breath, trying to empty his mind of panic and shame. Gradually, he began setting a slow pace. No rush. No acting. Just feeling the friction and the heat.

To his own surprise, his body responded with an eagerness he hadn't felt in a long time. The hardness took over, and a low, drawn-out moan escaped his throat.

Encouraged by his own body, Shane moistened his other hand with more lube. The panic struck again when he reached his fingers back, feeling around with an almost painful hesitation. He clenched his jaw. It was weird, invasive, and scary. The first touch made every muscle in his body tense up, his defensive instinct telling him to stop.

Breathe, he ordered himself. *You're in control*.

He relaxed his legs on the crumpled sheets and tried again. Gradually, the barrier of fear began to give way. The touch stopped being something invasive and became a dull electric shock. When the pressure of his fingers found a specific spot he had never explored in his life, Shane's body arched on the bed as if he'd been shot.

"Fuck..." he gasped, opening his scared eyes to the dark ceiling, his lungs searching for air.

It wasn't pain. It was a spike of sensitivity so sharp and confusing that his athlete's brain didn't know where to catalog the information.

Curiosity finally conquered the terror. Shane exhaled, picked up the smallest of the silicone plugs from the nightstand, and coated it generously with lube.

He shifted positions, bending his knees. The insertion was slow, clumsy, and accompanied by low curses muttered through clenched teeth. There was discomfort, yes, but as soon as the object found its place and the pressure stabilized, a wave of dense, heavy heat spread through the captain's lower abdomen.

It was a feeling of fullness that bordered on absurd. A physical completeness that made Shane's head spin.

He went back to stimulating his own member, now with the toy acting in the background, and the difference was brutal. Every movement felt amplified. The pleasure was no longer a straight, narrow, and tense line, but something diffuse, radiating down the back of his thighs and leaving him panting, gripping the sheets with white knuckles.

And then, helplessly, Shane's mind ran free.

The image of the fake video vanished. In its place, the memory of Ilya getting out of the pool under the Florida sun hit him with full force. The broad shoulders. The trail of hair disappearing into the waistband of his swim trunks. The deep voice murmuring short orders in a Russian accent.

Shane let out a loud, hoarse moan. He increased the pace of his hand, surrendering completely to the forbidden fantasy dancing behind his closed eyelids. He wasn't defending himself. He wasn't masking anything.

When the orgasm finally hit him, it was overwhelming. A physical explosion that left him trembling uncontrollably on the bed, his chest heaving and his eyes welling up with relief.

Shane lay there for a long time, listening only to his own rapid breathing in the dark room. He didn't feel broken, or disgusted, or like a fetishist. For the first time in almost ten years, lying in the middle of that mess, the captain of the Montreal Metros felt like he belonged in his own body.

After almost ten minutes just lying on the bed, his body still heavy and his breathing slowly returning to a normal rhythm, Shane reached for the nightstand and grabbed a tissue. With

slow and somewhat clumsy movements, he cleaned up his own mess from his abdomen and chest, feeling the shiver caused by the cold fabric touching his still warm, sensitive skin.

Then, with a slightly trembling hand—maybe from exhaustion, maybe from anticipation—he reached back and his fingers found the base of the plug still inserted. He pulled it slowly, feeling every inch slide out, and a low grunt escaped his throat, a half-hoarse, half-surprised sound that seemed to reverberate in the muffled silence of the room. The sensation left behind was deeply strange: a throbbing emptiness, an absence that pulsed like a second heart.

Almost without thinking, Shane let his fingers travel lower and touch his entrance. For his entire life, that piece of his body had been completely ignored in moments of pleasure—a border he had never crossed, unexplored territory that only existed in the realm of silent curiosity. Now, he felt it loose, soft, surprisingly receptive. With minimal pressure, the tip of a finger slid inside with no resistance whatsoever.

Shane gasped. The sound was sharp and involuntary, almost a hiccup.

Almost on instinct—a newly discovered instinct that his body seemed to understand better than his mind—he began to move his middle finger inside himself. He was standing next to the bed, the mattress still sunken in the shape of his body, and lifted one leg to rest it on the edge, opening himself up further. His free hand planted firmly on the wrinkled sheet, serving as a third support, his trembling arm sustaining his leaning torso.

It was strange, hot, wet, tight. The internal texture was velvety and narrow, completely different from anything he had ever touched. The heat wrapped around his finger like an involuntary hug, the muscles contracting around the intrusion in small rhythmic spasms.

"Fuck..." he murmured, his voice thick and low, pushing his finger as far as he could reach. With each thrust, his breathing grew shorter, more ragged, his chest rising and falling in uneven gasps.

The next step came as a compulsion, not a decision. He licked his dry lips, adjusted the angle of his hand, and slid a second finger inside, joining the first. The stretch drew a sharper moan from him, almost a whine.

"Oh, fuck..."

It was uncomfortable. The widening burned in a weird way, a pressure on the fine line between pain and pleasure. His body fought against and for it at the same time, the internal muscles contracting trying to expel the invaders, but Shane persisted, his fingers sliding out and in at a cautious, exploratory pace, like someone feeling around in the dark for something they don't even know how to name.

Until he found it.

His own thrusts hit a spot that brought everything down. His elbow gave out first, then his knees, and for a brief moment Shane collapsed onto the bed, a louder, uncontrolled moan escaping his lips before he could stop it. The wave of pleasure was electric, a shock that shot up his spine and exploded behind his eyes, leaving stars dancing in his peripheral vision.

It was there. That exact spot. The discovery throbbed in him like a revelation.

Still trembling, Shane gathered himself and sat back on the bed, his back resting against the cold wooden headboard. The new position was more comfortable, more stable, and he bent his knees, planting his feet on the mattress to open himself completely. He brought his right hand back down and slid his middle and index fingers inside himself again, now without hesitation, without the modesty of the first time.

He began chasing that shock of pleasure like an addict after their next fix. His fingers curled inward in a frantic search, the tips massaging the internal walls until they found the exact spot again, and when they did, Shane's entire body arched, his head thrown back against the headboard, his mouth open in a silent scream he tried to smother at all costs. Sweat dripped down his temples, his thigh muscles shook, and his fingers kept up the back-and-forth motion, tireless, relentless, extracting little deaths of pleasure with every precise touch.

Even with his cock still recovering from the orgasm fifteen minutes ago—still sensitive, still half-soft against his thigh, the skin gleaming under the dim light of the lamp—Shane wanted to touch it too. His left hand was idle, his fingers twitching in the void against the sheet, and he yearned to give it a purpose. His right hand was already serving him more than well, curled inside himself in a rhythm that made his eyes roll back, but his left hand begged for participation, for contact, for anything to pull it out of its inertia.

"Fuck..." Shane moaned, his voice coming out more fragile than he intended, and increased the movement of his fingers even though his right arm began to burn in protest. The muscle in his forearm ached with the repetitive strain, his wrist complaining about the forced angle, but he ignored it all in pursuit of that internal spot that dismantled him from the inside out.

His eyes, half-open and wet, fell on the purple vibrator abandoned on the nightstand. The silicone gleamed softly, almost accusingly. Fifteen centimeters. Suddenly, fifteen centimeters seemed like a lot. A measurement he knew all too well—Shane was above average and knew it, knew he was bigger than that, had seen looks of surprise from teammates in the showers to be fully aware of what he carried between his legs—but it was different now. Knowing that thing would be shoved inside him completely shifted the perspective. The fifteen centimeters that seemed so harmless in his own hand now revealed themselves as an imposing, almost threatening presence, a challenge that made his stomach clench in a mix of apprehension and anticipation.

And then his left hand found its purpose. It reached for the nightstand, fingers still trembling, and wrapped around the vibrator. The silicone was soft to the touch, slightly cold, and Shane disconnected it from the charger with a sharp pull—the cable dropped onto the nightstand with a dull thud. Even without a full charge, he thought, it would serve just for the feeling of fullness, not the vibration. The smooth texture glided against his sweaty palm.

Against his own will, Shane pulled his fingers out of himself. The absence was immediate and almost painful, a pulsing emptiness that his internal muscles sought to fill in vain, contracting around nothing. He ignored his body's silent protest and grabbed the lube, the bottle already warm from prior use. He squeezed the dispenser and the clear liquid ran in a generous string over the tip of the vibrator, dripping down the silicone sides. Shane spread it

with his left hand in circular motions, coating every inch of the purple surface until it shined completely wet.

He adjusted himself further on the bed, sinking his back against the stacked pillows, and opened his legs wider than they already were. His knees spread apart at an angle that would make any athletic trainer proud, and Shane silently thanked every pelvic stretch the hockey world had taught him. Years of training, of opening his hips on the ice, of controlled falls and quick recoveries—all converging on this unusual moment, this private act of exploration no coach could have foreseen.

There was a brief moment of pause. The wet vibrator in his hand, his legs spread, his body exposed. And then Shane felt a strange, almost intrusive impulse: he wanted to put that dildo in his mouth. Not for performance, not for anyone but himself—just for the sensation. He knew the human brain was capable of imagining the texture of things on the tongue just by looking at the object, a sensory illusion everyone experienced when looking at something soft or rough. And he could truly imagine what sucking that vibrator would be like: the cold silicone against his palate, the weight on his tongue, the rounded tip pressing against his throat.

For a moment, shame struck. Shane thought he couldn't do it—it was too much, too perverted, something the Shane of eight years ago would never recognize. But then he remembered, relief flooding his chest, that he was completely alone. Five hours of uninterrupted solitude while Liam was at school, his son sitting at a desk miles away, oblivious to everything. And he had barely started his morning.

So, before he could over-rationalize and back out, Shane acted. He moved his right hand back down and penetrated his fingers inside himself again, the middle and index sliding easily through the already-prepared path. With his left, he raised the vibrator to his lips and, totally inexperienced, knowing absolutely nothing of what he was doing, wrapped his mouth around the silicone tip.

The first thing he noticed was that he really needed to open his mouth wide. His jaw popped slightly at the joint, the corners of his lips stretching to accommodate the diameter. The taste of the lube was slightly sweet, artificial, a chemical that coated his tongue. But he kept going, lowering his mouth down the length of the vibrator, feeling the silicone glide against his tongue, filling his oral cavity. His eyes closed involuntarily, the fingers inside him continued their work, and Shane discovered he could moan around the object, a muffled, vibrating sound no one but him could hear. A private moan, a silent confession to the silicone filling him.

And in a matter of seconds, Shane wanted to find out how far he could shove that vibrator into his mouth, down his throat. The idea came as a flash—irrational, almost absurd—but the heat of the moment dissolved any hesitation. He knew about the infamous deep throat, a technique he had only witnessed in porn, catching glimpses while scrolling through videos late at night. He had never received it himself, never had the opportunity. Over the last decade, his lack of interest in sex with women had kept him far from that kind of exploration. But now, alone, trembling and hungry for new sensations, curiosity burned.

He brought the vibrator to his lips. The first thrust was cautious, just the silicone tip gliding over his tongue, tasting the artificially neutral flavor of the material mixed with the salty taste of his own sweat dripping from his upper lip. Then he opened his jaw wider and let the toy slide in, invading the hot, wet cavity of his mouth.

Instantly, the heat between his legs demanded attention. Shane shoved a third finger inside himself, and the moan he let out vibrated around the vibrator, muffled and guttural. The dual sensation was overwhelming—filled at both ends, his fingers curling and massaging inside while his mouth stretched around the silicone. With his left hand, he maneuvered the toy, controlling the depth with small back-and-forth movements, testing his limits.

He tried his hardest to relax his jaw, conscious of every muscle that needed to yield. He focused on suppressing the gag reflex, breathing through his nose in short, controlled puffs. His eyes watered, the vision of the room becoming a blur of shadows and lights, but he didn't stop. He slid the vibrator deeper, inch by inch, until the tip touched the back of his throat and triggered an involuntary spasm.

And then, with a start of fear—real, primal fear of choking—Shane pulled the toy out in a swift motion. The silicone emerged slick with saliva, a thin string connecting the tip to his swollen lips. He coughed once, wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, and then, his breathing still unsteady, evaluated what had happened. Where his fingers held the vibrator was more than two-thirds down its total length. The mark of his grip was there, saliva dripping down to the base.

"Holy shit..." he murmured, his voice hoarse and rough as sandpaper, his vocal cords scratched from the effort.

But now there was no reason to wait. The hesitation had dissolved. He slowly withdrew his three fingers from inside himself, feeling each joint slide out, the entrance twitching in the emptiness left behind. His right hand guided the vibrator down, and he ran the rounded, still-warm tip from his mouth around his stretched entrance. The touch was electric. A violent shiver ran down his spine, a mix of anticipation and anxiety that made the hair on his arms stand up and his nipples contract.

Shane grabbed the lube bottle from the nightstand, his trembling fingers squeezing the dispenser harder than necessary. A cold squirt ran over the silicone and his own skin, and he spread the liquid with circular motions, mixing the coolness of the lube with the heat radiating from his body. The wet sheen of the vibrator caught the dim light of the lamp.

Then, he gave it a try.

He positioned the rounded tip exactly against the opening and began to push. The pressure was immediate and uncomfortable—an elastic resistance his body instinctively imposed. The vibrator was sizable, chosen with almost mathematical criteria: not too thick to scare him, not too thin to disappoint, just right in that medium range he figured he could handle. Even so, the entrance yielded slowly, millimeter by millimeter, the internal muscles opening with a sluggishness that wavered between agony and ecstasy.

Shane bit his lower lip so hard he almost tasted blood. Air rushed in and out of his lungs in rhythmic gasps as he maintained constant pressure, the tip of the vibrator stretching him in a way his fingers never could. Sweat dripped down his temples, his chest, the groove of his back, and his eyes were glued to the spot where his body swallowed the toy, mesmerized by the sight.

"That's it..." he whispered to himself, his voice thick and full of awe. "That's it, that's it..."

And the rounded tip finally gave way, sliding inside with a wet pop that echoed in the quiet room. Shane let out a long, trembling groan, his head falling back against the headboard as the first inch of the vibrator filled him in an entirely new way. The real challenge was just beginning.

With every inch that slid inside, Shane's body rebelled and surrendered in contradictory cycles. The internal muscles contracted around the silicone, trying to expel the invader, but he maintained the constant pressure, his hand steady despite the tremor shaking his shoulders. The lube dripped down, easing the way, and the vibrator advanced with an exasperating slowness—a meticulous invasion that forced him to feel every millimeter of that forced opening.

When half the toy had already disappeared inside him, Shane stopped. He needed a moment. His chest heaved in jerks, his heart hammering against his ribs as if it wanted to escape his body. The sensation was crushing: fullness, pressure, a heat that radiated from the center of his being to his extremities, tingling in his toes. He had never felt so filled, so vulnerable, so intensely aware of every nerve ending in his own body.

"Fuck... fuck..." The word came out like a broken prayer, his eyes squeezing shut as he adjusted to the intrusion.

With a slow, deliberate movement, Shane twisted the vibrator slightly, testing the angle. The base of the toy was still firm in his hand, and he used it as a guide, tilting the tip upward in an instinctive search. His fingers had already mapped that territory minutes earlier, locating the exact spot that made his entire body collapse in pleasure. Now, with the vibrator, the precision was different—deeper, more intense, more relentless.

When the rounded tip hit the right spot, Shane let out a groan that came from his guts, a guttural, uncontrolled sound he couldn't muffle in time. The wave of pleasure was so sudden and violent that his back arched, his head smacking hard against the wooden headboard, and his thighs shook as if pierced by an electric current. The vibrator wasn't even turned on yet, and it was already dismantling him completely.

"Right there... right there..." he whispered to the empty room, his voice squeaky and reverent.

His fingers found the small button at the base of the vibrator. There was a second of hesitation—the fleeting awareness that, once that line was crossed, there would be no turning back—and then he pressed it.

The toy sprang to life inside him with a low, steady hum, vibrating at a frequency that reverberated through his internal walls and rippled outward in concentric waves of pleasure.

Shane swallowed a scream, his free hand gripping the sheet so hard his knuckles turned white. The vibration found that sensitive spot and massaged it mercilessly, turning every beat of his heart into a new peak of sensation.

He began moving the vibrator in and out, slowly at first, then faster, finding a rhythm that echoed the muffled groans escaping his throat. The buzzing sound filled the room, mixed with the wet noise of the thrusts and his ragged breathing. With every thrust that hit the right spot, his eyes rolled back, his vision fragmenting into kaleidoscopes of light and shadow.

Shane lost track of time. It could have been minutes or hours. All that existed was that dance of silicone and flesh, the relentless pursuit of an orgasm building on the horizon like a storm. His cock, which had softened during the initial concentration, was now completely hard again, throbbing against his abdomen, a translucent drop beading at the tip and dripping slowly.

He increased the intensity of the vibration. The hum grew higher-pitched, more insistent, and Shane bit the pillow he had pulled against his face to muffle the prolonged moan that tore from his throat. Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes—not from pain, but from a pleasure so absolute it bordered on unbearable. His body no longer belonged to him; it was merely a vessel for that sensation that grew, and grew, threatening to swallow him whole.

"I'm gonna... I'm gonna... Fucking hell," he babbled into the pillow's fabric, his hips now moving on their own, meeting the thrusts of his own hand in desperate synchrony. The storm was about to break.

The orgasm didn't arrive like an explosion, but like a collapse—an implosion that began in the exact center where the vibrator pulsed and radiated outward in concentric waves so violent Shane lost touch with reality for a few seconds. His entire body convulsed: his back arched in an impossible bow, his heels dug into the mattress, his toes curled in cramps, and a scream—a real scream, which he didn't have the presence of mind to muffle—escaped his throat, reverberating off the bedroom walls.

Semen spurted in hot spasms over his chest and abdomen, wave after wave, each internal contraction sucking the vibrator even deeper. His right hand kept moving the toy instinctively, extracting every last drop of pleasure, until the sensitivity became too sharp, bordering on pain, and he finally turned it off with a trembling click of his thumb.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Shane lay motionless for a long minute, his eyes closed, his body still sunk against the headboard. The phantom hum of the vibration still echoed in his nerves, small aftershocks rippling through his thighs and abdomen. Sweat cooled on his skin, a thin, salty layer that made him shiver when the breeze from the ceiling fan washed over him. The air smelled of sex, of artificial lube, of something raw and human that permeates lonely nights.

Slowly, with almost clinical care, he pulled the vibrator out. The toy slid out with a wet, obscene sound, and Shane let out a small whine at the feeling of sudden emptiness, his entrance throbbing, his internal muscles still twitching in delayed spasms around nothing. He

let the vibrator fall onto the stained sheet, the silicone gleaming under the dim light of the lamp.

That was when the fear hit him.

The scream. He had screamed.

Shane froze, his wide eyes fixed on the bedroom door, ears straining to catch any sound coming from the end of the hallway. His heart, which had barely begun to slow down, raced again—now for a completely different reason. He held his breath. Listened.

Nothing.

No cry of a scared child. No call of "Daddy?". No sound of small footsteps on the hardwood floor. Just the silence of the house, the distant hum of the city day, the occasional click of the air conditioning compressor.

Shane exhaled slowly, his shoulders relaxing in a collapse of relief. He let his head fall back against the headboard and closed his eyes, feeling his eyelids heavy, his entire body taken over by an exhaustion so deep it ached in his bones. Liam was at school. Shane was alone, in a soundproof room. And he remained there, naked, dirty, empty and filled at the same time, floating in that ambiguous space between satisfaction and the shame the day would bring.

With a heavy sigh, he forced himself to move. He needed to clean up. He needed to put away the vibrator and the other toys. He needed to erase the evidence of that morning before the sun moved too far across the sky and turned him back into the responsible father, the polite building owner, the man no one suspected carried so many secrets.

But for now, for a few more stolen minutes of the morning alone, Shane allowed himself to float.

[...]

Ilya waited for the school bell to ring next to Nora. Set back from the main gate, the two shared the wooden bench and the moment of pause, smoking while talking about the week's school schedule.

"It was supposed to be a surprise, but Bash definitely does not grasp the concept of keeping secrets," the curly-haired woman commented, laughing lightly. She had changed her hairstyle, sporting beautiful braids that unraveled into natural curls at the ends. "He already gave me the complete script of what they're going to do in art class for Women's Day."

"Well, Liam is a tomb. Hasn't said a word about it to me or Shane," Ilya replied, tapping the cigarette ash on the edge of the trash can next to the bench. "He'll probably give whatever little presents he makes to Shane's mom."

Nora nodded, mimicking the motion of tapping off ash.

"And what about your mom? Does she still live in Russia, or did she come to America too? I don't think I've ever asked you that."

Ilya stopped his cigarette halfway to his mouth. He let out a slow, heavy sigh, his shoulders dropping a fraction.

The shift in energy was immediate. Nora's eyes widened and she covered her own mouth with her free hand, mortified.

"Ilya, my God, I'm so sorry. I didn't..."

"It's no problem at all, Nora," he offered a slight, but undeniably sorrowful, smile, noticing the guilty expression on her face. "My mom has passed away."

"Is it very recent?"

"No. But it feels like it," the Russian finally brought the cigarette to his lips and took a deep drag. "She took her own life when I was twelve. She had severe depression and... lost the war."

Nora swallowed hard, fighting the knot that instantly formed in her throat, and reached her hand out to the Russian's broad shoulder, leaving a soft, sympathetic squeeze there.

"What was her name?"

"Irina," Ilya answered, his free hand moving up unconsciously to touch the three-bar crucifix pendant on the gold chain on his chest. "I look a lot like her. The same eyes, the same tone and type of hair... I remember she had several moles scattered across her back and shoulders. When I was a kid, I liked to play connect the dots with my finger to make drawings on her skin. She always said she was going to end up getting one of those drawings tattooed, but she never did because she was terrified of needles."

Nora listened to the memory with a sad smile.

"And the rest of your family?"

"My dad is a very old man, in the final stages of Alzheimer's," Ilya listed, his voice taking on a clinical, distant coldness, taking another drag of his cigarette and blowing the smoke upwards. "My older brother is a drug-addicted cop and a shitty husband. My sister-in-law is just a doomed soul chained to that family. My stepmother isn't worth the oxygen she breathes... and I prefer not to think about my niece for too long, if I can avoid it."

He paused, his gaze losing focus on the sidewalk.

"She's the exact same age as the boys. Eight years old."

Nora pressed her lips together, removing her hand from his shoulder to cross her arms.

"My dad also died when I was a kid," she confessed, her voice dropping in tone. "I was a daddy's girl. He always picked me up from school, we'd go get ice cream, and I'd tell him every useless detail of my day. Until he started getting sick out of nowhere. And, when we finally managed to schedule the exam he needed, it was already too late. Pancreatic cancer. Final stage."

She gave a weak smile, her eyes welling up.

"He still managed to fight for two months. He got to meet at least one of his grandkids, because my brother and his wife were expecting at the time... He held newborn Matt. I was only thirteen. And, because of that, today I religiously get preventative cancer screenings every year. I'm terrified of leaving Bash alone in the world."

"I completely understand," Ilya nodded in agreement. "I also do a battery of annual neurological exams to check for signs of early-onset dementia, even though medicine says early-onset only appears after thirty. I am fully aware of the shit I do to my body," he held up the cigarette as proof. "But I am also extremely attentive to any signs of depression. That was exactly why my best friend got me Anya. I was spending too much time locked up, alone and in the dark."

"Animals are essential to help hold our emotional state together. They saved my life too," Nora shook her head, the heavy mood beginning to give way. "Bash, for example, is going to inherit a turtle my aunt gave me when I was fourteen. Mrs. Green-Lime is living the absolute peak of her childhood, at twelve years old."

Ilya let out a nasal laugh, and soon the two were laughing together on the sidewalk, the ridiculous name of the turtle breaking the melancholy and bringing them both back to the safety of the present just before the school bell rang.

"But, look... not wanting to be that person who abuses the privilege of hanging out with the inner circle of famous people, but..." Nora took a breath, changing the route of the conversation straight to the topic that had been dominating Twitter, TikTok, and the headlines for the past week. "What the hell happened with Rose and Shane? How does the 'It' couple break up a week after Valentine's Day?"

"I plead the Fifth," Ilya answered immediately, pressing his lips together and making the theatrical gesture of zipping an invisible zipper over his mouth.

Nora burst into loud laughter. Being a California native, she caught the reference to the American law on the right to remain silent right away.

"Oh, come on! Just give me one detail."

Ilya let out a contained laugh through his nose.

"Look, I think there is only one thing I can tell you to correct the official gossip: they didn't break up a week after Valentine's Day."

"No way. When was it?"

"The day after."

Nora's jaw dropped comically, which drew a deep laugh from the Russian.

"My God! Nobody cheated on anybody, right?" the curly-haired woman whispered, leaning closer to him. "Look, I suspect even my own shadow when it comes to professional athletes, but Shane gives off such a different energy. He seems like a genuinely kind guy."

"No, nobody cheated on anybody," the Russian assured her, taking another drag of his cigarette, amused by her shock. "Things just weren't working out between them day-to-day. A lot of what the PR team posted in that official statement on Twitter is the pure truth. The distance from the West Coast to here and the time zone difference are too much of a hurdle for any relationship."

"I get it. And how did Liam react to this whole breakup?"

"Liam didn't like Rose," Ilya was lethally honest, before shaking his head with fake dismay. "But I, obviously, had to lie to her face and guarantee that he liked her a lot... exactly at the moment she came to me in the parking lot to tell me she had broken up with him."

Nora let out an incredulous and slightly shocked laugh, covering her mouth with her hand immediately.

"You are very mean, Rozanov."

"Very," he agreed without a drop of remorse, his eyes shining with mischief.

The shrill sound of the school bell cut through the air on the sidewalk, interrupting the interrogation. The square, previously quiet, began to buzz with the movement of other parents gathering. Ilya and Nora took their last drag, put out their butts in the trash can's ashtray, and crossed the street side-by-side, instantly switching back to "nanny and mom" mode as they waited for the boys to come through the main gate.

While waiting for the flow of children to start coming out of the main gate, the Russian felt his phone buzz in his jacket pocket. Unlocking the screen, he saw it was a notification from his supervisor at the agency.

[Direct Message]

Henrietta Lameire – Supervision: Good morning, Ilya. Today you officially complete six months of your contract with the Hollander family. I just took a look at the weekly reports you fill out about Liam. Our psychological wing and I believe it is the ideal time to pass this feedback on to Mr. Hollander. As you well know, we have excellent child psychologists at the agency and we can help with whatever is necessary to better accommodate little Liam's needs. Do you prefer to handle this alone or do you want me to contact Mr. Hollander myself about the psychological evaluation?

Ilya Rozanov: Has the board already formulated a structured initial report? Shane likes to read paperwork.

Henrietta Lameire – Supervision: It will be ready shortly. I'll send it to you around two in the afternoon.

Ilya Rozanov: You can send it to me then, Hen. I'll talk to Shane about Liam myself.

Henrietta Lameire – Supervision: Will do. I'll attach the report along with the contact info for the psychologists you asked me for a while back.

Ilya put his phone back in his pocket at the exact moment he spotted Liam walking out of the main building next to Bash. But any trace of a smile that might have appeared on the Russian's face evaporated instantly.

The first thing his eyes caught was a thick, white bandage wrapped around Liam's arm.

The boy was walking with his head down, closely accompanied by a nervous-looking teacher.

"Oh, Nora!" the woman addressed Bash's mother first, seeming relieved. "Has Liam's dad not arrived yet? There was an..."

It was then that Liam looked up. As soon as the boy's eyes met Ilya's massive figure, they overflowed. The tears fell heavily and the boy broke into a desperate run toward the blond.

"Ilya...!"

"Hey, hey, hey..." the Russian crouched down on reflex, catching the boy in his arms at the exact moment he collapsed into sobbing tears.

Nora blinked, completely confused and alarmed, squeezing Bash's hand.

"What happened to him?" the curly-haired woman demanded to know.

"Just now, during the last class, the kids were going from the regular classroom to the art studio," the teacher began to explain, gesturing anxiously. "A group of older students ended up bumping into and knocking over a glass test tube in the hallway. Liam slipped from the scare and ended up cutting his arm on the shards. It wasn't deep, but the amount of blood really scared him. And... excuse me, what is your relationship with Mr. Hollander?"

Ilya ignored the question for a second, adjusting Liam in his arms and wrapping the boy in a hug of pure protection against his own chest.

"I am Liam's caregiver. I work for Shane," he finally replied, his deep voice taking on a defensive, cutting edge. "And why didn't you call Shane as soon as this happened? Or me? Both of our numbers are at the top of his emergency contact list for a reason! The fact that it

didn't need stitches doesn't mean leaving an eight-year-old child bleeding, terrified with a shard of glass stuck in his arm, is acceptable!"

While Ilya's cold fury began to spill over, the school's vice principal rushed up from behind the other students and parents, drawn by the evident tension of the scene.

"Mr. Hollander, please, I understand that..."

"Rozanov," the blond corrected him with a lethality that made the man swallow hard.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! What the fuck is going on?" a loud, familiar voice echoed from the other side of the sidewalk. Ilya turned his head and saw Hayden approaching with long strides, the twins right behind him. The player scowled when he saw the scene. "Ilya, why is my godson crying like that?"

"Because the school thought it was a good idea to let him bleed and cry alone in the nurse's office instead of calling Shane or me," Ilya answered, his large hand stroking the boy's dark hair, who kept his face hidden in the curve of the Russian's neck. He shot a death glare at the vice principal. "Was your hand going to fall off if you picked up the phone?"

"Mr. Rozanov, Mr. Pike," the vice principal held up his hands, trying to do damage control. "I completely understand that you are upset, but Liam wasn't the only child who got hurt in the hallway, and we..."

"UPSET MY ASS!" Hayden completely exploded, his athlete's voice echoing across the square. "We aren't 'upset'. If there were more kids hurt and you didn't do a fucking thing to notify the families, you're just a bunch of soulless, fucking incompetents! I don't care if it was five minutes to dismissal time, you have the fucking legal obligation to inform parents if our kids get in an accident in there! What if the kid needed stitches? Huh?! What were you going to do? Cross your arms and wait for dismissal time to dump him hurt on the sidewalk?!"

"You can be absolutely certain that his father is going to be informed about every detail of this negligence," Ilya warned. His voice was dangerously calm, which made it a thousand times scarier than Hayden's yelling. "And the same lawyers who worked on his custody case will be too."

"It was just an accident! Accidents happen, gentlemen!" the principal tried to defend himself, breaking into a cold sweat.

"Yes. A child dropping glass and Liam slipping was an accident," Ilya finally lost his patience, his tone of voice snapping up in fury. "But you being a shitty incompetent at your job and choosing not to pick up the fucking phone to notify us, was a CHOICE! Good day, Mr. Mason."

With his blood boiling in his veins, Ilya turned his back and marched off, carrying Liam in his arms as if he weighed nothing. Hayden grabbed the twins' hands and accompanied the Russian, forming a protective barrier. Nora and Bash followed right behind.

"Man, what kind of fucked-up administration is that?" the Metros' winger cursed, in disbelief, as they walked away from the gate. "Do you want me to call Shane right now?"

"No. I'll call him when we get to the car," Ilya softly denied, his breathing still heavy. He stopped walking and focused all his attention on the boy in his arms. "Hey, Akula... look at me. It's all okay now, it's over, okay? Scrapes happen."

Liam pulled his face away from Ilya's neck. His little brown eyes were red and swollen, and his lips trembled.

"I-I... you... you n-never yell."

Ilya's heart tightened. He swallowed hard, using his thumb to wipe the hot tears from the boy's face with extreme gentleness.

"I'm sorry for yelling and scaring you, okay? I really don't like yelling," the Russian whispered, the fury vanishing to make room only for affection. "But finding out that they left you hurt and alone in there made me very, very angry. But I was angry at them, Li. Not at you. I would never be angry at you."

"Don't be sad, Li," Jade, one of Hayden's twins, let go of her dad's hand and gave Liam's leg a soft squeeze. "I know getting hurt hurts a lot. But you told me to be strong and not cry when I twisted my ankle on the playground that day, remember?"

Liam sniffled and nodded slowly, still sulking. Jade gave a sweet little smile, immediately joined by her sister, Ruby.

"If you need anything, anything at all, let me know, Ilya," Hayden said in a deadly serious tone. Then, he ruffled Liam's hair and left a loud kiss on the top of the boy's head. "It's going to be okay, buddy. Your Russian papa bear already saved you here, and the other Canadian papa bear is going to be here very, very soon to wipe the floor with them."

Liam let out a weak, choked laugh, lightly shoving Hayden's shoulder in play.

"See you around," the player said goodbye, grabbing his daughters' hands and heading to his own car.

Liam waved weakly to Nora and Bash, hiding his face in the nanny's neck once again. Ilya held him firmly and carried him to the Jeep, ensuring the rest of the world couldn't touch him.

Ilya's first order of business, as soon as he settled Liam safely in the backseat of the Jeep, was to open the glove compartment. He retrieved a milk chocolate bar he kept stashed there as an emergency trump card, handing it into the boy's trembling hands. Liam sniffled, wiped his face with the back of his good hand, unwrapped the foil, and began taking timid bites of the candy.

With the boy minimally distracted and safe, the Russian closed the back door, leaned against the cold metal of the car, and dialed Shane's number.

On the third ring, the captain answered, his voice sounding light and cheerful:

"Hey! Are you guys on your way home? I was just about to..."

"Liam got hurt at school today," Ilya cut him off, without beating around the bush, his tone of voice taking on a surgical seriousness.

There was a second of absolute silence on the other end of the line, followed by the hollow, cracking sound of some plastic container dropping and bouncing on the penthouse floor.

"What happened to my son, Ilya?!" Shane's voice went up two octaves, desperation and paternal instinct overflowing with every syllable.

"He cut his arm on a shard of glass," the Russian explained, keeping his voice perfectly level so as not to feed the other man's panic. "The school put a bandage on it and assured me it wasn't deep. I'll explain the details of their incompetence to you in person, but I don't trust the diagnosis of an idiotic vice principal and I want a real doctor looking at this. It's better if you meet us straight at the hospital."

Shane's breathing immediately became ragged on the other end of the line. Panic began to swallow the captain's reasoning.

"Ilya, Liam is terrified of hospitals. He doesn't like needles, he panics, he..."

"Breathe, Shane," Ilya ordered, his deep voice serving as a heavy anchor in the middle of the Canadian's mental storm. "I'll be with him the whole time. No one is going to come near him with a needle unless it's absolutely necessary. Meet us at the hospital. It's going to be okay."

Shane let out a shaky breath and agreed before ending the call.

Ilya put his phone in his jacket pocket, walked around the vehicle, and got into the driver's seat. He started the Jeep's engine and adjusted the rearview mirror, finding the boy's brown and still reddish little eyes in the reflection.

"We're going to make a quick stop at the hospital now, Akula, okay?" Ilya announced, shifting into gear. "Just so a real doctor can take a look at that arm and put a much better bandage on it than that one."

Liam chewed the piece of chocolate very slowly. He looked at his own bandaged arm and, trusting blindly in the adult in front of him, just nodded.

"Okay..."

[...]

At the hospital, the white lighting and the strong smell of antiseptic seemed to amplify the tension in the small exam room. After carefully cleaning and sterilizing the cut on Liam's

arm, the pediatrician pressed her lips together and looked up at Ilya, who was standing next to the exam table, motionless as a protective gargoyle since the second they walked in.

"Unfortunately, we are going to need to give him stitches," the doctor announced, already bracing herself to deal with the inevitable childish reaction. "It's not a very deep cut, but it's the safest alternative to prevent infection. The healing process will be very quick."

"No! I don't want to get stitches!" Liam panicked instantly, shrinking back on the exam table and trying to retreat, his eyes wide with terror.

"Hey, hey. It's okay, Akula," Ilya intervened quickly, holding the boy's shoulders with a careful firmness so as not to pull on the wound. "It's the best thing to do so you can get better soon, Liam."

"I'm really scared of needles! I hate needles!" the boy broke down crying again, his good hand grabbing the fabric of the Russian's jacket in desperation. "I'm scared..."

"*Yes. It is scary,*" Ilya agreed, without trying to invalidate the child's feeling. He leaned in, holding Liam's wet little face between his two massive hands. With his thumbs, he wiped away the tears that rolled down the boy's freckles, locking his gaze on the boy's brown eyes. "*But you are brave.*"

"Ilya?! Liam?!"

The frantic voice cut through the air. In the doorway of the exam room, Shane appeared panting, his face pale and in a cold sweat, as if he had run a marathon to the hospital. Hearing his dad's voice, Liam hurriedly wiped his tears with the back of his hand.

"Oh, God... Liam, I'm here. Daddy's here."

Shane rushed to the other side of the exam table.

"He's going to have to get stitches," Ilya updated him immediately.

Judging by the way Shane's shoulders shook and the color drained from his face, it looked like he was the patient about to be sewn up without anesthesia.

"Is there no way to just do a really tight bandage?" the captain begged, turning to the doctor with wide brown eyes.

"As I just explained to your husband, it is standard procedure to prevent infections," the doctor explained with unshakable, professional calm. "The wound could keep opening with movement, or he could accidentally scrape the scab while playing. The healing will be infinitely better this way."

Fuck.

Shane pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers. His brain short-circuited. He was overstimulated. His son was hurt and crying, the doctor had just assumed in no uncertain terms that Ilya was his husband and Liam's other father, the boy made no attempt to correct

the misunderstanding, and, to make the chaos worse, Shane's mind cruelly reminded him of what he had been doing exactly sixty minutes ago in his own bed.

The entire situation was too much for him to process. He focused on what mattered: Liam.

"You're going to have to get the stitches, buddy," Shane murmured, holding his son's free hand. "I'm sorry."

Liam took a trembling breath.

"I'm scared..." the boy confessed, looking at the doctor.

"I know, honey. But, like your dad over there said," the doctor smiled sweetly, pointing her chin at Ilya, "it is scary, but you are brave. You're just going to feel a quick little pinch, which is the anesthesia so you don't feel absolutely anything else from the other needles. It's going to be exactly like an ant bite. Can you be brave enough to face an ant?"

"Uh-huh," Liam nodded, his little voice thick with emotion. The doctor gave an approving smile, standing up to sanitize her hands and open the metal suturing kit.

When she approached holding the syringe with the anesthesia needle, the blood drained from Shane's face in a much more dramatic way than it did from Liam's.

"Did you know that extreme fear of needles is passed from father to son in about eighty percent of documented cases?" the doctor commented casually, looking directly at Shane's paleness.

The player blinked, stunned and defensive.

"When they're poking a child of yours, we can sit down and talk about genetics, Doctor," he shot back, his voice thick with anxiety.

"Shane. It's just a needle. Breathe," Ilya warned softly, taking control of the room's atmosphere.

The dynamic established itself naturally: Shane held the boy's hand firmly on one side of the exam table, and the Russian settled the boy on the other. While the doctor precisely aimed the needle at the area to be sutured, Liam squeezed his eyes shut tight. He crushed Shane's hand and hid his face in the crook of Ilya's arm, letting out a sharp whine when the needle pierced his skin, and a trembling sigh when it came out a second later.

"All done! The worst part is over. Now you won't feel anything else," the doctor assured him, discarding the syringe in the yellow sharps container. "You can lay him down on the table, please. It's easier for me to work."

"Okay. Come here, Li," Shane helped his son lie down comfortably. Ilya took off his own jacket in a swift motion, folded the fabric, and placed it delicately under Liam's head like a makeshift pillow, while the doctor set up a lateral support for his little arm.

With the boy temporarily stabilized by the anesthesia, Shane finally let the anger overtake his panic.

"What the fuck happened, Ilya?!"

"They broke some glass in the school hallway and Liam slipped from the scare," the blond reported, his tone of voice icy and contained. "The problem is that no one thought it necessary to call either me or you. And if it was, in fact, during the last class, I was literally sitting in the square out front chatting with Nora for almost half an hour. The vice principal came at me with a bunch of rehearsed excuses at the gate. Hayden arrived to pick up his girls right on time and cussed the guy out too."

"I never liked that shitty vice principal," Shane ran both hands through his hair, distraught. He leaned over his son. "What time did you get hurt, sweetie, huh? Tell Daddy."

"Right at class change..." Liam sniffled, his voice a little groggy, still squeezing Shane's hand.

"They had all that time to call..." The Metros' captain clenched his jaw, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the rail of the exam table. The protective instinct bubbling up lethally inside him. "Did any other child get hurt?"

"A girl cut her hand," Liam answered quietly. "They took her to the nurse's office with me too."

"They picked the worst family in the world to neglect..." Shane murmured more to himself than to the others, a massive hatred shining in his brown eyes. He looked up at Ilya. "I'm going to text my agent's entire team of lawyers as soon as we step foot in the house. I'm going to end that old son of a bitch's career..."

"Generally, school administrators who have never had children can't comprehend the magnitude of our panic when something bad happens to them," the doctor commented, surprisingly sympathetic, as she threaded the surgical line through the eye of the curved suture needle. She felt the area around the cut with her gloved fingertips. "Can you feel me touching you here, buddy?"

"No..." Liam replied, confused, looking at his own arm.

She laughed softly.

"That's the ideal. You don't have to look if you don't want to, okay? But I'm going to start sewing now."

Instantly, Liam turned his face the opposite way, burying his cheek into Ilya's jacket and squeezing Shane's hand until his bones popped.

Ilya smoothed the boy's dark hair with a gentleness that contrasted with his size, and locked his cold blue eyes on the wound, staring fixedly and unblinking at every movement the doctor made with the needle and thread through the child's skin. Shane, on the other hand,

with his eyes squeezed tightly shut, couldn't summon the courage to look for even a second, focusing entirely on stroking his son's hand until the nightmare was over.

Chapter 16: Family

Chapter Notes

family is familying guys, be ready

and also, idiots not knowing they're in love warning

After an exhausting two hours on the phone pacing back and forth on the balcony, Shane finally ended the call and went inside.

The scene in the living room was one of post-storm calm. Liam was fast asleep on the couch, wrapped up like a cocoon in his favorite blanket after being bribed with a generous bowl of vanilla ice cream with strawberry syrup. In the kitchen, Ilya was emptying the boy's lunchbox, washing the dirty containers with mechanical movements. The Russian had already put Liam's school shirt in a bucket in the laundry area with strong products to get the bloodstains out of the sleeve and hem.

"My mom is going to take care of absolutely everything," Shane announced, his voice hoarse, dropping his phone onto the marble island. "I can feel my brain tingling from exhaustion."

The Canadian pulled up one of the tall stools and sat down. Instantly, he made an involuntary grimace, clenching his jaw and shifting his body weight entirely to his left side.

Ilya, drying his hands on a dish towel, watched the movement. He wished he hadn't noticed that exact same difficulty on the way back from the hospital, when Shane settled into the passenger seat of the Jeep stiffly and carefully. But Ilya swallowed the question and didn't mention the subject. Not now.

"Even I have a headache today," the Russian agreed diplomatically, sparing his boss's dignity. "And what is Yuna going to do?"

"Destroy that vice principal's life and career, for starters," Shane pointed out, rubbing his temples. "When I was Liam's exact age, my mom made life hell for a kid on my team until he left the school, just because he played badly and got in my way. In high school, she terrorized one of my coaches until the guy quit and moved out of Ottawa. She knows exactly where to hit to make it hurt."

"Wow..." Ilya let out a low laugh. "I hope I never anger Yuna in my life."

Just then, the Russian's phone, also resting on the island, buzzed with the notification of Henrietta's email containing the PDF file.

"Need to answer that?" Shane pointed his chin at the device.

"It's my boss," Ilya shrugged, picking up the phone.

Shane frowned, confused.

"I thought I was your boss."

"My supervisor from the agency," the blond corrected him. "It's been exactly six official months that I've been working for you. When this milestone hits, the agency compiles a dossier with all the weekly reports I make about the family. If necessary, they schedule a meeting for the well-being of the child."

"Wait. You make reports... about us?" Shane raised his eyebrows. Ilya nodded. "I mean, that actually makes sense. It's just that... wow, it's weird to think you have other professional obligations to a company, besides just taking care of Liam or hanging around here chatting with us."

Ilya locked his phone screen and fixed his analytical blue eyes on Shane's face.

"Can I stress you out just a tiny bit more with this subject today, or are you at your limit?"

The Canadian swallowed hard. The Russian's tone of voice put him on alert. He tried to settle better on the stool, ignoring the discomfort radiating from the base of his spine.

"Hit me."

"That report is from the agency's psychological wing. About Liam."

Shane nodded slowly, intertwining his fingers on the cold marble.

"Yeah. I remember you mentioned weeks ago that you were going to ask for some recommendations for some nice therapists for him."

"Shane, listen. I obviously don't have a degree in psychology. But that doesn't mean I don't have trained eyes. I spend all day with him and I receive continuous training from the agency to identify patterns in childhood behavior," Ilya began, measuring his words carefully.

"Ilya, just say it. I trust what you say more than anyone else."

The Russian let out a sigh, unlocked his phone, and opened the PDF. The medical board's recommendations at the end of the document were exactly what he had suspected since his first month on the job.

"Shane, I am almost absolutely certain that Liam falls on the autism spectrum."

Ilya rested both hands flat on the counter. He saw a thousand and one emotions collide and reflect in Shane's big brown eyes—eyes that looked more like a startled deer's when he was in a safe, disarmed environment, like there in the presence of the nanny.

"It's not like Bash's case," Ilya continued, his voice soft so as not to scare the father. "But he is still on the spectrum. And the agency's wing of psychologists read my reports and fully

agreed with me."

He slid the phone across the marble. Shane picked up the device. He strained his eyes, zooming in on the screen, the fine print of the medical report blurring together. The captain blinked hard, frustrated.

"Hold on. Just a second."

Shane hopped off the stool, his socked feet sliding across the hardwood floor, and disappeared upstairs toward his own bedroom. He returned exactly ten seconds later. His face adorned by a pair of dark-rimmed prescription glasses.

Ilya blinked, incredulous, his lips parting slightly.

"*You wear glasses?*" the blond murmured, the image of the austere NHL captain in reading glasses causing a momentary short-circuit in his brain.

"*Just for reading,*" Shane waved his hand in the air, impatient.

He grabbed the phone back, leaned against the marble, and dove into reading the agency's considerations. Silence reigned in the kitchen for the next ten minutes.

In the meantime, Ilya finished drying the dishes, put everything away in the cupboards, and started prepping Liam's lunchbox for the next day, making the boy's favorite sandwich. When he was cutting the crusts off the bread, Shane finally looked up. His expression was a mix of confusion and defensiveness.

"Ilya... I do the exact same things they pointed out as 'symptoms' in Liam here. What's the problem with that?"

The Russian stopped the knife. He looked at Shane only out of the corner of his eyes, his expression perfectly unreadable.

"What is two plus two, Shane?"

The Canadian froze. Indignation started creeping up his neck.

"Are you insinuating that I'm on the autism spectrum?!" he pointed at his own chest.

"Shane, I work with kids," Ilya turned to face him, crossing his arms. "But in many, many cases indeed, autism and ADHD are genetic factors. When the child is diagnosed, one of the parents usually discovers they've spent their entire life masking the exact same symptoms."

"That's bullshit. I do all these things and I'm normal. My mom does these things, my grandpa does the same..."

Shane's voice gradually died out. The words hung in the air. The undeniable logic crushed his defensiveness. The entire lineage of obsessive behaviors, social difficulties, and hypersensitivities of the Hollander family flashed like a movie in his mind.

"Oh..." Shane let his breath out slowly, taking his glasses off his face and leaving them on the island next to the phone. "Okay. I get your point."

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with that, okay? With any of you," Ilya assured him, his tone comforting. He put the sandwich in the airtight container and snapped it shut. "Liam is going to start seeing specialized therapists, the best ones we can manage to pick. And you yourself can bring this subject and your behavioral patterns to Dr. Park in your next session. I guarantee she'll find it very interesting. And, for whatever you guys need... I can help. That's what I'm here for."

Shane took a deep breath. The weight of that day finally crashing down on his shoulders all at once.

"Thank you for putting your foot down and taking him to the hospital today," the captain murmured, his voice low and vulnerable.

"It's my job, Shane."

"No. Not entirely," Shane shook his head, leaning back against the fridge and looking at Ilya with overflowing gratitude. "You did that because you care about him. On the balcony, while I was on the phone with my mom, I got some texts from Hayden too. He told me what happened at the gate. He said you didn't let go of Liam for a single moment, and that you went head-to-head with the vice principal to protect my son."

Shane's eyes shone with a rare intensity under the kitchen light.

"It has been infinitely easier raising him having you here to help me."

Ilya held his gaze, a smirk slowly blooming on his lips, warming the usual coldness of his features.

"Six months are already down. Can I interpret this whole conversation as the official promise of six more months to come?"

Shane returned the smile, the exhaustion of the day finally giving him a break.

"I am not going to let you escape from us that easily, Rozanov."

[...]

The string of away games—Colorado, Calgary, and Edmonton—had been brutal on Shane's muscles, but the home front in Montreal was more than secured. His parents, David and Yuna, had come to take care of Liam. And, as was law on the team's road trips, Ilya stopped by the penthouse every night to put the boy to bed.

The Russian didn't stop there: he made absolutely sure to accompany Liam to his first appointment with the child therapist, the day before Shane returned, and also took him to the hospital to get his stitches removed. The result? Liam now proudly showed off his new scar, bragging to anyone who would listen that it looked exactly like a fishbone.

In parallel, Shane had brought up the autism spectrum issue with Dr. Park, still over the phone from his hotel. Heather didn't show the slightest surprise. She agreed with Ilya instantly, explaining that it was incredibly common for adults to only discover their own neurodivergences and behavioral patterns after their children were diagnosed. Shane's brain was still processing the weight of that relief.

On Monday night, taking advantage of International Women's Day, the Hollander quartet was walking through a vibrant night market in downtown Montreal. Yuna walked imposingly under the city lights, showing off the new pair of earrings Shane had given her, the ring hand-picked by Liam, and the elegant silk scarf gifted by David.

"That dirty bodycheck from that damn..."

"Yuna!" David scolded her immediately, cutting the curse word off in the air.

Liam let out a giggle, and the older woman covered her mouth with her hand, without an ounce of regret in her eyes.

"That mediocre Calgary Glaciers defenseman should have gotten at least a minor penalty for that!" she continued her heated complaint about the previous night's game.

Shane laughed, shaking his head at his mother's protective indignation.

"Ilya agreed with me completely, you know? He stayed at the house to watch the game with us last night," Yuna pointed out, victorious.

"Of course he agreed, Mom. You two love a conspiracy," Shane laughed softly, before shifting the weight of the subject. "But, seriously... you did it again, didn't you? I heard Vice Principal Mason quit and moved out of Montreal that same week because of you."

"Nobody messes with my grandson and lives to tell the tale in the same city. And that school got very lucky, because that son of a b—"

"Yuna." David cut in again, his tone sterner, and she bit her tongue hard to keep from unleashing the adjectives she had reserved for the family's enemies. "Jesus Christ. We're going to have to institute a real swear jar in this family."

"Grandma and Dad are going to fill the jar up real fast!" Liam accused, giggling, drawing a genuine laugh from his grandfather. "And then we can use all the money to go to the shark aquarium. Everyone together! Ilya told me he's never seen an eagle ray up close, or a manta ray. We have to take him."

"Oh, is Ilya coming along on the family trip too?" David played along with his grandson, with an amused smile, shooting a sideways glance at Shane.

"Yes! The doctor who sewed up my arm at the hospital thought he was Dad's husband."

Shane tripped violently over his own foot. He had to take a wide, clumsy step, flailing his arms so he wouldn't faceplant on the cobblestone ground of the market.

"Excuse me?!" the captain stammered, his neck and ears heating up instantly. He looked at the boy, his blue eyes wide with pure panic. "What do you mean? I don't remember hearing that, Li."

"She did so. She thought you guys were married or boyfriends. And she told me Ilya was my dad too. I remember perfectly," Liam confirmed, shrugging and looking nonchalantly at the illuminated candy stalls. "You didn't hear it because you were shaking from nervousness about the needles and weren't paying attention to anything."

"Are you still afraid of needles, Shane?" David arched his graying eyebrows at his son, a teasing smile shaping his lips.

"I wasn't scared for myself. And, for the record, you cried when I had to get my booster shot when I was ten," Shane fired back immediately, crossing his arms over his broad chest to keep his defensive posture intact.

Yuna let out a loud laugh. Her dark, almond-shaped eyes turned into two happy half-moons.

"God in heaven, you two are hopeless," she shook her head, holding her slender hand out to her grandson. "Come on, Li. Let's leave these two arguing and hunt down something real to eat at those stalls."

Liam let go of his dad's hand without hesitation and followed his grandmother toward the bright signs of the food stalls, disappearing into the festival crowd.

Shane and David stayed behind, the noise of the night market serving as a backdrop. The Metro's captain ran his hand through his thick, dark hair, frowning, still frozen in time and trying to process the exact moment in the hospital when someone explicitly insinuated that his son's Russian nanny was, in fact, his husband.

"Everything okay over there, son? You look like you saw a ghost," David nudged Shane's shoulder with his own, snapping him out of his trance. The older man took on a softer tone. "How are things after Rose, huh? Everything okay in there?"

He lightly ruffled his son's hair, a gesture of paternal affection that Shane accepted with a half-smile.

"I've been doing video calls with Dr. Park twice a week. I think that answers the question," Shane laughed through his nose, his tone relaxed but vulnerable.

The two walked over to a large, illuminated stone fountain in the center of the square and sat on the edge, watching the hustle and bustle of the night market. Shane observed his own hands for a moment, the warm-toned skin contrasting with the cold of the Montreal night.

"What kind of son was I, Dad?" he blurted out suddenly.

David intertwined his fingers, resting his elbows on his knees, and turned his face to look at his son with curiosity.

"What do you mean?"

"Was I a lot of trouble? Was I a quiet kid? Those things."

"Ah," David let out a soft, nostalgic little laugh, looking at the ground for a second. "You never gave me or your mother an ounce of trouble, Shane. And that was exactly what terrified us."

Shane frowned, surprised. He saw his dad press his lips together, choosing his words carefully to explain.

"You were a completely outlier teenager. You didn't sneak out to parties in the middle of the night, like I did with your grandparents. You never drank secretly in the basement, never did drugs. Your one and only simple rebellion was when you started dating Jessica and, every now and then, came home late, walking in your socks down the hall so you wouldn't make noise." David shrugged, listing things on his fingers. "What made our hair stand on end was that you had no social life. Hockey was your life, and Jessica was your only friend."

Shane absorbed the words. They aligned perfectly with his psychologist's theory.

"My therapist thinks I'm going through a late discovery phase," Shane murmured, looking out at the crowd. "Because, at eighteen, when I should have been discovering the world, I was in a courtroom and learning to change diapers in the middle of the night."

David raised his eyebrows, nodding in silent agreement with the doctor.

"You aren't doing drugs now, are you?" the older man questioned with a start, narrowing his eyes.

Shane's eyes went wide with shock, which made his dad burst into loud laughter.

"Kidding! I know you aren't." David patted his son's knee. "But tell me... what kind of discoveries have you been making, then?"

The kind you definitely can't tell your parents about in a public square, Shane thought, his face heating up just remembering the Amazon boxes hidden in the back of his closet.

"Just about what I like to do, besides hockey," Shane shrugged, clinging to a safe half-truth. "Improved my yoga routine, started meditating again... those things."

"And in the love department?"

"I just broke up with Rose, Dad," Shane laughed, shaking his head.

David joined in his laughter. But, in that exact same second, a third laugh, deep and unmistakable, cut through the noise of the crowd.

Shane's internal radar pinged. He looked up and, a few meters away, recognized the owner of the laugh.

Ilya was walking away from an artisanal popcorn stand. And he wasn't alone. Next to him was Svetlana, the gorgeous fitness influencer. The mix of her African-American and Russian heritage gave her a stunning beauty—her voluminous hair bounced as she laughed at something Ilya had said. She was holding a bag of sweet popcorn visibly larger than his, while the Russian carried her designer bag on his shoulder, walking arm-in-arm with the girl in an incredibly intimate way.

They were talking animatedly. They walked through the night market exuding the chemistry and harmony of any other... couple? No, a couple of friends. It had to be.

"Look at that, isn't that Ilya over there?" David recognized the blond over the heads of the crowd, squinted, and sat up straighter. "Uhm... and who is the spectacular young woman with him?"

"Svetlana," Shane replied with an immediate, sharp reflex, his eyes glued to Ilya's hand linked through her arm. "She's his best friend."

"Ah, yes! I remember her now," David commented, his eyes crinkling at the corners in a mild, affectionate smile. "Your mother is absolutely right, Ilya is a good young man. He's carrying the girl's bag, probably insisted on paying for the popcorn..."

"It's Women's Day, Dad," Shane shrugged, forcing an indifferent tone to try and hide the weird, almost acidic discomfort that crept up his stomach and tightened his chest. In the distance, he watched Ilya and the redhead sit down at one of the bistro tables, their heads close together as they talked rapidly, intimately, and fluidly in Russian.

David let the subject of Svetlana drop, but not his main train of thought.

"You really don't remember the doctor calling you two 'husbands' at the hospital?"

Shane slowly shook his head, his dark hair falling over his furrowed brow.

"Well, it's not surprising," the older man pondered, adjusting his coat collar. "Many female nannies get mistaken for the kids' moms all the time. And, thank God, with the world becoming a slightly more tolerant place, the image of a couple made up of two guys raising a kid is already something perfectly normal."

David spoke with a paternal calm so unshakable and progressive that it was enough to give Shane goosebumps from the back of his neck to the soles of his feet.

"Actually..." David continued, his tone casual. "There was a good period during your adolescence when your mother and I seriously considered the possibility that you were gay."

Shane's neck cracked with the force and speed with which he snapped his head to look at his dad. The captain's almond-shaped eyes, normally reserved, were now bugging out in pure shock.

David just shrugged, perfectly unconcerned with his son's internal collapse.

"You never went out with girls, you didn't bring girls home. What did you want us to think?"

"That I was shy?! Which I was, and still am?!" Shane shot back, his voice cracking up an octave, his defenses activated to the max.

"ILYA!"

The shrill, childish scream cut through the hum of the crowd, saving Shane from having to explain himself further. Both men turned their heads toward a brightly lit candy stall.

Liam, who had just gotten his cotton candy, recognized the giant blond at the tables and shot toward him like a missile. Ilya noticed the movement in time. He quickly pushed his own chair back, stood up with the agility of a feline, and caught the boy mid-air, absorbing the impact of Liam's jump easily.

"Hey! Big guy!" The Russian returned the greeting with the same intensity of excitement, but his tone soon shifted to that of a responsible adult, settling the boy on his hip. "Liam, don't run from your grandma in the middle of a crowd like that, you could get hurt or get lost."

The Russian's blue eyes quickly swept over the people and focused on Yuna's figure, making sure she wasn't too far away.

"We definitely should invest in a leash for him," the Japanese woman approached seconds later, not out of breath. Yuna's natural elegance stood out even in heavy winter clothes, while she held an immense blue cotton candy sculpted in the shape of a shark. She stopped next to the table and offered a polite, gentle smile. "Hi, Svetlana."

"Hi, Mrs. Hollander!" The influencer stood up immediately. The dazzling mix of her Afro and Slavic features shone under the yellow lights of the market. She gave the older woman a quick, warm hug. "Happy Girls' Day!"

The two laughed together, sharing an easy, friendly harmony.

"To you too, dear," Yuna returned with a knowing wink. "Come on, Li. Get down. Let's let Ilya enjoy his night off with Sveta. Your grandpa and your dad are waiting for us."

Liam pouted, but slid to the ground. Before backing away, however, the boy looked at the blond, his almond-shaped eyes overflowing with hope.

"You're still coming to our house tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, I am," Ilya confirmed, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "But I'm going to need to leave a little earlier than usual. I have an appointment in the evening."

"But you're still going to spend the whole afternoon with me and Dad, right?"

"Obviously, Akula."

Satisfied, the boy nodded. Ilya looked up over the small commotion of people and located exactly where Shane and David were sitting on the edge of the fountain. The Russian raised his hand in a restrained wave, his face expressing a silent, heavy familiarity.

For some reason that Shane's science and shame would never be able to explain, the captain felt a sudden, dizzying flutter in his stomach as he raised his own hand to wave back.

"Do svidaniya, Liamshka," Svetlana waved sweetly, using the affectionate Russian diminutive for the boy.

"Bye, Sveta!" Liam waved back, smiling and taking his grandmother's hand to march back to the fountain, where his understanding grandfather and his father, who was still processing a mini cardiac panic, awaited them.

[...]

Since Ilya had said he would leave the penthouse early, Liam's soccer practice that Tuesday afternoon marked his final duty of the shift. As soon as the Russian and the boy walked through the front door, they found Shane coming down the stairs. The captain was also sweaty, wearing workout clothes that clung to his body, indicating he had just finished his own training session in the building's gym.

"Straight to the shower, you little dirtbag," Shane ordered, pointing upstairs as he evaluated the deplorable state of his son, who was covered in dirt, sweat, and grass from the field.

Liam let out a mischievous giggle and bolted upstairs, taking the steps two at a time in his childish haste.

"Liam!" Shane and Ilya reprimanded in perfect unison, their authoritative voices echoing through the living room.

The boy froze in the middle of the stairs and, rolling his eyes, started climbing the rest of the steps one by one, stomping his feet on purpose.

With a nod, the blond walked straight to the kitchen, opening the boy's backpack to wash the plastic containers from his lunchbox.

"If you want to leave those in the sink, I'll wash them myself later," Shane offered, walking over to the island and resting his arms on the marble. "You need to leave early today, don't you?"

"Yes, but it'll take me less than five minutes to wash this. My date is only at seven thirty," Ilya replied casually, turning on the faucet.

The exact millisecond the word "date" floated through the kitchen air, Shane's spine locked. His broad shoulders stiffened under his compression shirt.

"A date? You have a... date?" the captain stammered, his voice sounding a pitch higher than usual.

"Yeah," Ilya shrugged, squirting dish soap onto the sponge. "Date is a very strong and romantic word, I know, but it sounds a little more polite than saying I have a fuck scheduled for eight *o'clock*."

Shane couldn't define, with words from the human dictionary, the exact chemical reaction taking place inside his chest at that moment. Not even if he really wanted to. It was a toxic mix of morbid curiosity, shock, and a sharp, inexplicable, and pathetic pang of jealousy.

"Yeah... definitely," the Canadian forced a hoarse laugh, trying to maintain casualness while his brain short-circuited. "And are you going to, I don't know... take the person out before... you know? Or..."

Ilya stopped scrubbing the container. He turned his face to look at Shane, raising a perfectly drawn eyebrow.

"What kind of person do you think I am, Shane?" the Russian mocked, a smirk appearing on his lips. "We're going to the movies first, because he said he really wanted to see a movie premiering this week. I don't give a damn about the movie, to tell you the truth. But, as soon as the credits roll, we're going straight to my house and that's it."

He.

The word echoed in Shane's mind like a church bell. It was a guy. Not that if it were a woman the sentence would have sounded any better to the player's turning stomach. But... why the hell did Shane want anything about Ilya's romantic—and highly active—love life to sound good to his ears in the first place?

"Are you on Tinder or something?" Shane desperately tried to divert the focus from his own panic, but without letting go of the subject entirely.

"Yes and no. I have a terrible habit of remaking and deleting my accounts multiple times a month," the blond answered, going back to methodically rinsing the boy's containers. "Same thing on Hinge and Grindr. But I found this one on Grindr, which is great, because it makes it one hundred percent clear that it's just a one-night thing and nobody gets false expectations."

Shane let out a heavy sigh, crossing his arms. Astronomical fame in hockey had its cruel prices.

"I honestly don't know if I envy you or pity you for being able to use dating apps freely."

Ilya let out a genuine laugh, shaking the water from his hands before grabbing a dish towel.

"Don't envy me, Shane. Men are the exact same primates on any app. It doesn't matter if it's Tinder, Hinge, or Grindr... you match, say 'hi', and the first thing that pops up in the chat, even before a good morning, is an unsolicited dick pic."

Shane's brown eyes widened to comical proportions, his face losing some of its color at the brutal and graphic frankness of the statement.

Ilya just threw his head back, laughing lightly at the chaste, scandalized reaction of his multi-millionaire boss, as he put the dry lunchbox away in the cabinet.

"Still more or less on that topic... or maybe not," Ilya said, drying his hands on the dish towel, his back still to Shane. "What about you?"

"Me?" Shane swallowed hard.

The captain's mind gave a dangerous lurch. Shane's brain, in an unforgivable betrayal, decided that this was the exact moment to replay, in ultra-high definition, all the recent times he had masturbated himself breathless thinking about the body, the voice, and the back of that exact man in front of him.

The Canadian's ears instantly began to burn. A wave of relentless heat crept up his neck, making the back of his head burn as if he had a fever.

Ilya turned around slowly and raised an eyebrow, his blue eyes capturing the panic and instant redness on his boss's face.

"You blush very easily, you know that?" the Russian laughed, a low, dangerously amused sound. "I'm talking about your 'homework', Shane. The matter of discovering what gives you pleasure and whether you really like sex or not."

"I... uhm..." Shane stammered, his heart beating in his throat.

Good thing he had just finished a heavy workout at the gym. His compression shirt was already damp, which was his only salvation to mask the cold sweat of pure terror that started running down his back. He felt like a criminal about to confess to something heinous.

"I've been trying... a few things," he mumbled, averting his gaze to his own hand resting on the marble island.

"A few? Wow." Ilya leaned his hip against the sink counter and crossed his arms over his broad chest.

The simple, casual movement made the Russian's biceps flex under the fabric of his cotton t-shirt, a perfectly natural display of strength that Shane tried—and failed miserably—to ignore.

"And how has this exploration been?" the blond probed, his voice velvety.

"Interesting," Shane replied too quickly, in a defensive, squeaky tone.

Ilya tilted his head a millimeter to the side, his smirk widening until it became predatory.

"Interesting like... when Liam got hurt at school, we went to the hospital, and then you spent two whole days not being able to sit properly on the couch and limping around the house?"

Shane's eyes widened to inhuman proportions. The air vanished from his lungs. He stopped breathing.

Seeing the absolute terror and shock on the captain's face, Ilya couldn't hold it in. The Russian let out a loud, thunderous, genuine laugh, throwing his head back and needing to grab the edge of the counter so he wouldn't lose his balance. The sound filled the kitchen, vibrating against the walls of the penthouse.

"Is it six o'clock yet?!" Shane shot out in a tone of pure desperation, whipping his neck around so fast to look at the clock on the wall that he almost gave himself whiplash. It was five-forty. "Fuck, Ilya..."

"I don't believe it," Ilya tried to catch his breath, wiping an imaginary tear from the corner of his eye. "You really followed my advice to the letter. Seriously now, Shane... I am very glad you're finally discovering what you like."

The Russian spoke with genuine sincerity, but the smug and incredibly annoying smile didn't leave his face for a single second.

"I didn't do *that* much, alright? Go fuck yourself, Rozanov," Shane growled, his entire face on fire, pointing his finger threateningly but uselessly at the nanny.

The insult only served to draw another light laugh from the Russian. Ilya uncrossed his arms and stepped away from the counter, his blue eyes dropping from the clock on the wall back to the collapsing Canadian.

"Oh, I certainly intend to fuck," Ilya responded immediately, his teasing smile reaching maximum lethality. "In exactly three hours."

[...]

And within three hours, Ilya was indeed fucking.

The bedroom was bathed in a warm, dim light, illuminated only by the orange glow of the lamp that cast dancing shadows on the walls. The air smelled of sweat, heated sheets, and imminent sex. And in the center of the bed, Blaine was on all fours, his knees sunk into the mattress, his hands gripping the pillow as if it were the only anchor keeping him tethered to the world.

Ilya held firmly onto his waist. Long, strong fingers dug into the hot skin, marking the iliac bone with the exact pressure of someone who knew exactly what they wanted. And what he wanted was right there, in that arched, trembling body, in the muffled moan Blaine let out against the fabric, in the movement of his hips that made him thrust back against Ilya's cock with a desperate urgency.

The rhythm was brutal and synchronized. Every thrust from Ilya pushed Blaine forward, and every response from Blaine brought him back, the clash of their bodies echoing in a wet, rhythmic sound that filled the room. The bed creaked in protest, the frame hitting the wall at increasingly shorter intervals.

The Russian slid one hand down the side of Blaine's body, his fingers tracing the outline of his ribs, feeling every tense muscle under the sweat-slicked skin. He moved up the length of his spine, his fingertips tracing vertebra by vertebra with a deliberate slowness that contrasted with the violence of the thrusts. Until his fingers buried themselves in Blaine's dark hair and pulled hard, yanking his head back, exposing the vulnerable curve of his neck.

"Argh, yes!" Blaine gasped, his voice hoarse and high-pitched, completely lost in his own pleasure. "Harder. Fuck, Ilya... harder!"

The request came out as a growl, the words dissolving into moans as Ilya intensified the pace. The Russian leaned his body forward, his chest sticking to Blaine's sweaty back, his lips brushing the shell of his ear in an inaudible whisper that was more vibration than voice.

"Is this how you like it?" Ilya asked, his accent thickening the vowels, his hot breath hitting the back of Blaine's neck.

Blaine couldn't answer with words. He only nodded, his hair slipping from Ilya's grip, his dark eyes rolled back and his mouth open in a silent moan. His entire body burned, every nerve ending lit up, the pleasure pooling in his groin like an electric current ready to discharge.

Ilya noticed. He felt the internal contractions around his own cock, the uncontrollable tremor in Blaine's thighs, the ragged breathing that gave away the proximity of the climax. He let go of his hair and grabbed both of Blaine's shoulders, using them as leverage to bury himself even deeper, searching for the exact angle that drew the most primitive and desperate sounds from that man.

"Come on," Ilya ordered, his voice raspy, his hips accelerating into a furious rhythm. "Come for me. Now."

The command was the trigger. Blaine screamed—a hoarse, prolonged sound that tore from his throat—and his body collapsed, his arms giving out, his face falling against the pillow as the orgasm ripped through him in violent waves. Ilya kept thrusting through that convulsion, extracting every spasm, every hot jet that soiled the sheet, until his own lucidity fractured and he collapsed too, the guttural growl of his climax exploding against Blaine's sweaty back.

The two bodies slowed down in unison, collapsing onto the tangled sheets. The sound of ruined breathing filled the dark room, echoing like the aftermath of a violent storm.

"Fuck... fuck, holy shit..." Blaine panted, his voice thick and shaky, his entire body still vibrating with the crushing ecstasy of the orgasm.

Ilya let out a heavy sigh, feeling his mouth go dry. He pulled back slowly, slipping out of the other body with extreme care. In a fluid, practiced motion, the Russian took off the condom,

tied a blind knot in the latex, and tossed it into the small trash can next to the bed.

"You definitely didn't lie about the nine inches..." Blaine murmured, his eyes closed and his chest rising and falling erratically.

"And why would I lie?" Ilya panted back, his deep voice reduced to a hoarse whisper.

He let himself fall onto his back on the mattress, his long, heavy arms resting relaxed above his head. Blaine let out a weak, breathless laugh. The Russian turned his face to look at him. The lightness of the post-orgasm endorphins incredibly softened Ilya's hard features, creating a contrast with the freckled, flushed, and sweat-covered face of the young man next to him.

"I'm going to need, at the very least, a good few minutes to remember how to walk," Blaine announced, making a colossal effort just to roll over on the mattress and lie on his back, mirroring the Russian's relaxed position.

"No problem. Take all the time you need," Ilya shrugged against the sheet. "You can use the shower to take a hot bath. And, if you're hungry after the marathon, we can order something to eat. What do you think?"

Blaine turned his face on the pillow, a lazy, satisfied smile appearing on his lips.

"Is all this attentiveness after sex part of Slavic culture?" the young man joked. He leaned in with some difficulty, placing a wet, soft kiss on the hot skin of Ilya's bicep, blinking his almond-shaped, exhausted eyes at the blond.

"Something like that," Ilya answered. A tiny, almost invisible smile played on the Russian's lips.

He turned his torso, leaned toward Blaine, and captured the young man's lips, sealing the night with an incredibly slow, soft, and careful kiss.

[...]

Shane bit into his own pillow hard, his teeth sinking into the fabric to muffle the groan that rose from his throat the instant he clicked the vibrator into thrust mode. The same mode that, hours ago, he had told himself would take a long time to test. That would require patience, preparation, courage. But that night, with his body still throbbing from the previous discovery and the early hours of the morning advancing like a silent accomplice, Shane decided the time was now. The time was tonight.

The vibration echoed through his body in waves that weren't limited to the point of contact. It shot up his spine, spread across his abdomen, tingled in his fingertips, and made every breath a conscious effort. But it was the slow, rhythmic sensation of the soft silicone coming and going inside him that dismantled him piece by piece—the mechanical, tireless back-and-forth, gliding against his internal walls, filling and emptying him in a hypnotic cycle. And as

if that weren't enough, the base of the vibrator had adjusted in a way that wrapped around his balls and rubbed against the base of his cock, creating a dual stimulation that made every thrust reverberate in three different places at once.

It was a lot. All at once. Too much.

He was surrendered on all fours, his knees sunk into the mattress, his forearms planted in the pillow, his body arched in a curve of complete submission. The room was immersed in darkness, with no lights on, just the bluish, intermittent glow of the vibrator's remote emitting a ghostly pulse between his fingers. And there, alone in the pitch black, Shane moaned. He moaned for a vibrator, for the silent walls, for the emptiness of the night. His son slept at the end of the hall, just a few meters away, and the awareness of that throbbed at the back of his neck like a delicious sin.

"Oh, fuck..." he gasped, his voice hoarse and muffled against the pillow, his fingers gripping the vibrator's mode controller so hard the plastic creaked. "Fuuuuck..."

The words stretched into a drawn-out groan, the vowel dissolving into a gasp that seemed to fill the entire room.

That was good. Really good. Absurdly good.

And for that very reason, Shane increased the intensity of the thrusts. The toy accelerated suddenly, the strokes becoming shorter and faster, hammering that internal spot with a precision that made him whimper, choking on the sound, dying in his throat like a hiccup. His free hand reached down to his own cock, wrapping around it firmly, and he began a back-and-forth rhythm calculated to synchronize with the vibrator's thrusts. Every internal stroke met an external pull, every retreat of the silicone met a slow downward slide of his hand, and the pleasure multiplied in a cruel arithmetic he could no longer keep up with.

He increased the intensity again. Of both the thrusts and the vibration.

His eyes rolled back instantly. His eyelids squeezed shut, and behind them, as always happened in moments of the most absolute pleasure, images of Ilya rushed back into his mind. The shirtless Russian, the broad shoulders and muscular arms gleaming in the sunlight, the thick, raspy accent dripping like poisonous honey, the square jaw, the gaze that carried promises Shane had never dared to name. And for a moment—a moment that stretched like rubber—Shane imagined that the vibrator was Ilya. That the soft, tireless silicone was the Russian's cock, thrusting inside him with the same intensity, the same hunger. That the hands holding him were large and calloused, and that the hot breath against the back of his neck carried that accent that unmade him from the inside out.

"Ilya..." The name escaped like an inaudible whisper, so low that maybe not even he heard it.

Shane's finger pressed the button once more. The thrusts became even faster, deeper, more relentless, hitting his prostate squarely with every stroke, while his hand jerked off his member with desperation, the movements now out of sync and frantic. The orgasm was swelling on the horizon like an avalanche, and Shane let himself be swallowed by it, the Russian's name still burning on his lips.

The pleasure piled up in layers, each one more unbearable than the last. Shane no longer knew where the vibration ended and his own body began; both had merged into a single trembling mass of sensations. The toy's hum filled the dark room like a distant swarm, and the mechanical thrusts continued relentlessly, hammering that internal spot with a precision that drove him to the brink of madness.

In his mind, the fantasy solidified. Ilya was there, behind him, his large hands digging into his waist, his hips moving with the same brute force Shane imagined in him. The Russian whispered things in his ear—words Shane didn't fully understand, but that set him on fire inside, that made him open up even more, surrender even deeper. He could almost feel the hot breath on his neck, the brush of a broad chest against his sweaty back, the real weight of a body over his.

"Yes... don't stop..." Shane moaned into the pillow, his voice unrecognizable, hoarse, and strangely submissive. He no longer knew if he was talking to the vibrator, to Ilya, or to himself.

The hand on his cock sped up even more, the fist now closed tightly, pumping up and down in a rhythm that had lost any pretense of control. The lube and pre-cum mixed, making the slide slippery and noisy, and the base of the vibrator kept rubbing against his balls with every thrust, sending additional shocks that made him shudder from head to toe.

Shane opened his eyes for a moment and saw only darkness. He was on all fours in his own room, alone, naked, his face buried in a pillow soaked in saliva and tears he hadn't even realized he'd shed. The image was pathetic. It was liberating. It was exactly what he needed.

"Imma... I'm gonna cum..." he babbled, the warning more for himself than for any other entity. The muscles in his thighs began to tremble uncontrollably, his toes curling, his abdomen contracting in preparatory spasms. The vibrator continued its tireless work, oblivious to the imminent collapse, and Shane felt like an instrument being played by invisible hands.

And then it came.

The orgasm exploded into a deafening silence. Shane bit the pillow so hard he tasted the fabric, and his entire body convulsed, his hips pushing back against the vibrator while his hand pumped his own cock with urgency. The semen spurted in hot, thick waves, staining the sheets, his stomach, running between his fingers. Each jet was accompanied by an internal contraction so strong that the vibrator was partially expelled, but Shane pushed it back in with a desperate motion, wanting to prolong that delicious agony to the very limit.

And in the center of it all, behind his closed eyelids, Ilya smiled.

Shane moaned his name again. This time louder, more surrendered, frighteningly true. The sound escaped, tearing his throat before he could contain it, vibrating through the dark room like a confession he could no longer deny. And for a brief, pathetic moment, floating in that thick post-orgasm haze, Shane allowed himself the illusion of imagining that the Russian had heard. That, somewhere in Montreal, Ilya shivered without knowing why.

Gradually, gravity pulled him back. His body collapsed, slowing down. His hand loosened its rhythm, the toy's vibration slowed until it stopped completely, and Shane slumped sideways onto the mattress. His broad chest rose and fell in jerks, his lungs searching for oxygen as the sweat cooled rapidly on his bare skin. The silicone toy slid out of him with a wet, discreet sound, abandoned between the folds of the stained sheet.

Absolute silence swallowed the room again. The house went back to being just an empty house. The guilt, the panic, and the weight of reality would arrive soon, he knew very well. But, for now, Shane just kept his eyes closed and let the darkness embrace him. Ilya's name still tasted sweet on his tongue—a silent prayer he would never have the courage to say with his eyes open.

About half an hour later, the Canadian woke up from his brief, exhausted nap. The cold from the air conditioning forced him to get up. With mechanical movements, he stripped the sheets and pillowcases from the bed. Wearing only a pair of old sweat shorts, Shane went down the stairs to the first floor, carrying the bundle of fabric to the laundry area.

He shoved everything into the washing machine. While measuring the cap of laundry detergent, his dark, almond-shaped eyes wandered over the penthouse's huge glass windows, watching the lights of the Montreal night view twinkle on the freezing horizon.

On his way back to the kitchen, something caught his eye. Liam's school backpack was tossed on one of the island chairs—exactly where Ilya had left it before heading out for his date. The corner of the boy's sketchbook was sticking out of the half-closed zipper.

It had been a while since Shane had stopped to look at his son's new "works of art." With a tired smile, he pulled out the spiral notebook and opened it on the marble counter.

The first few pages were a festival of marine biology. Several drawings of sharks in different styles, fruits of his art classes, all meticulously dated in the bottom corner of the page with the day, month, and year. And, right below the date, a cursive signature.

Shane let out a nasal laugh. Liam was always watching him sign contracts, jerseys, and checks with a quick, stylized signature of an "SH". The boy, with all the mirrored admiration of his eight years, had created his own signature: a crooked, but proudly written "LH".

He turned to the last filled page. It was a drawing dedicated to Women's Day.

Shane immediately noticed how his son's drawing style had evolved. The figures were no longer stickmen; they had volume, clothes, and details. In the center of the page, dominating the space, was the unmistakable matriarchal figure. Liam had written "Grandma Yuna" next to her, drawing her with the same slanted eyes as theirs and—in a touch of childhood genius—a golden crown on her head.

Next to her, "Grandpa David", drawn with meticulously gray-colored hair and a gentle smile.

On the other side of the page, the new generation. There was a smaller figure, with spiky dark hair, labeled "Me". On the little figure's arm, Liam had made a point of drawing a red zigzag line, showing off his newly acquired fishbone scar like a war trophy.

Flanking little Liam, there were two large figures.

On the left, a dark-haired man wearing a Metros jersey, duly named "Dad Shane".

On the right, an immense figure, drawn with bright yellow crayon for hair. There was a word written next to Ilya's name. Shane frowned, bringing his face closer to the paper. The letters were strange, square. It looked like a lowercase "n" mixed with other shapes.

"*Иана* Ilya."

Shane tilted his head. *Must be his crooked handwriting trying to write "nanny,"* the captain concluded, oblivious to the fact that he was looking at the Cyrillic alphabet.

Shane's heart gave a strange, warm lurch in his chest. The fact that Liam had included the Russian in the drawing of the family, holding hands with him, tightened the Canadian's throat in a way he couldn't put into words.

With extreme delicacy, Shane closed the notebook and put it back in the backpack, fixing the zipper and leaving everything perfectly tidy for school the next day.

He walked to the fridge, opened the door, and grabbed an ice-cold can of Ginger Ale. The pop of the tab broke the silence of the early morning. Shane walked over to the living room couch and sat down in the semi-darkness, the cold metal against his fingers, waiting patiently for the washing machine to finish its cycle, while his own mind kept spinning in circles around the blond man who had drawn his own place right in the center of that family.

Chapter 17: Honesty

Chapter Notes

I AM NOT OKAY

MY EDVIN IS IN SEASON TWO - MY BABY EDVIN

my little gay heart of young royals is so healed - in Jacob we trust, guys
also, Priyanka girl?! What are you doing here????

We have our Troy, our Luca, our Wyatt - Now, Jacob... YOU HAVE BOOD, GIVE!
also give us Fabian and Ryan, I need to hold my babies as well - wouldn't mind have
Eric too soon enough hehe

With the first round of the playoffs finally set on the calendar, Shane Hollander had entered a state of absolute trance. He was completely out of orbit from the real world; all he breathed, dreamed, and thought about was hockey.

The first round of the best-of-seven series would be a classic nightmare: a head-to-head clash against the Toronto Guardians. The focus of the Metros' hatred had a first and last name, along with an extensive penalty record: Dallas Kent—a massive bastard, both on and off the ice—and his right-hand man, Troy Barrett.

To maintain this level of monastic concentration and physically prepare himself for the brutality of the playoffs, Shane was paying an obscene amount in overtime for Ilya to stay with Liam practically every day. The Russian was filling the gaps in the routine that the captain's mind, now entirely focused on the Stanley Cup, couldn't manage.

That night, the atmosphere in Montreal was electric. It was Game 1.

Familiar ice. Home ice.

In the locker room, the smell of athletic tape, ammonia, and pure adrenaline hung in the air. Shane was sitting with his head down, running through power play strategies for the thousandth time in his mind, when his phone buzzed against the wood of the bench next to him.

Picking up the device, he saw it was a message from his dad.

It was a selfie taken by David. The framing caught the vibrant lighting of the arena in the background and, in the foreground, showed Yuna exuding elegance in her Metros jersey, Liam flashing a radiant, missing-tooth smile, and, right behind them, Ilya. The Russian was there, his arms crossed protectively close to the boy, his blue eyes focused on the camera with a subtle smirk.

A wave of comforting heat dissipated the icy tension in Shane's chest. He gave a small, genuine smile, typed a simple heart emoji in response, and locked the screen.

Family time was over. It was time to hunt.

"Here's the deal, pay attention!" J.J. marched to the center of the locker room. As usual, the role of igniting the team's killer spirit belonged to the defenseman. "All of us in here know very well how Kent plays! He plays dirty. He hits to hurt, he hits to break! And Barrett comes right behind him, wagging his tail like the submissive little bitch he is!"

Aggressive murmurs of agreement echoed through the lockers.

"But they don't carry a fucking team by themselves!" J.J. beat his own chest, his voice reverberating off the walls. "In here, we help each other! We are brothers! And we're going to go out there and fuck shit up on that ice! This cup is ours, damn it!"

The locker room exploded into a frenzy.

"THAT'S RIGHT!"

"LET'S GO, BOYS!"

"LET'S GO, METROS!"

"GUARDIANS CAN SUCK MY DICK!" someone yelled from the back, drawing savage laughs and the slamming of sticks on the floor.

Shane put his phone in his locker, stood up, and pulled his helmet onto his head, the safety strap snapping under his chin. The transition was complete. The worried single dad stayed in the locker room; the man who walked toward the tunnel was the captain of the Montreal Metros.

When he stepped into the hallway leading to the rink, the muffled sound of the crowd began to transform into a physical roar. Shane skated into the light, and the freezing air hit him right in the face.

The exact second his skate blades cut the ice, the heavy beat of his theme song exploded over the Bell Centre's speakers. The bass of *Hey Daddy (Daddy's Home)* shook the plexiglass of the stands, and the twenty-one thousand fans in attendance belted out the chorus at the top of their lungs, stringing together a deafening "HOL-LAN-DER! HOL-LAN-DER!" at full volume.

On his first quick warm-up lap to get a feel for the ice, Shane's sharp eyes swept the front row of VIP seats.

He found them immediately.

Yuna was standing, banging on the glass with her perfectly manicured nails. And right next to her, raised high above the crowd and sitting majestically on Ilya's broad shoulders, was Liam.

The boy had his face painted with two thick stripes—one blue and one white—and was waving frantically at the ice with a giant smile.

From behind the scratched visor of his helmet, surrounded by twenty thousand people screaming his name, Shane couldn't help it. He smiled.

[...]

When the final buzzer sounded and the scoreboard froze at four to two for the Montreal Metros, the entire arena seemed to collapse in euphoria. It was only the first game of the best-of-seven series, but starting off by crushing the Toronto Guardians and taking the lead was the exact kind of adrenaline shot the team needed.

In the VIP parking lot, the freezing night air served to cool Shane's body down. Waiting for him next to the cars were his parents, Ilya, and Liam. As soon as the captain approached, his heavy bag hanging off his shoulder, Yuna didn't waste any time. She stepped forward and crushed her son in an absurdly tight, proud hug, almost cracking Shane's tired vertebrae in the process.

"Mom... oxygen..." he gasped, his face squished against her coat.

Yuna released him with a jerk, holding her son's face between her two small, firm hands.

"I got carried away. My bad."

Before Shane could catch his breath, a small missile collided with his legs. The captain bent down and scooped Liam up in a fluid motion, lifting the boy as if he weighed absolutely nothing.

"That was so awesome, Dad!" Liam exclaimed, his little voice high-pitched and vibrating with pure euphoria. "You, Uncle J.J., and Uncle Hayden crushed the Guardians today!"

"That was exactly the intention, buddy," Shane let out an exhausted but genuine laugh, planting a loud kiss on his son's sweaty temple.

"Going to do anything with the team to celebrate?" David asked, his hands in his jacket pockets and the smile of someone who knew locker room culture.

"They're planning to go to a club," Shane shook his head, refusing the idea immediately. "I much prefer to go home."

He knew that, in the safety of his penthouse, there was a dish of vegetarian lasagna waiting for him—something he had put together himself that afternoon under Ilya's impatient supervision, and which now only needed thirty minutes in the oven. It was a paradise infinitely superior to any packed nightclub.

"Then we'll see you the day after tomorrow for Game 2," Yuna decreed. Before stepping away, she patted the back of Shane's neck and adjusted his dark hair with maternal disapproval. "You desperately need to cut this hair, Shane."

"Mom!" the captain rolled his eyes, embarrassed. The older woman just threw both hands in the air in surrender and spun on her heels, laughing with her husband.

David and Yuna waved one last time and walked toward their own car. Shane set Liam back on the ground, and the little one ran straight to Ilya's black Jeep.

The Russian, as usual, was leaning against the car's body, the very image of stoicism.

"I already told you that you should take one of my cars to come to the games instead of wasting yours," Shane resumed their old argument, walking over to the trunk Ilya had just unlocked. "Or, at the very least, accept the gas money I've already offered you a thousand times."

"You're the one who signs my fat paycheck at the end of the month. Therefore, transitively, you are already paying for my gas," Ilya shot back, his hands in his pants pockets and a mocking smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

"You are an extremely annoying person, you know that?" Shane grumbled, sliding his equipment bag off his shoulder and tossing it into the trunk.

"Look who's talking. Said Mr. Well of Charisma and Friendliness," Ilya poked back, without missing a beat.

Shane cracked his neck and narrowed his eyes.

"Careful what you say, Rozanov. Having very flat emotions and not understanding the context of things is a strong trait of the autism spectrum," the Canadian returned the joke with dry humor, pointing his finger in the nanny's face.

"And what about this? Do you know what spectrum this fits into, huh?" Ilya raised his hand and, with the most neutral expression in the world, flipped Shane off right in his face.

The player's eyes widened, putting his hand to his chest in a theatrical display of shock and indignation.

"What kind of faggy shit is this in my parking lot, good Lord?!" a loud voice echoed through the arena's double doors.

Hayden appeared taking long strides, but his sentence was immediately interrupted by the sound of a hollow, loud slap. J.J. was right behind him and had just smacked the back of his teammate's head.

"Argh! Fuck, J.J.!"

"Watch your mouth around the kid, you idiot," the defenseman scolded.

"My bad, it slipped out," Hayden grumbled, rubbing his own head under his team hat. Shane and Ilya turned to face the duo of intruders. Hayden pointed at the two of them. "But I'm not lying. You two argue exactly like a bitter old married couple."

"Oh, go fuck yourself, Hayden," Shane rolled his eyes, but couldn't hold back an exhausted laugh. Ilya let out a nasal laugh next to him.

"You better be careful who you tell to go fuck themselves, Rozanov," J.J. joined in the joke, with a sly smile. "Your new boyfriend is going to be dying of jealousy over this vibe between you two."

Shane froze. His blood seemed to run cold all of a sudden.

This time, it was Ilya who rolled his eyes.

"He's not my boyfriend. We've just gone out together a few times," the Russian corrected him naturally, pushing off the trunk and walking toward the driver's side door.

Shane, trying to hide the stutter in his own thought process, gave his two teammates the middle finger one last time before opening the passenger door.

"Hey, don't try to play the detached guy with me!" J.J. yelled over the roof of the Jeep. "Considering you rarely go out with the same guy more than once, three dates in the same month is basically a marriage for your statistics!"

Ilya's face twisted into the most genuinely horrified grimace possible at the word "marriage," drawing loud bursts of laughter from J.J. and Hayden.

They got in the car, and the thud of the doors cut off the laughter from outside. But the silence lasted only a second.

"Marriage?" the curious little voice came from the backseat.

Liam had lifted his head, his new book on marine life—which Ilya had bought the day before—resting on his lap.

"Uhm..." Shane froze, his heart skipping a beat. For an absurd and chaotic moment, he had completely forgotten that his eight-year-old son was in the backseat listening to everything.

Ilya, however, didn't seem to panic.

"Remember our conversation about what each person's heart likes, Li?" the Russian began, his tone of voice taking on that calm, pedagogical cadence he used only with the boy. He started the Jeep and shifted into reverse. "Well... I'm sorry for not telling you this before, but I like both girls and boys. And, over the last few weeks, I've been hanging out a lot with a guy."

Shane blinked, quick and dazed. The air of sarcastic banter completely evaporated inside the cabin. The naturalness, frankness, and delicacy with which Ilya chose to talk about his own

sexuality and personal life to Liam hit the captain's chest in a painfully beautiful and strange way.

"Do you like him?" Liam asked, tilting his head to the side, perfectly oblivious to the weight of the conversation.

"I don't know yet, Akula. It's too early to know," Ilya shrugged, maneuvering the car onto the street.

"Do you like him... more than us?" childish insecurity finally leaked through Liam's voice.

"What? *No!* Absolutely not," the blond denied immediately, and his tone left no room for doubt.

"But what about Dad? Do you like him more than you like Dad?"

Shane stopped breathing.

Out of the corner of his eye, under the orange glow of the streetlights illuminating the interior of the car, the captain saw Ilya's knuckles turn white as they squeezed the leather steering wheel. The Russian visibly stiffened.

"Liam," Shane's voice came out thick, low, and loaded with an immediate warning, his instinct to protect his son mixing with a desperate need to protect himself and Ilya from that impossible comparison.

"I like your dad in a different way, Akula," Ilya answered before the silence could weigh them down. He pressed his lips together, his sharp, blue eyes meeting Liam's through the rearview mirror. The honesty in his voice was almost cruel it was so pragmatic. "Your dad and I are *great friends*. Blaine and I... we kiss."

The final sentence hung in the air. Cold. Definitive.

Shane turned his face to the window, pretending to watch the lights of Montreal pass in a blur. Ilya's words were a reality check, drawing a bright red line on the floor of the car, reminding the captain, with devastating precision, of the barrier that existed between what they had, and what he, deep down, was confused about wanting to have.

[...]

Ilya came down the stairs in silence, leaving behind a perfectly passed-out Liam in bed, and found Shane in the kitchen, finishing washing the dinner dishes. It was almost ten at night—a time way beyond the blond's regular shift—but the captain was paying an obscene amount in overtime for him to stay close and cover the crazy gaps the playoffs caused in the house's routine.

"Want help with anything else?" the Russian asked, his deep voice filling the spacious kitchen.

"Can you put away the leftover lasagna?" Shane asked, pointing his chin at the glass dish cooling on the stove.

Ilya readily agreed. He took his phone out of his sweatpants pocket so he wouldn't crush it when bending over, and left the device on the marble island before opening the lower cabinets in search of containers.

The exact second the phone touched the stone, the screen lit up and the device buzzed, giving away a rapid succession of three messages.

Shane, whose hands were covered in suds at the sink right across from it, squinted. He mentally cursed having to need his damn reading glasses to see up close, but he managed to decipher a blurry "B". By the number of letters in the contact name, the math was simple and cruel.

"So, how are things with Blaine?" the captain asked, trying to sound as casual and disinterested as possible.

Internally, Shane knew he shouldn't be so bothered by the fact that Ilya was out there fucking around. To keep from losing his mind, the Canadian had convinced himself of a comforting lie: *I only masturbate thinking about Ilya because he is the person who encouraged me to do it.* He told himself that the Russian was just the "face" of his discovery process, of mapping his own pleasure. A guide, not the destination.

"Nothing like we planned," Ilya grumbled quietly, pulling the captain from his thoughts. "You know very well I don't date. But he is clearly wanting to drag things in that direction, suggesting we meet in public places that aren't just my house or his apartment."

A tiny, selfish, and dark piece of Shane jumped for joy at that drastic divergence in goals. But the Canadian strangled that part of himself in the exact same second, forcing himself to wear the mask of the pragmatic friend.

"And... and why don't you, I don't know, cut it off once and for all? Stop going out with the guy or answering his messages," Shane shrugged, genuinely confused as to why Ilya wouldn't just eliminate that headache from his life.

"The thing is, I feel like a massive son of a bitch for not being able to just stop. Because the truth is, I really enjoy fucking him," Ilya replied with lethal frankness, focused on fitting the layers of lasagna into the airtight glass container.

Shane's stomach churned.

"Yeah... this doesn't look like it's going to end well at all," the captain murmured. He placed the last plate on the drying rack, turned off the water, and grabbed a towel to dry his hands with more force than necessary. "And I thought that, since you guys met on Grindr, it would already be pretty explicit to everyone that it was a strictly casual thing."

"I thought so too," Ilya sighed. He handed the dirty glass dish to Shane, who took it and dropped it into the bottom of the sink to soak. "It's not that he's uninteresting," the Russian continued, turning to face the captain as he locked the plastic container's flaps with sharp clicks. "But... I don't know. I don't want a relationship. At least not with him."

Shane leaned his hip against the sink and crossed his arms.

"Want some relationship advice from the guy who has had exactly two girlfriends in his entire life, one being a complete manipulative psycho and the other breaking up with me the day after Valentine's Day?"

The self-deprecation broke the tension immediately. Ilya let out a nasal laugh, his shoulders relaxing.

"Go for it, Captain. Enlighten me."

"It's obvious you don't want the same thing he does. Just tell Blaine that once and for all. If he doesn't understand or doesn't want to keep it strictly about sex, that's too bad for him. But you're not going to change who you are or what you want for some guy from an app," Shane shrugged, his voice firm and protective, much more confident in solving other people's lives than his own.

Ilya raised a perfectly drawn eyebrow, adopting a comically thoughtful expression.

"Very mean of me if I just stop replying and block him on everything right now?"

"And what exactly is stopping you from doing that?"

"Christian guilt."

"Oh, spare me, Rozanov! You don't even step foot in a church!" Shane rolled his eyes, indignant.

Ilya laughed out loud, turning his back to head to the fridge and put the container of lasagna away.

While the blond's laughter echoed in the kitchen, Shane's eyes were drawn to the glow of the massive television in the living room, which had been on mute since earlier. The streaming screen was playing the opening minutes of *Red, White & Royal Blue*.

"Have you seen this movie?" Shane asked, nodding toward the screen.

Ilya closed the fridge door and followed his boss's gaze.

"No. I don't think I've ever seen it."

"Rose used to talk about it a lot, because she's friends with one of the lead actors," the captain commented, uncrossing his arms and rubbing the back of his neck, suddenly uncertain. "Want to watch it? Or... I don't know. We're both going to have to wake up early as fuck tomorrow for practice. Probably better not, right?"

Ilya grabbed his phone off the island and slid the device back into his sweatpants pocket, without even bothering to open Blaine's messages.

"I'm the one who's going to have to wake up early and drive all the way here," Ilya gestured with his large hands, walking nonchalantly toward the living room couch. "You can hit play. It looks interesting."

Shane let out a small laugh, relief draining the tension from his shoulders. He turned off the main kitchen lights and walked to the living room, settling onto one end of the massive suede couch while Ilya threw himself onto the other end. Shane grabbed the remote and pressed play on the story of the son of the President of the United States falling in love with a British prince.

The captain watched a lot of movies—it was the best way to kill time on chartered flights during team road trips—but his repertoire basically consisted of action, thrillers, and stupid comedies. He had never stopped to watch a real romance. And he had definitely never watched a gay romance.

Everything was under control until the New Year's Eve party scene. When Prince Henry looked at Alex and dropped the line: "The people I date don't interest me, and the people I'm interested in I can't date," it was as if Shane had taken a hockey puck to the back of the head at a hundred miles an hour.

The sentence resonated inside him in a terrifying way. And, a few seconds later, Henry stepped forward and kissed Alex under the snowy trees.

Shane's stomach plummeted and went cold instantly. Sitting stiffly on the edge of the couch, he shifted, swallowing hard, and risked a sideways glance at the other end of the furniture.

Ilya was the picture of absolute tranquility. The Russian hugged a throw pillow against his broad chest, paying attention to the screen with serene, mildly focused blue eyes. No identity crisis, no internal panic, no butterflies in his stomach. He did that in real life. He was more than used to kissing men. In fact, he had been kissing the same man frequently lately—some guy named Blaine whom Shane, for some completely illogical reason bordering on irrational hatred, detested.

A few scenes later, when Alex was telling Nora the details about the kiss and how Henry had pulled his hair, Ilya let out a low chuckle, vibrating against the pillow.

"What is it?" Shane asked, unable to stop a sly smile at hearing the sound.

"Bisexual telepathy," Ilya answered without taking his eyes off the TV, his tone loaded with teasing. Shane laughed more openly, the sound encouraging the blond to smile too.

"Oh, yeah? So you're the type who likes having your hair pulled?" the captain provoked, his tongue loosening more than it should have in the safety of the dark.

Ilya turned his face to look at him, his eyes shining with mischief and irony.

"It might not seem like it, Shane, but there is a sensitive, beating heart underneath this thick accent and this incredible six-pack, okay?"

Shane let out another laugh, but had to clench his hands into fists on his own thighs to ignore the sudden, uncomfortable tingling that shot up through his fingertips. His treacherous mind instantly tried to calculate exactly what the texture of Ilya's thick, golden curls would feel like if he pulled them.

They continued watching in a silence that, gradually, grew thick. And when the first real hookup scene in the Paris hotel room began on the screen, the room's temperature seemed to rise ten degrees.

When Alex was hovering over Henry, with the prince slowly giving him permission, Shane almost had a nervous system collapse. He shifted abruptly on the couch, crossing and uncrossing his legs, pretending he was just trying to find a more comfortable angle against the cushions, when, in reality, he was completely covered in goosebumps, his heart hammering against his ribs, fighting with all his strength not to show how desperately affected he was by watching two men having sex right next to the man who dominated his late nights.

[...]

"I'm going crazy." Shane fired off the exact second his therapist answered the video call.

"Okay. Elaborate," Dr. Park replied with the same clinical calm as always, clicking her pen and adjusting her notebook on her lap.

Shane was locked in his bedroom, the curtains drawn tight. Ilya had taken Liam to school that morning, giving the captain the perfect window to schedule his session early, ensuring he could focus one hundred percent on practice later.

"Okay, you know I've been a little more comfortable with myself, with my body, with the whole discovering pleasure thing, right?" Shane looked at the screen, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

The blonde nodded gently, adjusting her thin-framed glasses.

"What do you mean by 'going crazy'?" Heather gestured for him to verbalize.

"Every time I... try to focus, conventional videos don't work anymore. So, I always end up thinking about the exact same thing. The same person."

"Which would be?"

"Ilya."

Shane's expression, dropping the Russian's name out loud inside the very room where he had moaned while his body was dismantled by a thrusting vibrator hitting his prostate, was one of pure misery.

"Holy shit, I never thought I'd become the pathetic kind of boss who literally has sexual fantasies about an employee! And I spent weeks trying to convince myself I only thought about him because he was the one who encouraged me to do this, to 'map my pleasure', all that shit. But now I'm freaking out! I almost had a nervous breakdown on my own couch last night. He stayed here after his shift, we watched a gay romance movie, and I wanted to throw myself off the fucking balcony at every sex scene!"

"Shane. Take a deep breath and hold it for five seconds," the doctor raised an index finger in the camera frame, her firm voice cutting through the player's hysteria.

Shane huffed, but obeyed.

"Let it out slowly... Good. Very good."

The Canadian dragged both hands aggressively over his face, pulling at his dark hair.

"I'm going to ask you a series of short questions, and I want you to answer me with absolute honesty, okay?" she instructed.

"Okay."

"Is heterosexual pornography still a viable option for you?"

Shane shook his head no.

"Have you found genuine, pleasurable comfort in including anal stimulation in your moments of self-pleasure?"

The back of Shane's neck burned instantly with shame, but he confirmed with a short nod.

"Have you caught yourself randomly throughout the day thinking about a specific part of the male body?"

"Ilya's?"

"Ilya's. Or any other man's. Could be that too."

"Sometimes..."

"Okay. You mentioned you watched a gay romance movie last night. Was there any line, any specific scene that caught you off guard? Aside from the explicit sex scenes, which are normally uncomfortable to watch around anyone who isn't your partner."

"We watched *Red, White & Royal Blue*," Shane swallowed hard. "And there was this one scene... the prince turns and says he dates people who don't interest him, because the people who really interest him, he can't date."

"And that resonated with you, Shane?"

The captain couldn't look at the laptop camera. He lowered his almond eyes to his hands and nodded slowly.

"And what exactly is stopping you from being honest with yourself, just like Prince Henry was at the end of the story?"

"You've seen the movie?" Shane blinked, genuinely surprised by the direct reference.

"I read the book first. I have an eighteen-year-old son, openly gay, who almost went crazy with joy when the movie came out because we both loved the story," Heather shared, with a naturalness and lightness that Shane would give his life to be feeling right then. Her expression, however, soon returned to clinical focus. "But answer my question. What is stopping you from being honest with yourself? Because we both know very well that this 'psychological association' theory you created in your head regarding Ilya is a lie. You know what you feel."

"Eight years, Dr. Park." Shane's voice broke. "I spent eight years of my career dividing my sanity between courtrooms, ice rinks, and late-night diapers. Now that I've finally managed to stabilize the two best things in my life... I don't want to risk losing hockey."

"And who told you that you're going to lose your place in hockey because of who you love?"

"Can you tell me the name of a single active player in the league who is g—"

Shane cut himself off mid-word. He froze, realizing the sound of the letter that was about to come out of his own mouth. The crushing weight of that word hung in the room. Heather's expression remained unchanged on the screen, while Shane's dark eyes filled with hot tears.

"I..." Heather let out a long sigh, pressing her lips together. The silence seemed to last for hours before she made a decision. "I don't usually do this under any circumstances. But here we go: Yes, Shane. I can tell you the name of another player in the league. Because I treat him too."

Shane blinked, the oxygen vanishing from his lungs.

"He's been my patient much longer than you have," the psychologist continued, her voice gentle, ensuring absolute anonymity while handing Shane the anchor he needed. "For years he's known exactly what he is, known what he likes, but he also lives with the same terror you do: the terror of risking it all if he tells the world the truth. He was just as scared and paralyzed as you are right now. But, from the beginning of this year onward, I noticed a massive change in him. He became more cheerful in sessions, enthusiastic, and stopped being withdrawn and depressed."

She paused, holding Shane's wide-eyed gaze on the screen.

"And, just yesterday, he finally told me the real reason for this improvement: he has a boyfriend. He loves him madly. And you know what? We had a period, months ago, where he

ghosted his appointments and left me worried sick. It was because they had had a huge fight. He thought it was the end of everything and that, ultimately, his destiny would be the same as many other players who retired locked in the closet and only lived their truth after being forgotten by the media. But he got back on track. And, just from the sparkle in his eye during yesterday's call, I know something huge is going to happen soon. Something that will change his life."

Shane listened to every word with his mouth slightly open, feeling as if an anvil had been lifted from his chest.

"The only difference between you and him right now, Shane, is that he has already had the courage to tell himself who he is. And he's been building the strength necessary to tell the world in his own time. You, on the other hand, still haven't been able to utter the word. The first and most important step to accepting yourself... is saying it out loud to yourself." She offered a warm smile. "And it helps a lot if it's to someone with a psychology degree tied to an unbreakable oath of confidentiality."

All of Shane's naivety, illusion, and isolation were ripped from his body at once. It was obvious he wasn't the only guy in the NHL who was... that way. But hearing it from a reliable source, hearing from Dr. Park's own mouth that another player existed, loved, and endured, made him feel instantly and profoundly less alone.

"I'm such an idiot..." Shane murmured, rubbing his damp eyes and letting out a weak, tearful laugh. "Of course there are other guys in the league going through conflicts a thousand times worse than mine."

"Hey, hey. None of that," Heather interrupted him sweetly, but firmly. "To ourselves, our own problems will always feel like the end of the world. And that's exactly why it's good to have someone on the outside... just to show you that, sometimes, you might just be drowning in shallow waters."

The silence in Shane's room became thick, but for the first time in months, it wasn't suffocating. It was a blank space. A page waiting to be filled.

On the laptop screen, Dr. Park maintained a welcoming and patient expression, waiting. She didn't rush him. She knew that this was the leap in the dark that Shane needed to take on his own.

Shane looked down at his hands resting on his knees. He remembered Jessica. He remembered the disconnection, the mechanical emptiness of sharing a bed with her, and how he spent years believing the problem was an irreparable flaw inside him. He remembered Rose, the easy friendship that never managed, even for a second, to ignite a real spark of desire.

And then, he remembered Ilya. His body. The texture of his deep voice. The way the Russian dominated whatever room he stepped into, and how Shane's body responded instinctively to that dominance, hungry and awake.

The captain looked up, fixing his eyes on the laptop camera. He clenched his fists, drew in all the air his athlete's lungs could hold, and let it out.

"I'm gay," Shane said.

The voice came out low, almost a scratchy whisper, breaking mid-sentence. But he had said it. The bedroom walls didn't crumble. The ceiling didn't fall on his head. The NHL commissioner didn't knock on his door to confiscate his skates.

He blinked, a few lonely tears escaping, and repeated it, this time with a firmer, more projected voice.

"I'm gay. Holy shit, Dr. Park... I'm gay."

Heather broke into a wide smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Pleasure to officially meet you, Shane Hollander," she replied with immense sweetness. "How does it feel to breathe above water?"

Shane let out a washed-out laugh, rubbing his wet face with his palms.

"It's terrifying," he confessed, his chest rising and falling with unprecedented lightness. "But... it feels good. It feels very, very good. And it makes me want to go back in time and punch myself in the face for taking almost thirty years to understand the obvious."

"Neurobiology explains that our brain blocks trauma and discoveries until it feels we are in an environment safe enough to process them," the psychologist pointed out, making a quick note in her notebook. "You needed to stabilize your life, your career, and your son before you had the structure to look at yourself. You didn't take a long time, Shane. You survived. And now that you know exactly who you are and what you want... we are going to work on how to navigate this new world, step by step."

When Shane ended the video call half an hour later, he felt ten pounds lighter. The chronic headache that had been hammering his temples since the beginning of the week had simply disappeared.

He took a quick shower, threw on his Metros practice sweats, and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

Ilya had already returned from the school run. The Russian was leaning against the marble island, wearing gray sweatpants and a basic black t-shirt that hugged his shoulders almost offensively. He was holding a steaming mug of coffee in one hand and typing something on his phone with the other, his expression concentrated.

I am gay, Shane's brain whispered immediately upon laying eyes on the blond. And, for the first time, the realization didn't come with guilt or moral terror. It came with a crystal clear, predatory, and dangerous clarity.

He was finally admitting what he wanted. And what he wanted was five steps away, drinking coffee in his kitchen, and apparently texting that guy Blaine.

Shane swallowed hard. The competitive spirit of the NHL captain—the guy leading a team to the Stanley Cup—finally woke from its coma.

"Hey," Shane announced his presence, walking to the fridge to grab a bottle of water.

Ilya locked his phone screen and looked up.

"Hey, what's up. Productive session with the therapist?" the Russian asked casually, taking a sip of his coffee with cream.

"You have no idea," Shane replied, leaning against the fridge door and uncapping the water bottle. He held Ilya's blue gaze longer than usual, refusing to look away or blush.

Ilya raised an eyebrow, noticing the almost imperceptible shift in his boss's posture. Shane's shoulders weren't tense. He didn't look like a startled deer today.

"You look less... ready to explode from stress than last night," Ilya observed. "Discovered the meaning of life?"

"Discovered a few things about myself. Things that were pretty obvious right under my nose and I refused to see," Shane shrugged, his tone perfectly neutral, but his almond eyes shining with silent challenge. "And how is your morning going? Blaine still pushing for romantic dates?"

Ilya almost choked on his coffee. He lowered his mug, looking at the Canadian with a mix of surprise and suspicion at the sudden audacity to bring up that topic so casually.

"He tried," the Russian admitted, crossing his arms and playing along. "But I made myself clear. I told him I'm not looking for anything serious. At least, not with someone I don't have... a real connection with outside of bed."

"Got it," Shane nodded, taking a step forward, closing the distance between them slightly. The scent of Ilya's woody cologne mixed with the coffee flooded his senses. "It's a good start, man. Honesty is the best policy. After all, why waste time with someone who doesn't interest you when you know exactly what you want, right?"

Ilya narrowed his eyes. There was a new magnetism there, a spark he couldn't completely decipher, but that definitely intrigued him. The Russian tilted his head, his lips tugging into a slow, lethal smile.

"Careful, Captain. Speaking with all that confidence, it almost sounds like you know what you're talking about."

Shane didn't back down. He gave a half-smile, lightly tapped his water bottle against Ilya's shoulder, and walked past him toward the front door.

"I'm learning, Ilya. And I learn fast. See you this afternoon."

[...]

During a break in a brutal practice, Shane was leaning against the boards of the rink, sweat dripping from his dark hair and sticking to his neck. He pulled his phone from his hoodie pocket to check the time and found two recent notifications from Rose.

[Direct Message]

Rose Landry 🌹: Guess who has an unmissable appointment in Toronto next week... on the exact day of Game 5?

Rose Landry 🌹: Don't even think about getting eliminated before then, Hollander. Or I'll go to Montreal personally just to smack you.

Shane: The team's intention is exactly not to get eliminated so I don't get beaten up by you.

Shane: How are you doing?

Rose Landry 🌹: At the moment, feet soaking getting a pedicure. So, wonderful. And you?

Shane: Trying not to die after Theriault made us do fifteen max-speed laps around the rink.

Rose Landry 🌹: Yikes. What a gross sport. But, taking advantage of the text, I'm going to thank you again for those heels you gave me for my birthday, because I'm wearing them absolutely everywhere.

Rose Landry 🌹: You really know how to give good gifts, Shane.

Shane: No need to thank me, it was your birthday. It was the least I could do.

Rose Landry 🌹: Modest. And you have scary good taste when choosing colors.

Shane: It was actually pretty easy. You always wear a clothing palette with warmer, earthy undertones, so getting a heel in a reddish-burgundy tone was the most logical choice to match.

Rose Landry 🌹: A brute NHL captain who understands palettes, skin undertones, and color theory... Wow. Remind me again why we broke up?

Shane's thumb hovered over the virtual keyboard.

He hesitated. His heart gave a dangerous leap against his ribs. An hour ago, he had been crying on a video call with his therapist; now, he was laughing on an ice rink. The air felt

cleaner, easier to breathe.

He realized he wanted to tell her. He wanted her to know.

Taking a deep breath, Shane typed the shortest and most honest reply of his entire life and hit send.

Shane: Because I'm gay.

It didn't even take three seconds. The "Read" receipt flashed, and in the exact following millisecond, the phone screen switched from the chat to an aggressive FaceTime video call request.

Comical panic hit Shane. He looked around, seeing J.J. and Hayden approaching with water bottles, and slinked away as fast as his skates allowed into the semi-darkness of the access tunnel, far from the team's ears.

He answered.

"WHAT?!" Rose's scream burst through the speaker, slightly muffled by the echo of tiles. She had clearly locked herself in a bathroom. "SHANE HOLLANDER!"

"Rose Landry," Shane replied. His voice came out shaky, but a wide, uncontainable smile broke across his face.

On the other side of the screen, the actress covered her own mouth with both hands, her brown eyes wide. She propped her phone up on what looked like the marble counter of a beauty salon sink and, without the slightest warning, began doing a frantic, weird, and absolutely silent victory dance, shaking her hips and punching the air.

"What is that, Rose?" Shane laughed through his nose, resting his head against the cold concrete wall of the tunnel.

"I never miss!" she celebrated in a euphoric whisper, returning to the screen and fixing her perfectly blown-out hair that had gotten messed up in the process. "Lucky for you I had gotten up to grab a soda and locked myself in the bathroom to call you, because I wasn't going to be able to hold it in! I was going to scream in the middle of the other salon clients! You can't drop a bomb like that on me via text message, you crazy man!"

"I... I don't know, I just... wanted to tell you."

"This is simply amazing. I am the literal straight cure!" Rose continued, speaking more to herself than to him, gesturing dramatically. "Perfect score! Now it is officially five for five of my ex-boyfriends who have come out as gay after being with me! My track record is flawless!"

Shane quickly turned down the call volume, laughing at her chaotic energy.

Rose finally stopped, resting her face in her hands and looking at the phone screen, her expression shifting from euphoric to deeply affectionate and attentive.

"Have you told anyone else yet? Are you okay? Do you want to talk after practice is over?"

"I told my therapist this morning," Shane nodded, rubbing his neck, inexplicably unable to stop smiling like an idiot in love with his own freedom. "And yes. For the first time in a long time, I'm really okay."

Rose softened. A proud and sweet gleam appeared in the actress's eyes.

"I have never seen you smile like that, Shane. Never."

The simple comment caught him off guard, warming his chest.

"But look here," she pointed a freshly painted fingernail at the camera, resuming her commanding posture. "Our gossip session after practice is not optional, do you hear me? I'm going to call you and you are going to answer. And I am going to guide you, because I have infinitely more experience in this than you do."

"In being... gay?" Shane frowned, instinctively looking over his shoulder to make sure the tunnel was still empty.

"No, you dummy. In having gay ex-boyfriends and thousands of gay friends," Rose corrected him, sticking her nose in the air with a funny, theatrical arrogance. "Get ready. The full interrogation begins at two in the afternoon."

[...]

As soon as Ilya walked through the front door to take Liam to soccer practice, Shane pulled his phone out of his pocket and sent a quick "ok" to Rose. He walked out to the penthouse balcony, leaning over the glass railing, and watched the Russian's black Jeep turn the corner down below, disappearing into Montreal's traffic.

The phone rang with a video call almost immediately.

"Okay, we are officially in a one hundred percent safe environment. It's just us and Florent," Rose announced as soon as the image loaded. She was sitting on the massive couch in her living room in the upscale neighborhoods of Los Angeles, adjusting her phone on a tripod on the coffee table.

"Who the hell is Florent?" Shane frowned.

"My new greyhound whippet!" Rose reached her arms out of the camera frame and pulled the animal onto the screen.

A skinny, gray, shivering little puppy sporting a neon pink and lime green knit sweater appeared on the screen, wagging its tail nervously.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?" the actress asked, her eyes shining.

"Beauty is really a very relative concept..." Shane murmured, settling onto the outdoor sofa on the balcony. Rose let out a loud laugh and let the little dog slide back to the floor.

"Alright, enough stalling. We have our main topic to discuss," Rose crossed her legs, her expression taking on a theatrical seriousness. "But, first and foremost, I want you to say the sentence out loud for me."

"Rose..." Shane rolled his eyes, his ears already burning.

"Say it, Shane!" she demanded, unyielding.

The captain sighed. He looked up at the cloudy Montreal sky, feeling his chest light.

"Alright... I am gay."

Rose let out a high-pitched squeal of pure emotion and clapped her hands frantically.

"Aaaaah! Okay, you're gay, I already knew that, wonderful! But I'm so glad you finally figured that out on your own! I am very, very happy for you, Shane."

"Since when did you know?" he asked, incredulous. "Since... that night?"

"Something like that. I already had my suspicions, but my internal denial kept screaming: 'No, Rose, it is statistically impossible for your fifth consecutive boyfriend to also be gay.' But, apparently, I was dead wrong. My radar is impeccable!"

"My bad..." Shane scratched the back of his neck, laughing nervously.

"No! Never apologize for being gay!" she pointed an accusing finger at the lens, before leaning in and grabbing a generous glass of red wine from the table.

Shane raised his eyebrows.

"Rose, it's like eleven in the morning over there in Los Angeles and you're already drinking wine?"

"It's happy hour somewhere in the world, Hollander," the redhead countered naturally, taking a sip. "But getting back on track... do you want to tell me how you're feeling about this whole wonderful thing of finally accepting that you like guys?"

"I'm going to start talking about the details with my therapist in my upcoming sessions..."

"Yes, of course. But your therapist is a professional, she has a code of ethics and isn't going to slap you in the face if you need it. I will. Because I love you and I am your best friend!" Rose retorted.

Shane laughed, shaking his head. And then, encouraged by that absolute safety net, he started talking. He described how strange it was to finally walk around his own house without feeling like he needed to carry an invisible weight. The pressure in his chest that had suddenly evaporated with the power of those simple three words.

And, inevitably, the venting led to the blond with the Slavic accent.

"And the only person... I mean, okay, not the *only* one, but the person who gets me the most... genuinely turned on is... thinking about Ilya."

Rose spat her wine back into the glass.

She coughed violently, wiping her red-stained chin with the back of her hand, her brown eyes bugging out at the screen.

"SHANE!" she choked. Right after, the shock on the actress's face melted away and morphed into an expression of deep, deep pity. "Oh, Shane..."

"I know..." Shane threw his head back against the couch, letting out a long, frustrated groan.

"Look... there might be a chance that you are maybe projecting a lot of things onto him, Shane," Rose tried to explain, using her calmest tone, which drew the captain's attention back to the screen. "Because, like it or not, he is practically the only openly queer person you interact with on a daily basis in your hockey bubble."

She shrugged, gesturing with her glass.

"And look, I completely understand your side. Because I would absolutely sit on that man, since he is incredibly hot. Even more so with that deep voice, that criminally charming Russian accent, and all that size... Oof, what a dream."

Shane grimaced, but Rose held up her hand to finish her thought.

"But, even so... even with him being a Slavic god, we have to remember the big, problematic issue, my angel: he's your son's nanny."

Chapter 18: Letters

Chapter Notes

we're getting there, hold on guys

now we have a little of Ilya's perspective on the situation

"Dobroye utro, Ilya," Dr. Galina greeted with a nod as soon as the Russian crossed the door of the office.

The immediate switch to his mother tongue was an instant relief. That was the only safe space where Ilya could untie the knots in his mind fluidly, without having to translate his traumas and anguishes into English.

"Doctor," the blond returned with a short nod, settling his massive frame onto the leather sofa in the office.

"How has your week been so far?" she asked, crossing her legs and adjusting her thin-framed glasses on her face before opening the notebook on her lap. "How are things at work with the Hollander family?"

"Shane traveled to Toronto yesterday morning for the playoff series. And he... he invited me to go watch Game 5 with him," Ilya shared, pulling one of the sofa cushions and hugging it against his stomach, an unconscious, defensive posture.

"And how did this invitation affect you regarding that emotional block we've already concluded you built to deal with him?"

Since his second month working at the penthouse, Shane had become the central—and frequently exhausting—topic of his therapy sessions. Before, it was infinitely easier to ignore the latency of the desire he felt. Ilya used his impeccable professionalism as a titanium shield, propped up by the irrefutable "certainty" that Shane was straight.

Except Shane clearly wasn't. But Ilya wanted—and needed—to believe that protective lie with the same desperate force that the captain himself seemed to cling to it.

During his almost seven years working as an elite nanny at Lily-Jane's, Ilya had become a master in the art of compartmentalizing emotions, shielding himself against any inappropriate interest in the mothers or fathers he worked for. Until Shane Hollander showed up. Svetlana spent weeks teasing him, rubbing it in his face that Shane was the hottest player in the entire NHL. Ilya wasn't blind; he had perfectly functional eyes and a brain that schemed against him. With every tease, every smile from the Canadian, the Russian was forced to lay another

cement brick on the wall separating "Shane, the boss" from the forbidden feelings the nanny should never harbor.

The peak of that endurance test occurred the night Rose and Shane broke up. When the player—vulnerable and confused in the middle of the night—heard Ilya's cynical suggestion that maybe he should buy a dildo, the Russian's mind did a thousand lethal backflips. Ilya's entire bloodstream decided, in that exact and inopportune millisecond, that it was an excellent idea to quickly migrate south, settling heavily and undeniably between his legs. Ilya had a creative imagination. A little too creative.

As he always did when cornered by something dense and dangerous, the Russian triggered his immediate defense system: humor, sarcasm, and irony. His Holy Trinity of "I don't want to deal with my feelings, please don't insist." But the terrifying truth he swallowed that night was that, if Shane had insisted... if the captain had made a single, measly reciprocal gesture toward him, Ilya would have been on the first flight the next morning requesting a permanent transfer back to the Boston branch. Because he definitely would have grabbed Shane right then and there, tearing his own code of ethics to pieces on the living room rug.

"I don't know," Ilya finally answered, shrugging his broad shoulders and avoiding the woman's analytical gaze.

"So far, Ilya, what we know as an absolute fact is that you like Shane. But you don't want to like him."

"I can't, Galina," the Russian countered, his voice gaining a harsh tone as he locked his blue eyes on her. "He is my boss and I love my career. The agency has a zero-tolerance policy, brutally clear, about things like this. Not to mention that trying to have any romance with a professional NHL player is signing a contract to live a lifetime in the shadows. I refuse to go back into the closet for any man."

"You yourself have told me several times that you never had to 'come out' of the closet here in America. That you were only inside one during your teenage years in Russia, for obvious reasons of survival," the therapist shot back surgically, making the blond huff in frustration. "But the work argument is, indeed, extremely valid. Getting involved with a boss is asking to be summarily fired and have your license revoked. However... one day, Liam is going to grow up. He won't need a nanny forever."

"When? At thirteen? He's eight. That's five years away, Galina."

"I am raising this temporal issue because you clearly don't want to find a way out of this degrading situation you've put yourself in," the therapist debated, relentless.

Ilya blinked, his entire body retreating half a centimeter, as if he had taken a physical slap to the face.

"You hurt yourself a little more every day you walk through that door," Galina continued, her tone dropping to a note of severe empathy. "You use Liam as a perfect shield, and the love for your profession as another. But that doesn't shield you from reality. Even knowing perfectly well that nothing can happen between you two right now, you stay there, orbiting this man."

Waiting for a few crumbs of attention and affection to fall on the floor so you can pick them up. And as soon as you pick them up, you hate yourself and regret it. And the cycle restarts, day after day."

She rested her steaming mug on the side table, adjusted her pen over her notebook, and proceeded, her voice carrying the same surgical precision as before.

"You even found a perfect escape valve for all this repressed frustration: the young man you went out with these past few weeks. You fought with all your might not to see it, but their names have the same sonority. The two share frighteningly similar physical traits." Galina intertwined her fingers over her knees, her dark gaze weighing heavily on the Russian. "And you ended everything not because you weren't ready, but because your conscience weighed on you. You knew it was cruel to use another person as a ghost, trying to wring out of him something he simply couldn't give you."

"I thought... I thought I might end up really liking him," Ilya murmured, his voice cracking, his hands squeezing the fabric of the cushion in his lap hard enough to turn his knuckles white.

"But he would never be Shane."

The sentence dropped into the silence of the office with the weight of an anchor.

Ilya clenched his jaw, fighting against his own biology, but the involuntary tremor in his chin betrayed him. He quickly averted his burning gaze to the office window, desperately focusing his attention on the blurred movement of the cars through the gaps in the blinds, refusing to let the hot tears fall.

"You have a paralyzing terror of real relationships, Il'ya. And yet, you continue actively searching for them, always in impossible or unsustainable situations, as a silent form of self-flagellation," Galina pointed out, diving into the core of the trauma they had been dissecting for years. "You have a sickening fear of losing control and becoming an abusive and aggressive man like your father. And, as penance for that fear, you spend your entire life seeking out situations where you walk away with a broken heart... accepting being hurt over and over again, taking on the exact same victim role that your mother had."

"And how do I stop?"

The question escaped in a thread of a voice, breaking Ilya's unshakable swagger. He raised his blue eyes, now shining and tearful, pleading for an answer from the therapist.

Galina let out a long, heavy sigh, leaning back in her armchair.

"You need to let go, Il'ya. You still actively hate your father for absolutely everything he did. And that is extremely valid; he was a monster in your life and in your mother's life. But you will never, ever be able to be genuinely happy if you allow his ghost to continue haunting your head and dictating your choices."

She gestured softly, with an open palm, asking him to pay attention to every word.

"You need to learn to discover who Ilya is inside a relationship. And, to do that, you have to untie the moorings. You have to let Grigori and Irina go."

The Russian let out a bitter, defensive laugh. Sarcasm, his old and rusty shield, instantly rising in the face of vulnerability.

"And what do I do to make that happen? Call my dad in Russia right now and curse him out until I lose my voice? Or do I look for an ouija board to try to talk to my dead mother?!"

"I was going to suggest something much simpler: that you write a letter," Galina remained unfazed by his sarcastic outburst. She raised both hands in a placating gesture and then stretched her arm across the coffee table, pushing the box of tissues closer to the Russian's knee. "For your mother, I recommend that you write down everything you feel, everything you couldn't say, and then burn the paper. It's a physical and symbolic gesture to purge the pain and let everything bad go away with the smoke."

She took a brief pause, letting the idea settle.

"For your father... you can do the exact same ritual, or you can decide to put the words in an envelope, seal it, and send it to him. The destination of Grigori's letter is entirely your choice."

Ilya pulled a tissue from the box roughly, the frustration and ancient grief mixing into an impenetrable knot in his throat.

"My mother was such a good person, Galina..." his voice broke, his chin trembling again and bringing down the final barrier of his stoic posture. The deep-rooted pain of a boy who couldn't save the woman he loved overflowed in the words. "It's not fair that I do this to her. It's not fair that I just leave her behind."

The therapist tilted her head, her dark gaze overflowing with a deep, silent empathy.

"And good people want to see the people they love happy, don't they?" she asked with a piercing sweetness. "Good mothers, above anything else, want their children to be happy and free, Il'ya. And you are not happy."

[...]

On Thursday, the routine was summarily broken. Instead of going to Liam's traditional soccer practice, Ilya drove the Jeep straight to Trudeau International Airport. There, they met up with Yuna and David to board the short commercial flight destined for Toronto.

The purpose of the trip was singular, definitive, and exuded tension: watching Game 5 of the first round of the playoffs. If the Metros won on enemy ice that night, their spot in the second round would be mathematically guaranteed, and the Toronto Guardians would be humiliatingly eliminated on their own home turf.

Inside the plane's first-class cabin, Liam, obviously, made absolutely sure to sit by the window. Yuna yielded the seat to her grandson with an indulgent smile and settled into the aisle seat. The final configuration left Ilya squeezed into the middle seat. David, in turn, sat in the center row of the aircraft, right next to them, already immersed in reading a hardcover tome.

Ilya shot a sideways glance at the page the older man was reading and narrowed his eyes.

"Is that a book about the Romanov dynasty and Russian Tsarism?" the blond frowned, genuinely surprised.

Yuna looked up from her phone screen, glancing back and forth between Ilya and her husband. She let out a long sigh.

"Yes, it is," she agreed, adjusting her reading glasses on the bridge of her nose. "David has spent the last two weeks binge-watching a bunch of documentaries on Imperial Russia. Why do you think I made a point of sitting between the two of you? To keep him from interrogating you for three straight hours during the flight."

Ilya let out a low, nasal laugh.

"It is a highly interesting subject!" David defended himself promptly, marking the page of the book with his index finger. "It is important and extremely cultured to learn about the complexity of cultures different from our own, Yuna."

"Oh, sure. And why don't you take this inexhaustible thirst for culture of yours and go read about the Edo Period, or about your own wife's family's Japanese history?" she mocked, her tongue sharp and quick.

"General Winter is fascinating, Ilya. Pure strategy," David pointed to the cover of the book, surgically ignoring his wife's teasing and making the Russian let out a sincere laugh.

"Who's that? Is he a real Russian soldier?" Liam intruded on the conversation, leaning over Ilya's arm and temporarily abandoning his new illustrated book on marine biology.

"He is the greatest of all soldiers, Akula," Ilya answered, turning his face to the boy with a didactic smile and the tone of voice he used for telling stories. "A long time ago, a very arrogant French general decided to try and invade Russia with his army. But he wasn't expecting that a single Russian 'soldier' could defeat and destroy his gigantic army all by himself."

"Just one?!" Liam's almond-shaped eyes widened in pure shock and admiration.

"Just one," Ilya confirmed, building theatrical suspense before the reveal. "Because this French general decided to march his troops straight into Russia right in the middle of winter. Which is just as strong, as freezing, and as unforgiving as the worst winter here in Canada. So it wasn't an armed person who defeated them. The snow, the ice, and the cold destroyed the invaders. 'General Winter'."

Liam processed the information for a second, his eyebrows furrowed in disbelief.

"He lost the entire war to the weather?!" the boy asked, indignant. Ilya nodded. "What a dummy general!"

Liam's absolute sincerity and perplexed tone drew loud, amused laughs from Ilya, Yuna, and David, momentarily breaking the heavy playoff tension that hung over the trip to Toronto.

Once the plane reached cruising altitude and the seatbelt sign was turned off, Ilya opened his backpack. He pulled out his dark-covered notebook and a pencil. He was halfway through the letter Dr. Galina had instructed him to write to Irina. The letter to Grigori was already finished—written that very morning, before picking Liam up from school, in a burst of contained anger and resentment. The letter to his mother, however, required a vulnerability that tightened his throat.

He was immersed in the foreign letters when a little voice snapped him out of his trance.

"Bash and I looked up the Russian alphabet once. You guys have a lot more letters than we do, don't you?" Liam, who was carefully observing the page, commented, noticing that the nanny definitely wasn't writing in English.

"Why did you guys look that up? And, by the way, the correct name is the Cyrillic alphabet," Ilya answered, momentarily closing the notebook and looking at the boy with a smirk.

"In one of our art classes, the teacher asked us to write the most different name we knew. And if it was from another language, with another alphabet, we had to try and write it in that real alphabet," Liam explained, swinging his legs that didn't reach the floor. The excitement in the boy's voice even caught Yuna's attention in the seat next to them. "So I chose Grandma Yuna's name and yours. The teacher let us use the computer to search how to write them."

"You know how to draw the kanji for my name? Not even your dad knows how to do that to this day!" Yuna commented, her almond eyes wide in a mix of shock and pure pride.

Liam nodded, puffing out his little chest. Ilya decided to test the veracity of the claim. He opened the notebook to the last page, completely blank, and handed the pencil to the boy. Liam rested the notebook on his lap, pursed his lips in absolute concentration, and began to draw the complex strokes of the kanji for his grandmother's name.

"Lord, not even I know how to write the kanji for her name. But, in my defense, there are three different ways you can write it," David chimed in from the center aisle seats, lowering his book on Tsars to watch the scene.

"Here!" Liam turned the notebook around.

Yuna leaned in close, covering her mouth with her hand. She looked from Liam to Ilya, amazed.

"He nailed it," the matriarch declared, her voice overflowing with pride. "And how do you write Ilya's name in your Cyrillic, buddy?"

Liam took the notebook back and, with the same concentration and the tip of his tongue sticking out, drew the characters in slightly shaky, childlike handwriting: *Илья*.

"Wow..." the Russian murmured, genuinely touched to see his own name in the crooked letters made by the boy. "Want to see how you write my whole name in the Cyrillic alphabet?"

"Show me, show me, show me!" Liam hurriedly handed the pencil back.

Ilya rested the notebook and wrote with his quick, fluid handwriting: *Илья Григорьевич Розанов*.

"Wow, what weird writing," Liam judged right away, with the relentless frankness of children.

Ilya laughed through his nose, amused by the audacity. Then, he wrote another line right below it: *Лиа́м Шейне́вич Холла́ндер*.

"And what's this bottom one?"

"It's your whole name," the Russian revealed, writing the English translation right underneath so the boy would understand perfectly. "In Russia, everyone gets a middle name, which is called a patronymic. It always comes from our dad's name. So yours would be something like this, mixing your dad's name, Shane, with the ending 'ich,' because you're a boy. If you were a girl, it would end in 'na'."

"And what is your middle name?" Liam tilted his head, curious.

"Grigoryevich," the blond pronounced perfectly, the weight of his father's name sounding bitter on his own tongue, but keeping his expression soft for the child. "Because my dad's name is Grigori."

"And if you had a son? What would his middle name be?"

"Ilyich," the Russian wrote the letters in Cyrillic on the paper to illustrate.

"What about Dad? Would he have Grandpa David's name in the middle, then?"

"He would. It would be something like this..." Ilya wrote David's name and adapted it to the Russian rule, scribbling the last line on the page for the boy to admire: *Шейн Давидович Холландер*.

[...]

The first thing they did upon landing in Toronto was drop their bags in the luxurious hotel room Shane had booked on the same floor where the team was staying. Then, they headed

down to the lounge area. The space was enormous, equipped with foosball, card, and pool tables. From afar, Liam spotted his dad, who was in the middle of a doubles match with Hayden against J.J. and Viktor Andropov.

"Daddy!" Liam bolted toward the table.

Shane turned around instantly, handing his pool cue to Hayden and opening his arms.

"Hey!" The captain caught his son mid-air, spinning the boy in his arms in a tight hug and planting a loud kiss on his cheek.

Ilya stopped a few steps behind, his hands shoved in his jacket pockets and a discreet smile on his face as he watched the scene.

"How was the flight, buddy?" Shane asked, setting his son back down on the floor.

"It was really cool! I learned how to write my name, your name, and Ilya's name in the Cyrillo alphabet!"

"Cyrillic," Ilya corrected softly right behind him.

"Cyrillic," Liam repeated, looking at his dad.

Shane couldn't hold back a laugh.

"Oh, yeah?" Viktor Andropov, the Metros' giant Russian defenseman, leaned against the edge of the pool table, raising an eyebrow at the boy. "I definitely have to see this."

Viktor dropped his own cue, reached into his gear bag resting nearby—in a few hours they would be heading to the arena—and pulled out a notepad and a pen, holding them out to the boy.

"Impress me, Mister Hollander."

Liam took the notepad and leaned on the corner of the pool table, standing on his tiptoes to be able to write properly.

"Priviet, Rozanov." Viktor nodded.

"Priviet, Andropov." Ilya and the defenseman exchanged a firm handshake, switching to their native language. "*On umel pisat' moyo imya—pochemu by ne nauchit' yego yeshcho pare veshchey?*" (He knew how to write my name—why not teach him a couple more things?)

"*Naprimer, kak poslat' kogo-nibud' na kher,*" Viktor replied, his tone laden with Slavic mischief, drawing a genuine, loose laugh from Ilya. "*Samoye luchsheye—Sheyn dazhe ne budet znat', chto on eto delayet.*" (For example, how to tell someone to go fuck themselves. The best part—Shane won't even know he's doing it.)

Shane narrowed his eyes at the two big guys.

"Hey, I definitely heard my name in the middle of that suspicious conversation."

Viktor raised both hands in comical surrender, exchanging a knowing, amused look with Ilya.

"Here!" Liam turned the notepad around to the defenseman.

"*Blyat!*" Viktor let out a surprised laugh as he read the perfect spelling of Ilya's full name on the paper. He looked at the captain. "It's official, Shane. Your son speaks three languages."

"A polyglot, in this case. Liam also knows how to write the kanji for Yuna's name perfectly," Ilya added, his chest puffing up with an almost paternal pride.

Shane rubbed the back of his neck, covering his face with his other hand.

"I don't know how to write my mom's kanji."

"Yeah, your mom made a point of saying that on the plane," Ilya laughed at his boss's embarrassment.

"Let's see if you know the whole alphabet yet, then... Can you read this here for me, Li?" Andropov took the notepad, scribbled a short sentence, and showed it to the child.

Liam frowned at the letters. Slowly, in an instinctive movement, the boy took a few steps back until he bumped into Ilya's legs, using the Russian's body as a shield and a consultation base.

On the paper, it was written: Мой папа глупый.

Ilya read the sentence. He held back his laughter instantly, biting the inside of his cheek and shooting a sideways glance at Shane, who immediately realized it was some joke at his expense. Viktor's face was already red from holding in his laughter.

"What does this last word here mean?" Liam pointed to the paper and whispered to Ilya, as if no one else could hear.

Ilya crouched down to the boy's height.

"*Glupyy*. It means 'dummy'," the Russian whispered back.

Liam turned his face to Shane instantly and pointed an accusing finger at the Russian defenseman.

"He's the one who wrote it! Viktor wrote that my dad is a dummy!"

"And we fully agree!" J.J. and Hayden yelled in unison from the other side of the table.

Shane shot his teammate a death glare.

"I have a solid wood cue perfectly within my reach, Viktor. You better run."

The Russian just burst out laughing. Shane huffed, shaking his head, and reached out to take the notepad from his son's hand to verify the offense. But the exact second the captain's eyes hit the paper, the smile evaporated from his lips. All the oxygen seemed to be drained from the room.

He didn't know how to read Russian. But the second word of the sentence burned into his retina.

"nana"

Weeks ago, in the lonely early morning hours after masturbating and while washing his own bedsheets, Shane had opened Liam's school backpack. He had seen the sketchbook. The gigantic figure of the nanny colored in crayon and a strange word, with angular letters, written next to it: *"Папа Илья."*

Shane, in his Western ignorance and naive tranquility, had sworn it was just his son's childish attempt, with crooked handwriting, trying to write the word "nanny."

The dark, overwhelming math finally pieced itself together in his mind.

"Does this..." Shane swallowed hard, feeling his tongue turn to sandpaper, forcing his own voice not to crack. He pointed a slightly trembling finger at the word on the paper. "Does this word here mean *dad*?"

"*Da*," Viktor and Ilya replied together, nodding casually. Liam also nodded frantically.

The floor beneath Shane's feet seemed to open up. His son had drawn Ilya and labeled him, in no uncertain terms, as "Dad Ilya."

"And... how did you already know that word by heart, Liam?" Shane tried to sound as natural and conversational as possible, fighting the desperate tingling that crept up his legs and the panic squeezing his throat.

"Oh, I searched it on the iPad with Bash at school in art class!" Liam answered with the lightness of someone commenting on the weather. "We looked up a bunch of cool Russian words for me to know. That one was really easy to memorize!"

[...]

The final score cemented a merciless 6-1 victory for the Montreal Metros.

The arena in Toronto mourned the brutal elimination, but the locker room and the streets of Montreal were certainly ablaze celebrating their guaranteed spot in the second round of the playoffs. After the phenomenal performance on the ice, the dynamic of the night split: the entire team went out to get drunk and celebrate—and, to everyone's shock, even Shane joined them.

Meanwhile, the family rear guard retreated to the luxury hotel. David and Yuna went upstairs with Liam, who passed out the second his head hit the pillow. Rose Landry, who had watched the massacre on the ice straight from the VIP section with the Hollanders, also went back with them, since her own hotel was at the end of the same street.

Ilya, however, couldn't sleep.

The Russian was out by the hotel pool. Sitting on an isolated lounge chair, he watched the city lights reflect in the chlorinated water while he finished writing the letter to Irina. To bear the weight of his own words, he was taking advantage of the isolation to smoke. One cigarette after another. Almost an entire row of the pack had already turned to ash.

"Ilya?"

The female voice pulled him from his trance. He turned his face over his shoulder and saw Rose approaching. The Hollywood star was completely stripped of her usual glamour: she wore only comfortable jeans and a baggy t-shirt, her face washed bare of any makeup and her red hair tied in a loose bun.

"Hey, girl" she smiled weakly. "Are you busy?"

"Not really..." He answered, his voice hoarse, letting the pencil slip onto the open notebook on his lap. "Therapy homework."

Rose walked over and sat on the lounge chair next to his, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Ah. Is that the one where you write down everything bad you feel about someone in your life and then burn the paper? My therapist in Los Angeles had me do that exact thing with my mom."

"And did it work?" Ilya asked, tapping the cigarette ash into an empty paper coffee cup he had snagged from the lobby.

"It took a lot off my chest, yeah," Rose explained, the serene tone of someone who had truly processed their ghosts. "My mom was always too hard on me. I was the only girl in a house with three older brothers, so all the pressure regarding aesthetics, behavior, perfection... fell entirely on me."

She shrugged, looking out at the pool water.

"Some of the things I wrote in that letter, I actually managed to gather the courage to say to her face after a while. And, miraculously, she listened to me and started going to therapy too."

Ilya stayed silent for a moment, absorbing the normalcy of Rose's trauma. He looked down at his own Cyrillic handwriting on the paper.

"Yeah... I'm just going to burn mine," he pressed his lips into a hard line, watching the actress blink softly in confusion. "My mom killed herself when I was twelve."

Rose drew in an audible breath. Genuine shock stamped her features. Nobody was ever prepared for the weight of that sentence.

"This letter on my lap is for her," Ilya continued, his voice frighteningly monotone. He raised his hand and took a deep drag of the cigarette. "And I already wrote one to my dad this morning. I might even mail his. He'll forget he read it the next day, anyway."

"My God, Ilya..." Rose whispered. She tried to collect herself. "If you want to talk about it... I mean, I only came down the street because Miles, my friend I'm traveling with, has company in his room and kicked me out."

Ilya let out a scraping laugh, the acidic humor serving as a momentary relief.

"My therapist thinks I'm so afraid of becoming my dad, that I ended up becoming my mom in my relationships," the blond shrugged, staring at the glowing ember of the cigarette burning in the dark. "He hit her. Constantly."

Rose closed her eyes for a second. Without hesitating, she leaned toward him and placed her warm, delicate hand over the Russian's strong forearm, in a gesture of silent, unshakeable support.

"I'm sorry. I am so, so sorry, Ilya."

"And you want to know what makes me even angrier?" Ilya's jaw clenched, the ancient anger finally leaking through the crack in his armor. "What drives me crazy is that he simply forgot he did all those atrocities. My dad has advanced dementia. He won't make it past this year, I know that. And this shitty disease only makes me want to believe even more in the existence of Heaven and Hell. Because I really want, with all my might, for him to go straight to Hell and rot there. Just to guarantee he never lays a finger on my mom in Heaven."

Silence swallowed the pool area. The distant noise of Toronto traffic seemed not to belong to that space.

"What was she like?" Rose asked sweetly, squeezing his arm. "Your mom."

Ilya let the smoke out slowly through his nose. The tension in his shoulders eased a fraction of a millimeter.

"She was very funny. And beautiful." A tiny, ghostly smile touched the Russian's lips as he looked at her name in the notebook. "But she was also very sad. She had postpartum depression. She had her first episode when my older brother, Alexei, was born. But when I was born, things got irreversibly worse... Since she killed herself years after I was born, Alexei says in no uncertain terms that it was my fault. That I broke her mind."

"What?!" Rose's understanding features vanished, replaced by a lethal indignation. "Of course it wasn't your fault, Ilya! With absolutely no respect to his grief, your brother can go fuck himself!"

Ilya let out a hoarse, genuine laugh, agreeing with the actress's protective fury. He brought the cigarette to his lips again, blowing the smoke away from her.

"Your mother was sick. She needed medical help that, unfortunately, she didn't manage to get in time," Rose said with a piercing firmness, not letting go of his arm. "And I am absolutely certain that, wherever she is, she would be immensely proud to see that you, unlike your father and your brother, are having the courage to seek that help. To heal yourself. To rid yourself of all this garbage they threw on you."

"I stopped caring about what Alexei thinks many years ago," Ilya shrugged, an exhausted movement, but one that carried a genuine relief. "At first, when I was younger, I was always begging for his approval. But then I realized it wasn't worth the effort to try and fix something I didn't even break."

"Exactly," Rose agreed, nodding slowly.

"And... maybe it's also no longer worth spending all my energy living with this constant terror of becoming my father," he admitted, his voice sounding almost surprised by his own conclusion.

Rose tilted her head softly, a sly, sweet, and perceptive smile illuminating her makeup-free face.

"It's that old saying, Ilya: you'll never know if you're really bad at something, or if you hate something, if you never allow yourself to take the risk. Just look at our Shane."

Ilya frowned slightly, and she continued, gesturing with her hands:

"The guy is the living definition of control and rigidity. But today he forced himself to go party with the guys on the team. Most likely, right at this exact hour, he must be curled up in the corner of some VIP club, leaning against a wall and internally begging to die or go home to eat lasagna. But the point is: he tried to go. He risked stepping out of his comfort zone."

Ilya let out a sincere, nasal laugh, the image of the Metros captain's social despair forming clearly in his mind.

He looked back down at the lines of his letter in the notebook resting on his thighs. There was nothing left to be said, no new pain to be excavated. His chest felt surprisingly empty. Holding the cigarette between his lips, he picked up the pencil one last time and firmly traced a single final sentence at the bottom of the page:

Я люблю тебя, мама. (*I love you, Mom*).

Setting the pencil aside, he grabbed the edge of the page and tore it from the spiral with a sharp rip.

"Feeling more relieved?" Rose asked, holding an encouraging and incredibly patient gaze.

"I'd be infinitely more relieved if I could physically set my dad on fire," he mumbled with dark humor.

Rose covered her mouth with both hands to smother a loud laugh, her shoulders shaking.

Ilya folded the paper carefully. Next, he also tore out the page where he had poured out all his fury and resentment in the letter to Grigori. He put the notebook away and took the metal lighter out of his pocket. The sound of the lid flicking open echoed across the pool deck, followed by the hiss of the spark.

"He's controlled my life, my mind, and my fear for far too long," the Russian declared. His icy blue eyes reflected the small yellow flame of the lighter.

"That's right. Burn it all," Rose encouraged. She leaned over, grabbed the thick paper cup Ilya was using as an ashtray, and placed it on the stone floor, right in the center between the two lounge chairs, to serve as a makeshift cauldron.

Ilya touched the flame to the corners of the two joined letters. The paper caught fire quickly, the orange glow illuminating both of their faces in the dim light of the night. He watched the flames consume the ink, the Cyrillic, the guilt, and the grief. When the fire threatened to lick the tips of his fingers, he let the pages drop into the cup, watching in silence as the last remnants of paper writhed and turned to dark ash under the cold Toronto breeze.

The silence that settled was no longer dense or suffocating. It was clean.

Rose leaned back on the lounge chair, crossing her legs. An amused, mischievous gleam returned to dance in the actress's brown eyes.

"So... does this mean we'll have a single, mingling Ilya on the loose from now on?"

Ilya looked down at the smoking ashes and then at the smile of the woman next to him. The wall of ice he had kept up for years finally seemed to be melting. A tiny, hesitant, but undeniably real smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"Yes," the Russian sighed, taking a drag of the rest of the cigarette with an unprecedented lightness. "I think so. Probably."

"Speak of the devil..." Rose murmured, pointing her chin toward the massive glass walls that separated the pool area from the hotel's main lobby.

Ilya turned his face right away. Through the transparent glass, he saw the unmistakable figure of Shane walking through the automatic doors. The captain was walking somewhat crookedly, dragging his feet with his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his leather jacket, his head down in a posture of absolute social defeat.

"Two hours. That must be his personal record for survival in a nightclub," the redhead commented, checking the time on her phone.

"Tell me about it," the Russian laughed softly, following the Canadian's path with his eyes.

Shane was dressed tragically simple: his worn leather jacket, a basic black t-shirt that molded to his chest, and jeans. On anyone else, it would be mundane. But it was Shane Hollander. And he looked annoyingly, absurdly handsome.

This time, Ilya didn't try to look away. He didn't raise his mental shield of ice and didn't list the thirty ethical reasons why he shouldn't be checking out his boss. He just allowed himself to look. And appreciate. The massive, bureaucratic question of how this would affect his career at the agency would be a problem for future Ilya. Present Ilya was exhausted from denying himself the basic right to enjoy things. And to enjoy people.

"Shane!" Rose called out loudly, putting two fingers in her mouth and letting out a shrill whistle that cut through the silence of the lobby.

The player stopped in his tracks, blinked dazedly, and turned his head until he found them in the semi-darkness of the pool area. He changed course and walked through the access arch, making his way slowly to the lounge chairs.

"What the hell are you guys doing out here in the dark?" Shane asked. His voice came out slurred, his syllables slightly jumbled together. The captain was undeniably drunk.

"Burning Ilya's dad," Rose answered with the greatest naturalness in the world.

Ilya let out a nasal laugh at her dark frankness. Shane, on the other hand, froze in place. He raised his eyebrows, his intoxicated mind struggling to process the information, and stopped exactly next to the Russian's lounge chair.

"How much did you drink, Hollander?" Rose asked, crossing her arms.

"J.J. gave me something over at the bar. I don't know what it was, but it had a very... questionable color," Shane confessed, putting a hand on his stomach and holding back a burp with a grimace.

"What do you mean, questionable color?" Rose asked, a sly smile already appearing on her lips.

"It was this... translucent white, thick liquid," Shane replied, his face twisting into a grimace of genuine disgust.

"Cum in My Mouth," Rose and Ilya said in unison. Their tone came out so synchronized and clinical it sounded rehearsed.

Shane widened his dark eyes, staring at the actress and then at the nanny.

"Oh, gross..." the Canadian grumbled, his shoulders rising as a shiver of revulsion ran down his spine.

"It's not bad," the two said in unison again.

Shane froze. He turned his head painstakingly slowly, blinking lethargically as he looked from Rose to Ilya.

"Are you talking about the shot... or...?"

"The shot," Rose shook her head, holding back her laughter.

"Yes," Ilya answered enigmatically.

The Russian didn't specify what he was agreeing with. He just held Shane's desperate, confused gaze for a second longer than necessary before bringing the cigarette to his lips, taking the last drag of the night, and crushing the butt against the cold ashes at the bottom of the paper cup.

Shane swallowed hard. The Canadian's cheekbones gained a reddish hue that wasn't just the effect of the alcohol. Searching for stability, he let out a heavy breath and dropped down, sitting right at the foot of Ilya's lounge chair. The player's weight sank the upholstery, and the Russian made no motion to pull his legs back.

"So you guys are out here... I don't know, burning his dad," Shane murmured, pointing his finger at the paper cup on the ground, watching the small trail of smoke still rising from the dark ashes. The alcohol seemed to have removed the containment filters from his mind, because the following words spilled out of his mouth before he could stop them. "Did you know that Liam drew us a while ago and wrote your name on the drawing, Ilya?"

"Liam loves to draw. It's not the first time he's done that for me," Ilya shrugged, settling back against the chair, his voice low and calm.

Shane looked down at his own hands resting on his knees. He shook his head slowly, his jaw tense.

"Yeah. But he also wrote the word 'dad' in Russian right in front of your name."

"Uhm... when I worked taking care of Cliff Marleau's nephews, the boys were always saying I was like a father to them too," Ilya replied, breaking the thick silence that had settled. His voice sounded controlled, polite, taking on an almost didactic tone. "Because they had two moms, in that case. So I ended up becoming the most present male figure in their routine. Kids make those kinds of associations all the time, Shane."

Rose, on the other lounge chair, remained absolutely silent. She just crossed her legs, her sharp blue eyes darting from the player's painfully vulnerable face to the nanny's suddenly defensive posture. She knew exactly what Ilya was doing. And Ilya did too.

The Russian knew perfectly well that wasn't what Shane was trying to say. He could read the mute urgency, the confusion, and the intensity begging for a reaction between the lines of the captain's dark, drunken gaze.

But Shane was drunk. And, above anything else, Ilya's vulnerability quota for that night had already evaporated. The wall of ice, which minutes before had seemed to be melting, was hastily rebuilt.

He simply had no vital energy left to dissect Shane Hollander's crises and confusing feelings. All the Russian desperately needed right now was to end that conversation, go up to the isolation of his own room, and cry until he dried out the ancient pain that the letters had excavated from his chest.

He needed to fall apart alone so that, when the sun rose over Toronto the next day, he could put on his iron armor and pretend, with the same impeccable mastery as always, that everything was absolutely fine.

Chapter 19: Unhappy birthday

Chapter Notes

I did a lot of thinking about what to do in this chapter, and this was the best way I could write what I wanted, so, hope you guys enjoy

don't hate me and don't hate baby ilya pls

The day before Game 1 of the second round of the playoffs against the dreaded New York Admirals was marked by a rare, and absolutely necessary, calm.

Shane, Hayden, and J.J. were sprawled across the wooden benches of a tree-lined park in Montreal. A few meters away, their kids ran and played with a larger group of children under the afternoon sun, allowing the three players to enjoy their last moments of peace before diving headfirst into another round of pure stress and ice.

The topic of the moment, inevitably, was Scott Hunter, the Admirals' star player, who had been delivering a spectacular performance. He had scored at least two goals in absolutely every playoff game so far, being the main reason the Boston Raiders were kicked out of the Stanley Cup race as early as Game 4.

"What are the chances Hunter is doped to the gills?" Hayden raised an eyebrow, adjusting little Amber in his lap to give her a bottle, while keeping an eye on Arthur, who was playing in the sandbox under the supervision of the other boys' mothers.

"Zero. The league does surprise drug tests all the time, you idiot," Shane murmured, leaning back on the bench with his arms stretched out over the backrest.

"So maybe he's fucking frantically?" Hayden threw another theory into the air. "I always play way better after I get laid."

"Oh, well that perfectly explains why you've been playing like that lately," J.J. didn't miss a beat for the joke, scrolling through his Instagram feed with his thumb disinterestedly.

Hayden's jaw dropped in indignation, while Shane bent forward, letting out a loud, trapped laugh between the two of them on the park bench.

"Your luck, you little shit, is that I'm holding my daughter right now," Hayden pointed the baby bottle at the defenseman, who only responded with a venomous chuckle. "But my theory makes total sense. Granted, there's that legend that during playoff season you're not allowed to hook up so you don't waste energy, but maybe Hunter got himself a new girlfriend."

"Scott is a robot. He's never been seen with any woman by the media, Hayd," Shane shook his head.

"You weren't either, and out of absolutely nowhere, boom! Rose Fucking Landry," J.J. pointed out, finally putting his phone away in his sweatpants pocket. "You saw that the entire internet is theorizing that you guys got back together, right? All because she went to watch our game in Toronto and sat in the VIP area with your family."

"Rose and I are just friends. Period." Shane rolled his eyes hard.

"Uh-huh. I'm also super good friends with Jackie," Hayden teased, with the sly little smile of someone who knew his own wife. "She's my best friend, to tell the truth."

"Go fuck yourself, Hayden," Shane rolled his eyes again, shaking his head at his friends' insistence on pushing him back toward his ex-girlfriend.

"Not to mention that the paparazzi also saw her sitting in the hotel lobby in Toronto, in the middle of the night, talking to you and Ilya," J.J. pointed out, as if that were the final proof of the crime.

Before Shane could formulate a response to shut the topic down, a double chime cut through the conversation. And, like synchronized watches, both J.J.'s and Shane's phones vibrated in their pockets.

The two of them pulled out their devices. Shane unlocked his screen and saw the nanny agency's logo heading the urgent notification.

[Direct Message]

L.J.A. Co.: *Bonjour, monsieur* Hollander. We regret to inform you that our employee Ilya G. Rozanov will be unavailable for the next 5 to 8 days due to a loss in the family. We are contacting you in advance to notify you, in case you do not receive a direct and immediate response from *monsieur* Rozanov through your personal channels.

Shane's eyes scanned the words, his stomach dropping slightly. He typed a quick, automatic reply.

Shane Hollander: Okay. Thank you for letting me know.

"Fuck..." J.J. muttered beside him, his eyes fixed on his own screen.

"What happened? Did the coach move practice up?" Hayden asked, pulling the empty bottle from Amber's mouth and tossing it into the stroller, already turning the baby over his shoulder to burp her.

"Ilya's dad died," Shane replied, his voice coming out deeper and somber.

"How are you so sure? The agency's message didn't say it was his dad. At least, not in the copy they sent me," the defenseman looked at the captain in confusion, showing his screen that contained the exact same generic text.

"Yeah, man, I know. But we already knew his dad was very sick," Shane returned the look, remembering the ashes of the burned letter flying across the pool deck just a few days ago.

"His dad was sick?" Hayden frowned, finally standing up from the bench so he could rock Amber more easily.

"Advanced Alzheimer's," Shane clarified.

A grimace of immediate empathy took over Hayden's face.

"Holy shit, man. I remember very well when my grandpa developed that same disease. It's hell. He didn't even remember who he was most of the time, but, by some bizarre miracle, he still remembered my mom's and my two uncles' birthdays," Hayden commented, his features mournful at the complexity of the loss.

Silence fell over the three of them, contrasting with the happy screams of the children in the background. Shane rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the weight of the Russian's impending absence, not just in Liam's routine, but in his own.

"Do you guys think we should send him a condolence message directly right now or... wait a bit?" Shane asked, uncertain of the blond's boundaries in a moment like that, and looked at J.J. for confirmation.

"I already sent him a message while you two were sitting there talking about diseases," the defenseman turned his phone screen, showing his private chat with Ilya, making Shane stare at him with exasperation and a touch of disbelief. "What? You guys talk too slow. Life doesn't wait."

[...]

It was almost eleven at night, and Shane still hadn't sent a single message to Ilya.

Everything he typed and deleted on the screen felt monumentally stupid. *"Hey, I heard about your loss. I'm sorry you lost the dad you hated?"*

Shane had never lost someone so close—let alone someone he hated. In fact, Shane didn't hate many people. He hated Jessica, sure, but for completely different, legal reasons. It was extremely difficult for the Canadian to conceive the idea of a relationship where a son hated his own father so much. Shane loved David unconditionally; his dad had been his first best friend and still held that title.

When Shane had a bad day at school or suffered from anxiety attacks as a teenager, it was his dad who calmed him down. David would make a chocolate milkshake, throw his son's favorite blanket over his shoulders, and sit next to him on the couch to watch some Marvel movie until Shane's breathing returned to normal. There were days when the pressure of adult life and the NHL was so crushing that Shane would give absolutely anything to have one of those days back.

And, deep in his soul, he was terrified that his relationship with Liam would end up differently. Shane tried to do his best every day to be at least a third of the man David was when raising him. And, even with all that effort, he still felt like a constant failure.

He sighed, deleted the long text for the tenth time, and went with the basics.

Shane: Hi. How are you doing?

That was the highest level of elaboration he could manage. In the dim light of his own bedroom, curled up under the heavy comforters, he stared at the glow of the screen. The silence was broken only by the continuous hum of the air conditioning, the faint electrical buzz of the digital clock on the nightstand, and the distant sound of Montreal traffic.

Agonizing minutes passed. Shane kept staring at the screen until the "Read" receipt flashed and the three typing dots appeared.

Ilya: I don't know.

Three tiny words, but they carried an overwhelming weight for Shane.

Shane: I don't know if saying "I'm sorry" would sound right. From what you said at the hotel about what your dad did to your mom, I don't know what to say. So... I'm sorry you have to deal with all this baggage right now.

Ilya: At least the fact that he died gave me an excuse to come back and see my niece.

Ilya: The piano room feels even emptier than I remembered. I'm sitting here right now. The daylight looks weird, kind of ghostly. I'm halfway through my glass of vodka, just waiting for the funeral home to call so we can go to the cemetery.

Shane: It's daytime over there in Russia, right? I completely forgot about the time zone.

Ilya: Yes. And shouldn't you be sleeping? You guys have Game 1 against the Admirals scheduled for tomorrow. Stanley Cup on the line, big prize.

Shane: I already have three of those. Scott Hunter has zero.

Ilya: Almost a year working at your house and I've never seen your famous trophy room. You have one, don't you? From what they say, you win awards even for breathing.

Shane: You know that dark wooden door right next to the glass wall? In the living room. It's in there.

Ilya: I thought that was, I don't know, a junk room for expensive crap.

Shane: It is a room, yes. Originally it was supposed to be a second guest bedroom, but I remodeled it and, well, it holds a bunch of trophies and medals now.

Ilya: The few I have fit on a single rusty shelf.

Shane: Honestly? If it weren't for your knee, I think I would've really liked playing against you. Or on the same team. I don't know.

Ilya: Nah, you would've hated my guts. I was an unbearable brat on the ice.

Shane: You? A brat?

Ilya: My old coach used to say I beat my opponents because I provoked them until I made people furious and blind. Pure ragebait. And, well, that cost me my knee and the entire career I could have had in the NHL. The Raiders were eyeing me for the draft, from what I remember back then.

Shane: So we would have been sworn division rivals.

Ilya: And you would never get to eat the different types of pastas and lasagnas I make 😊

Shane: That would be the most outrageous and unacceptable part of all for Liam.

Ilya: Speaking of him, have you told him yet that I won't be showing up for the next week?

Shane: You can call me a coward. I don't know, I just haven't been able to say it yet.

Ilya: There's a kid at the agency. I trained him myself on Lily-Jane's protocols, so you can ask him to cover my hours and stay with Liam until I get back. He has excellent reviews. He's taken care of league babies too. Evan Dykstra's daughter and Nick Chouinard's three kids, over at the Centaurs.

Shane: Wow. Those guys are excellent defensemen stuck on a very bad team. What's the kid's name?

Ilya: Luca Haas. He's very sweet, he's Swiss, and he has a round teenage face, but believe me, he's actually twenty years old.

Shane: If you were the one who trained him, then I trust him with my eyes closed.

Ilya: I like him. He looks like a golden retriever puppy with a kind of funny accent.

Shane: Look who's talking.

Ilya: Hey. My accent isn't funny. It's sexy.

Shane's heart gave a dangerous leap against his ribs upon reading the word "sexy." He bit his lower lip, holding back an idiotic smile before typing his reply.

Shane: Your accent *is* funny. You can barely pronounce the word "girls" in English without stumbling.

Ilya: It's three consonants glued together (r-l-s), give me a break! My diction in Russian is absurdly better and impeccable. I'm way smarter and more articulate in Russian too.

Shane: You're very smart in English too, Ilya. You knew perfectly well what empiricism was. I had to open Google on the sly to look up the meaning when you said that.

Ilya: The basic principle of empiricism: you only acquire knowledge after testing things in practice.

Shane: See? Get some rest, nanny. And try to drink some water in between the vodka.

[...]

The Montreal Metros kicked off the second round with a bang, securing a hard-fought four-to-three victory in Game 1. On the ice, however, Shane finally got a real taste of the monster Scott Hunter had become in those playoffs—the New York Admirals' star looked ready to spill blood if it meant hoisting the Stanley Cup.

On the rest day between games, however, Shane's focus shifted entirely from the rink to his own home. It was Luca's first day.

Henrietta, the agency's ruthless supervisor, didn't seem the least bit surprised when Shane sent a message specifically demanding that Luca Haas take the temporary spot. Apparently, on the rare occasions Ilya needed to be away, he always left the Swiss guy on standby.

"So, make yourself at home. And, just to remind you, tomorrow is Tuesday, which means Liam..."

"Has soccer practice. And I need to bring apple slices with light peanut butter for a snack, along with a crustless tuna sandwich on whole wheat bread cut into triangles," Luca finished automatically, his hands shoved in his hoodie pockets, a gentle, peaceful smile on his face.

Shane blinked, caught off guard.

"Ilya sent me a literal testament via text explaining the smallest details of the little guy's routine," the boy explained, his blue eyes shining with amusement.

"Ah, okay..." Shane couldn't hold back a sly, relieved smile at the Russian's absurd efficiency, even from the other side of the world. "Uhm... well, Liam doesn't handle changes in routine very well. Especially absences. So... he might be pretty reluctant and even a bit defiant with you at first."

"Don't worry, Mr. Hollander. I have a specialization course in handling neurodivergent children. My little sister is on the autism spectrum," Luca replied with an enviable calm. And Shane had to admit to himself that Ilya was right: the kid's thick Swiss accent was, in fact, quite peculiar and funny.

"You asked for it. Good luck," Shane shook his head, gesturing toward the stairs.

They went upstairs in silence. Liam was at his bedroom desk, hunched over his notebooks, finishing his French homework for the next day. Shane knocked softly on the wood and pushed the door open.

"Hey, buddy," the captain walked in first, leaving the door wide open so Liam could see the unfamiliar figure in the hallway.

Liam lifted his head from his book immediately. His almond-shaped eyes focused on his dad and then slid over to Luca. The boy's brow furrowed in an expression of absolute distrust.

"Remember our conversation at breakfast? Where I explained that Ilya had to travel for a few days to sort out some family stuff?" Shane began, using the softest tone he could muster. "And since I still need to work, especially with the games this week, I called another trusted nanny from the agency to stay with you."

Liam ignored his dad's explanation. He locked his eyes on the newcomer.

"Are you Ilya's friend?" the boy fired off, his tone bordering on a police interrogation.

"I am," Luca answered from the doorway, gesturing politely. "May I come in?"

"Only if you know something about me. A real friend of Ilya's would know," Liam crossed his little arms over his chest, lifting his chin in a clear challenge.

Shane's eyes widened, ready to scold his son's lack of manners, but the Swiss guy remained unfazed.

"You are obsessed with sharks. And you have an awesome best friend named Mr. Bubbles," Luca replied with the same placidity, pointing directly at Liam's messy bed, where the worn-out shark plushie rested on the pillows.

Liam blinked, pulling back a millimeter. He looked away quickly, trying not to show how impressed—and mildly annoyed—he was by the intruder's accuracy.

"You can come in," the boy grumbled reluctantly. Luca took two careful steps into the room. "You talk really funny."

"That's because I'm also European, like Ilya."

"But you don't sound Russian..."

"No, I'm not. I'm from a country more in the center of Europe. Switzerland. I moved to Canada only about two years ago," Luca continued the conversation, his voice rhythmic and perfectly controlled so as not to scare the boy. "Ilya told me a lot of amazing things about you, Liam."

"Like what?" curiosity finally beat out the stubbornness.

"He told me that your best friend at school is named Bash. That you are an excellent soccer player and kick the ball really well. And... that you have a giant fear of needles."

"Ugh! That was an absolute secret!" Liam gasped, indignant at the Russian's betrayal.

Luca let out a light, crystalline laugh, and Shane couldn't hold back a breathy chuckle from the other side of the room.

"How long are you staying here?" the boy wanted to know, already accepting his new reality.

"Until Ilya gets back from his trip," Luca approached the desk and crouched down, getting perfectly at Liam's eye level. "But you know what? I can do one thing your giant Russian nanny can't."

"What?"

"*Je parle français*," Luca gave a conspiratorial wink. And that was checkmate.

Liam's eyes lit up with pure relief, realizing he finally had someone to actually help him with his homework, without them having to turn to Shane all the time.

Shane leaned against the doorframe, watching as Luca pulled up one of the upholstered stools and sat next to his son to start correcting the questions in the book. The captain crossed his arms, a feeling of deep respect warming his chest. That hypnotic ability to disarm and charm difficult children with a handful of words and a lot of empathy was, undeniably, the direct and flawless effect of Ilya's training.

Shane's phone vibrated in his hoodie pocket with a short jolt. He pulled the device out mechanically, but as soon as his eyes landed on the name glowing on the notification screen, an involuntary smile—so instant it was almost idiotic—broke across his face.

[Direct Messages]

Ilya: Luca texted me saying he was on his way to your house. How did Liam react to the news? Has he totally forgotten who I am and replaced me yet?

Shane: That is absolutely impossible. But Liam seems to like him a lot.

Ilya: Good.

The conversation died there. Short, dry, and pragmatic, exactly how Ilya operated, even more so being across the ocean dealing with his father's death. Shane stared at the screen for a few seconds, feeling that familiar, frustrating pang of wanting to prolong the contact at any cost, but ended up locking the device and putting it back in his pocket.

With Liam's situation momentarily resolved and pacified, the captain went downstairs toward his first-floor office. He needed to focus. There were dozens of tactical videos to watch and power play strategies to review against the New York Admirals' crushing defense. Besides that, he had a therapy session scheduled with Dr. Park in two hours, and he needed to organize his own restless mind before sitting in front of the camera.

Time passed in a blur of hockey statistics and frantic notes on the iPad.

When it was time for the session, Shane left the office and went back up to the second floor to lock himself in his bedroom. However, the exact instant he stepped onto the carpeted hallway, he froze.

Coming from Liam's room, the sound of loud, relaxed childish laughter echoed through the hall, mixing with Luca's light laugh and funny accent. They seemed to be genuinely enjoying some joke in French.

Shane stood static, his hand hovering in the air near his own bedroom doorknob. The sound, which by all logic should have brought only the pure relief of a father who left his son in good hands, made the Canadian's chest constrict in a painful, irrational conflict.

A sudden, sharp insecurity sank its claws into Shane's mind.

What if Luca was a little *too* friendly? What if the Swiss boy's fluent French, sweetness, and patience were easy enough to erase any homesickness? What if, suddenly, in a volatile, childish twist, Liam started preferring Luca and asked him to permanently take the Russian's place?

Shane swallowed hard, his throat suddenly tight. The icy panic that hit him in that hallway wasn't just the fear of his son losing his favorite nanny. It was the purely selfish, silent, and devastating terror that, if Liam no longer needed Ilya... he himself would lose the only valid excuse he had to keep the Russian in his house and in his life.

[...]

One piece of news Shane definitely didn't expect to receive—much less on the eve of a tense Game 5, with the series tied at two wins apiece—was a text message from Ilya. And its contents were enough to make the captain's blood boil.

[Direct Message]

Ilya: I'm going to need to stay here in Russia for two more weeks. My brother and I got into an argument, things got out of hand and he ended up hitting my bad knee. It's a minor injury, but because of the metal pins, sitting for twelve straight hours with my leg bent on a commercial plane is not a viable option right now. But I'll be back as soon as it's medically possible. I don't want to stay here another second.

Shane wasn't just furious about the fact that Ilya's absence would be prolonged for two more painful weeks. He was blinded by hatred because of his brother, Alexei. Shane had never crossed paths with the guy in his life, but he already cultivated a visceral hatred for him. Starting with the fact that he was an abusive bastard to Ilya, followed by the disgusting detail that he was openly homophobic. And, well... nobody besides Rose and Dr. Park knew, but Shane was also gay. The urge the Canadian had was to charter a jet to Moscow just to knock Alexei's teeth out with a hockey stick.

But reality knocked on the door. The delay meant that Ilya would, very likely, miss the entire final stretch of the playoffs. And, upon realizing this, a petty, exhausted, and frighteningly loud voice whispered in the back of Shane's mind: *What's the point of winning this cup, then?*

And Game 5 was, indeed, an absolute terror.

It was a dragged-out, physical, and brutal match for both teams, but one that, in the end, granted a hard-fought victory to the Admirals on New York ice. Two to one. The rivals now had three wins on the overall scoreboard, which meant the Metros were on a tightrope, fighting for survival in Game 6.

It was one hell of a birthday and Mother's Day present Shane received. The most pathetic and discouraging "two to one" of his career.

But, at least one thing during those days was worth it: Yuna loved the gift Shane bought her. The son had hunted down and won a very rare collection of ancient Japanese poetry books, the same ones she used to read with her grandmother in childhood. And Liam, with Luca's help, had folded an entire bouquet of origami flowers to give to his grandmother. In the end, Yuna probably liked the crumpled paper from her grandson a thousand times more than the priceless literature, but what mattered was her smile.

"Happy birthday, Daddy!"

Liam grabbed Shane's waist tightly. The captain was standing at the kitchen island the next morning, finishing packing a bag of healthy snacks to take on the flight back to the pressure of New York in a few hours.

"Hey!" Shane broke into a tired but genuine smile, bending down to pick his son up in his arms and returning the tight hug, burying his face in his curls. "Thanks, buddy. Uhm... I was needing exactly this hug today."

"How old are you turning?"

"Twenty-seven," Shane answered, settling the boy on his hip. "And next month is yours. Have you decided what the theme of your party is going to be this year?"

"Yeah!" Liam nodded, his eyes shining with excitement. "I want an under-the-sea party. With mermaids and dolphins for decorations. Just like in the show *H2O*!"

"Oh, okay. An aquatic theme. We'll talk to Grandma so she can start organizing a perfect themed party, then," Shane smiled, placing a lingering kiss on his son's temple.

The lock on the front door clicked. For a stupidly instinctive millisecond, Shane's heart skipped a beat, expecting to hear Ilya's deep voice with his thick accent announcing his arrival.

But it wasn't him. It was Luca.

"Good morning, Mr. Hollander. This here just arrived for you down at the building's front desk," the Swiss guy walked into the apartment, holding a perfectly wrapped cardboard package. He looked at the boy. "Hey, buddy! Have you brushed your teeth for school yet? You still need to change your clothes."

"I already brushed my teeth, Luca. But I came down first to say happy birthday to my dad," Liam shared, sliding off Shane's lap and climbing onto the island stool to try and see the mysterious package.

Luca blinked, surprised. It was obvious the temporary nanny had no idea of the date.

"Oh! Happy birthday, Mr. Hollander. Best wishes."

"Thank you, Luca," Shane gave a small smile in appreciation. He took the box and set it on the marble, starting to tear the brown paper. "Did the doorman say who left this here?"

"Nope," the Swiss guy shrugged, giving Liam two friendly pats on the shoulder. "Come on. Clothes. Now."

"Ugh, okay, okay," Liam grumbled dramatically, sliding off the stool and walking toward the stairs to the second floor.

"Watch the steps!" Shane warned on autopilot, his fingers finally finding an envelope attached to the box.

"I was already walking up the stairs normally, Dad!" Liam yelled back, indignant at the lack of trust.

Shane raised his eyebrows, genuinely shocked, and looked at the boy's back.

"Since when do you go up and down these stairs normally without Ilya or I having to call you out five times in a row?"

Liam just shrugged, without turning back, and continued on his way.

Shane laughed softly, shaking his head. While Luca moved around the kitchen to finish putting together the school lunchbox, Shane slid his finger under the flap of the envelope and pulled out the card.

"Happy Birthday to the guy who is, by far, one of the best bosses I've ever had. I really hope this package arrives on the right date, because I'm putting it in the mail more than a week before your birthday to ensure it isn't late.

Anyway. I normally gift my bosses with something basic and polite, like a pen or some wine, but in this case, I decided to put a little more effort into it. Out of all the families I've temporarily been a part of throughout my career, the Hollander family is definitely my favorite. Liam is an extraordinarily special boy and I will never have enough words to describe how amazing he is.

But you already know all of that. You're his dad. Happy birthday, Shane.

Of all the bosses I've ever had, you were the one who gave me the biggest headache. In a good way... but also in the worst and most painful sense. You were always praising my professionalism, commenting on how I was made of ice and didn't get shaken when people flirted with me on the street. I really did just ignore it. Until, suddenly, I desperately started wanting you to do it—"

Shane froze. The oxygen seemed to evaporate from the kitchen.

He pressed the card against his own chest instantly, his heart hammering against his ribs in a crazed rhythm. He blinked three times, straining his eyes. He read it wrong. He definitely read it wrong.

He pulled his hand back and read the last line again.

"Until, suddenly, I desperately started wanting you to do it."

No. He hadn't read it wrong. Holy shit, what was happening?

Without saying a single word, Shane grabbed the cardboard box and the envelope. If Luca asked any questions about the package, the captain simply didn't hear them. He took the stairs two at a time, as fast as he could, went into his own bedroom, and locked the door with a muffled thud.

With trembling hands and bated breath, he continued to read.

"—for you to flirt with me. The rules of the Lily-Jane's agency are more than explicit and strict about never, under any circumstances, having any kind of relationship with our employers (in the vast majority of cases, this is so we don't destroy marriages). But fuck, Shane... how are you supposed to keep your sanity and follow stupid rules when your boss is the fucking hottest player in the entire NHL?

I closed myself off. I built a wall of ice in my head, cementing block by block and repeating to myself: 'he's your boss, he's unattainable.' And you went ahead and absolutely destroyed everything when, in the middle of the night, you decided to ask me for advice on whether you should maybe buy a dildo.

I let myself imagine things I really shouldn't have. But I kept quiet. I swallowed it all. For Liam.

That boy is too precious and important to me for me to run the risk of ruining his life by doing something irremediably stupid with his dad.

And I know you've never told me anything concrete about your sexuality, so know that I will understand, more than completely, if you're just a curious straight guy who enjoys anal stimulation. It's okay.

But, the night before I came to Russia, I came to the conclusion that I couldn't keep pretending anymore. I was getting literally sick having to live daily, under the same roof, with someone I wanted absurdly and knew I couldn't have. And you have every right to think I'm a massive, selfish son of a bitch for dropping this bomb on you right on your birthday, after Mother's Day, and in the middle of a playoff series. But I needed to be honest. I really hope we can, at the very least, try to remain friends in the future. That's why the gift.

Mother's Day coming up made me think too much about my mom. And about how I need to stop being a coward who accepts grief and start acting the way she would want me to act. To react to life. To stop allowing myself to get hurt and take a stand on things. I really think you would have liked her a lot, Shane. You are my friend. And I don't have many true friends. My defense mechanism is always to push people away when things get too real or too bad.

I sincerely hope you don't hate me for simply using this paper to let you know I won't be working for you like this anymore. I am resigning from your house.

I will get over what I feel for you. I promise I will. And maybe, after the dust settles, we can go back to being friends, hang out. Because I've decided to be a little more selfish and admit that I don't want to lose contact with Liam. Yes, over these years I've been placed in the position of 'dad' by dozens of traumatized kids I've cared for... but none of them hit me as hard, and broke down as many barriers in me, as Liam did when he called me that.

I'm sorry. I really hope I haven't ruined your birthday with this.

And it's even a little funny to think you're exactly one month older than me.

Old man.

Signed: Ilya R."

Shane sucked in air so hard his lungs burned. He hadn't realized he was crying until the first drops blurred the ink on the paper. He rubbed his soaked face aggressively with the back of his hand, sobbing.

He dropped the card on the bed, grabbed the cardboard box, and ripped the lid off with brutal force, tearing the sides, as if Ilya were hiding inside and Shane could have the satisfaction of punching that cowardly, idiot Russian in the face for quitting and breaking his heart by mail.

But Ilya wasn't there. Obviously.

Instead, inside the box, nestled in bubble wrap, was a plushie. It was a dark gray, grumpy-looking kitten. It was wearing a perfect, detailed miniature of the Metros uniform, complete with Shane's little captain jersey. On the face of the plush kitten, someone had hand-painted small, delicate little dots to mimic the player's freckles.

And, at the bottom of the box, underneath the plushie, was a black wooden picture frame. The framed image was a montage of two photos: on one side, a photo Shane had no idea even existed—taken in some distracted moment, where the Canadian had his classic, bored, grumpy face. On the other side, the photo of that famous grumpy cat meme with the exact same facial expression of hatred for the world.

Out of all the absurdly expensive gifts, designer watches, and aged liquors he had received from millionaire friends and family over almost three decades of life... that stupid cardboard package was, by far, his favorite.

Shane hugged the plush kitten in uniform to his chest, sliding his back down the bedroom door until he sat on the floor.

"You fucking son of a bitch," Shane sobbed, laughing and crying at the same time, his red eyes locked on the grumpy face of the cloth toy.

[...]

And what else could be expected from a captain playing with a shattered mind?

The Montreal Metros lost Game 6 by a merciless five to two. Shane Hollander was not physically, mentally, or spiritually present on the ice that night. With every charge, every face-off, his mind brutally returned to the cardboard box in his hotel room, to the freckled plush kitten, and, above all, to the overwhelming fact that Ilya Rozanov felt something real for him. And that Ilya had left him.

With the Metros officially kicked out and out of the Stanley Cup race, Shane lost his last escape. Hockey was his anchor, his "off" switch to avoid dealing with real-world problems. And now, with the season suddenly over for him, the silence would be deafening. Now, Shane would be forced to think.

"Hey, Hollander."

Shane stopped in the deserted hallway of the New York arena, his equipment bag weighing heavily on his shoulder. He had just escaped the circus of press conferences and only wanted to get to the team bus. He turned around and saw Scott Hunter walking toward him, still wearing his Admirals hat, his face marked by exhaustion and the adrenaline of victory.

"Everything okay, man?" Scott approached, offering an empathetic smile that didn't match the monster he had been on the ice. "Sorry for ending your playoff run right on the day after your birthday."

"No problem, Scott. It's the game," Shane shook his head, forcing a polite smile. Exhaustion spoke louder than any rivalry. "I already have three championship rings at home. I think you deserve your first. Truly."

He said it with an honest shrug, without a single drop of bitterness, irony, or arrogance.

"Yeah... it would be pretty amazing if I finally got one," Scott sighed deeply, crossing his arms, but his dark eyes analyzed the Canadian's face. "But you didn't answer my question. Are you really okay? You look, I don't know... completely defeated. And don't take this the wrong way, but it doesn't look like it's just about the game."

Shane let out a long puff of air, rubbing his red eyes with the back of his free hand.

"I just... I've had a shitty week," Shane murmured, his honesty slipping through the cracks of his exhaustion. "I might do an emergency therapy session as soon as I get back to the hotel. Just so my therapist can look me in the face and tell me exactly what I already know, but that I desperately need to hear come out of her mouth so I can wake up to reality."

Scott let out a wheezy laugh, nodding his head in deep understanding.

"Man, I know exactly what that's like. My therapist is exactly like that. I come in, dump my stupidest problems on her, and Dr. Park just gives me a moral slap in the face to wake me up and realize the solution was right in front of me the whole time."

Shane froze.

His heart stopped beating for a full second.

Dr. Park.

Scott gestured softly, oblivious to the internal collapse he had just caused in the opposing captain. The gears in Shane's head spun frantically. *He's been my patient much longer than you have... He was scared... He has a boyfriend...*

"But anyway, I'm gonna head out before Carter shows up to drag me to some bar to celebrate and I won't be able to sleep," Scott smiled, giving a friendly pat on Shane's tense shoulder.

"S-See ya..." Shane waved back, an automatic and robotic gesture, his eyes wide as he watched the Admirals captain turn his back and disappear toward the opposing locker room.

Scott Hunter was the other gay player.

Still in a state of shock, Shane leaned against the cold concrete wall of the hallway. He dropped his bag on the floor, reached into his suit jacket pocket, and pulled out his phone, opening the chat with Rose as fast as his trembling fingers allowed.

Shane: Remember when I told you Dr. Park told me she treated another active gay player in the league?

Rose Landry 💖: I remember very well.

Rose Landry 💖: WAIT. DID YOU FIND OUT WHO IT IS?!

Rose Landry 💕: For the love of God, tell me you found out by making out with him 😊

Shane: No, Rose. That's gross.

Shane: But yes, I think I just found out who it is. I mean, there's still a tiny chance it's just another therapist with the same common Korean last name and who, by a terrible cosmic coincidence, is also his therapist.

Rose Landry 💕: Not even you believe that idiot theory of yours. Tell me everything!

Shane: I haven't been believing in a lot of things recently, Rose...

Rose Landry 💕: Wanna video call to gossip and, most importantly, to talk about the Ilya Rozanov situation?

Shane: Give me thirty minutes. When I get to my hotel room, I'll call you and cry.

Rose Landry 💕: ❤️ I'll be ready with virtual glasses of wine.

[...]

"I don't know if I should text him now, if I should wait for him to get back from his trip, I simply don't know," Shane murmured, his heavy head resting in the palm of his hand, leaning against the arm of the chair on his hotel room balcony.

Through the half-open glass door, he could hear Hayden's voice on the phone with Jackie and the kids, each complaining about some chaotic aspect of their domestic routine. The contrast between his friend's sorted-out life and his own existential crisis was almost comical.

On the phone screen in his hand, Rose sighed.

"I still think you should give yourself some space to have other experiences before rushing so eagerly to the cookie jar," she advised, painting her fingernails with surgical precision as she spoke. "Especially now that you know, spelled out in a birthday card, that the Russian wants *your* cookie as well."

"But I don't want another cookie, Rose. I want *that* cookie..." Shane groaned, throwing his head back against the chair and staring at the dark New York sky.

"Then send a fucking text to the cookie!" The redhead shook the nail polish brush in the air, declaring the overwhelming obviousness of the situation.

"But what if... I don't know..."

"No fucking 'what ifs', Shane Hollander!" Rose raised her voice, her ruthless maternal side taking full control. "You've been living a completely miserable love life for almost eight years, being haunted by a psycho ex-girlfriend, fighting for your son in court, and putting your own happiness on the back burner. You better send that message to that cookie right now! Because if you keep stalling until the dust settles, when you lose the opportunity for good, it's going to be the worst regret of your entire life. Send! The! Message!"

Shane shrank his neck instinctively, as if Rose were physically there on the balcony ready to slap him.

The captain let out a defeated but resolute sigh. He minimized the FaceTime window, opening the messaging app and tapping on Ilya's chat.

"Very good. If you want the cookie, you're going to go get your cookie," the actress encouraged, her tone turning sweet again.

"I'm going to get the cookie," Shane repeated, swallowing hard.

Shane: I read your card.

Shane: And yes, I think you're a massive asshole for doing that having the safety of an entire ocean between us right now.

Shane: And yes, I think you're an asshole for simply resigning from my life like that.

Shane: And yes, I never told you anything directly about my sexuality after that whole conversation of ours. And yes, I am gay, Ilya.

"I sent the message," Shane announced, his voice coming out in a trembling sigh. He started scratching the back of his neck anxiously, his heart beating at the base of his throat.

"I want real-time updates. I am an excellent relationship counselor," Rose replied with absolute tranquility, dipping the brush into the nail polish bottle and brushing it over her thumb.

Shane let out a nervous, nasal laugh.

"All your ex-boyfriends discovered they were gay after you, Rose..."

"Coaches don't play, Hollander. As an elite professional athlete, you of all people should know that," she shot back without blinking, drawing a genuine laugh that relieved a fraction of the tension in Shane's shoulders.

In the exact following millisecond, the "Read" notification flashed on the screen. The three typing dots appeared, disappeared, and appeared again.

"From your 'seen a ghost' face, he's typing, isn't he? Is he typing?!" Rose asked, her voice going up an octave.

"Yes! Be quiet!" Shane hissed, his dark eyes glued to the device's screen.

Ilya: I'm sorry.

Ilya: I really didn't want to do things this way, but I knew I wouldn't be able to look you in the eyes and do it in person. And I am very happy that you figured yourself out, Shane. Truly.

Shane let out the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. A wave of pure relief washed over his chest.

Shane: I don't hate you.

Ilya: Thank God... I'm sorry for ruining your birthday. And I saw the results of Game 6. You always play badly and lose focus when you have too much weighing on your mind. I'm sorry for that too.

Shane: You told me once that I apologized too much for everything. Now you're the one doing it non-stop.

Ilya: It rubbed off on me.

Shane: How's your knee after what your brother did?

Ilya: Swollen, sore, throbbing like it's broken all over again. But the doctor said I should be able to go back in two weeks.

Shane: You better come back. Because Liam's birthday is next month. And he wants you at his party.

Shane: And so do I.

The three typing dots took a little longer this time. Shane's breath caught again. The silence of the city seemed to have swallowed the balcony as he waited for the reply, until the little gray bubble finally popped up on the screen.

Ilya: It will be an honor.

Chapter 20: Champions

Chapter Notes

since it took me days to write this, i decided to give what you guys have been asking for
- tee hee

be ready for cuteness

- and i'm okay, i got distracted playing minecraft, i was building my base, sorry for taking this long

With the Metros officially out of the playoff race, Shane's schedule suddenly emptied out. Without the crushing pressure of the ice and constant travel, he was able to redirect all his energy toward something theoretically much less stressful: organizing his son's ninth birthday party.

Or, at least, he naively thought it would be less stressful.

Leaning over the kitchen island, going over the guest list on paper for the tenth time, Shane felt a familiar pang of anxiety squeeze his chest. His mind betrayed him, dragging him back to the memory of one of his own childhood birthdays. He couldn't even remember what age he was turning at the time—the experience had been so traumatic that his brain tried to erase the details—but the feeling of abandonment was unforgettable. No one. Absolutely none of the kids that little Shane had invited with such enthusiasm showed up to his party.

He swallowed hard and shook his head, forcing the phantom anguish away.

Liam's scenario was completely different. Liam was charismatic, extroverted, and, most importantly, had real friends. Bash and his parents were coming with absolute certainty; Nora had already RSVP'd and even sent a picture of the wrapped present in the trunk of her car. Bayley had also confirmed, as had Elise and Hayden's other kids. Arthur and Danny, soccer teammates a year older, would also be there, their parents having already guaranteed they would bring them.

The only logistical problem was space. Being a children's birthday party that required running around, Shane's penthouse wasn't the ideal environment. That was when Simone Dagenais proved, once again, to be an angel walking on Earth. The actress offered her own luxurious home—a property with an absurdly spacious backyard, perfect for housing the horde of children and the under-the-sea decorations Liam wanted so badly.

The adult list was the usual circle of trust: Simone and her boyfriend, Jeremy; J.J.; Hayden and Jackie; David and Yuna; Nora and her husband.

And, right at the end of the list, written with slightly heavier handwriting, was Ilya's name.

Shane knew, through brief message exchanges with the agency, that the Russian had been back in Canada for a few days, still dealing with the pain and recovery of his injured knee. Besides him, Luca was also on the list. Liam himself had put his foot down and insisted on inviting the Swiss guy, arguing with irrefutable logic that "if Ilya is going to the party, he'd like to have a friend of his there to talk to, too."

"What did the poor pen do to you, Mr. Hollander?"

Shane gave an almost comical start on the stool, his shoulders shooting up to his ears at the sound of Luca's calm voice right behind him. The Swiss boy was holding back a laugh. The captain looked down and only then realized he was gripping the ballpoint pen against the paper so hard that his knuckles were white and the plastic was creaking.

"Nothing. I just... got distracted thinking about the party logistics," Shane huffed a weak laugh, loosening his grip and dropping the pen on the counter. "Is Liam doing his homework?"

"He's already finished everything. I checked the answers and sent the little guy to the shower," Luca confirmed with a soft smile, walking behind Shane to reach the fridge and start preparing the boy's snacks for the next day.

"Okay..." Shane sighed, rubbing his face with his hands.

Luca left his own phone on the counter, next to the cutting board, while he sliced apples. Suddenly, the screen lit up with a rapid sequence of messages. The boy glanced sideways at the display and let out a small, nasal laugh, his eyes shining. When he noticed Shane watching him curiously, he flipped the device screen-down.

"Sorry," Luca apologized, his cheeks taking on a slightly rosy hue. "It's my boyfriend. He just got home from work and is already sending me voice memos complaining and gossiping about his office coworkers. People he manages to make me hate with all my might, even though I've never seen their faces in my life."

Shane laughed, a weak sound, but loaded with sincerity and a drop of good envy.

"Have you guys been together a long time?"

"Depends on how you look at it," Luca shrugged, fighting the silly little smile that insisted on tugging at his lips. "We dated in high school back in Switzerland. We ended up breaking up senior year because of college and distance. And then, out of absolutely nowhere, I move here, go for a walk downtown Montreal on a random Tuesday... and I see him walking out the door of a video game store. The world is bizarrely small sometimes."

"I'm glad you guys found each other again, Luca. Truly," Shane murmured, shaking his head softly.

He turned his eyes back to the guest list, stopping at Ilya's name. Internally, Shane's chest ached with a silent, overwhelming desire to have exactly what the boy next to him had. A relationship that was simple. An intimacy that made him smile just from the vibration of a silly text in the middle of the afternoon. Someone he could come home to at the end of the day, and who would come home to him.

[...]

"That's it, just like that. Push harder, Ilya."

The Russian grunted through his teeth, sweat dripping down his temple as he finally gave in, releasing the brutal tension of the physical therapy resistance band. He looked up and found Michelle staring at him with her hands on her hips and a priceless "are you serious, you weakling?" expression.

"Give me a break, Michelle... you've been torturing me for almost two hours," the blond panted, collapsing on his back against the soft upholstery of the clinical table.

The physical therapist crossed her arms over her impeccable lab coat, her posture unwavering.

"I'm torturing you because I know perfectly well you can push this shit a lot harder," she insisted and, without warning, abandoned her usual delicacy to let out her natural voice: thick, deep, and drawling. "How do you intend to fuck someone properly with that glass knee, huh?"

Ilya let out a loud laugh, his chest rising and falling quickly as he tried to catch his breath.

Michelle had been taking care of his physical rehab for years. The Russian had been her patient since the time when the diploma on the wall and the plaque on the office door still said Mitchell. The trust between the two was absolute, polished by hours of painful sessions and frank conversations. To Ilya, she was the exact figure of an absurdly affectionate aunt, but one who never missed a single chance to humiliate and pick on her nephews during family holidays.

"Always so poetic and delicate with words," Ilya laughed, wiping his face with his towel.

"I am a lady," she countered, softening her voice back to its melodious everyday intonation, grabbing her water bottle from the counter and tossing it at his chest. "And what about work, honey? You need to fix that leg soon so you can get back to chasing after your little brats."

"I'm only responsible for one kid now. I quit one of the houses last week," Ilya replied, sitting up with a contained groan as his knee popped, and squirting water straight into his mouth.

Michelle arched a perfectly drawn eyebrow, her gaze narrowing with immediate curiosity.

"Hmm. But why? Did something bad happen? A disagreement with the family?"

"No," he shook his head, closing the water bottle. "I just... knew that if I stayed longer, I'd end up breaking my own rules of conduct. And I didn't want to regret the damage later."

The realization hit Michelle in three seconds. She placed her flat hand over her chest, her jaw dropping in a theatrical, delightful shock.

"No way! You wanted to hook up with your boss?! Ilya Rozanov!" she laughed, relishing the high-class gossip.

"How much do you know about hockey?" the blond tested, a smirk appearing.

"I was a right wing on my high school team, damn it!" Michelle deepened her voice again, imitating a player's aggressiveness, before laughing and returning to normal. "And I love the NHL. To tell you the truth, I'm super excited for the Stanley Cup finals next week. It looks like Scott Hunter is finally going to get his ring."

Ilya moistened his lips and shrugged, adopting a falsely innocent expression.

"Well... let's just say I was working under the same roof as a Metros player and..." he let the rest of the sentence die in the air, implied.

Michelle widened her painted eyes, letting out a high-pitched scream of pure disbelief, followed by a cheeky, scandalous laugh that echoed down the clinic hallway.

"That's right, honey. Find yourself a super-hot millionaire to sugar daddy you and solve both of your lives at once," Michelle gave a little shrug with a sly smile, making Ilya roll his eyes and laugh as he grabbed his jacket.

After finishing the excruciating session, the Russian stepped out of the clinic onto the busy Montreal sidewalk. He walked with a visible limp, his body weight poorly distributed and his right leg wrapped in a thick, black compression brace.

He was just a few meters away from reaching his parked Jeep when, across the street, a figure crossing the crosswalk stole all the oxygen from his lungs.

It was Shane Hollander.

The captain was wearing a dark baseball cap pulled low and sunglasses—the universal and almost comical disguise celebrities thought was impenetrable. But not to Ilya. The Russian would be able to recognize Shane's posture, the width of his shoulders, and the way he walked in the middle of a blizzard, blindfolded.

Shane had his phone to his ear, walking with hard steps and looking deeply stressed. His shoulders were rigid under his jacket, the space between his eyebrows wrinkled in frustration, and his jaw so clenched that Ilya could see the muscle popping. The nanny knew how to identify from miles away when the Canadian wasn't having a good day.

Ilya froze in the middle of the sidewalk. He stood there, planted like a statue, for far too long.

Shane finished crossing the street, stepping onto the same sidewalk as the blond. When the player turned his head to continue on his way, he stopped dead in his tracks. Even hidden by the sunglasses, Ilya knew the exact millisecond Shane's eyes widened in shock upon recognizing him.

In the blink of an eye, Shane lowered his phone, hung up the call without saying goodbye to whoever was on the other end of the line, and started walking toward Ilya.

The Russian's brain short-circuited. Suddenly, his entire vast English vocabulary simply evaporated. The only thing Ilya managed to do was swallow hard, his hands sweating inside his jacket pockets.

The Canadian stopped a few steps away and took off his sunglasses. His beautiful, expressive almond eyes quickly scanned Ilya's face, dropped to the black brace on his knee, drifted to the facade of the rehab clinic, and finally returned to the blond's face.

"Hi," Shane said. His voice came out in a thick mix of surprise, anxiety, and unprecedented shyness.

"Hi," Ilya replied. In exactly the same pathetic way.

"I... I figured you had already come back," Shane murmured, lowering his gaze as he put his phone in his pants pocket. Ilya couldn't help but notice the slight, almost imperceptible tremble in the player's hand as he did so. "What about your knee?"

"It just got twisted, mashed, and wrenched several times in a row," Ilya replied on autopilot. Once again, he raised humor as an instinctive shield, but quickly checked himself, softening his tone. "I was going to text you to let you know I was back, but..."

"You didn't," Shane finished softly.

"I didn't," Ilya pressed his lips into a thin line.

Shane took two short steps forward, closing the distance between them. The scent of the player's woody cologne invaded Ilya's personal space.

"Are you okay? With your dad's death, the trip... and everything else?" The Canadian asked, his tone heavy with genuine concern. He shifted his gaze from one of Ilya's blue irises to the other, looking for any sign of a fracture.

Ilya stayed silent for an extra second, allowing himself to closely admire the constellation of freckles on Shane's nose in the sunlight, before finding his own voice.

"It's weird to admit this out loud, but... I have absolutely nothing tying me down over there in Russia anymore," the blond shook his head slowly. "My sister-in-law finally asked my brother for a divorce. She plans to move to Germany with her parents very soon. And she's taking my niece with her."

Shane broke into a small, sweet, relieved smile. He took two more steps forward. The distance between the two was now dangerously short for a public sidewalk.

"So it'll be a much shorter and more pleasant trip when you want to go visit her, right?"

"Considerably, yes," Ilya agreed. An involuntary, mirrored smile appeared on his lips, as if the mere presence of Shane's smile pulled his own up by gravity. "How's Liam? Has he adapted well to Luca?"

Shane's eyes softened even more upon hearing his son's name.

"He likes Luca a lot, yeah. The kid is great," Shane admitted, his voice dropping to a deep whisper. He locked his gaze on Ilya's, the intensity of the declaration in the birthday card hanging in the air between them. "But... he's never going to be you."

The weight of that sentence hit Ilya with the force of a freight train. And he knew perfectly well that Shane wasn't just speaking for Liam.

The Russian took a deep breath, feeling his chest tingle, and shook his head.

"Of course not. After all, no apprentice surpasses the master."

The palpable, electric tension broke. Shane threw his head back and let out a loud, rich, sincere laugh, the sound lighting up the Montreal sidewalk.

"Do you... do you have any plans right now, anywhere to be or...?" Shane asked. His voice stumbled slightly over his own hesitation, as he yearned with all his might for the answer to be a resounding "no."

"My original plan was to swing by and pick Anya up from her daycare," the Russian replied naturally.

Shane's face fell a fraction of a centimeter. The captain rubbed the back of his neck, already preparing the ground to retreat.

"Oh. Okay... Then, in that case, I guess we'll bump into each other..."

"Shane," Ilya interrupted him, not allowing the Canadian to retreat back into his shell of frustration and insecurity. A mischievous, amused gleam danced in the blond's blue eyes. "It's an elite daycare that operates twenty-four hours a day. I can pick her up at the exact time I want."

Relief hit Shane's chest instantly. He blinked, his lips parting into a small smile.

"Oh. Like a kennel?"

"Daycare," the Russian corrected immediately, raising his index finger in a good-humored reprimand that drew a contained, embarrassed chuckle from Shane. "I would never leave my princess dumped in just any kennel. It's a doggie daycare and spa. She's probably getting a relaxing massage right at this very moment and doesn't want to be disturbed."

Shane let out a slightly looser laugh, shaking his head at the absurd devotion that tattoo-covered giant had for a little dog.

The captain shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, his heart hammering against his ribs, but his voice coming out with renewed courage. The busy Montreal sidewalk seemed to have shrunk down to just the two of them.

"Well... in that case," Shane tilted his head softly, holding the blue gaze. "Do you want to get some coffee? Or, I don't know, just sit somewhere quieter so we can actually talk?"

[...]

Shane ordered a black coffee, thick and bitter. Ilya ordered his with a generous splash of cream, exactly as he always did in the mornings in the penthouse kitchen.

They settled into a small booth in the darkest, most isolated corner of the coffee shop, strategically far from the large glass windows and the main door to avoid any curious glances. But the instant they sat facing each other, the heavy, crushing tension returned in full force. It was a bizarre dynamic; they felt like two strangers walking on eggshells on a first blind date, rather than two grown men who had shared the same roof, the care of a child, and an undeniable domestic intimacy almost every day for the past eight months.

"You quit..." Shane murmured. The low voice finally broke the uncomfortable silence hanging over the table.

"Yes," Ilya agreed, holding the Canadian's gaze without backing down. "I had to do it, Shane."

"Why?"

"You know perfectly well why. I wrote my reasons in that card."

"But I want to hear it coming from your mouth," the captain asked, his voice sounding soft, but loaded with a raw, vulnerable need. He leaned back against the padded backrest of the booth and fixed his eyes on the Russian's face.

Ilya let out a long, exhausted sigh. His tattooed thumb started nervously scratching the cardboard sleeve of the hot cup.

"Because I started to like you. Much more than as a friend or as a boss," the blond confessed.

Shane swallowed hard, pulling back a millimeter. He didn't expect Ilya to be so brutally direct right off the bat, even knowing that relentless frankness was the Russian's trademark.

"And I refuse to run the risk of hurting Liam in the middle of a possible crossfire," Ilya continued, his firm voice outlining his non-negotiable boundaries. "Or to lose my entire career over a romantic impulse on my part."

"If a Lily-Jane's nanny gets romantically involved with their bosses..." Shane started, testing the weight of the bureaucracy that separated them.

"The person is summarily fired for cause. The agency cuts ties, and you can rarely find any other elite place that will accept your resume after breaking the code of ethics like that," Ilya explained, shaking his head grimly and staring at his own coffee. "I love my job. And I fought too hard to get where I am and have the stability I have."

"I know. I know you did," Shane nodded quickly, respecting the gravity of the other man's profession.

The Canadian leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and intertwining his fingers. He took a deep breath, opening the floodgates of his own mind in a way he had never done with anyone besides Dr. Park.

"I just... I spent the last few months trying to convince myself that it was pure madness in my head that I found you absurdly handsome," Shane admitted, his voice dropping an octave. "I told myself that this attraction was just another confusing, delayed part of my process of figuring out I was gay..."

Shane let out a dry, self-deprecating laugh, shaking his head.

"I even thought I was projecting a bunch of needs and desires onto you just because you were, ironically, one of the only openly queer people in my daily life. But that wasn't it. The truth is... maybe because I've never genuinely liked someone before in my entire life. I simply didn't know what this fucking feeling was like, or what it looked like, until it ran me over."

"Henrietta might still want to strangle me in front of everyone for whatever this turns out to be. But... I had to try to find a solution," Ilya shrugged, a relaxed movement, but one that carried the weight of an irrevocable decision.

Shane felt his heart skip a heavy beat against his ribs, his pulse racing under the weight of the Russian's intense and absurdly blue gaze.

"But is that it, then?" Ilya asked, his voice dropping to a deep timbre that vibrated through the narrow space of the booth between them.

"Is what it?" Shane swallowed hard, gripping the edge of the table to maintain what little composure he had left.

"You like me, huh?" A slow, mischievous, and undeniably teasing smile curved Ilya's lips, breaking the thick tension.

Shane let out a nervous huff, pulling the brim of his dark cap even lower in a failed attempt to hide his face, and quickly looked away at his own cup of black coffee.

"I can see perfectly well that you are blushing, Captain. The tips of your ears always turn red when you're flustered," the Russian pointed out, lethal amusement evident in every syllable.

"Shut up," Shane grumbled. But there wasn't any trace of real irritation there. Just the exhausted, relieved surrender of someone who no longer needed to hide.

The captain looked up, took his hand off the edge of the table, and let out a long sigh that seemed to empty out the denial and fear accumulated over all those months.

"Yeah. What can you do?" Shane held his gaze, a tiny, vulnerable smile finally appearing on his lips. "Like you explained to Liam yourself once at the house... we don't control our hearts."

The teasing mischief vanished from Ilya's face instantly, replaced immediately by a genuine, overwhelming intensity.

"No. We don't," the Russian agreed, his voice dropping to a raspy whisper.

Slowly, ignoring the sharp pain and discomfort in his injured leg, Ilya slid his boot under the small table. The movement was careful, calculated, and stealthy, until the side of his shoe firmly touched the side of Shane's sneaker.

The contact was physical, minimal, and invisible to anyone else in the coffee shop, but the friction sent a silent electric current shooting down the Canadian's spine. The air around the table seemed to shrink. The eye contact between the two intensified—heavy, magnetic, and, for the first time in almost a year, absolutely free of barriers.

"What do you intend to do about it?" Ilya asked, his voice calm, bringing the paper cup to his lips to take a long sip of his coffee.

Shane blinked. The captain's eyes darted from one blue iris to the other, slightly confused at first, until the realization hit him. He understood, with a crushing weight sinking into his stomach, that he was the one who had absolutely everything to lose in that scenario.

Ilya was not a public figure. The Russian had been openly bisexual for years in his personal circle and didn't have any million-dollar contracts, global brand sponsorships, or a highly conservative sports league acting as a leash. Shane's reality was brutally different. Shane carried the weight of the entire NHL on his shoulders and had no other player—except, perhaps, the unconfirmed Scott Hunter—openly gay by his side to share the media impact.

And Shane definitely didn't feel brave enough to be the first and paint that giant target on his own chest. It was all still too new, too dense, and terrifying. He had never even kissed another man in his life—purely because the only man he really wanted to kiss was sitting in front of him at that exact moment.

Scott Hunter had a boyfriend—that is, if the deduction about Dr. Park was right—and they were making it work in the most absolute, suffocating secrecy. But Shane didn't want that. Ilya Rozanov didn't deserve to be a closely guarded secret, hidden away in Shane's penthouse. And Shane didn't deserve to live in constant fear either. But, at the same time, the dread of making a false step paralyzed him completely.

"I'm not going to force you to stay in the shadows with me," Shane replied, his voice coming out choked. He squeezed the hot coffee cup between both hands, his knuckles white, using the cardboard as an anchor. "But I don't know if I can be the first active player in the league to do this... publicly. I'm already treated differently by the media because of the circus that is Liam's custody case, and for being a half-Asian captain. If I'm the first to come out of the closet, it'll just be one more giant label they slap on the gossip headlines before they even mention my name or my hockey."

Ilya listened in silence. The Russian's expression didn't waver, didn't show any trace of disappointment or pity. There was only a deep, silent understanding.

"I perfectly understand that you're not ready, Shane," the blond shook his head in a soft, measured way. Under the table, he moved his healthy leg, hooking the tip of his foot around the Canadian's ankle with a delicacy that contrasted brutally with his size, as if to anchor him back to reality. "But, maybe, to build that courage you think you don't have, it would be good for us to take small steps."

Shane let out a shaky breath, the touch on his ankle sending shivers up his leg.

"Like what?"

"Liam's birthday is on the eleventh, isn't it?" Ilya began to sketch out the plan, and Shane nodded quickly. "And since you've already done the incredible kindness of getting eliminated early, I know very well that you're not going to do absolutely anything the week before the party. You're probably going to stay locked up in the penthouse, overthinking and creating a thousand catastrophic scenarios about everything that could go wrong at his birthday."

Shane opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again, defeated. It was exactly, to the millimeter, what he would do.

"But what if, instead of spiraling alone... we went out?" Ilya suggested, his voice dropping to a confidential timbre. "What if we watched the finals game together?"

Shane's heart did a backflip against his ribs.

"Like..." he swallowed hard, his almond eyes wide. "Like a date?"

"Yeah. Like a date," Ilya confirmed. A small, sweet, and terribly dangerous smile tugged at the corner of the Russian's lips.

Shane felt his own cheeks heat up, his mind working at a thousand miles an hour, running over the logistical obstacles.

"But... but where would we do that? Any sports bar or pub showing the finals game here in Montreal is going to be packed with fans. Someone will recognize me in two minutes."

Ilya held his gaze, his blue eyes shining in the dim light of the coffee shop. He slid the simplest, most obvious, and most intimidating solution of all through the air:

"Come over to my place."

[...]

"I have a date."

Rose literally spit out the water she was drinking. The scene was cartoon-worthy, with the liquid splashing spectacularly back into the actress's kitchen sink, on the other side of the FaceTime screen.

"Excuse me?!" Her voice came out shrill and raspy from the sudden choking. She stared at the phone lens with her brown eyes wide in pure disbelief.

Shane had been locked in his own penthouse bathroom for at least ten minutes since he had returned from the coffee shop. He was leaning against the cold marble of the sink, still struggling to process the reality that he really, physically, had a date scheduled.

"With who?!" Rose screamed, her voice going up an octave. "With the cookie jar?!"

"With the cookie jar!" Shane confirmed in a euphoric whisper. A huge, silly, and completely idiotic smile bloomed on his face, pulling his cheeks until they hurt.

"YES!" Rose cheered in a deafening scream and started doing a clumsy celebratory little dance in the middle of her Los Angeles kitchen. "I knew it was going to work out! When is the date? Where are you guys going? What are you going to eat? Are *you* the food?"

"Rose! For the love of God!" Shane waved both hands in the air frantically, leaning over the sink where the phone was propped against the mirror. "Calm down. Take a deep breath, woman."

"My bad, my bad. I'm just too excited!" The redhead stopped jumping, leaning against the marble counter and staring at the camera with a full, victorious smile, still hugging the water bottle to her chest.

"We're going to watch the Stanley Cup Final together. At his place..." Shane revealed, feeling the tips of his ears heat up just from saying it out loud.

Rose froze. Her smile widened even more, taking over her face.

"Oh, my dear... You better go very well prepared."

"Prepared?" Shane frowned, his naivety screaming.

"Prepared." Rose raised and lowered her eyebrows twice in rapid succession, adopting a deliciously wicked expression.

Shane blushed so violently that the redness crept down his neck. He let out a groan of embarrassment, covering his face with both hands and ducking his head until he almost hit

his forehead on the edge of the sink.

"Shut up, Rose!" his voice came out muffled by his hands. "It is literally the first time I'm going on a date with another guy in my entire life! Don't freak me out!"

"Better safe than sorry, right?!" the actress sang, tilting her neck comically as she waited for Shane to gather the courage to return to the camera frame. The Canadian reappeared, his face still tinged dark red. "But relax, I'm just messing with you. I know our stoic Russian well enough to know he's a true gentleman. He will, at most, give you a respectful kiss on the cheek when it's time to leave so he doesn't make you uncomfortable, so you can relax."

Shane bit his lower lip, genuine nervousness taking control of the situation.

"Do you think that's all he'll do?"

"Why?" Rose's features softened, adopting a more attentive and affectionate tone. "Is that too fast? Or is it not enough for you?"

"I don't know..." Shane murmured, looking away from the lens and focusing on his own reflection in the mirror, his voice dropping to a vulnerable tone. "I definitely wouldn't turn down a real kiss."

The wicked smile returned to reign on the actress's face instantly.

"Well, lucky him, then. You actually kiss pretty well for a hockey player," Rose teased, winking at the screen.

Shane let out a loose laugh, throwing his head back before covering his burning face with his hands once more, his heart beating lightly in a way he hadn't felt in a very, very long time.

[...]

With every passing day and the grand finale approaching, Shane's anxiety level hit unprecedented peaks. The series between the New York Admirals and the Stallions was brutally tied at three-to-three. The decisive Game 7 was scheduled for the tenth—exactly the eve of Liam's ninth birthday.

Shane strongly considered texting Ilya, suggesting they postpone the date to the twelfth. He almost did it. But, with the help of emergency sessions with Dr. Park and liters of chamomile tea, he kept his cool. The captain's nervousness was so palpable that J.J. even offered him weed in the locker room to help him relax. Shane just looked at the defenseman as if he were a lunatic convinced the sky was green.

The logistical plan was solid. Luca would arrive in the late afternoon to take care of Liam, make dinner, and, if it got too late, sleep in the guest room. That left Shane with a clear path and a clean conscience to go to the Russian's place.

But, right at that moment, the plan seemed to be falling apart at the most basic step.

Shane was planted in the middle of his giant closet, wearing only boxer briefs, staring at the sea of hangers. None of those clothes seemed good enough. And, even knowing Rose was just joking about the preparation, Shane definitely wasn't going to risk looking sloppy—although he also knew that, most likely, nothing major would happen that night.

He considered calling Rose and begging for fashion advice. The actress was a fashionista by nature and always helped him out, but Shane wanted something more organic. More familiar.

Even if the alternative made him feel absolutely pathetic.

"Hi, sweetie!" Yuna answered the video call with a radiant smile. She was in the spacious kitchen of their Ottawa home, holding a piping bag full of blue frosting. In the corner of the screen, Shane could see his dad's arm stealing icing from the bowl of Liam's birthday cake. "We're just finishing decorating Li's cake. It's going straight to the fridge and then we'll bring it tomorrow for the party table. Actually, we'd be done by now if your father stopped licking the spatula!"

"It's vanilla frosting, Yuna! I love vanilla!" David defended himself, sticking his face into the camera frame. He smiled widely. "Hey, champ... and why are you shirtless in the middle of your closet?"

"Great, you're both there..." Shane muttered, the sudden urge to throw himself off the penthouse balcony crossing his mind. He rubbed his face. "Ah, to hell with it. I have a date in two hours and I have no idea what to wear. Help."

Yuna froze. The movement of the spatula stopped in the air. She stared fixedly at the phone lens, while David let out a crystal-clear, loud laugh overflowing with pride.

"That's my boy!" the older man celebrated. "Alright, focus. Is this your first date?"

"Yeah..." Shane nodded, feeling magically transported back to fifteen years old, a terrified teenager begging his parents for help.

"And where are you guys going? Going to a bar to watch the Final? Just to see if it's going to be Scott Hunter's big year of consecration. Your mother bets he takes the cup today," David wiped his hands on a dish towel and stood next to his wife. He was wearing a faded apron that Shane had hand-painted in fifth grade, with the crooked words "I love Papa David."

"It's not a public place. So... I don't necessarily need to dress up too fancy," Shane shrugged. It was then that he realized his mother still hadn't blinked. "Mom? Are you okay?"

"Uhm? Oh, I'm great! I just... wow, you're going to understand what I'm feeling when Liam gets to dating age," she dropped the spatula back into the glass bowl and set the piping bag aside, licking a bit of frosting that had fallen on her finger. "But okay, let's think calmly... What do you mean it's not a public place? You invited her over to your house on the very first date, Shane? Isn't Liam there with you?"

"Yes, Liam is here, but Luca came to stay with him. And no, the date isn't here at the house..." Shane's chin trembled slightly.

Saying exactly *that* over the phone wasn't the ideal scenario, but there was the immense advantage of being able to see David and Yuna's reactions in real-time.

"You are hiding something from us," David pointed his finger at the screen, narrowing his eyes analytically. "Your right eyebrow is twitching. You always do that when you're holding back information."

"So, wait... you're going to her house? Okay..." Yuna pondered, her eyes wandering around her own kitchen, talking more to herself than to her husband or son. "Well, not giving Liam a little brother on the very first date seems like a very prudent and reasonable attitude to me."

"Mom!" Shane made a horrified face and huffed, pinching the bridge of his nose for long seconds. "There is not the remotest possibility that I will give Liam a sibling today! Because, first: it's just a date and the goal isn't to hook up. And second..."

The captain's breath hitched. He closed his eyes tightly, drew in air, and let the words out.

"My date is with a guy."

The sentence hung on the video call. The silence lasted exactly two seconds.

"I'm gay," he opened his eyes, which were already slightly reddened from tension.

Yuna clasped her hands in front of her mouth, her dark eyes wide. David raised both eyebrows to the limit of his forehead, absorbing the information. Then, the older man slowly turned his face to his wife.

"You owe me twenty bucks," David demanded, holding his hand out to Yuna.

"David Hollander!" Yuna yelled, landing a loud smack on her husband's chest.

Shane let his jaw drop, absolutely shocked.

"Excuse me?! You... you guys bet money on my sexuality?!"

"It was over ten years ago, Shane!" Yuna quickly explained herself, trying to maintain a serious mom pose. "Which, legally, makes the bet completely void!"

"You bet on whether I was gay?!" Shane's jaw dropped. The icy dread and anxiety that had consumed him for weeks evaporated in the blink of an eye, instantly replaced by purely comical indignation.

"In my defense, you spent your entire high school years far more interested in analyzing the biomechanics and shoulder alignment of opposing players than looking at the cheerleaders your mother kept trying to push on you," David shrugged, without an ounce of guilt, adjusting his frosting-stained apron. "I just connected the dots. But Yuna swore up and down you were, at the very least, bisexual, because of Jessica and Rose."

"Jessica is a bitch who deserves hell, but Rose is a sweetheart, I had to take my lucky guess on bisexuality!" Yuna retorted promptly, before pushing her husband's shoulder and turning all her attention back to the phone screen.

The matriarch's expression softened drastically. The playful gleam vanished, giving way to a love so deep and unconditional it made Shane's throat close up.

"Oh, my love..." Yuna's voice sounded sweet and slightly choked. She brought her clean hand to the screen, as if she could touch her son's face through the call. "We love you. It doesn't matter if it's a girl, a boy, or absolutely nobody. The only thing your father and I truly care about is if you are safe, happy, and being loved with the respect you deserve."

David nodded, the proud smile returning to his face.

"What your mother said, champ. We are very proud of the man you are. And if this guy makes you smile... then he already has points with us."

Shane swallowed hard, blinking rapidly to chase away the treacherous tears that threatened to form. An invisible weight, the size of a mountain, was lifted from his shoulders. They had no idea that the guy was already a friend of theirs—that he had already had dinner with them at Shane's penthouse on a few nights, that he took a flight with them to Toronto during the playoffs.

"Thank you," his voice came out as a raspy whisper. "I love you guys."

"We love you too, sweetie. So much," Yuna smiled widely, clapping her hands and shifting the energy of the conversation back to "tactical operation" mode in the blink of an eye. "Now, focus! We have a wardrobe crisis to resolve. You are going to this young man's house, it's an intimate environment, but casual. You're going to watch hockey, drink beer, and eat pizza on the couch, I presume?"

"Yeah... basically that," Shane nodded, flipping the phone's back camera to show the immensity of hangers in his closet.

"Then no blazers or button-down dress shirts, for the love of God. You'll look like you're going to a job interview," David pointed out, pointing the blue-frosting-covered spatula at the screen. "Put on dark jeans. Ones that don't have those rips in the knees. Adult man pants."

"Show me that section of long-sleeve shirts, Shane," Yuna commanded, her eyes narrowed in evaluation. The camera glided over the hangers. "There! Stop! That black Henley-style shirt. The one with the three little buttons on the collar."

Shane pulled out the hanger with the soft cotton shirt.

"This one?"

"That's the one," his mom confirmed with an approving smile. "The fit on it is perfect. It hugs your shoulders and chest without making it look like you're trying too hard to show off, and

the dark color contrasts well with your skin. Put that on, the dark jeans your dad mentioned, clean sneakers, a good cologne, fix your hair a little... and you will be irresistible."

Shane looked at himself in the full-length mirror of the closet, holding the hanger against his body. The outfit was exactly the balance he was looking for: comfortable enough to sit on Ilya's couch, but put-together enough to make it clear he cared.

"It's perfect. You guys are the best," Shane sighed, turning the camera back to himself once more, a genuine smile lighting up his face.

"We know," David winked at the camera. "Now go get dressed. Enjoy your date, don't overthink things, and be yourself. And give my grandson a goodnight kiss for me before you leave."

"And later, I am going to corner you before the party so you can tell me the details!" Yuna threatened with the tip of her finger, before softening her expression. "Have fun, my love. Good luck."

The call ended. Shane tossed the phone onto the ottoman in the center of the closet and stared at the clothes in his hand. The butterflies returned to beat their wings violently in his stomach, but this time, there was no panic. There was only the pure, intoxicating anticipation of someone who was about to knock on the door of the person they wanted.

Exactly thirty minutes later, Shane was ready.

Most of that time, actually, had been spent in a silent crisis in front of his watch organizer. He stood paralyzed evaluating the options, terrified of choosing a piece that would make Ilya think he was trying to show off. Which was a somewhat irrational concern, considering the Russian knew perfectly well that Shane was the poster boy for Rolex and got very expensive models for free. In the end, he opted for a classic, discreet model with a leather strap, just so his wrist wouldn't be bare.

He still had some time to kill before leaving the house. Ilya had texted his apartment address a few minutes ago, along with a captionless photo showing two stainless steel pots boiling on the stove.

Shane's heart gave a comfortable leap at the image. Obviously, they would be eating pasta. It was Ilya's favorite dish to cook, and the captain loved absolutely any pasta the Russian prepared.

Shane went down the stairs to the first floor, feeling strangely light. The sound of the television flooded the living room with the noise of water and the theme song of another episode of *Mako Mermaids*.

"Li?" Shane called softly as he reached the room, but the boy was hypnotized by the screen. The captain approached the couch and snapped his fingers near his ear. "Hey. Look at me for a second, merman."

Liam blinked, breaking the trance, and tilted his head back to look at his dad upside down. The boy's eyes scanned Shane's clean, put-together clothes.

"Uhm? Are you going out?"

"I'm going out to dinner, remember I told you earlier?" Shane rested his arms on the back of the couch, smiling affectionately at his son. "And I probably won't be back until after you're already asleep. But don't even think that just because you're having your birthday party after school tomorrow, you get to stay up late tonight, huh?"

"Ah, but why not?! I'm turning nine tomorrow, Dad!" Liam threw his arms in the air, complaining with all the drama an almost-nine-year-old boy could muster. "Having to go to bed at nine o'clock is so boring!"

"I wish I could go to bed and sleep at nine o'clock," Luca pointed out, appearing from the kitchen hallway. The Swiss guy carried two plates with natural sandwiches cut into triangles and some fruit, a light snack so as not to ruin the boy's actual dinner later.

"Behave with Luca, okay? Don't give him a headache," Shane asked, reaching out to ruffle Liam's curls.

The boy grumbled an "okay," but his features changed. The bedtime drama disappeared, giving way to a slightly more vulnerable expression.

"What about Ilya? He's going to my party tomorrow, right?"

Shane felt a soft squeeze in his chest at hearing the longing tone in his son's little voice.

"Of course he is, Li," the captain offered a soft, comforting smile. "Do you really think he would miss your birthday for anything in the world?"

Liam shrugged, his little eyes returning to stare at the TV screen, although he was no longer paying attention to the mermaids.

"It's just that he hasn't been back to the house since he went to Russia. I thought he forgot."

If everything went right tonight... if Shane didn't ruin everything with his chronic nervousness, Ilya would be back at that house very often. But, this time, it wouldn't be as an employee.

"He hurt his knee again on the trip, remember?" Shane offered the quickest, partially true excuse he could find. "Even though it's been a while, going up and down all our stairs all day would hurt his leg even more. He was just resting so he could jump around a lot at your party tomorrow."

The logical explanation seemed to be enough for Liam, who nodded slowly, his face relaxing again.

"I'm going to get going," Shane announced, walking around the couch. He bent down and planted a loud kiss on the boy's curls. "I love you. Goodnight, buddy."

"Love you too, Daddy."

Shane straightened up, grabbed his car keys off the counter, and waved to Luca. The Swiss nanny blinked and waved back, an imperceptible, knowing smile on his face.

With his heart beating at the accelerated rhythm of a teenager going to prom, Shane opened the door and walked toward the elevator. It was time to go get his cookie jar.

[...]

Twenty minutes of hellish Montreal traffic were enough to leave Shane slightly irritated and his nerves on edge. Game 7 started at exactly seven in the evening, and the clock on the dashboard already read six-thirty. He had wanted to arrive with some time to spare, to have at least some free time to talk to Ilya, help him finish dinner, or simply get used to his presence before the puck dropped on the ice. But the universe clearly had other ideas.

When the robotic voice of the GPS finally announced his arrival at the destination, on a quiet, tree-lined residential street, Shane knew immediately he was in the right place. The Russian's dark, rugged Jeep was parked in front of the garage. And, noisily confirming the address, a signaling bark cut through the late afternoon air.

Anya, the adorable and enormous Weimaraner-Golden Retriever mix, had her paws resting on the window sill next to the entrance, her snout smushed against the glass as she watched Shane's unfamiliar car park in her territory. She was just doing her duty of defending the residence, until she was gently pulled away from the window by her collar.

Shane turned off the engine, drew a deep breath into his lungs in an attempt to calm his churning stomach, and got out of the car. He barely had time to lock the doors when he came face-to-face with Ilya opening the front door of the house.

And, for a brief and terrible moment, Shane simply forgot how to breathe.

The Russian wasn't wearing anything remotely extraordinary. It was just a pair of worn jeans with some rips in the good knee and a long-sleeved shirt in a dark red tone. But the fit of the clothes seemed designed to highlight the width of his shoulders, outlining the strong lines of his arms and contrasting perfectly with his blond hair. He was absurdly, annoyingly beautiful.

"Hi," Shane murmured. His voice came out a little breathy and low. He felt pathetically nervous, like a clumsy teenager knocking on the door of the most popular boy in school.

"Hi," Ilya replied. His deep tone carried a gleam of amusement, his bright blue eyes scanning Shane's outfit in a silent approval that made the Canadian's chest warm.

Before the electric tension could crush them both right there on the sidewalk, Anya pushed past like a little golden and gray tractor through Ilya's legs. The dog ran toward Shane, sniffing his sneakers frantically and spinning around him.

"Relax, she doesn't bite," Ilya warned, leaning his shoulder against the doorframe and crossing his arms. "And she's probably going to smell Liam stuck to your clothes and will want to lick you until you cry for help."

"Hi, Anya..." Shane broke into a wide smile, his nervousness melting a bit at the tail that wagged so hard it shook the dog's entire body.

He bent down and held out a closed fist, waiting for the evaluation. Anya meticulously sniffed Shane's skin with her cold, wet nose, let out a grunt of approval, and, a second later, gave his hand a wet lick. Without wasting time, she moved forward, pushing her big head under the captain's arm to demand scratches behind her ears.

"Hey, good girl... you're beautiful, you know that?" Shane laughed softly, affectionately rubbing the dog's neck, secretly grateful and relieved for the perfect distraction she provided while he desperately tried to get his heartbeat back to a normal human rhythm.

After finally managing to free himself from Anya and her endless demands for affection, Shane took off his sneakers, leaving them on the entrance mat, and followed Ilya inside the house. His heart, which had slowed down for a brief moment because of the dog, returned to hammering with full force in his ears with every step.

The decor of the place was modern and subtle, but carried an undeniably cozy and personal touch that matched the owner. There were some framed photos on the walls—the vast majority of Ilya and Svetlana, on trips and in happy moments. But what really caught the Canadian's attention was a large decorative frame near the hallway, containing twelve photos of Anya organized in a clear progression of her first few months of life.

Shane had an exact replica of that frame hanging in his penthouse, only documenting Liam's first year of life.

To each father his own monthly board, Shane thought, a small, affectionate smile tugging at his lips at the adorable similarity.

The layout followed an open concept, with the living room flowing directly into the kitchen. Right off the bat, Shane's senses were hit squarely by the thick, welcoming, and wonderful smell of the pasta Ilya was making, whose sauce was finishing thickening on the stove over low heat. The dark wooden dining table, which could easily seat six people, was set. With only two places laid out.

"What's the menu for tonight? You made it the biggest mystery over text all afternoon and this smell is already making me absurdly hungry," Shane finally managed to formulate a natural sentence, shoving his hands in his pants pockets as he looked at the Russian.

Ilya let out a deep laugh and turned around, turning off the burner on the stove.

"Nothing too elaborate, really. Because, after eight months living with you, I've already memorized the gigantic list of all the things you are picky about and refuse to eat. So, I decided to play it safe," Ilya shrugged, a teasing, smug smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

Shane let out a soft, nasal laugh. He felt his own face heat up under Ilya's attentive and knowing gaze, and ended up averting his eyes to the plates on the table, feeling deliciously disarmed and exposed inside the other man's home.

"Rigatoni in parmesan cream with roasted garlic and grilled chicken strips," Ilya announced, taking the lid off the pan and letting the fragrant steam rise. "No mushrooms, no peas, no raw onions, and absolutely no pepper so as not to irritate the great athlete's sensitive stomach."

"I'm not *that* picky," Shane protested, although the crooked smile on his face betrayed him.

"Shane. You are the man who orders mozzarella pizza and leaves the crusts intact on the plate. You are the definition of picky in the dictionary," the Russian shot back, handing him a dark ceramic bowl and a pair of pasta tongs. "Help yourself. The pre-game broadcast has already started."

Shane reached out to take the bowl. In the process, his fingers lightly brushed against Ilya's. It was a tiny, banal contact, but one that sent an invisible electric current shooting up the Canadian's arm. Ilya didn't pull back immediately; he held Shane's gaze for a fraction of a second longer, a warm and teasing gleam in his blue eyes, before turning to grab two longneck beer bottles from the fridge.

They headed to the living room. The dark leather couch looked huge, but, for some reason that made Shane's heart skip a beat, Ilya chose to sit close. Close enough that their knees almost touched when they settled in.

Anya, realizing she wasn't going to get food from either of them, let out a long, dramatic sigh, throwing herself onto the fluffy rug right at Shane's feet and resting her snout on her paws.

On the giant flat screen mounted on the wall, the New York arena appeared packed and deafening. The sports network announcer spat out Scott Hunter's statistics while the players did their final warm-ups on the ice. But Shane was barely paying attention to the Stanley Cup final.

He twirled some of the pasta onto his fork and brought it to his mouth. Instantly, the Canadian's eyebrows shot up. He closed his eyes and let out a low, drawn-out moan of pure satisfaction.

"Holy shit, Ilya..." Shane murmured, eyes still closed, chewing. "This is ridiculously perfect. If you tell me you bought jarred sauce, I swear I'll kick you out of your own house."

Ilya let out a genuine, rich laugh, settling back against the couch cushions and taking a sip of beer before attacking his own plate.

"The secret is a whole block of butter, real cheese grated fresh, and never, under any circumstances, breaking the pasta before putting it in boiling water," the blond replied, his voice loaded with that didactic tone Shane secretly loved. "Glad it pleased your extremely childish and demanding palate, Hollander."

Hearing his own last name come out of Ilya's mouth, drawn out by that unmistakable Russian accent, made Shane's stomach do a flip that had absolutely nothing to do with the taste of the food.

The Canadian took another bite, forcing his eyes to focus on the TV screen. He was there to watch the game. They were in the middle of a first date. He needed to be normal.

"Think the Admirals take the cup today?" Shane tried to strike up a conversation on neutral, safe ground, pointing his fork at the television.

"With Hunter playing out of his mind the way he has been this series? It's highly likely," Ilya pondered, chewing slowly. He turned his face to analyze the profile of the Metros captain. "Does it bother you seeing him win and hoisting the cup that should be yours?"

"Honestly? No," Shane shook his head. And it was the absolute truth. "Scott is a nice guy and an exceptional player. And after a conversation we had in the locker room hallway the other day... I think he deserves a bit of peace and glory like that."

Ilya stopped his fork mid-air and raised an eyebrow, his nanny and gossip instincts immediately activating upon catching the underlying meaning in the other's sentence.

"A conversation in the hallway, huh? Discover something interesting I should know about?"

"Well, he kind of apologized for kicking my team out of the playoffs the day after my birthday. Then I threw a jab, reminding him that I already had three championship rings stored at home, so the elimination didn't hurt that much," Shane shrugged with zero humility, drawing a genuine laugh from Ilya.

"If I had had the chance to win a Stanley Cup, I swear I would never take that fucking ring off my finger. Not even to shower," Ilya pointed out, his blue eyes shining with amusement.

Shane laughed too, shaking his head.

"Hayden did exactly that for, I don't know, like three months straight. He would go to the supermarket with his hand raised. Until Jackie threatened his marriage and made him take that giant rock off his finger and lock it in the safe at home," he shared softly, taking a long sip of his beer.

When the game finally got underway, the empty plates were abandoned on the coffee table and their attention was divided between the television and their proximity on the couch. It was only halfway through the second bottle that Shane noticed a minute detail: the label on his beer was subtly different from Ilya's. It had a considerably lower alcohol content.

The Canadian didn't say anything, but a cozy warmth spread through his chest. Ilya knew perfectly well that Shane was a lightweight and hated losing control. Silently and incredibly thoughtfully, the Russian was controlling the doses to ensure the captain stayed sober and comfortable for the entire date.

By the second period, the score read one-to-zero for the Stallions. But Shane's clinical eye on the ice caught what most fans were missing: Scott Hunter wasn't exactly giving his all in the game just yet.

"The Admirals are falling back on purpose. They're letting the Stallions skate like crazy across the ice to tire themselves out," Shane analyzed, pointing the neck of the bottle at the TV screen.

Ilya raised his eyebrows, impressed by the quick, technical read, but his teasing tone returned quickly.

"But can they handle the pressure of scoring two goals in the third period to turn the game around?" the Russian doubted lightly, leaning his head back against the couch. "Scott Hunter is old already. His gas isn't what it used to be."

"Man, he's thirty!" Shane huffed, offended on behalf of the class.

Ilya let out a hoarse laugh.

"Why did you get so defensive? If the shoe fits? You're a lot closer to thirty now, old man."

"You..." Shane narrowed his eyes, indignant, but the loose, silly smile wouldn't leave his face. The memory then clicked in his mind. "Wait a minute. When is your birthday again? It's this month too, isn't it? In the card you wrote that I was a month older."

"The fifteenth," Ilya shrugged, taking a nonchalant sip of his beer. When he noticed Shane widening his almond eyes and straightening his posture, the Russian rushed to cut him off. "And relax. You can wipe that planning look off your face. Don't even worry about getting me presents, I am terrible at receiving anything. The dog plushie Liam gave me for Christmas says it all. I am an emotional disaster with wrapped gifts."

The mention of Christmas made Shane's heart squeeze. He remembered that day in the penthouse living room well. The plushie Liam had bought after much insisting—the first Christmas present Ilya had received in fourteen years.

The Canadian lowered his bottle to his leg, the atmosphere suddenly seeming a little denser and more intimate than the screams of the fans on the television.

"When was the last time you got a birthday present?" Shane risked asking, his voice coming out soft, with the care of someone stepping on a thin layer of ice.

Ilya's features lost their trace of humor for a fraction of a second. He spun the base of the wet bottle on his own knee, staring at the label before raising his blue eyes back to the Canadian.

"Since my mom died," the blond replied, shaking his head softly. Raw vulnerability, once again, being handed directly into Shane's hands.

"The way you talk about it so casually makes me a little scared," Shane pointed out, his voice low.

"This year marks fifteen years since she died. I've lived much longer without her than the time I knew her," Ilya shook his head peacefully. He stretched one of his arms out, resting it along the back of the couch.

The Russian's fingers brushed lightly, almost ghost-like, over Shane's shoulders. The touch was minimal, but enough to make the captain shiver entirely under the fabric of his shirt.

The subject didn't drag on, and the two returned their attention to the screen for the tense final period of the match. And, exactly as Shane had predicted with surgical precision, it was in that moment that Scott Hunter and Carter took the reins of the team with relentless aggression. In less than three minutes on the ice, the Admirals scored the tying goal. Five minutes later, they secured the heroic comeback.

In the agonizing final seconds of the clock, Scott hit the puck straight into the center of the empty net, completing his hat-trick for the night. When the red siren blared on the television, the timer also hit zero, officially crowning the New York Admirals as the grand champions of the year.

"*Suka syn*," Ilya murmured. Even without understanding a single word of the language, Shane understood perfectly from the Russian's tone of reverence and shock what that meant.

It was only in that moment of sports euphoria on the screen that Shane noticed a crucial detail in the real world: Ilya's arm was no longer just resting on the back of the couch. It was firmly around his shoulders, and Shane's own shoulder was perfectly tucked against the blond's warm, broad chest. It was as if Shane's brain had been so focused on the tactics of the game that it had simply stopped processing the surrounding environment. And, wow, the heat of Ilya's body felt absurdly good.

In a very rare moment of boldness and instinct, Shane uncrossed his arms and placed his own hand on his thigh, letting the side of his fingers continuously and intentionally brush against the Russian's leg.

On TV, the New York players roared with pure happiness, throwing their helmets and gloves into the air in celebration with the fans making the stands shake. The families began entering the rink, running toward each player. But Scott stayed further back, in the center of the ice. He had been an orphan since he was twelve, publicly single, and had never had anyone waiting for him in victories, at least not that the sports media knew of.

"Liam almost lost one of his front teeth the last cup I won because he managed the feat of slipping on the ice in sneakers," Shane commented lightly, drawing a surprised laugh from Ilya. "By pure luck, most of the guys there have dad reflexes, and J.J. managed to catch him by his coat before he hit his face."

"The bright side is the fall was going to be straight onto the ice, so you wouldn't even need to look for a cold pack to compress it," Ilya joked.

Shane laughed out loud, shaking his head softly.

And then, the voice of the network's official announcer cut into the celebration:

"It looks like Hunter is trying to get the attention of someone in the crowd to come down to the rink..."

The announcer sounded intrigued, and the main camera cut to focus on Scott waving to the lower stands.

When the TV lens turned to show the person, Shane's breath evaporated. It was a young man in a denim jacket, with dark curls and a short, well-trimmed beard, hurrying down the stairs. Shane had the absolute, undeniable certainty: Scott Hunter was, indeed, the second gay player in the league. And, if that guy was his boyfriend, Scott was about to do exactly what Shane had spent weeks convincing himself he wouldn't have the courage to be the first to do.

"No fucking way..." Ilya murmured, his eyes wide in disbelief.

The young man jumped over the edge of the plexiglass, and Scott immediately pulled him into the middle of the slippery ice. In an exchange of words too quick to catch, Shane's breath hitched. Scott and the mystery guy pulled toward each other and pressed their lips together in a deep, passionate kiss, right in the middle of the New York arena, being broadcast live to absolutely every channel covering the final in North America.

"My God..." Shane whispered, stunned and emotional, as the camera refused to cut away from the kiss scene. Until the two pulled apart, smiling widely, and Scott hugged him with all the strength he had left.

"Listen to the roar of this crowd! Good for him! Good for Scott Hunter! They are loving every second of this! That is the captain of the Admirals!" The announcer celebrated in ecstasy along with the deafening noise of the fans.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asked. His deep voice was dangerously close, and the Russian's hand now squeezed Shane's shoulder protectively.

"I am." Shane nodded softly and turned his face to look directly into Ilya's blue eyes. "I told you he deserved to win that cup."

The intensity of the Russian's gaze looked stormy under the light of the TV.

"And if it were you down there... would you have done the same thing?"

"Who would I call from the stands?" Shane returned in a whisper, his breath already short.

"Shane..."

"Okay..." Shane swallowed hard, his gaze inevitably dropping to the Russian's mouth. "If I knew for sure that you were there... I would do it."

"You would do what?"

"This."

Shane didn't think anymore. He simply tilted his head all the way, destroying the little distance that still separated them, and sealed his lips against Ilya's in a soft, tender, and quick kiss. The electricity of the touch made his skin tingle.

The captain pulled back almost instantly. His chest rose and fell erratically, his brown eyes darting over the Russian's paralyzed face in a brief moment of panic, not knowing exactly what reaction he was looking for.

Until Ilya shifted on the couch cushions.

The blond's enormous hand slid quickly up Shane's hot neck until he firmly buried his fingers in the back of his head. Without the slightest ceremony, Ilya pulled him back, crushing his lips against Shane's with force, hunger, and a devastating desire.

Shane gasped in surprise mid-kiss, his hands blindly grabbing the nanny's dark shirt while Ilya's tongue took control of the rhythm. His brain melted and stopped working.

God in heaven. Ilya kissed absurdly well. The kiss had absolutely nothing cautious, experimental, or restrained about it within seconds.

Ilya took control with a magnetic urgency that seemed to set every nerve ending in the Canadian's body on fire. The Russian's lips were surprisingly soft, but the pressure he applied was demanding, hungry. When Ilya's tongue asked for entrance, firmly tracing Shane's lower lip, the captain opened his mouth with a trembling sigh, surrendering completely to the invasion.

The bitter taste of the beer mixed with the intoxicating heat of their shared breath. The blond's enormous hand remained anchored at the back of Shane's neck, his long, calloused fingers tangling in the player's dark hair, holding him in place with a possessiveness that made Shane's stomach do violent flips. Ilya's other hand slipped from the back of the couch to grab the Canadian's waist, pulling him even closer, until there wasn't a single millimeter of space between their chests.

Any trace of inexperience or hesitation Shane thought he would have from kissing a man for the first time simply evaporated. Instinct took the wheel.

He let out a low noise, a sound that died straight in Ilya's mouth, and his hands—which until then were gripping the fabric of the Russian's red shirt uncertainly—took on a life of their own. Shane slid his hands up Ilya's broad shoulders, up the sides of his hot neck, until he buried his fingers in the short, blond hair at the base of his neck. The captain pulled him even tighter against him, matching the rhythm of the kiss with the same desperate intensity.

It was a collision loaded with eight whole months of averted glances, repressed domestic tension, silent flirting, unspoken jealousy, and the agonizing frustration of a professional line that had finally just been crossed and obliterated.

On the television, the deafening noise of the New York Admirals fans continued to echo through the room, but for Shane, the entire world had been reduced to the texture of Ilya's

stubble scraping lightly against his jaw, the heat of his hand on his waist, and the woody scent of the cologne he wore.

The need for oxygen, however, was cruel and relentless.

Ilya was the first to slow down. He pulled back millimetrically, turning the ravenous kiss into slow, wet, lingering pecks, until he finally parted their lips. But he didn't really pull away. The Russian merely tilted his face and rested his forehead against Shane's, both of them breathing heavily and noisily, sharing the same air.

When Shane finally had the courage to open his eyes, he found Ilya's blue irises inches away. They were darkened and clouded with desire, but there was a palpable tenderness there, a raw adoration that made Shane's heart beat against his ribs like the wings of a caged bird.

Ilya swallowed hard, his thumb coming up to lightly stroke the Canadian's flushed cheek, tracing the path of the freckles he watched so much from afar.

"Wow," Shane whispered, his voice nothing more than a hoarse, trembling breath. He still kept his fingers tangled in the blond's hair, refusing to let him go.

A slow, lazy, and incredibly smug smile began to form on Ilya's face.

"For the first time kissing a guy in your life..." the Russian murmured, his breath hitting Shane's wet lips. "You kiss very well, Captain."

Shane let out a weak, unsteady laugh, closing his eyes again as he slid his nose against Ilya's.

"Lucky for you. My teacher is a nanny guy with excellent reviews."

Chapter 21: Happy Birthday

Chapter Notes

my head is spinning because now that they finally kissed, I want to write more but don't want to rush anything

i'm yeeting myself (of my bed) 🤪

sorry for any mistakes, i'm studying for a test and frying my brain to much

Right after class, Shane picked Liam up from school. They stopped by the penthouse for only an hour to shower and get ready before heading out to the suburbs. Seeing the pure excitement overflowing in his son's smile was such an overwhelming feeling that Shane would never be able to put it into words.

As they parked in front of Simone's imposing house, Shane immediately recognized his parents' car in the driveway. Liam barely waited for the engine to shut off before opening the door, almost sprinting down the sidewalk if Shane hadn't grabbed him by the backpack strap in time.

The sharp pull was justified a second later, when the deep, unmistakable roar of J.J.'s Bugatti echoed as it turned the corner into the neighborhood.

"What have we talked about concerning crossing the street without looking both ways, young man?" Shane scolded, holding the boy's hand firmly.

"It's Uncle J.J.!"

"But what if it wasn't?" The captain raised his eyebrows, sternly, but the lecture was lost.

The black Bugatti made the turn smoothly and parked flush against the curb. The defenseman got out of the car balancing a medium-sized box, perfectly wrapped in blue and green paper.

"You guys don't see me. I am perfectly invisible and definitely not holding any presents," J.J. declared from across the street, looking up at the sky and playing dumb, drawing a loud laugh from Liam. Shane chuckled and safely crossed the street with his son. "Hey, my favorite merman-shark! Happy birthday, champ!"

As soon as J.J. rested the box on the hood of his car, Liam jumped on him. The big guy lifted him into the air easily, crushing him in a tight bear hug.

"Did you see the Finals game yesterday, Uncle J.J.?" Liam asked as soon as he pulled back, his arms still around his honorary godfather's neck.

"I did. Hell of a final, wasn't it?" J.J. shook his head in admiration, and then looked directly at Shane. "Man, I had no idea Hunter was gay."

Shane's heart skipped a beat, but he kept his posture impeccable.

"I thought what he did on the ice was cute," the captain commented, shoving his hands in his pants pockets with studied casualness. "Brave as fuck."

"Tell me about it. I spent the whole night reading sports gossip sites. Apparently, he and his boyfriend have been together in secret since the beginning of the year," J.J. shared, setting Liam back on the ground. "The guy's name is Christopher, but goes by Kip. Seems like a super nice guy, even has a degree in History."

"And the two of us don't have any degrees other than knowing how to hit a piece of rubber on the ice," Shane pointed out. J.J. let out a loud laugh, agreeing as he picked the box back up.

As they walked into the house, Shane let out the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. A wave of pure relief washed over his chest. Knowing that J.J.—one of his best friends and teammates—had reacted with such naturalness and respect to Scott's public coming out was liberating. Liam, obviously, had also thought the kiss on TV was awesome. The kid was amazing, and Shane would be eternally grateful to Ilya for having the patience to explain things to him that Shane himself had been too afraid to approach at the time.

When they reached the backyard, the setup was worthy of a movie. There were tables draped with fabrics that mimicked the movement of waves, trays full of cupcakes crowned with sugar shells and candy pearls, chocolates sculpted like mermaid tails, and dozens of gummy sharks. In the background, an enormous panel displayed floating jellyfish and the words "Happy Birthday, Liam!" in a bubbly font.

"Ah, my birthday boy is finally here!" Yuna exclaimed, opening her arms as soon as she saw them. Liam didn't think twice and ran to his grandmother. Nearby, J.J. deposited the present onto the growing pile on the main table and already bent down to scoop Elise up, kissing his daughter's curls.

While watching Yuna smother her grandson with so much love, Shane felt a heavy, warm, and familiar hand rest on his shoulder. Turning around, he found David. His dad was watching him with a deep, soft look, loaded with silent pride.

"So... how was your date last night, huh?" David arched an eyebrow, a knowing smile playing on his lips.

Shane swallowed hard, fighting with all his might against the idiotic, lovestruck smile that insisted on taking over his face.

"It was... a very good date."

David nodded, satisfied, and opened his arms.

"Scott Hunter has no idea the immense relief he gave your mother and me with that scene on the ice yesterday," David murmured near Shane's ear, squeezing his son tightly, transmitting safety in every second of the hug. "Nothing will ever change between us, do you hear me? You will always be our boy. And, just for the record, know that your mother is already inside drafting a PR statement in case you want to ride the same wave as Hunter..."

Shane let out a weak, uneven laugh, closing his eyes as tears of relief blurred his vision.

"I figured."

"All in good time," David murmured, tightening the hug one last time to transmit safety before letting go.

Shane stepped back with a small smile, grateful for the anchor his dad represented. But the emotional atmosphere of the moment was brutally interrupted by a loud voice coming from the entrance of the deck.

"Calm down, calm down, hold your emotions! I know perfectly well that my illustrious presence brings tears to the eyes!"

Shane turned his head. It was Hayden. The blond was leading the family chaos: little Amber was asleep in the sling tied to his chest, Jackie was right behind him carrying Arthur, while the twins were already blowing past like two little hurricanes toward the lawn, both dressed head to toe in mermaid costumes.

"Go fuck yourself, man," Shane laughed out loud, rubbing the corner of his eye quickly and covertly.

Hayden let out a genuine laugh, extending his free hand to the captain for a quick handshake followed by an awkward half-hug because of the baby.

"I urgently need someone to confiscate this child from me, so I can go back to the car and grab Li's present," Hayden announced, pointing his chin at Amber.

Simone, who was supervising the garden, didn't miss her cue and quickly approached with open arms.

"You can give her to me."

As the group spread out under the awnings and across the lawn, the rest of the guests began popping into the party: Bayley, Bash, Danny, and Arthur—from the soccer team—soon joined the birthday boy, filling the backyard with children running around. Shane watched Nora and her husband sit down at one of the tables to talk with Jackie. The captain had to admit it: unlike the rigid mental image he had built of the man in the past—a workaholic lawyer who put his career above everything and who was probably a massive asshole—Bash's dad seemed to have undergone a drastic shift in priorities. He was visibly friendlier, more sociable, and, above all, much more present and attentive to his son.

The afternoon flowed perfectly well, until the air in Shane's lungs seemed to vanish.

Simone reappeared from the glass door of the living room, and right behind her came the final—and most anticipated—guests of the day. Luca and Ilya. The Swiss boy walked in smiling with a shark-printed gift bag in his hands, while the Russian followed behind with his characteristic limp and a box under his arm.

The exact millisecond Liam laid eyes on Ilya's immense figure, he simply abandoned his game with his friends and sprinted, crossing the entire yard toward him.

"ILYA!"

The Russian's eyes widened. He dropped the box on the ground carelessly and opened his arms just in time to catch the boy mid-air. Ilya crushed him tightly against his chest, letting out a deep, rich laugh loaded with pure longing.

Shane watched the scene from a few meters away, his heart warming in his chest in a way he couldn't put into words. He just held his cup of icy blue lemonade between his hands, using the drink as an excuse to stand there, paralyzed, admiring their interaction.

"Hey, Akula!" Ilya ruffled Liam's curls, swinging him lightly in the air before setting him down carefully. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"A really long time!" Liam accused, crossing his arms and narrowing his little eyes in a dramatic reprimand.

"But, hey... I sent Luca to cover my shift, didn't I? All that to make sure you didn't go a single day without proper supervision."

[...]

Shane barely managed to exchange half a dozen words with Ilya before Liam and little Elise kidnapped them for some chaotic game on the lawn. Another victim of the children's dragnet was Luca, who also ended up being captured by Liam.

"Are you absolutely sure that kid is of legal age?" Hayden asked, sipping his lemonade—dangerously spiked with vodka—while adjusting Amber, who was drinking her afternoon bottle on his lap.

"I am, man," Shane laughed, shaking his head.

"The kid's face is so round he looks like he just got out of high school!" Hayden pointed back, still skeptical.

"He's twenty, Hayd," Shane assured him gently.

The blond just shrugged, still half-disbelieving. Beside them, J.J. was sprawled in a lawn chair, focused on his phone, until he suddenly snapped his fingers, catching the attention of

the two.

"Look at Hunter," the defenseman turned his phone screen toward them. It was a story Scott had just reposted from his boyfriend's profile. The image was a short, looping video of the kiss on the ice, accompanied by the caption: *"NY-Admirals won, so did love. Oh captain, my captain."* J.J. smiled, nodding in approval. "Straight up, I'm a big fan of this guy."

"Wow, I completely forgot to mention that to you guys! I freaked out so much about it with Jackie at home last night that I completely blanked today," Hayden sat up in his chair, his eyes wide with curiosity. "Did you guys suspect Hunter was gay? I had no idea. I mean, not that it's a problem, far from it. But, man... I was in absolute shock. Almost choked on my beer right then."

"And how could we know something like that, man? Nobody has a crystal ball," Shane frowned, his heart beating a little faster in his chest, fearing the direction of the conversation.

"I don't know, it's just that, in my head, he doesn't look gay. You know? Gay." Hayden gave an awkward, stereotypical little shake of his shoulders. "He's the captain of the Admirals. A tractor on the ice, super masculine, I don't know."

"Ryan Price was also built like a brick shithouse, the biggest, most violent enforcer in the league, super masculine, and he's gay," J.J. shot back immediately, remembering the former Toronto Guardians player who had retired years ago and was now living in a highly publicized marriage with pop singer Fabian Salah.

"That's true, never mind. I'm stupid," Hayden let out a surprised laugh at his own faulty logic, taking another sip of his lemonade. "But think about it with me: it's kind of pure math, isn't it? Like, on our active roster, there are twenty guys in that locker room. By basic world statistics, at least one of them has to be gay, right?"

"At the very least," J.J. agreed with the utmost naturalness in the world.

Shane took a long, silent, and considerably desperate sip of his own lemonade, wishing with all the forces in the universe that his plastic cup was also spiked with alcohol like Hayden's to deal with that level of tension.

"I vote for Viktor... That guy never introduced any girlfriend to us at those team parties," J.J. theorized, scratching his chin.

"The Russian?!" Hayden let out a loud, incredulous laugh. "I highly doubt it."

"And what does him being Russian have to do with it? Ilya is Russian and he's openly bisexual," J.J. pointed his cup toward the blond nanny who, at that exact moment, was crouched on the grass patiently tying the pink shoelaces of Elise's sneakers.

"Oh. Well, that's true, isn't it?" Hayden blinked, his mind engaging and finally surrendering to the facts.

"Man, I think you've had enough spiked lemonade for today," Shane pointed out dryly. Hayden burst into laughter, moving the acrylic cup away and raising his free hand in a sign of surrender.

Shane took advantage of a gap and stepped into the cool, quiet kitchen of the house to refill the pitchers of natural juice—which, ironically, were being consumed much more by the exhausted adults than by the children, who were currently operating on pure adrenaline and soda.

The muffled sound of the party came from the garden, until heavy, familiar footsteps sounded on the hardwood floor right behind him. Shane looked over his shoulder and saw Ilya approaching.

"Hey," the Russian's deep voice broke the silence.

He stopped and leaned his hip against the marble kitchen island, maintaining a cautious distance. He was clearly respecting Shane's space, taking care not to cross any boundaries while they were in a crowded environment.

"Hi," Shane dropped the empty pitcher in the sink and turned to face him. His gaze instinctively dropped to the nanny's leg. "Are you absolutely sure that knee of yours is good enough to be chasing a horde of children running around on the grass?"

Ilya slightly raised his right leg and swung it back and forth in the air. A dry, yet soft, pop echoed in the space between them.

"And that is exactly why I have Luca," the blond joked, drawing a weak laugh from Shane. The captain shook his head and took a soft step toward the island. Ilya's features lost their teasing tone, softening. "Thank you for inviting me, Shane. I really, really wanted to see Liam today."

"And he really wanted to see you, too," Shane murmured, stopping next to the counter. He was just two steps away from the Russian. Or, depending on how you looked at it, maybe a little less. Gravity always seemed to pull the two of them closer.

Ilya's blue eyes held his with a silent intensity.

"What about you?" the question came out low, loaded with intention.

"I wanted to, too," Shane admitted with raw honesty. He looked away to the marble of the island for a second, feeling his face heat up, which drew a wonderfully knowing smile from the Russian. The Canadian swallowed hard, feeling courage expand in his chest, and looked back up at him. "I told my parents I'm gay last night, before I went to your house."

Ilya's posture changed instantly. The playfulness vanished, giving way to a deep, protective attentiveness.

"They reacted well," Shane hurried to continue, a genuine, relieved smile lighting up his face. "Very well, actually. And I'm already thinking of a way to tell Hayden and J.J. the truth soon."

Seeing how calmly they reacted to the news about Hunter out there gave me a lot more grounding and security to finally do it."

Ilya tilted his head softly, his gaze overflowing with a silent, affectionate pride that made Shane's stomach do a flip.

"Small steps, Captain," the Russian murmured encouragingly.

"Small steps," Shane repeated, nodding slowly, his heart lighter than it had been in years.

Stealthily, Shane cast a glance through the glass window overlooking the backyard. The chaos of the party was in full swing, and all the guests were perfectly distracted by their own exhaustion or running after the children. With a subtle nod of his head, the captain indicated the half-open door of the pantry next to the kitchen—a room so ridiculously large and stocked it looked more like a luxury supermarket inventory.

Ilya followed his gaze, assessing the outdoor area for a fraction of a second before arriving at the same silent conclusion. A predatory, mischievous flame sparked in the Russian's blue eyes.

They didn't need words. They both slipped quickly and silently into the pantry.

But the exact millisecond Shane pushed the door shut and the latch made a soft click, enclosing them in the dim light, the air was stolen from his lungs. He felt Ilya's immense hand grab the side of his waist with urgency, pulling him in hard. Before the Canadian could even blink, his lips collided brutally with the Russian's in a hungry, overwhelming impact.

Shane gasped in surprise right against his mouth, his hands flying instinctively to rest on Ilya's broad shoulders. Without breaking contact, the blond moved forward, firmly pushing Shane—but with his usual care—until the player's back hit the empty wall between the grocery shelves. One of the Russian's hands moved up quickly, his hot fingers burying themselves in the back of the Canadian's neck to hold him in place, while the other remained anchored possessively at his waist.

When the Russian's tongue demanded entrance, brushing his lower lip demandingly, Shane yielded without a single second of hesitation.

The player slid his arms up Ilya's shoulders until they completely circled his neck, pulling his immense body even closer, erasing any space left between their chests. What was supposed to be just a quick, stolen kiss hidden away in the middle of a party quickly escalated in intensity, becoming thick, urgent, and desperately fiery, isolated from the childish laughter echoing on the other side of the door.

"Ilya..." Shane let out a short, muffled groan, hooking his leg around the Russian's calf in a desperate attempt to pull him even tighter against his body, wanting to nullify any remaining millimeter of space.

The blond's hot hand, however, slid from the back of Shane's neck to his chin, holding him firmly and delicately at the same time, breaking the kiss and hitting the brakes on their

overwhelming momentum.

Shane instinctively leaned his face forward, seeking to start another one, blinded by adrenaline, but Ilya stopped him gently. A low, deep, breathy laugh vibrated in the scarce air of the pantry.

"Don't moan my name like that when I still need to go back out to the garden and maintain decency in the middle of a bunch of kids, Shane..." Ilya warned in a hoarse whisper, shaking his head in a denial that carried absolutely no force.

The Canadian let out a weak, uneven laugh, leaving his arms around his neck and running his fingers slowly through the short, blond hair at the base of the Russian's neck.

"When are we going to be able to have our second date, huh?" Shane asked, his voice coming out as little more than a breath.

"As soon as possible..." Ilya promised without hesitating. He moistened his visibly reddened lips, his calloused thumb swiping reverently across the tense line of the captain's jaw.

"Gospodi, ty takoy krasivyy..."

Shane broke into a silly smile, completely disarmed by the sweetness in the deep tone of his voice. He tilted his face slightly into the touch, and Ilya leaned in once more, placing a soft, chaste, lingering kiss on his lips.

"What did you say?" Shane murmured, his brown eyes shining curiously in the dim light.

"Just what a bunch of magazines and sports websites out there already say all the time," Ilya offered a smirk, dragging his thumb across the Canadian's cheek. "That you are very handsome."

"It's different when you're the one saying it..." Shane countered. The tone of flirtation and urgency vanished from his voice, giving way to a piercing vulnerability.

"Different how?" Ilya's gaze softened completely.

"It's just that when you say it..." Shane swallowed hard, holding the Russian's blue eyes. "I actually believe it."

"Shane!" Simone's loud voice suddenly sounded from the kitchen.

The two froze instantly, their eyes wide in pure shock, their breath caught in their throats.

"Since you're already in there, bring Li's cake out for me! I'm already taking the pitchers of juice!" the actress yelled.

When Shane finally heard the familiar sound of Simone's heels clicking away across the hardwood floor, he let out his breath all at once. His shoulders relaxed and he looked back at Ilya. The Russian was biting his lower lip, holding in a laugh so hard his broad shoulders were shaking.

"Kind of poetic that you're literally inside a closet at a time like this, by the way," the blond whispered, lethal amusement shining in his blue eyes.

"Oh, go to hell," Shane murmured, playfully shoving the Russian's chest and untangling himself from his grip.

The captain stepped out first, adjusting his shirt collar, while Ilya obeyed the silent tactical rule and stayed inside the pantry mentally counting to thirty.

It was the exact amount of time Shane needed to open the fridge, grab his son's huge, heavy decorated cake, and carry it carefully out to the main table in the garden. David had already started herding all the kids scattered across the lawn for the time to sing Happy Birthday, while Yuna took the mermaid-tail-shaped themed candle with the number nine out of its box.

"Uhm..." the matriarch grimaced, patting her pants pockets as Shane placed the candle perfectly in the center of the frosting. "The matches were left on the island, in my kitchen."

"Monnie, do you have a match in there to light the candle?" the captain asked loudly, turning toward the glass door. But, in the same instant, he saw Ilya finally returning to the backyard, his hands shoved in his pockets and his expression perfectly neutral. "Oh, never mind. Ilya, can I borrow your lighter?"

David frowned, evaluating the interaction with an astute look.

"How do you know he has a lighter?" his dad asked, his tone loaded with a deliberately playful curiosity.

"Because he smokes," Shane answered point-blank.

Ilya placed a dramatic hand over his heart, pretending to have been deeply offended by the direct accusation, but he didn't even try to deny it. He lifted his leg and quickly fished out a metallic Zippo lighter that was hidden inside the shaft of his boot.

"And if he didn't have one, Nora definitely would," Shane added with an innocent smile.

"Are you really going to go around exposing me to everyone, Shane?!" the brunette crossed her arms, indignant, drawing loud bursts of laughter from the entire circle of adults around the table.

"Go on up to your cake, Li," Hayden encouraged with a light tap on the birthday boy's leg.

The boy laughed and ran behind the main table. Shane positioned himself on the right side, pulling up the wooden stool where his son would stand to reach the height of the cake. But, before stepping up, Liam stopped. He turned around, reached his hand out toward the guests, grabbed Ilya's enormous hand firmly, and pulled him without any ceremony, positioning the Russian exactly on his left side.

Shane swallowed hard instantly. His heart did a triple backflip in his chest. He gripped the metallic lighter in his hand a little too tightly, actively fighting to mask the overwhelming emotion that threatened to overflow on his face.

On the other side of the boy, disguising an internal nervousness of almost identical magnitude, Ilya merely blinked. With his usual care and familiarity, the Russian grabbed Liam by the waist and hoisted him up, placing him on the stool, standing between the two men.

The Canadian's hand trembled slightly, but he managed to light the sparking wick of the candle without incident. Shane snapped the lid of the lighter shut with a metallic click and reached his arm behind Liam's back to hand it back to Ilya.

The exchange of the small metal object was quick, but their fingers brushed purposely in the process—a minimal, electric, and intentional touch, hidden from the view of all the guests, that sent an instant, piercing shiver down both of their spines.

And then, the loud, warm, and off-key chorus of "Happy Birthday" finally began to echo through the backyard.

[...]

Liam came home so exhausted that he went straight to the shower—purely because he was filthy with dirt and frosting—and passed out as soon as his head hit the bed. Luckily, he had eaten an entire banquet of sweets and snacks at his own birthday party, so Shane didn't even sweat him skipping dinner.

After organizing the last box of presents in the corner of the room, to the soft, rhythmic sound of his now nine-year-old boy's tired snores, Shane turned off the lamp and stepped out into the hallway. He cracked his aching back, feeling his phone vibrate in his pants pocket.

[Direct Message]

Ilya: Very tired?

Shane: More sore than tired. And you?

Ilya: Thinking about when you're going to need to travel to Los Angeles for the league's awards ceremony.

Shane: Next weekend. But I was considering not even going. It's practically certain that the season MVP award is already Scott's, and this definitely wasn't my best playoff round.

Ilya: So...

Ilya: If you're really not going, what do you think about having a second date on Friday?

Shane broke into a huge smile, as happy and goofy as an idiotic teenager, and dropped down to sit on the top step of the stairs.

Shane: One more reason for me not to go, then.

Fueled by sudden euphoria and newfound courage, Shane's next action was to open his best friends' group chat and send a message asking if they were busy, or if they could take a quick video call.

Hayden didn't even bother replying by text; he just started the call right away. J.J. accepted the request shortly after. The defenseman's camera showed his phone propped up on his bathroom sink; he had just gotten out of the shower, wearing only boxer briefs and with a towel thrown over his shoulder.

"One of these days, you're going to call me out of nowhere and, out of pure spite, I'm going to answer this shit naked," the giant threatened, pointing an accusing finger at the lens.

"Man, we get paid to see your dick almost every day," Hayden countered naturally. He was sitting in the dark in his own living room, the light of the TV illuminating his exhausted face as he clearly enjoyed absolute peace after putting four little kids to sleep. Shane frowned at the blond's comment, but decided to ignore it. "What's up, Shane? Did something happen?"

"I..." the captain let out a long sigh, playing with the hem of his shirt. "How pissed would you guys be at me if I dropped a bombshell over the phone instead of in person?"

"Who's pregnant?" J.J. pressed his face to the screen instantly. "Did you knock someone up again?"

"Are you dating someone in secret?" Hayden also leaned into the camera, his curiosity piqued.

Shane rolled his eyes at his friends' deductive skills.

"It's a serious question, you idiots," he huffed.

"Man, if you have something awesome to tell us, can't say it face-to-face, but still want to tell us... that takes just as much courage as if you were here, in this bathroom with me right now," J.J. philosophized. Shane instantly made a face of revulsion. "Don't make that face. I'm a delight and, as Hayd rightly remembered, we get paid to shower next to each other."

"It's still disgusting," Shane pointed out.

"Man, it's what Jean said. What matters is that you say it and get this weight off your chest," Hayden intervened, shrugging and gesturing softly in the dim light. "Over the phone, in person, by text, letter, smoke signal, carrier pigeon. Give it to us straight."

"Okay..." Shane took another deep breath, scratching the back of his neck, searching for the right words in his own mind. "I... I went on a date last night."

Hayden immediately sat up straight on the edge of the couch, and J.J. almost dropped the afro pick he was holding, leaving it tangled in his curly hair.

"Okay... look at him, our stud!" Hayden let out a loud laugh, a wide, excited smile already breaking across his face. "What is it? Are you going to tell me you already fell in love on the first date? Took the mystery girl to watch the Cup Final and fell head over heels like a dummy?"

Shane laughed softly, rubbing his hand over his face. It was the first time in his life he had felt this way: nervous in a good way, anxious in an exciting way, and not dominated by that suffocating panic he felt when trying to force things with Rose. Ilya calmed him down, even just being the indirect subject of the conversation. Being with the Russian didn't feel forced, it wasn't a role to be played. It simply felt right, as if it was exactly what Shane needed to do to finally be happy.

"I... I've actually liked this person for a while and... it kind of wasn't going to work out for us to be together, because of external professional reasons, and..."

"Holy shit. You were going after a married woman?!" J.J. widened his dark eyes in shock.

Shane just ignored his friend's hysterical interruption and continued, his voice dropping to a denser, more vulnerable tone.

"And I didn't really know how you guys were going to react to all this. In general. But... you guys are my best friends. Literally the first two true friends I ever had, who came into my life and stayed for good. Our kids are growing up together. I was the best man at both of your weddings. And, even with all of that, I was still really scared of how you might react."

"React to what, Shane?" Hayden's voice, usually light and teasing, abandoned any trace of playfulness and adopted absolute seriousness.

"What Scott Hunter did yesterday in the final, in the middle of that ice, was very important," the captain took a deep breath, his heartbeat echoing in his ears. "To me. You guys were right earlier today, at the party, about it being statistically probable that there was at least one guy in our locker room who had to be gay. And... I'm the guy. I'm gay."

Absolute silence fell over the call. On the split screen, Hayden's lips slowly parted in pure shock, while J.J.'s face seemed to process a thousand and one different reactions in less than a second.

Shane waited. His heart beat so hard it hurt against his ribs. He started picking at the edge of his nails with his free hand, pulling at the skin out of pure nervousness, while his other hand gripped the phone so tightly his knuckles were white.

"But... you dated Rose..." Hayden murmured, genuinely confused. You could almost hear the sound of the gears working in overdrive inside the blond's head to connect the dots.

"I did. But I wasn't really happy with her. Not like that," Shane shrugged, his voice coming out small and choked as a thick knot rose in his throat, threatening to suffocate him.

"Oh..." Hayden looked away at nothing, blinking slowly as the realization finally hit him. His expression softened, the confusion giving way to immediate, affectionate understanding.

"Well... I guess I'm going to need a little time to police myself and stop saying the dumb shit and jokes I usually say in the locker room, then."

"I can't believe Simone was right, again!" J.J. finally broke from his own stupor, throwing his hands in the air and making the phone shake on the bathroom sink.

Shane blinked, caught off guard by his friend's random indignation, and let out a confused, strangled laugh, his brown eyes overflowing with tears of pure relief.

"Hey, hey, hey! No crying, or I'm going to cry too and I just washed my face!" J.J. pointed his finger at the screen, his voice loaded with an unyielding, protective affection. "Man, relax. Take a deep breath. I definitely don't give a damn about this, you know you're my brother. And, to make your life easier, I officially volunteer to slap the back of Hayden's head for every clueless, dumb thing he says from here on out."

"There you go. Excellent idea," Hayden agreed automatically, nodding his head, before suddenly stopping and frowning at his own camera. "Wait a minute. I didn't like that part where I get physically assaulted at all."

"Well I loved it," Shane laughed for real, wiping the tears from his face with the back of his hand, feeling a ton of weight disappear from his shoulders.

On the bottom screen, J.J. rubbed his hands together and let out a deep, perfectly evil laugh, already preparing for the job.

Chapter 22: Next Friday

Chapter Notes

i swear if the wattpad imigration find me and start pissing me off, I'll explode everything
- i'm very happy being just a little queer person writing queer love

when i was there, the thing i hated most was when poeple commented like "who's the romantic partner?", "when are they having sex?", "when will you update?", "where's the update?"

i'm not on my best brain moment because of the test i'll have this monday, but i'm keping my cool

anyways, hope you guys enjoy - i'm already planning the next fic and possibly will be a hospitalAU hehe idk

Even though Ilya had been categorical in saying that Shane shouldn't worry about birthday presents for him, it was obvious the captain wouldn't let the date go unnoticed. Still, out of respect for the Russian's boundaries, he held back his own anxiety and didn't hand over the little gift—no matter how simple and silly it was—on Tuesday, the fifteenth. Instead, Shane sent a perfectly crafted text message wishing him a happy twenty-seventh birthday, which resulted in the two of them spending hours on end talking on the phone until the middle of the night.

Liam's school break had already begun, and Shane's official vacation would start shortly after. As usual, the family plans involved heading to Ottawa, straight to the lake house. There was a hungry, insistent part of Shane's mind that desperately wanted to invite Ilya to go along. But they hadn't even had their second official date yet, and the Canadian had learned hard lessons in his past relationship with Rose about not getting too caught up in his emotions, even if he wanted to rush eagerly to the cookie jar.

But the detail was that, now, that cookie jar had an owner. And Shane knew perfectly well whose it was.

"Like we agreed, you are allowed to go to bed at exactly eleven during your break, okay?" Shane leaned against the back of the couch, watching Liam lying comfortably, glued to a movie about a blue-tailed mermaid whose name escaped the captain's memory.

"You're not traveling today?" Liam asked, somewhat confused, without taking his eyes off the screen. "You always travel far away after the playoffs."

"Not this year. I only traveled when I had a real chance of winning some award at the league's ceremony. This year I don't think I'm going to win anything. And, if by some miracle it happens, they'll mail the trophy," Shane shrugged. Liam laughed.

"And then I can put it on the shelf in the trophy room?"

"You can." Shane smiled and ruffled the boy's dark hair. "And no eating too much junk food late at night. Both of you."

Luca, who was arranging something on the coffee table, raised his light eyebrows, pointing to his own chest with a slightly offended expression.

"Yeah, the message is for you too, Luca," Shane laughed, grabbing his car keys off the counter and watching the Swiss nanny let out a mischievous little laugh.

"My blood sugar levels are perfectly balanced, boss," the blond pointed out, making Shane laugh again.

The captain said his goodbyes, taking the elevator straight to the building's underground parking garage. As he walked to one of his cars, he checked the notifications on his phone. He was surprisingly calm, largely because Ilya's present was already resting safely on the passenger seat of his vehicle.

[Direct Message]

Ilya: The fact that you have never watched *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* offends me on levels I can't even describe.

Ilya: You are literally Amy Santiago, just with skates and a hockey stick.

Shane: Oh, yeah? And which character do you think you look like, smartass?

Ilya: Detective Diaz. Rosa and I are essentially the same person.

Shane: Uh-huh, sure. Tell me another one.

Shane broke into a wide smile, locked his device, dropping it into the console, and started the engine. He drove through the night streets of Montreal, drumming his fingers on the leather steering wheel to the soft rhythm of the music on the radio.

The feeling dominating his chest was absolutely nothing like the date from the previous week, when he wanted to tear his own skin off he was so nervous, trying to put on some fake confidence. No. That scared Shane was gone. His parents knew he was gay and had embraced him. His best friends knew—which indirectly meant Simone and Jackie probably already knew and supported him too. Luca knew.

The only person who really needed to know was Liam, but Shane wanted to do that with the care and calm his son deserved. The plan was to tell him when they were in the absolute peace of the lake house, just the two of them. And, eventually, David would also be part of the plans, because the patriarch had already proclaimed his annual week of kidnapping his

grandson to go fishing on the lake with him. A tradition he had kept since Shane was a kid—until the unfortunate day when the bait worms made little Shane throw up on the boat. The captain even tried to warn his dad that his grandson might have the exact same disgusted reaction, but David was adamant about living the full "grandpa experience."

In exactly twenty minutes, Shane parked in front of Ilya's house. His arrival was immediately announced by a noisy, furry doorbell barking wildly through the living room window glass. Shane grabbed the bag with the wrapped gift and got out of the car.

As soon as he reached the first step of the porch, the door opened. Ilya appeared filling the doorframe, pushing Anya's dead weight back with his thigh as the dog tried to squeeze through every possible gap to jump on Shane.

"Anya, *net! Sadis'!*" The Russian snapped his fingers with an authority that resonated on the wood. The dog whimpered, clearly displeased and annoyed, but obeyed instantly, sitting well-behaved in the entrance hall. "Someone is testing my limits today," Ilya sighed, looking up at Shane.

The Canadian let out a soft laugh, already stepping into the house and hiding the bag slightly behind his leg while reaching out his free hand to pet the grumpy dog's head.

"Monkey see, monkey do. It's just a reflection of the owner's mood," Shane teased. Ilya chuckled through his nose, closing the door.

When Shane finished taking off his sneakers, he finally stood up straight. The Russian met him halfway, his massive hands wrapping around the Canadian's waist easily before joining their lips in a soft, warm kiss punctuated by small sighs of mutual relief.

"Happy belated birthday," Shane murmured against his mouth.

"You already told me that," Ilya whispered in a drawl, stealing a few more lazy pecks. The movement of their bodies, however, made the paper of the bag rustle behind Shane's back.

Ilya pulled back almost instantly. He let out a long, resigned sigh, lowering his eyes to identify the sound before bringing them back up to the captain's face.

"Shane..."

"It's just a silly little thing. I swear."

The Russian let out an unintelligible grumble but took the bag from his hand. He opened it carefully, reached in, and pulled out the contents.

It was an orange plush kitten. But it wasn't just any toy: the doll was wearing a perfectly stitched miniature of the Russian junior hockey league jersey, sporting the number 81 on the back, right below the last name embroidered in Cyrillic: **ROZANOV**.

Ilya stood paralyzed. The Russian's breath hitched slightly as he ran his thumb down the number on the plushie's jersey.

"How did you find out what my junior number was?" he murmured, his voice coming out cracklier and hoarser than usual.

"You let a picture of yourself as a kid, in uniform, slip by, forgotten way down at the bottom of your Instagram feed," Shane pressed his lips together, feeling his face heat up slightly. "You gave me a plush kitten wearing my team's jersey for my birthday. So I thought..."

Shane didn't get the slightest chance to finish his sentence. Ilya's hot hand shot to the back of his neck, pulling him in with urgency. The Russian obliterated what was left of the space between them, sealing Shane's lips with his own in a firm, deeply intense, and overwhelmingly warm kiss.

When Shane's fingers moved up to the back of the Russian's head, tangling in his short hair and pulling lightly to deepen the kiss even further, the tension in Ilya's broad shoulders simply melted away, only to be replaced by a ravenous urgency.

The plush kitten slipped from the blond's hands and fell forgotten onto the floor.

Without breaking the contact of their mouths, Ilya grabbed Shane's waist with both hands and moved forward, pushing him firmly until the captain's back hit the wall of the entrance hall with a dull thud, drawing low groans from both of them.

By pure instinct, Shane lifted one of his legs. Ilya immediately grabbed the Canadian's thigh tightly, using the movement to pull him even closer and slot their hips perfectly together. The heavy friction of their dark jeans evidenced the heat and the growing, undeniable arousal radiating between them, destroying what little sanity they had left.

Ilya's mouth moved down fast. Urgent, possessive kisses abandoned Shane's lips, tracing a wet line of fire down his chin, marking the line of his tense jaw, until they finally found the sensitive skin of the captain's neck.

In that exact instant, Shane's brain simply short-circuited. Absolutely no rational thought could survive the sensation of that hot, eager mouth against his skin, and the dense heat pooling at the base of his spine.

"Ilya..." Shane let out a hoarse groan, his head falling back and bumping lightly against the wall.

The blond panted against his skin, his teeth scraping teasingly right over the racing pulse in the Canadian's neck. The bold touch drew a start and a second, even more helpless groan from Shane's throat.

"Fuck, Ilya..."

"Tell me to stop..." the Russian murmured. His voice came out thick, crushed against Shane's neck, his accent heavy with a dark, restrained lust, waiting only for the command.

Shane swallowed hard, digging his fingers tighter into the blond curls, feeling his knees weaken.

"Don't stop..." he gasped, his breath hitting erratically against Ilya's shoulder. "But... maybe continuing standing up in the entryway isn't our best idea."

Ilya let out a low, hoarse laugh, the sound vibrating dangerously against the sensitive skin of Shane's exposed neck.

Slowly, the Russian pulled his face away just enough to look at him head-on. The captain swallowed hard upon realizing that Ilya's pupils were so dilated they almost completely swallowed the blue immensity of his irises. Shane was absolutely certain that his own eyes must look exactly the same, giving away the raw desire that pulsed to the rhythm of every erratic beat of his heart.

"We could go to the living room and start watching the show, and every time Jake Peralta makes a stupid joke, we kiss..." Ilya suggested in a whisper, raising his eyebrows in a seductive challenge.

"I've never seen a single episode of this show in my life, but I feel like that's going to end up happening very frequently," Shane pointed out, his lips still tingling.

"Maybe," the blond broke into a lazy, smug smile.

They laughed together, the suffocating tension finally breaking to make way for a comfortable, light intimacy. Ilya bent down to pick up the plush kitten from the floor, and then guided Shane toward the living room.

Two large buckets of popcorn were already waiting for them on the coffee table. While Shane took off his jacket and settled onto the dark upholstery, the Russian went to the kitchen, returning with a can of Coca-Cola for himself and a stupidly cold can of Ginger Ale for the captain.

Ilya settled onto the chaise part of the L-shaped couch, stretching out his long legs casually. He raised one of his arms in the air—a silent, wide-open, irresistible invitation. The Canadian didn't have to think twice.

Shane nestled into the space beside him, resting his head against Ilya's firm shoulder and letting himself be hugged and pulled close. Enveloped by the heat of the Russian's body and the woody scent of the cologne he wore, the captain let out a long, heavy, deeply relaxed sigh at the exact moment play was hit on the first episode of the comedy.

In less than ten minutes, the rule of one kiss for every Jake Peralta joke went completely out of control. The episode playing on the television was totally forgotten, and one of the popcorn buckets was shoved carelessly aside. Shane was infinitely more interested in having his tongue exploring Ilya's mouth, or the Russian's taking over his own. The order was absolutely irrelevant.

The nanny panted against the Canadian's lips. His left hand moved down the side of Shane's waist, gripping the fabric of his shirt before, in a bold move, slipping under the hem. The direct contact of the hot, calloused fingers against the bare skin of his abdomen made the captain shiver all over, his breath hitching in his throat.

Driven by an irrational need to erase any remaining space, Shane slid one of his legs over Ilya's thighs and, without breaking the kiss at any point, straddled the Russian's lap.

Immediately, Ilya's hands stopped. He pulled back a fraction of a centimeter, separating their mouths just enough to breathe. His blue eyes, now darkened and stormy, searched Shane's face, scanning the captain's expression with an almost reverent care, hunting for the slightest trace of hesitation or discomfort.

But Shane just stared back at him, his eyes half-closed and his chest rising and falling quickly, and nodded.

"The exact moment you want me to stop..." Ilya whispered, his deep voice vibrating with the brutal effort he was making to keep a tight rein on his own control.

"I don't want to stop. Not yet," Shane murmured back, panting, grabbing the back of the blond's neck and pulling him in again.

Ilya's firm hands moved slowly down the sides of the player's body until they reached his thighs, squeezing the dense hockey muscles with a possessiveness that sent shocks down Shane's spine. Internally, the Russian cursed those damn jeans, wishing the thick fabric would vanish so he could feel more of the Canadian.

When Ilya's immense hands wandered further back and squeezed his buttocks with a delicious firmness, Shane couldn't hold back. He gasped mid-kiss, a hoarse, deep, helpless moan escaping and dying straight against the other's mouth.

"Fuck, Ilya..." Shane swore in a breath, his fingers gripping the blond's shoulders.

The friction between them was maddening. They were undeniably hard and pressed against each other, their hips moving in an instinctive, hot rhythm against the denim, while the kisses became increasingly ravenous, intense, and loaded with a lust that felt too overwhelming and desperate for a mere second date.

Shane's hips moved down instinctively, pressing against the bulge in Ilya's pants, seeking more of that maddening friction.

The movement drew a guttural, torn moan from the Russian's throat. Ilya's head fell back against the back of the couch, exposing the strong line of his neck as he panted. The nanny's massive hands gripped Shane's thighs so hard that the Canadian was absolutely certain he'd have fingerprint bruises the next day—and the thought turned him on even more.

Blinded by the fog of desire and the overwhelming novelty of finally being with the man he wanted, Shane moved his lips down the blond's exposed neck, lightly sucking the hot skin just below his jawline.

Ilya shuddered entirely. The limit of his self-control was dissolving like paper in water.

"Shane... Captain..." Ilya murmured. His voice came out broken, hoarse, and unrecognizable.

Making an almost superhuman effort, the Russian moved his hands, bringing them up from Shane's buttocks to his waist. Firmly, but with extreme care, he held the Canadian's hips in place, stopping the constant friction that would take them to a point of no return.

Shane froze, his chest rising and falling uncontrollably. He blinked, trying to clear his blurred vision, his lips wet, red, and swollen from the kisses.

"Did I... did I do something wrong?" the player asked in a whisper, a trace of genuine insecurity rising in his voice.

"*Nyet*. No. Holy shit, no," Ilya let out a weak, panting laugh, shaking his head before leaning forward and resting his forehead against Shane's. The Russian's broad chest rose and fell in the same frantic rhythm. "You are doing everything perfectly well. That is exactly the problem."

Shane swallowed hard, feeling his heart hammer in his throat.

"Then why did we stop?"

"Because if we keep rubbing against each other like this for two more minutes, I'm going to lose my fucking mind and end up ripping your pants off right here," Ilya confessed, raw sincerity shining in his darkened eyes, his thumb coming up to stroke the Canadian's freckled cheekbone.

Shane felt his own face heat up violently, but a small, cheeky smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"And would that be such a big problem?"

"For our second date? And your first time with a guy in your life?" Ilya ran his fingers through Shane's dark, messy hair, his gaze overflowing with an affection that managed to be even more intense than the arousal. "Yes. It would be a problem. Because you deserve a lot more than a rushed fuck, squished on my living room couch, with Jake Peralta's voice echoing in the background on the television."

The answer hit Shane straight in the chest. It wasn't rejection; it was respect, adoration, and absolute care for what they were building. The player let out the breath he didn't realize he was holding, the heat in his body slowly being replaced by an immense, overwhelming comfort.

"You're unbelievable, you know that?" Shane murmured, smiling for real, before leaving a chaste kiss on the tip of the Russian's nose.

"I try," Ilya winked, the smug smile finally returning to his face. He loosened his grip on the player's waist. "Now, please, lie on my chest and try to stay still for a bit so my blood pressure can go back to normal, or I'm going to have a heart attack before I hit thirty."

Shane let out a genuine laugh. He slid to the side, getting off Ilya's lap, but refused to go far. The Canadian nestled against the Russian's side again, throwing one of his legs over his and

resting his head right on top of the blond's left pectoral.

There, listening to Ilya's still-racing heartbeat slowly decelerate, Shane closed his eyes. The television continued playing the forgotten episode, but, for the first time in a long time, Shane felt he was exactly where he belonged.

[...]

Liam pulled his small rolling suitcase down the penthouse hallway, stopping at the top of the stairs to wait for Shane to help him carry it down. The captain soon emerged from his own bedroom, dragging the canvas duffel bag that held enough casual clothes for the weeks they would spend isolated in the peace of the countryside.

"Did you pack everything? The new swimsuits we bought? Your swimming goggles?" Shane checked the list mentally as he pushed down the metal handle of his son's suitcase and lifted it by the side handle, doing the same with his own.

"I got it," Liam assured with a firm nod. "And I also packed the giant LEGO set Ilya gave me for my birthday. I want to build it there so we can leave something of Ilya's at the cottage with us."

Shane's heart warmed instantly. He broke into a small, deeply affectionate smile at his son, and the two began to descend the wooden steps.

Ilya was also officially on vacation from the nanny agency. And, ultimately, it was a tremendous relief that Shane had held back his own anxiety and hadn't impulsively invited him on the family trip in the heat of the moment. Because, apparently, the Russian and his "sister" and best friend, Svetlana, had boarded a flight to Paris.

The two had posted photos together a few hours ago on Instagram. They appeared impeccably dressed in formal gala attire right after the ceremony, which had taken place in the grandiose and historic Orthodox cathedral where Sasha, their model and childhood friend, had chosen to marry his new wife.

It was thinking of the Russian that Shane made an important and irrevocable decision after their last burning kiss on the couch at Ilya's house. Their third official date was already perfectly architected: it would be a week from then, at the cottage, exactly during the days when David would "kidnap" Liam for the traditional grandfather-and-grandson fishing trip. And, when they were finally completely alone in the middle of nature, Shane wanted to sleep with Ilya for the first time.

The choice of location was not a random detail. The lakeside cottage had always been Shane's absolute refuge. During all the dark, terrifying, and exhausting years of the custody battle, that was the only place in the world where the captain felt truly sane, safe, and impenetrable with his son. He simply couldn't imagine taking a step as vulnerable and

surrendered as his first time with a man in a cold hotel room, or anywhere else other than his true home.

However, the prospect of spending the next few days away from each other was already making Shane's stomach churn with anxiety. He knew Ilya liked him. Liked him a lot, if the way the Russian looked at him and touched him served as a gauge. But what were they now, anyway? A former boss and a former employee crossing a professional line? Casual flings? Boyfriends?

Shane desperately wanted a label. He wanted to give a clear and definitive name to what connected them. And, from the bottom of his heart, he hoped Ilya wanted exactly the same thing.

[...]

Svetlana placed another kamikaze shot in front of Ilya as soon as she returned from the open bar. That was already his third in just thirty minutes of the wedding party.

"Why have you had that scowl on your face since the vows at the altar?" the redhead asked, sitting down next to him. She adjusted the slit of her glamorous black sequin dress and set her own glass of champagne on the impeccably decorated table. "Are you jealous of seeing your ex-fling getting married? Or are you like this purely because you left your hot hockey player behind in Montreal?"

"You know perfectly well that I never felt absolutely anything for Sasha," Ilya shot back with disdain, taking a quick sip of the citrus drink.

"Yeah, I know. But for Shane..." She broke into a soft, knowing smile on her perfectly drawn lips. "What exactly are you waiting for, Ilya? You endured eight months of pure stalling and repressed tension under the same roof as that man. Now he's finally not your boss anymore, you guys have already had two perfect dates... all that's left is to go to bed already!"

Ilya's expression closed off immediately. Any trace of lightness disappeared from his face.

"It's his first time, Svetlana," the Russian pointed out, his deep voice taking on a dangerously serious and protective tone. "I'm not going to cross any line that he isn't absolutely and completely ready for. I want him to feel comfortable enough to ask for it. And, more than anything, I don't want to run the risk of it being too soon and having sex simply end up fucking up everything we are building."

Svetlana dropped her teasing posture. She let out a long sigh, her gaze softening, and rested her hand affectionately on her best friend's broad shoulder.

"You really like him, don't you?"

Ilya spun the glass on the table, his blue eyes fixed on the liquid swirling inside.

"And it scares the shit out of me," he admitted in a raw whisper.

The redhead pressed her lips together in silent empathy, lightly stroking the fabric of his suit jacket.

"I want him to be ready for all of this," Ilya added, shaking his head slowly. "And he's not there yet."

"Well, that speech Scott Hunter gave while receiving the trophy on Saturday was incredibly powerful. Maybe that will give Shane the push he needed to gather the courage and come out of the closet publicly in his own time," Svetlana theorized, her soft and encouraging tone soon escalating back to her usual exaggerated excitement. "And then you guys will finally date, get married, adopt another beautiful child, name me as the official godmother, obviously, and raise your two little kids and Anya happily ever after in a gigantic house with a white picket fence that costs millions of dollars."

"How drunk are you?"

"Never in life have I been drunk, Russians do not do this," she shot back with perfectly feigned dignity, lifting her chin.

After that, the two finally relaxed and started to truly enjoy the party. But, to Svetlana's absolute hatred, Ilya stuck by her side the entire night, using his best friend as an impenetrable human shield against Sasha and Lidiya's single friends who kept trying to flirt with him non-stop. The Russian's relentless defensive tactic, by extension, made it impossible for Svetlana herself to hook up with anyone.

Back at the hotel room in the early hours of the morning, the redhead went straight to the shower. Ilya, in turn, threw himself onto the soft upholstery of the balcony couch. With a lit cigarette held between his lips, he unlocked his phone and his heart gave a little leap when he saw there was an unread message from Shane.

Immediately, the Russian's thoughts traveled to their third date, scheduled for exactly a week from then. It would be at the captain's cottage, during the highly anticipated weekend when Liam would be camping and fishing with David. Ilya kept repeating to himself that he wasn't setting any kind of unrealistic expectations about what could happen during those isolated days. He would never do that.

Except for the fact that he was doing exactly that.

Shane's message was a photo of Liam. The boy appeared with his face completely smeared with fruit ice cream, wearing only swim trunks. The surface of the lake reflected the sun in the background of the image, composing the perfect summer scene next to a shark floatie and swimming goggles dropped on the lush green grass.

[Direct Message]

Ilya: And here I was, spending my whole life thinking sharks were strictly carnivorous.

Shane: Yeah. Turns out this specific specimen here really likes pineapple and coconut ice cream.

Ilya: Wow, I've never seen a popsicle in that flavor for sale at the grocery store. Is it some secret Ottawa delicacy?

Shane: I made it for him myself. But I made my batch without coconut, because the taste stays really weird in your mouth afterwards.

Shane: How was Sasha's wedding?

Ilya: Loud. Extremely Russian. Highly alcoholic. His parents came. My former coach was already drunk in the first hour, tearfully reminiscing about the hockey star I could have been if it weren't for my fucked-up knee. And I'm already on my eighth drink.

Shane: Please don't die of cirrhosis. Or lung cancer.

Ilya: How do you know I'm smoking right now?

Shane: Because you only smoke socially. And you definitely needed to be very sociable today.

Ilya: It's just to de-stress my mind.

Shane: Weddings are really stressful. J.J.'s wedding, for example, ended with three people being admitted to the ER. One of them being Hayden with two broken fingers on his hand.

Ilya: Funny. I always thought J.J.'s wedding had ended in divorce.

Shane: 😂😂😂 That too.

Shane: Are you missing Elise crying in your ear yet?

Ilya: A little bit. But I confess I'm missing a certain 25% Japanese little boy much more.

Shane: Hey! My genetics are dominant, okay? He barely looks like Jessica.

Ilya: And missing another bigger boy who is 50% Japanese even more.

Shane: I can't wait for Friday to get here.

Ilya: Me neither.

Ilya locked his device's screen. He took a deep drag and slowly exhaled the smoke through his nose, his blue eyes lost in the dark vastness of the Parisian night sky. The muffled, constant sound of the city echoed in the distance, serving as the perfect soundtrack for the twinkling, golden lights of the Eiffel Tower shining on the horizon.

Driven by an impulse, he raised his phone again, took a picture of the illuminated tower against the Parisian night, and sent it to Shane. The reply popped up on the screen within seconds:

"Wow. Since I've never been to Paris, sometimes I forget that they actually light up the tower at night."

Upon reading the message, an immense, tight, and sudden warmth took over Ilya's chest. An absurd and inexplicable desire to take Shane's hand and show him all of Europe. France, Germany, Italy, Spain, England... anywhere. Literally anywhere in the world would do, as long as they were together.

[...]

After dinner on Wednesday, Shane and Liam were comfortably sprawled on the couch at the cottage, watching *Finding Nemo*. The boy rested his head on his dad's chest, receiving soft, rhythmic head scratches while he paid attention to the television.

"Marlin and Nemo are kind of like us," Liam commented suddenly, his voice sounding quiet in the silence of the room.

Shane craned his neck to look at him, a smile breaking at the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah? Just a dad and a son against the entire ocean?" Shane agreed, his fingers slowly combing through the boy's dark hair. "But wasn't there a part in that book of yours about the sea that said male clownfish turn into females if the mom dies?"

"There is. That actually happens. But most kids wouldn't understand that in a cartoon," Liam shrugged with the peculiar wisdom of a nine-year-old. "There are people at my school who don't even understand how a girl in my class has two dads."

"Yeah... there are a lot of small-minded people out there, buddy," Shane murmured, his heart giving a little leap in his chest.

"After Scott Hunter kissed his boyfriend on the ice at the Finals, some kids in my class said their parents got really mad at home. But that's not fair. Ilya explained to me that nobody chooses to be different, you're just born different. Just like us having freckles!"

The mention of Ilya and the absolute purity in Liam's voice hit Shane square in the chest. He tried to swallow the thick, inexplicable knot that formed in his throat, but the overwhelming emotion was faster.

"You are a very, very smart boy, you know that?" Shane whispered, his voice coming out dangerously choked. "And you have a heart of gold. That makes me even more proud to be your dad."

Noticing the sudden change in tone, Liam took his eyes off the TV and frowned, watching his dad's face closely.

"Why are you crying, Dad?"

Shane sniffled quietly, wiping the corner of his eyes with the back of his hand in a quick movement.

"Because, just like Nemo is Marlin's greatest treasure, you are mine." He pressed his lips together, feeling the sting in his eyelids. "And you're all mine. It's always going to be you and me, Li. Because now Mom can't hurt us anymore or try to take you away from our house. And even if she tried, I would spend another eight years fighting in court just to keep you with me."

Overcome by an absolute protective instinct, Shane pulled the boy into a tight hug, resting his chin on the top of his head and letting out a shaky sigh that emptied his lungs.

"And I know you've told me several times already that you didn't want to have another mom..." Shane started again, his voice a little firmer now, his chest vibrating against the boy's back. "So, you don't have to worry. You are never going to have another mom."

He pulled back a little, tilting his face until Liam met his eyes. Those big, expressive, doe-like brown eyes, a perfect reflection of his own.

"Because, for me to even think about giving you a stepmom... I would have to like girls." Shane let a solitary tear roll freely down his cheek, not caring to wipe it away this time. He broke into a small, incredibly relieved and free smile. "And I don't. I'm gay, Li. I like boys."

The silence that followed seemed to last an eternity for Shane. The sound of the television in the background, with Marlin's voice echoing through the room, became just a distant noise while the captain held his breath, his heart beating erratically against his ribs.

Liam just blinked. He processed the information with the pure, unrestricted calm that only a child raised with a lot of love could have. The boy's gaze dropped from his dad's face to his own hands for a second, before looking back up at Shane.

"So..." Liam began, frowning in a deeply thoughtful expression. "Does that mean you're going to have a boyfriend? Like Scott Hunter does?"

Shane let out a weak, wet laugh, a mix of a sob and the purest relief. The tension that had dominated his shoulders for years began to melt away.

"Yeah. Like Scott Hunter."

"And then, if you guys get married, I'll have two dads? Like Gina in my class?" the boy tilted his head, innocent curiosity shining in his brown eyes.

"Yeah, buddy. If I get married someday, yes. You'd have two dads," Shane swallowed hard, smoothing his son's hair with a trembling hand. "Is that okay with you?"

Liam shrugged with the utmost naturalness in the world, as if they had just finished debating what flavor of dessert to have.

"Sure. Boys are way cooler. We can play video games together, play soccer or hockey in the backyard, and he won't get mad if we get mud on the rug."

Shane couldn't contain himself. He threw his head back and let out a loud, genuine laugh, the sound reverberating through the wooden walls of the cottage. The ton of weight he had been carrying on his back had simply disappeared. Evaporated like mist.

He pulled Liam into another tight hug, crushing the boy against his chest and burying his face in the top of his head.

"You are the best kid in the world, you know that? I love you so much, little shark. More than anything."

"I love you too, Daddy," Liam replied, his thin little arms circling Shane's broad torso and squeezing tight.

They stayed hugging like that for a long time, lulled by the sound of the movie and the warmth of the moment. When they finally pulled apart, Liam adjusted his posture on the couch, his gaze suddenly taking on an investigative and almost mischievous gleam, surprisingly similar to Hayden's or J.J.'s when they wanted gossip.

"But so?" Liam narrowed his eyes. "Do you already have a boyfriend now?"

Shane's face heated up violently. The captain cleared his throat, looking away at the television for a moment before returning to a smile.

"Well... I'm getting to know someone. We've already gone on a few dates."

"Is he nice?" The boy crossed his arms, adopting a protective stance that made Shane's chest swell with pride. "Because he has to be really nice to date you."

"He is... very nice. Amazing, actually," Shane murmured, the image of Ilya's crooked smile, blue eyes, and blond curls invading his mind with overwhelming force. "I think you would like him a lot."

"Cool." Liam nodded, satisfied with the answer, and went back to leaning against his dad's chest, his eyes gluing back to the TV screen again. "Just let him know that the right side of the couch is mine."

Shane laughed, kissing the top of his son's head once more. As Liam's breathing became slow and heavy, falling asleep before the movie even ended, Shane looked out the living room window. Night was falling peacefully over the lake.

For the first time in his entire life, there were no more secrets, no more closets, fears, or omissions. He was Shane Hollander. Captain of the Montreal Metros, a good father, and gay. And, with Liam leaving to travel with David in two days, Shane was more than ready—body, soul, and heart—for Friday.

For the empty cottage.

For Ilya.

Chapter 23: The Cottage

Chapter Notes

AND HERE WE ARE - HEHEHE

since this chapter is quite >something<, there's possibly some translation errors, but I tried my best to correct them <3

Shane checked the contents of Liam's backpack for the third time. Bug spray, plenty of sunscreen, allergy medicine—in case the bug spray failed miserably—and a strategic little container full of gummy bears. The hot and cold weather clothes were already properly folded, and the nine-year-old boy was absolutely radiant at the prospect of camping with his grandpa for two whole days in the "wild world."

The comical detail of it all was that the so-called "wild world" consisted only of the opposite shore of the huge lake at the back of their own property. If Shane really wanted to, he could reach their campsite in a relaxing forty-minute walk along the shore.

"Liam? Hurry up, your grandpa is going to be here in less than ten minutes!" Shane called from the front room, forcefully zipping the backpack shut. His son was still downstairs, theoretically changing his clothes.

It was still early. Ilya wouldn't arrive until the afternoon, after lunch. Shane knew he should be a bundle of nerves, but surprisingly, everything around him felt calm. Almost unreal.

As if there were some kind of cosmic telepathy between the two of them, the phone in the Canadian's pocket vibrated with a notification.

[Direct Message]

Ilya: Do I need to bring anything specific?

Shane: A swimsuit. The weather forecast says it's going to be pretty hot tomorrow, so we could swim in the lake.

Ilya: Okay. Swimsuit in the bag.

Shane locked the screen and let out a long sigh, feeling his face heat up and smiling to himself like an idiotic teenager.

It was then that the unmistakable sound of an emergency brake being yanked hard in front of the house cut through the silence. Shane barely had to move to open the door, because the next second, the doorknob turned and the older man was already walking in. David wore his inseparable fishing vest full of pockets and a bucket hat hanging down his back by the string tied around his neck.

"The best, greatest, and most feared fisherman in all of Ottawa has just arrived," David announced, planting his hands on his hips in an exaggeratedly heroic pose. "I have come to get my worthy heir to the waters, since my own son gets the urge to throw up just looking at fish and worms."

"They're gross, slimy, and they smell bad," Shane defended himself immediately, crossing his arms. "A fish is only an acceptable creature when it's fried, baked, or raw accompanied by a lot of soy sauce."

"Wow, you are so your mother's son it's actually scary," David laughed, kicking off his old sandals at the entryway and craning his neck to look downstairs. "Where's Liam?"

"Stalling. For a change," Shane rolled his eyes, leaning his hip against the rustic wooden dining table. "Liam! Grandpa's here!"

"I confess that this art of deep stalling tends to come from my side of the family," David assumed his share of the blame with a shrug. He walked over to his son and lowered his voice a little. "But, taking advantage of the fact that it's just the two of us... how are the conversations going with the young man you're seeing?"

"They're good," Shane replied promptly. He felt his heart speed up a little bit at the mention of Ilya, but he held his dad's gaze. "He's very nice. I think... when the time is right, you guys will like him a lot."

"Uhm... So things seem to have a future?" David raised an eyebrow, his paternal instinct disguised as casual curiosity.

"I hope so," Shane shrugged, a small, sincere smile tugging at his lips. "I told Liam I'm gay on Wednesday, while we were watching a movie."

David blinked, surprised, but a soft, proud smile soon took over his face.

"And he reacted incredibly well," Shane continued, letting out a weak little laugh. "Got all protective the second I said I was dating a guy, crossed his arms and asked me super seriously if he was nice to me."

"Well, there's nothing to laugh about. You would do exactly the same thing if your mother and I ended up splitting up and one of us showed up with someone new."

"Not at all. Mom would kill you first. To her, there's no divorce, only widowhood," Shane pointed out with absolute conviction. "That part of your vows at the altar about 'till death do us part' was definitely a threat from her."

David let out a loud, full-bodied laugh, nodding his head slowly.

"And they have been the best twenty-nine years of my life," the older man shook his head affectionately. "Holy shit. Now that you mentioned it, I remembered I need to sit down and plan our pearl anniversary trip..."

"You guys could go to Japan. Mom would love to visit everything again," Shane suggested.

David raised his eyebrows, scratching his graying chin as he strongly considered the idea.

"Not a bad idea..." he murmured.

Minutes passed and there was still not the slightest sign of the boy.

"Liam Dubois Hollander!" Shane yelled from the top of the stairs, using the dreaded full name to command respect.

Behind him, David made a face of pure disgust.

"You know, now that you have one hundred percent custody of him, you could easily go to court and get that 'Dubois' taken off the kid's last name. The dead weight is already gone."

Shane let out a short laugh. He could perfectly imagine Yuna popping a very expensive French champagne and throwing a party the day Liam no longer carried any reminder of Jessica in his own name.

Before he could agree with his dad, the sound of hurried footsteps echoed on the wood. Within seconds, the boy appeared running, out of breath, from the lower floor. He was perfectly dressed for fishing, wearing a miniature vest just like his grandpa's, and with absolutely no obvious sign of why he had taken almost twenty minutes down there.

"Finally," Shane shook his head, smiling and bending down to fix his son's shirt collar before sending them off on their adventure.

"I was sorting my LEGO pieces for when I get back," Liam admitted, a little embarrassed, and Shane let out a weak laugh through his nose.

"Go enjoy your wild life, buddy," Shane leaned in, leaving an affectionate, lingering kiss on his son's dark hair.

David picked up his grandson's backpack from the table and held out his huge hand to him.

"We will return in one piece and loaded with fish for dinner on Monday," the grandpa promised.

"As long as the fish arrive here already dead, headless, and perfectly clean, they are allowed into my kitchen," Shane countered, crossing his arms protectively.

David let out a loud laugh and unlocked the car, letting his grandson run ahead to the passenger seat.

In less than five minutes, the sound of the engine faded down the dirt road and Shane found himself completely and absolutely alone at the cottage. He decided to take advantage of the silence to try and prolong the atypical calm he was feeling. He changed clothes, putting on just comfortable swim trunks, grabbed the book he had been reading for the past week, and prepared the smallest cooler he had in the closet. He filled it with ice, two cans of Ginger Ale, a homemade pineapple popsicle to start, and a mango one for backup.

Shane walked out to the wooden deck facing the lake. He settled onto one of the upholstered lounge chairs, put on his sunglasses, and dove into his reading, letting the late-morning sun golden his skin while he savored the citrus popsicle.

The problem started halfway through the second popsicle.

Feeling the sweet, cold taste of mango melting on his tongue, the book started to get dangerously more interesting—and, spicily speaking, explicit. For a treacherous moment, Shane's mind wandered away from the pages and he caught himself imagining that, in a matter of a few hours, he could very well be sucking on something other than a popsicle.

It definitely wouldn't be something cold. And, with all the certainty in the world, it wouldn't be something small—after all, his hip had already perfectly felt the heavy outline of that reality through Ilya's jeans, pressed against the wall of his apartment hallway.

Completely on autopilot, staring blankly at nothing, Shane realized he was shoving the mango ice cream on the stick much deeper than necessary. And, to his own surprise, he wasn't even having gag reflexes in the process. *Maybe this is a good sign*, his dirty, optimistic mind whispered. *An excellent sign, actually.*

But when the sex scene in the book finally reached the climax of its descriptions, Shane's mental control went out the window. All he could visualize, in vivid detail, was what it would be like to have sex with Ilya for the first time in that very house.

He had to snap the book shut in shock. Having a hard-on, tenting the fabric of his trunks in the middle of his own backyard, wasn't exactly what he had planned for the morning, no matter how isolated the property was and how completely alone he was.

Defeated by his own libido and overwhelming anticipation, Shane dropped the book on the chair and ran inside the house. He went straight into the shower to wash the sweat from the sun—and the built-up tension—off his body. A quick, desperate jerk-off under the warm water was the only possible solution, and he stepped out of the stall minutes later, considerably more relieved, ready to make a light lunch and finish getting the details ready for Ilya's arrival.

[...]

Ilya didn't want to assume anything. He tried his best. He really tried. He even appealed to his old barriers of mental professionalism—which, truth be told, didn't even exist anymore. Shane was no longer his boss and, whether he wanted to or not, he was going to spend two nights and three full days, completely alone, at his cottage. So, just as a pure precaution, Ilya hid two condoms in his wallet and shoved a small bottle of lube into an inside pocket, deep in his leather duffel bag.

Normally, on a long, solitary drive of over two hours, the Russian would have smoked a cigarette or two on the way to relax. But he definitely didn't want to kiss Shane tasting and smelling like nicotine.

Following the GPS coordinates down a densely wooded road, well past the Ottawa city limits, Ilya began to spot the properties surrounding the immense lake. They were imposing homes, a perfect, luxurious blend of rustic and modern. And, when he finally took a gentle curve to access a dirt driveway almost swallowed by vegetation, Shane's refuge revealed itself. It was a stunning building, constructed with lots of solid wood, dark stone, and gigantic glass windows.

The captain's car was already parked in front of the porch. Ilya stopped the Jeep and pulled the emergency brake. Through the vast windows of the house's facade, he immediately saw Shane's silhouette moving hurriedly toward the exit.

The dull thud of Ilya's car door closing coincided perfectly with the click of the front door opening. The two stared at each other from a few meters away and, honestly, it was impossible to say which of them broke into a smile first.

"Hi," they said exactly at the same time, in unison.

Shane hurried down the wooden steps of the porch and walked straight toward Ilya. The blond opened his arms and welcomed him in a tight hug, crushing the Canadian against his chest. The grip was soon loosened for a fraction of a second—just enough time for Ilya to tilt his face and take his lips in a soft, quick kiss loaded with a palpable longing.

"I'm really glad you came," Shane whispered right after the kiss, his lips still brushing lightly against Ilya's.

"I never miss a date," the Russian murmured back, a smile breaking at the corner of his mouth.

Reluctantly, they pulled apart. Ilya opened the back door of the Jeep, took out his leather bag, and slung the wide strap over his shoulder. In an almost microscopic movement, Shane held out his hand. Ilya didn't hesitate and immediately intertwined their fingers.

The Russian scanned the interior of the hall with his eyes as they took off their shoes at the entrance. The entire house smelled of rustic wood, citrus cleaning products, and, intoxicatingly, of Shane.

"So... I can give you an official tour of the property, if you want. There's food in the kitchen if you're hungry, drinks if you're thirsty... I have my own artesian well, you can see it right

through the window there..." Shane babbled on, his voice loaded with an adorable nervousness, fighting a silly smile the whole time, while Ilya just watched him in silence, his eyes shining with affection. "There are... there are two guest bedrooms downstairs. Several options for you to choose from."

"Uhm. I need a king-size bed," Ilya decreed.

"All the rooms have king-size beds."

"And an impeccable view."

"They all have a great view of the lake."

"And an en-suite bathroom just for me," Ilya arched his eyebrows.

He certainly already knew the exact layout of the house, probably from having watched the documentary the sports network had filmed there years ago. The simple thought of Ilya looking him up on the internet made Shane break into a wide smile and take a step forward, his lips stopping millimeters from the Russian's.

"Well... that might be a slight problem."

"Uhm. A problem?"

"It turns out there's only one bedroom with an en-suite bathroom in this whole house. And it's mine."

Shane laughed through his nose, pulling Ilya by the hand. They went up the short steps that divided the spaces, crossed the TV room, and entered the master bedroom. The room was huge, with glass walls surrounded by blackout blinds, an enormous bed in the center, and a spacious open closet on the left wall that led to the bathroom.

"A thousand pardons, sir. We at the resort would really like to accommodate you in the best possible way..." Shane continued the joke.

Ilya simply dropped his bag carelessly onto the rug and pushed Shane by the shoulders straight back onto the soft mattress. The sudden movement drew a loud, surprised laugh from the captain. With a frighteningly feline grace for a man of his size, the Russian crawled onto the bed, throwing a leg on either side of the Canadian's hips. He planted his hands flat on the sheets, one on each side of the player's head, perfectly caging him in.

Shane held his breath in pure anticipation. His hands flew immediately to grab Ilya's waist.

"S-sir, I'm just the bellboy! You can't treat the staff this way!" Shane gasped, struggling to keep up the act.

"Oh, I think it's high time for a role reversal around here, don't you think? You being the submissive employee and me being the boss?" Ilya purred, his deep, teasing voice vibrating in the quiet room.

Shane laughed even harder, his eyes overflowing with desire. Ilya finally gave in, leaning down to close the distance between them once and for all with a ravenous, warm, wet, and desperately needy kiss.

Shane's tongue brushed against Ilya's lower lip, which yielded instantly, opening the way and deepening the kiss with a hunger that drew low, satisfied moans from both of them.

The Canadian's hands slid up the sides of the Russian's waist. Feeling the heat radiating through the cotton fabric, Shane gathered his courage and slipped his hands under Ilya's t-shirt, marveling at the firm texture and the hot skin beneath his fingertips.

The Russian gasped right into his mouth. Taking the sound as clear approval, Shane moved his touch higher, eagerly exploring his broad back, mapping every muscular contour, the well-defined grooves, and the perfect curve of his spine.

Overcome by gravity and desire, Ilya ended up giving in and settling all his weight onto Shane's body. The two were immense men—an elite professional hockey player and a guy who clearly spent hours at the gym—but the problem there wasn't the lack of air from the weight itself. The real problem was the dense, obvious, and desperate heat that pooled in the exact spot where their hips aligned.

In search of oxygen, Ilya abandoned Shane's lips. The Russian moved his urgent, wet kisses down the line of the captain's jaw, until he focused his attention on the sensitive skin of his neck, nibbling and sucking the spot possessively.

Shane let out a hoarse hiss. He threw his head back onto the pillow, exposing his throat even more, and, driven by pure instinct, bent his knees and crossed his legs around Ilya's lower back. The movement locked the Russian against his body, intensifying the heavy friction between the nylon fabric of Shane's shorts and Ilya's sweat shorts.

The friction was so direct and overwhelming that they both groaned in unison, their voices tangled in the tight space between them.

The impact of the sensation made Ilya stop kissing the captain's neck the very next second. The Russian buried his face in Shane's shoulder and pulled in a sharp breath, his teeth gritted, while the Canadian's fingers unwittingly dug in, lightly scratching his broad back in a spasm of pure pleasure.

And, for a long, agonizing moment, the only sound that filled the absolute silence of the cottage bedroom was the noisy, erratic echo of the two men's heavy breathing, fighting with all their might not to lose what little sanity they had left.

Slowly, Ilya lifted his face from Shane's shoulder. The Russian's chest rose and fell in a heavy, erratic rhythm. His blue eyes were so dark, dilated, and stormy that the light color of his irises had almost completely disappeared. He scanned the captain's flushed, freckled face, searching, with his unyielding usual care, for the slightest shadow of doubt, panic, or hesitation.

But all he found in Shane's gaze was a desire as raw, bright, and desperate as his own.

"Shane..." the Russian whispered. His voice came out drawn out, hoarse, sounding like a warning and a prayer at the same time.

Gently, he used his calloused thumb to caress the Canadian's cheekbone, tracing the freckles over skin that was flushed in a way he had never seen before.

"We have three whole days here. I don't want you to do absolutely anything because you feel obligated, or because you think it's the logical 'next step' people take, or just because you think it's what I want. You have to want this for you," Ilya pointed out, every word heavy with seriousness. "And, remembering all the times we've discussed how you simply thought you didn't like sex in the past... I respect that more than anything. I respect you and your boundaries."

Shane moistened his dry lips. His brown eyes ran over every detail of Ilya's face, absorbing the safety radiating from him, while his hands remained firmly anchored on the Russian's hot waist under his shirt.

"I want to try," the captain whispered back, his voice trembling but sustained by an absolute certainty. "I have never felt this horny in my entire life. I mean... if this really is what being horny feels like, because I've never felt it before, but I'm pretty sure it is. So... I want to try. Anything. Literally anything. But with you."

Ilya broke into a small, sweet, and absolutely reverent smile. The devouring tension in his shoulders seemed to dissipate, giving way to a deep devotion. He leaned down slowly, placing a chaste, soft, and reassuring kiss over the captain's swollen lips.

"Just tell me what you want," Ilya murmured against his mouth. "And I'll do it."

Shane drew in a shaky breath, trying to calm the storm in his own chest. He raised one hand, tracing the strong line of Ilya's jaw with his fingertips, while the Russian followed his every slight movement without even blinking.

"Wait..." Shane murmured, moving slowly to get off the mattress.

Ilya pulled back instantly, granting total passage without questioning. The Canadian walked over to the closet shelf and grabbed a small remote control. With a soft, technological beep, the blackout blinds began to lower smoothly against the glass walls, blocking out the afternoon sun and plunging the immense bedroom into a safe, intimate semi-darkness.

Next, Shane went to the room's door and closed it with a firm click of the lock, ensuring that the outside world finally ceased to exist for the two of them.

Settled on the edge of the bed, Ilya waited in silence. The Russian's posture overflowed with an almost lethal patience, his dark eyes devouring and memorizing the Canadian's every step across the room.

When he finally turned back around, Shane held Ilya's gaze for a few moments. His heart was beating so hard it hurt. Finding a courage he didn't know he possessed, he crossed his arms,

grabbed the hem of his own shirt, and pulled it over his head, tossing the piece of fabric carelessly over the arm of the chair next to the wardrobe.

Ilya's eyes immediately fell on the player's bare chest and the freckles on his shoulders, darkening even more with desire. The Canadian managed to catch the exact moment a pink flash of the Russian's tongue darted out to moisten his dry lips.

Under the weight of that ravenous gaze, Shane felt preyed upon—and, in an overwhelming and intoxicating way, he loved the feeling.

Shane returned to the bed, and this time, he was the one who positioned himself on top, a leg on either side of Ilya's waist. The Russian surrendered, allowing Shane to explore at his own pace, to seek out what he wanted for himself.

Their lips met again. Shane's hands moved up into Ilya's golden curls, while his ran along the other man's thick, muscular thighs. The friction between them continued, hot and insistent.

One of Shane's hands slid under Ilya's shirt, feeling the contour of his abdomen, the trail of hair that outlined his navel and disappeared under the waistband of his shorts. He wanted to see where that trail ended.

"Take this off..." he murmured, pulling at the hem of the shirt.

Ilya obeyed without hesitation. Shane helped, and then, finally, had before him the chest he had admired from a distance for so long. The blinds were two-thirds closed, exactly as he had left them, and the afternoon light still invaded the room. And, my God, Ilya looked so good in that light.

Shane slid his hands over the Russian's chest, feeling the texture of the skin, absorbing every detail up close: the contours of his abdomen, the moles scattered across the pale, smooth skin. Resting on his collarbone, slightly crooked, was the gold chain with the Orthodox crucifix. Shane straightened it, centering the pendant on Ilya's chest, and leaned down to kiss him slowly.

Meanwhile, his other hand moved down unhurriedly, not eagerly rushing in, slipping under the waistband of his shorts. The touch drew an audible sigh from Ilya, who felt Shane's fingers now brushing the waistband of his underwear.

Then Shane pulled back, resting his forehead against his, leaning on his forearm. His hand remained on the side of Ilya's waist, inside the shorts.

"I want to suck your dick." His voice came out hoarse, drawn out, almost a whisper

Ilya swallowed hard, biting his lower lip. His right hand came up, and his thumb stroked Shane's freckles.

"Are you sure?"

"I am."

With a brief nod, they moved. Ilya settled himself on the bed, and Shane let out a sigh of anticipation before positioning himself between the Russian's legs, following his every movement as he took off his shorts and tossed them on the floor. Shane's eyes ran over the new expanse of exposed skin with an almost reverent admiration.

The outline beneath the dark gray fabric of his underwear was, without a doubt, the focal point of that sight—but there was more. The trail of hair he had so often imagined in inappropriate moments really did continue into the underwear, confirming every silent fantasy. Shane also noticed the small scars on his knee, whitish marks from the surgery Ilya had had when he was eighteen. They were there, present, part of him.

"Come here..." Ilya called, his voice calm and low.

Shane leaned in, and the blond held the back of his neck, joining their lips in a sweet, lingering kiss. His fingers slid through Shane's dark, short hair, in a caress that made him melt inside.

"It's okay... I'll guide you."

"Please."

Shane took a deep breath, feeling his heart beat heavy against his ribs. His hands moved slowly down Ilya's waist, his thumbs sliding over the hot skin above the waistband of his underwear. He hesitated for a moment, not out of doubt, but out of a desire to prolong that moment—to keep every detail.

Ilya noticed. The hand still on the back of Shane's neck slid down to his shoulder, in a firm, comforting touch.

"No rush," he whispered.

Shane nodded, and then his fingers curled under the elastic of the underwear. He pulled slowly, revealing centimeter by centimeter. The fabric slid down the strong thighs, and Ilya slightly lifted his hips to help. The garment ended up on the floor, forgotten next to the shorts.

Shane's gaze moved back up the Russian's body, now completely exposed in the golden afternoon light. There was something almost sacred about it—Ilya's trust, the silent surrender, his naked beauty on the sheets.

"You are..." Shane started, but his voice failed him.

Ilya smirked, pulling him closer.

"I know."

Shane laughed softly, leaving a kiss on the inside of Ilya's thigh, and then another, and another, moving slowly up, feeling the muscles contract slightly beneath his lips. His scent was intimate, hot. Shane closed his eyes for a second, just absorbing it.

"I want to do this right," he murmured against the skin.

"You already are," Ilya replied, his voice a little hoarser.

The captain opened his eyes and looked up at the Russian through his eyelashes, seeking permission once again. Ilya touched his face, his thumb swiping across his freckle-dusted cheekbone.

"You can go. I'm right here."

Ilya took Shane's hand and guided it to his own member, teaching him how to hold it, the touch drawing a visible tremor from him. Shane swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly salivating, his gaze fixed on the hot, rigid skin beneath his fingers, already shining with precum at the tip.

"Start slow," the Russian instructed, his voice measured, his hand still covering Shane's. "Careful with the teeth."

He moved Shane's hand up and down, in a slow, deliberate rhythm. Even without lube, the friction felt good—too good. Shane felt the weight, the texture, the heat. And, above all, he felt the silent power of having Ilya like this, surrendered to his touch.

Then he pulled away, and Ilya retreated immediately, attentive. But Shane just reached over to the nightstand, opening the top drawer and pulling out a bottle of premium water-based lube.

"I at least know how to jerk off, right, Ilya?" he teased, with a smug smile.

The Russian let out a low laugh, tilting his head slightly.

"You can't deny it's different holding a dick that isn't yours."

Shane popped the cap open and poured a good amount into the palm of his hand.

"Different, but not impossible."

He set the bottle aside on the mattress and, on his own, wrapped his hand around Ilya's member again. Now with the lube, the glide was smooth, hot, indecent. The Russian gasped, his head falling back as Shane's firm hand moved up and down in a rhythmic cadence.

"*Blyat*, Shane..." he whispered, his voice heavy with pleasure.

Shane smirked, watching every reaction, every small shudder. He wanted to memorize everything. And he hadn't even really started yet.

He saw Ilya grab the bedspread, his fingers gripping the fabric tightly when Shane slid his hand from the base to the glans, twisting his wrist over the sensitive head and, on the way down, pulling the foreskin with it. The Russian let out a muffled curse, his chest rising and falling in an irregular rhythm.

And then, after what seemed like an eternity, Shane leaned down and ran his tongue just below the glans, slowly and deliberately.

"*Blyat!*" Ilya dug his elbows deeper into the mattress, his grip on the sheets intensifying.

Shane took that as encouragement and repeated the movement. One, two, three times. Until, finally, he wrapped his lips around the reddened head of Ilya's dick, sucking slowly, with the same dedication with which he had savored the fruit popsicle earlier—thinking precisely of this moment.

"Fuuuuck, Shane..." Ilya groaned slowly, his hand moving up to the other man's dark hair, just holding it, like a silent encouragement. "That... that... *Da*, just like that. Fuck."

He was mixing English and Russian without realizing it, and that just made Shane more confident. His mouth moved down a little further, without his hand stopping its work on the rest of the shaft. His tongue swiped across the slit, tasting Ilya's pre-cum. Salty, hot, and strangely exactly as Shane had imagined.

Ilya's hand firmed in Shane's hair, not pulling, just anchoring him there, as if he needed that contact so as not to fall apart completely. The sounds escaping his lips were low, hoarse, mixed with words Shane didn't understand, but didn't need to translate. Ilya's body spoke for itself—his hips moved in small, involuntary thrusts, seeking more of that hot, wet mouth.

Shane relaxed his jaw and went down a little further, controlling his breathing through his nose. His hand remained firm at the base, following the movement of his mouth in a rhythm that alternated between slow and teasing, intense and soft. With every descent, his tongue pressed against the throbbing vein beneath the skin. With every ascent, his lips closed more precisely around the glans.

"Look at me," Ilya asked, his voice choked.

Shane looked up without interrupting what he was doing. And what he saw almost disarmed him: Ilya with his head tilted, lips parted, his chest flushed, his brown eyes fixed on him with an intensity that bordered on adoration.

"You are..." Ilya tried, but the sentence was lost in a groan when Shane sucked harder, his cheeks hollowing.

He felt the dick pulse against his tongue. Ilya's body tensed for a moment, and the hand in his hair squeezed slightly, like a warning.

"Shane..." the name came out trembling, urgent. "I'm going to... if you keep going like this..."

Shane didn't stop. He just slowed down, keeping the rhythm, but without rushing. He wanted to feel Ilya lose control. He wanted to be the reason for it. And, more than anything, he wanted to taste him all the way to the end.

Shane's free hand moved up Ilya's chest, sliding over the thin layer of sweat that was beginning to form. His other hand was covered by Ilya's, their fingers intertwining tightly, as if he needed that anchor to not lose himself completely.

"Fuuuuck, Shane... *Blyat!*..."

The Canadian relaxed his jaw even more. He knew he could take more than four inches—the tests with the six-inch dildo hadn't been in vain. When his hot, tight mouth moved even further down Ilya's length, the Russian rolled his eyes back, groaning loudly, his back coming off the mattress for a moment. He squeezed his fingers tightly intertwined with Shane's.

The Canadian picked up the pace, mouth and fist working together, and that was the limit.

"Shane..." Ilya groaned one last time, before pulling him by the back of the neck away from his dick.

With a wet pop, Shane pulled away. Ilya took over the movements, his hand flying over his own member, frantic, until his entire body tensed. Hot, white jets spurted out, accompanying a hoarse, almost guttural groan.

Shane watched everything with his eyes shining with desire and fascination, his temple resting on the Russian's abdomen. And then Ilya pulled him up, sealing their lips in a firm, needy kiss, as if Shane were the air he needed to return to the world.

"I wanted to do that..." Shane murmured against his mouth, still out of breath.

"You did," Ilya replied, his voice drawn out, still floating between pleasure and reality. "And you did very well."

"So... did you like it? Was it good?"

"If this is your first time sucking a dick, I fear for my life when you become a professional," he joked, with a slow smile.

Shane laughed softly, hiding his face in the crook of Ilya's neck, feeling his racing pulse against his lips. The other man's scent enveloped him entirely—musk, heat, something vaguely sweet that seemed uniquely his. And Shane stayed there, warm, satisfied, and strangely complete.

Except for the throbbing hardness between his legs, ignored for the past several long minutes. But not for much longer. And definitely not on Ilya Rozanov's watch.

The Russian reached for the tissue box on the nightstand, wiping the cum off his own hand and part of his legs with an almost clinical calmness.

"There are wet wipes in the bathroom..." Shane started, already trying to get up.

"Shh..." Ilya pushed him back against the mattress, climbing over him and slotting himself precisely between his legs. He left a slow kiss on his lips, his eyes loaded with intent. "My turn to show you some tricks."

"Literally the third blowjob of my life," Shane admitted, swallowing hard.

"And the first one that's going to be actually good."

Ilya kissed him again, lingering and wet, while his hands already moved down Shane's abdomen, pulling the nylon trunks down along with his underwear in one swift motion. The fabric slipped down his thighs, and the air in the room was a cruel contrast to the heat of the exposed skin.

"God..." Shane groaned against Ilya's mouth, his arms wrapping around his neck without knowing exactly where to grab.

"Relax..." the Russian whispered, distributing kisses along the way: cheek, collarbone, center of his chest, abdomen. His lips moved down patiently, tracing his navel, and then his hot mouth touched the inside of one thigh, then the other, teasing.

Shane propped himself up on his elbows, and just the sight of Ilya there, between his legs, his golden hair falling over his eyes, already had him on the edge of the precipice.

Ilya gripped the base of Shane's member firmly, without hesitating, like someone who knew exactly what he was doing. And then he ran his tongue from the base to the glans in a single, slow lick, tasting.

"Uhm... you're circumcised. Unfair," he murmured, with a fake pout of disappointment.

Before Shane could respond to the tease, half of his dick disappeared inside Ilya's mouth.

Shane was not small. And knowing that Ilya was swallowing him with that ease made him groan twice as hard.

"Holy shit, Ilya, fuck..." the words came out broken, his voice cracking, his legs trembling.

Ilya only let out a satisfied sound around his length, his hands firm on Shane's hips, holding him in place as he began to move with a wicked cadence, his hot mouth and tongue working every centimeter.

Shane let his head fall back, his eyes closing for a moment before forcing themselves to reopen—because he didn't want to miss any of it. Seeing Ilya there, his mouth stretched around his dick, his reddened lips shining with saliva, was an image he knew would be burned into his memory forever. It was the first time in ten years, since his sex life became active at seventeen, that Shane wanted to be in a sexual encounter. He didn't just want it to be over with, he wanted it to last forever.

Ilya looked up at him through his eyelashes, his blue eyes darkened with desire, and went down further, relaxing his throat with an ease that made Shane let out a guttural groan, his thighs trembling around the Russian's head. Ilya's hands firmed on his hips, his thumbs tracing distracted circles over the hot skin, as if soothing and teasing him at the same time.

His mouth moved up slowly, sucking hard, his tongue pressing against the vein pulsing beneath the skin. On the way down, Ilya swallowed him all the way to the back, his nose brushing the dark hair at the base. Shane arched his back, a broken curse escaping his lips.

"Fuck... I can't take it like this..." he warned, his voice hoarse, his hands grabbing the sheets, Ilya's hair, anything that kept him anchored to reality.

Ilya slowed down, pulling off with an obscene sound that echoed through the room. A drop of saliva ran down the corner of his mouth, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand, without breaking eye contact with Shane.

"Can't take what?" he asked, his voice hoarse and deliberately low. "I haven't even really started."

Shane let out a panting laugh, his chest rising and falling in jerks.

"You're sick, you know that?"

Ilya smiled—that slow, dangerous smile that Shane had come to hold as one of his favorites. He bent down again, but this time he kissed the sensitive skin just below his navel, then the junction of his thigh, his tongue tracing a lazy path.

"You like this," he murmured against his skin, while his hand wrapped around the base of Shane's member, pumping slowly.

Shane bit his lip, his hips moving involuntarily in search of more. He was so hard it hurt, his skin shining with moisture, the tip red and throbbing.

"Stop torturing me, Rozanov."

Ilya looked up, his fingers lightly squeezing Shane's thigh.

"Just a little longer. You look beautiful like this," he said, and there was no mockery in his voice, just raw desire, naked admiration. "Completely surrendered, shaking for me."

"Yeah... and we've come to the conclusion that I like sex, so for the love of... Argh!"

Ilya didn't let him finish. He dove back in, without warning, swallowing Shane to the base in a single fluid motion. The sound that escaped Shane was almost a sob, his legs closing instinctively around the Russian's head, who only groaned in response, the vibration traveling up the entire length of Shane's dick.

He was lost, completely undone, surrendered, on the edge of a pleasure that threatened to swallow him whole. And Ilya didn't show the slightest intention of taking pity.

"This is the best moment of my life..." Shane gasped with his whole chest, his fingers gripped in Ilya's golden curls, who bobbed up and down with a wet, obscene sound that only made everything better. "Oh, my God."

It was when one of the Russian's hands slid down to play with his balls that Shane whimpered, his hips thrusting reflexively into his mouth, seeking more, always more.

"Ilya... Ilya... *Tabarnak*, fuck, fucking God, holy shit..."

And it was when the Canadian's English and French started to mix that the Russian knew he was truly on the edge of orgasm.

He intensified the sucking, the back-and-forth of his mouth along Shane's member, the deepthroats. And it was during one of them that the captain's back came off the mattress, a string of "fucks" escaping his lips as hot jets flooded Ilya's mouth.

He didn't stop. He kept sucking Shane through the orgasm, prolonging every spasm, sucking every drop, until the Canadian groaned that it was too much—the post-climax hypersensitivity overcoming the pleasure.

Even so, Ilya licked up the very last drop of cum and ran his tongue over his lips, his eyes fixed on Shane's.

"Why do you get to swallow the cum and I don't?" Shane murmured the injustice, panting, his face totally flushed, his dark hair plastered to his forehead, his chest rising and falling frantically. His almond, brown eyes were cloudy, still lost in pleasure.

"Because..." Ilya kissed Shane's iliac bone and slowly moved up. "I smoke..." he kissed every ridge of his abdomen. "And you..." he kissed one pec, then the other. "Spent the week..." he kissed his neck. "Sucking popsicles..." he kissed his jaw. "Made of fructose-rich fruits." He leaned close to Shane's ear, his voice a whisper loaded with mischief. "Meaning..."

He hovered over Shane with a wicked smile on his equally sweaty face.

"I normally don't care whether I swallow or not. But, in this case, I knew it was going to be sweet. Sweeter than usual."

"Caught in the popsicle plan." Shane pressed his lips into a smile, and Ilya let out a low, satisfied laugh before leaning down and joining their mouths in a lingering kiss, sharing the taste of Shane between their tongues.

[...]

After dinner, Shane still felt like he was floating. A lifetime's worth of tension had disappeared. They went out to the wooden deck at the back of the cottage, where the stone fire pit awaited them, already stocked with firewood left over from the nights Shane and Liam roasted marshmallows.

The night had brought a slightly sharper breeze. Settled on the wide sofa on the deck, Shane and Ilya shared the same thick blanket, illuminated and warmed only by the orange, hypnotic glow of the flames.

"So, the grand plan is for us to just sit here and stare at this?" Ilya teased, his deep voice blending with the crackling of the firewood.

"Yes. We just sit here and stare at this," Shane replied in the same tone, leaning his head against the backrest.

The Russian broke into a smirk and draped his arm over the Canadian's shoulders, pulling him all the way close.

"Wow. Ottawa is really super fun."

"Oh, shut up," Shane laughed, giving the Russian's chest a weak little shove before snuggling even closer against his side.

Ilya began to softly stroke Shane's dark hair, his fingers gliding unhurriedly. In response, almost on autopilot, the captain started drawing invisible, random patterns on Ilya's shirt.

"I'm glad you came," Shane murmured. His voice sounded low and peaceful, harmonizing with the crackling of the fire, the rustling of the surrounding trees, and the constant sound of the lake water breaking on the shore.

"Thank you for inviting me," Ilya replied in an equally soft tone, leaving a hot, almost ghost-like kiss on the top of Shane's head.

A comfortable silence fell over them. There were no more remnants of tension, just the pure and simple enjoyment of each other's company. Until Shane finally broke the stillness once more.

"I wanted it to be here..." he began, the sudden vulnerability in his tone catching Ilya's full attention instantly. "During all the worst years of the court battle, ever since the construction of this house was finished, this was the only place in the world where I knew Jessica couldn't disrupt my peace with Liam in the summer. It was right there on that grass where he took his first steps. It was in our living room where he said his first word... it was slipping on the slime of that deck down there, near the lake, that he lost his first baby tooth..."

Shane let out a long sigh, heavy with memories, and shrank even further under Ilya's arm, feeling the Russian's chest rise and fall slowly.

"I live in that giant penthouse in Montreal, but here... here is my real home," the captain continued, turning his face to meet the Russian's gaze. "And that's why I wanted our first time to be here. My first time allowing myself to be who I am, and doing something that I, deep down, always knew I would like."

Ilya stared at him in absolute silence. The Russian's thumb moved up slowly, stroking the freckles on the Canadian's cheek with an almost religious reverence for drawn-out seconds.

"I'm very relieved to know the real reason. I was already starting to think you brought me here just to make my body disappear in the middle of this forest," Ilya joked, gently breaking the weight of the confession.

Shane let out a weak laugh, leaning up and joining his lips to his in a slow, tender, and deeply affectionate kiss.

"The fact that you trust me like this is sexy as fuck, Captain," the Russian confessed in a whisper against his mouth, his gaze darkening with affection.

"I trusted you to take care of my son, Ilya. And he is the absolute center of my entire life," Shane replied, his brown gaze anchored firmly in the blue immensity of the other. "Of course I would trust you with anything else."

Within half an hour, they were back in the bedroom. The clock on the nightstand read just past nine at night. Shane was on his back on the soft mattress, with Ilya hovering over his body. Their lips were perfectly slotted together, moving in a lingering, lazy, and deeply intoxicating sequence of slow, wet kisses.

All that separated them now was their underwear—the only remaining pieces of clothing that, with the latent urgency threatening to escalate at any millisecond, could disappear very quickly.

The warm, golden light of the lamp was the only thing illuminating the room, bathing them in a cozy semi-darkness. Ilya's thumb moved in a constant, hypnotic caress over Shane's freckles, while the Canadian's hands traced slow paths, moving up and down the Russian's broad, hot back.

The calm lasted until Shane needed to break the kiss, his parted lips panting for air. Ilya didn't waste a single second of that proximity; he simply moved down, leaning in to distribute wet, possessive kisses over the captain's tense jaw, the base of his neck, and the line of his Adam's apple. Any patch of skin he could reach and claim without having to pull away.

"Ilya..." Shane called out in a weak gasp, his brown eyes half-closed, his head sinking into the pillow.

In response, he heard only a deep, questioning grunt, a muffled "uhm?" vibrating right against the skin of his neck.

Shane swallowed hard. He dug his fingers into the golden curls at the back of the Russian's neck, pulling him lightly until Ilya lifted his face to look at him. His blue eyes were dark, shining with a predatory devotion in the lamplight.

With his racing pulse hammering in his ears, but driven by an absolute certainty he had never felt before in his life, the captain whispered:

"I want you to fuck me."

Ilya nodded softly, leaning down and joining his lips to his with reverence and care.

"Is that really what you want?"

"Yes." Shane nodded his head, his breath short, his eyes fixed on Ilya's.

The lube was still on the nightstand from the first round in the afternoon, but Shane reached out his arm and opened the drawer, taking out a strip of condoms and leaving it next to the bottle.

"We are going slow... No rush," Ilya murmured, holding the side of Shane's face with a surprisingly tender firmness, his lips sliding down to his neck.

A loud gasp escaped the captain, his back arching slightly.

"It's not... it's not going to be the first time I have something inside me, Ilya."

The Russian paused for a moment, his blue gaze meeting the brown in the dim light. There was a silent understanding there, without judgment, just presence.

"No, but it's the first time it's me."

The sentence hung between them, loaded with something too deep to be named in that moment. Ilya kissed Shane's forehead, moving down past his eyes, the tip of his nose, until he found his mouth again, slowly and deliberately.

The Russian's hands moved down the sides of Shane's body, hot fingers outlining his ribs, waist, hips. Everything was intentional, calculated to soothe and, at the same time, tease.

"You tell me if you want to stop," Ilya said, his voice a breath. "Anytime. No questions asked."

Shane nodded, his throat dry, his heart beating so hard he felt Ilya could hear it.

"I know. I trust you."

And that seemed to be all Ilya needed to hear.

The blond pulled Shane's underwear down and threw it somewhere on the floor. His hand wrapped around the base of the rigid member, pumping a few times in a calculated rhythm, drawing short, breathy moans from the captain, his fists clenching the sheet.

Ilya smirked—soft, but with something predatory in the gleam of his eyes. He settled himself between Shane's legs, kissing the sensitive inside of his muscular thighs while maintaining the constant movement of his hand.

With a slow lick from the base to the glans, he wrapped his lips around the pink head and went down, swallowing his length with an ease that made Shane moan helplessly.

"Ilya... fuck." Shane panted, his fingers buried in the golden curls, as if he needed to hold onto that to make sure it wasn't an hallucination.

Ilya moved up and down unhurriedly, without holding back his saliva, sucking and licking with a devotion that almost made Shane come in less than two minutes. Then he pulled away, and the frustrated grunt that came from above made him smile again.

With dexterity, he slipped his hands under Shane's thighs and pushed them up, firming them against his chest.

The player gasped, his body trembling slightly, but he obeyed, holding his own knees. He felt incredibly exposed—because he was—but there was no insecurity in it. There was surrender. And trust.

Foolish him, to imagine that Ilya would go straight for the lube.

All that escaped Shane's mouth was a desperate prayer when the Russian's hot, wet tongue touched his entrance.

"Oh, God in heaven..." he moaned, his voice broken, his hips moving involuntarily in search of more.

Ilya only grunted in response, his mouth working patiently, wetting, teasing, preparing. His firm hands kept Shane's thighs spread, his thumbs caressing the skin in an indecent contrast to the intimacy of what he was doing.

Shane whimpered and panted at the same time, holding his knees against his chest, his legs trembling, his own dick leaking pre-cum onto his abdomen. Ilya continued to expertly circle his tongue around his ring of muscles, pressing occasionally, tasting, relaxing. And when the tongue finally entered, white spots exploded in Shane's vision.

"God..." he cried out between moans, his voice cracking, choked.

And he moaned even louder when, along with the tongue, came a finger.

"Fuck, Ilya..."

The Russian didn't answer with words. He just curled his finger slowly, exploring with precision, while his mouth went back to working around the entrance. Shane's body reacted on its own, his hips moving in search of more, his hands gripping his own knees tightly.

Ilya looked up without interrupting what he was doing, and the sight of Shane like this—open, exposed, surrendered—drew a grunt of pure satisfaction from him.

"Can you take more?" he asked, his voice hoarse against the skin.

"Yes... yes, please..." Shane pleaded, not recognizing his own voice.

The Russian placed a wet kiss on the underside of Shane's thigh and slid his second finger next to the first, carefully, feeling the resistance give way gradually. The sound that escaped Shane was long, drawn out, obscene. Ilya stopped for a moment, watching him, his fingers still, his breathing heavy.

"Does it hurt?"

"No... no, keep going..." Shane murmured, his head thrown back, his eyes squeezed shut. "Keep going, please."

Ilya resumed the movement, his fingers sliding in and out in a patient rhythm, his mouth returning to travel the length of Shane's member, distracting him, setting him on fire. The

room filled with wet sounds, heavy breathing, and the muffled creak of the mattress.

Shane was completely lost, his body on fire, every nerve ending on high alert. And Ilya hadn't even really started yet.

Shane didn't know how he could have spent months believing he maybe didn't like sex, when now it was clear he was just doing it with the wrong people—with women—because, at that moment, there was nowhere else in the universe he wanted to be but right there.

Especially when the Russian's fingers started to open him slowly, while his hot mouth still moved up and down his length. The dual stimulation, at any other time, surely would have made him come by now—if he hadn't emptied it all out in the afternoon, down Ilya's throat.

"Ilya..." Shane moaned, his voice pleading. "Please..."

The Russian let the Canadian's member escape with an obscene pop and placed a completely soft kiss on his inner thigh. Then, he carefully withdrew his fingers, drawing a grunt of disapproval from Shane.

The captain watched as Ilya got off the bed to take off his own underwear. And, suddenly, when the Russian hovered over him again, kissing his neck, Shane wondered if that would really fit inside him. He knew that six inches went in. But Ilya was well over six.

"Relax..." Ilya murmured, as if reading his mind. "It'll fit."

"Okay..." Shane replied, his voice trembling.

He watched Ilya tear a condom from the strip, ripping the wrapper with his teeth and taking out the latex. Of all the moments of anxiety Shane had ever lived—and there were many—that was the only one that made him feel something good.

Ilya squeezed a generous amount of lube onto his own member and also onto Shane's entrance, spreading it with his fingers slowly and carefully. Then he leaned down, joining his lips to the Canadian's in a deep kiss, which seemed to promise patience, surrender, presence.

And then he kept their foreheads together, his blue eyes searching for any sign of hesitation on Shane's face. He found none.

The captain nodded slowly.

Ilya guided his member to the entrance and pressed.

Instantly, Shane held his breath, his hands gripping the Russian's biceps tightly, his lips pressed together.

"It's okay..." Ilya murmured, with a reverent calm. "It's okay, *malyshka*..."

Whatever that word was in Russian, it was enough for Shane to let his breath out and allow himself to be stretched by the head of Ilya's dick. It was hot, wet, and it stung in a way that made him tremble. When the first barrier finally gave way, Shane let out a drawn-out moan,

throwing his head back against the pillow, and Ilya moaned with him, low and hoarse, as if he were holding on by a thread.

"How much is in already? God in heaven..." Shane gasped, clinging to the Russian's shoulders tightly, his nails digging slightly into the hot skin.

"A little less than half."

"Oh, fuck..." Shane released the tension in his shoulders, swallowing hard, his eyes fixed on Ilya's. He noticed the small smile threatening to appear on the Russian's lips. "It's funny because it's not you, isn't it?"

"A little," Ilya conceded, the smile finally appearing, crooked and affectionate. He leaned down and left a lingering kiss on Shane's lips. "No rush, remember?" Shane nodded, taking a deep breath. Ilya's thumbs traced soft circles on his hips, in a silent attempt to relax him. Shane's body was still tense, but the initial stinging was beginning to turn into something different—a heat that spread slowly, asking for more.

"You can keep going," Shane murmured, his eyes opening to meet Ilya's. "I want all of it."

Ilya held his gaze for a moment, as if burning it into his memory. Then he nodded and pushed forward a little more, with deliberate slowness, his body tense with control. Shane let out a long, low moan, feeling filled in a way that bordered on unbearable and perfect at the same time.

"That's it..." Ilya whispered, his voice hoarse. "You're so fucking tight..."

Shane let out a shaky laugh, his eyes tearing up from the mix of pleasure and intensity.

"You're tearing me in half, Rozanov."

"I'm not." Ilya kissed his forehead, then the tip of his nose, his lips. "I promise I'm not."

And then, centimeter by centimeter, he finished burying himself, until his hips slotted completely into Shane's. For a moment, no one moved. The whole room seemed to suspend itself, filled only by their breathing, by the racing beat of their hearts, by the absolute awareness that they were, finally, as close as two people could be.

"*Ty samyy krasivyy muzhchina, kotorogo ya kogda-libo videla, takoy dorogoy, takoy moy.*" Ilya murmured against Shane's neck, leaving a slow kiss there and giving in to the urge to suck lightly, just enough to leave a small red mark on the captain's smooth skin.

"I've never heard you speak so much Russian like this in front of me." Shane said, still regulating his breathing, his fingers intertwined in Ilya's golden curls. "Why now?"

"Because I'm comfortable... with you." Ilya replied softly, lifting his head to look at him. "*I potomu, chto ya nikogda prezhde ne lyubil tak, kak seychas...*"

"I'm going to start speaking in French if you keep going," Shane laughed softly, and Ilya smiled, safe behind the language barrier. "Move... please."

Ilya's smile dissolved into something more serious, more surrendered. He kissed Shane's forehead, then his lips, and then began to move.

The first thrust was slow, deliberate, almost reverent. Shane let out a weak moan, his eyes closing, his back arching against the mattress. His body, still adjusting, burned and throbbed around Ilya, who let out a muffled curse against the Canadian's mouth.

"Fuck, Shane..." he whispered, his voice hoarse and trembling.

"More..." Shane asked, his legs hooking around the Russian's waist, pulling him closer, deeper. "Don't stop..."

Ilya didn't stop. He established a calm, deep rhythm, each thrust drawing increasingly less controlled sounds from both of them. The room filled with heavy breathing, the muffled creaking of the bed, the hot friction between their sweaty bodies.

Shane kept his eyes open, fixed on Ilya's, and every time their hips met, something inside him unraveled and rebuilt itself at the same time. It wasn't just sex. It was surrender. It was trust. It was everything.

When there was no more discomfort—only pleasure pulsing in ever-stronger waves—Shane's moans became a pure melody of surrender. And Ilya, feeling the other's body yield completely to his, picked up the pace.

"That's it... Fuck, Ilya... So goooood..." Shane tossed his head on the pillow, his eyes closed, completely out of his mind. "Fuck me... Fuck me hard."

"Shane..."

"Hard."

The request came out firm, loaded with urgency, and Ilya felt his own control shudder. He braced himself better on his knees, his hands firming on Shane's hips with more intensity, his thumbs pressing into the marked skin. He kissed his mouth once, with an almost brutal voracity, and then obeyed.

The thrusts became deeper, faster, each one drawing louder, more erratic sounds from Shane. The bed creaked under the intense rhythm, the lamplight flickering slightly with the movement. Sweat ran down Ilya's forehead, down Shane's shoulders, making their bodies slippery, hot, glued to each other.

"That's it... like that... don't stop, don't stop..." Shane pleaded, his nails digging into Ilya's broad back, his legs squeezed tight around his waist, pulling him in with every thrust.

Ilya grunted against Shane's neck, his face buried in the crook of his shoulder, the rhythm relentless but still attentive—his eyes flicked up every now and then to watch the captain's face, to make sure everything was okay, that the pleasure hadn't turned to pain.

But what he saw was pure abandon. Shane was completely surrendered, his lips parted, his hair plastered to his forehead, his body arched, his pupils dilated, his gaze lost in a pleasure

so deep it felt sacred.

"*Blyat*, Shane..." the Russian groaned, his shoulders trembling as much as his. "So tight, so hot..."

He wanted this to be one of the best experiences of Shane's life. For that reason, he slowed down the pace, ignoring the grunt of complaint that escaped the Canadian right after.

"Turn over..." Ilya murmured, pulling away from on top of him. "I'll show you what's good."

Shane moistened his lips and obeyed as soon as the Russian pulled out of him. With his stomach against the mattress, he felt Ilya grab a pillow and position it under his hips, elevating him slightly. The blond's hands squeezed his buttocks calmly, and Shane knew, without needing to look, that he was observing his widened entrance, still throbbing from the absence.

"So beautiful..."

If it were possible to get any redder, Shane would have at that moment. But he didn't have time to process the compliment—Ilya guided his member back to his entrance and slid inside, drawing a drawn-out moan from both of them. He leaned over Shane's body, covering it with his own, and kissed his shoulder.

"Okay?"

"Fuck, yes, fuck..." Shane gasped, feeling every centimeter filling him again. "Fuck me, Rozanov."

Ilya left another kiss on Shane's shoulder and started moving. The thrusts came firm and deep, his hands gripping the captain's waist tightly. And, to his surprise, Shane started to match the rhythm, thrusting his hips back, fucking himself against Ilya's dick with a surrender that made the Russian lose his breath.

"That's it..." Ilya grunted, his voice hoarse, almost unrecognizable. "Keep going, Shane. Show me how much you want it."

Shane didn't answer with words. He just buried his face in the pillow and rolled his hips back, seeking the exact angle that made him see stars. And when he found it, a drawn-out moan tore through his throat, his hands gripping the sheets in desperation.

Ilya noticed immediately. He adjusted the angle and went back to thrusting with more precision, aiming for that exact spot, drawing increasingly louder and broken sounds from Shane. Both of their skin shone with sweat, the sound of their bodies meeting filled the room, and the pleasure grew in ever-higher spirals, like a wave about to break.

The entire room seemed reduced to that single point of contact—Ilya's body moving inside Shane's, the two surrendered to a rhythm that was no longer controlled, only felt. The headboard bumped lightly against the wall with every harder thrust, and not even the golden lamplight seemed capable of containing the scene.

Shane had his face buried in the pillow, his fingers clenched in the sheet as if that were the only anchor keeping him tied to reality. The sounds escaping his mouth were pure desperation and pleasure, a wordless plea. Ilya, leaning over him, kept one hand firm on his hip and the other resting beside his body, his lips brushing his nape, his ear, his shoulder, while he whispered things Shane didn't understand, but that made him tremble all over.

"Ilya... I'm close..." Shane warned, his voice broken, almost a sob. "Fuck, I'm really close..."

"Come for me," Ilya murmured against his skin, picking up the pace, seeking that same angle that made Shane fall apart. "Come with me, *malyshka*..."

Ilya's hand slid under Shane's body, wrapping around his throbbing member, pumping in the same rhythm as the thrusts. The touch was the spark. Shane screamed into the pillow, his entire body tensing, and then came the orgasm—violent, devastating, tearing him from himself in successive waves that seemed to have no end.

Ilya felt Shane's body contract around him and that was it. With a deep grunt, he buried himself to the base one last time, the pleasure exploding in every muscle, every nerve ending, every thought. The world went white for a moment, and he only came to when he realized he was whispering Shane's name against the damp skin of his neck.

The two stayed like that for a long moment, panting, glued to each other, their bodies still trembling with the remnants of pleasure. Ilya was the first to move, pulling out of Shane carefully, attentive to any sign of discomfort. He quickly took off the condom, leaving it tied over the wrapper it came from on the nightstand. Then, he pulled the Canadian to him, settling him against his chest, not caring about the sweat, the cum, the mess.

Shane buried his face in the crook of Ilya's neck and let out a weak, exhausted, incredulous laugh.

"I think I just saw God."

Ilya laughed softly, his hand moving up to stroke Shane's dark hair.

"Me too."

They lay in silence for a moment, breathing together, both of their hearts still racing, but gradually finding a calmer, more intimate rhythm.

"Stay," Shane asked, his voice sleepy, his fingers distractedly tracing the outline of the crucifix on Ilya's chest. "Just a little longer."

Ilya kissed the top of his head and squeezed him lightly against himself.

"I'm not going anywhere."

[...]

Shane woke up the next morning with the palpable sensation of a comfortable weight on his waist, a heat radiating against his back, and a dull, deep, and undeniable ache spread across his hips. It was an overwhelming physical exhaustion, but that ache made him break into a lazy smile anyway.

Seeking even more of that contact, he snuggled back, melting into Ilya's body and feeling the Russian's rhythmic, hot breath hitting his bare shoulder.

The moment of lethargic peace, however, was interrupted by two short vibrations. Shane carefully stretched his arm so as not to wake the man behind him and grabbed his phone from the nightstand. Upon disconnecting the device from the charger, he squinted against the brightness of the screen to read the notifications in his friends' group chat.

[Group: Playdates]

Simone: Is it really mean of me to be wishing Ilya wasn't on vacation? Because I really needed him here right at this exact moment.

Simone: Or am I just being petty? 🙄

J.J.: What happened to my daughter?

Simone: Elise is great, relax. It's just that, since you're traveling this week, Jeremy and I can't go out. And next week I already travel to New York to start shooting my new movie.

Jackie: I remember Ilya mentioning once that he usually only took two weeks of vacation a year, even though he was entitled to a lot more time.

Shane looked away from the screen and looked over his own shoulder, observing Ilya's face resting on the pillow. His expression carried a serenity that the Canadian had never seen before. Shane had never been the type to believe in the cliché that people literally "glowed" after an unforgettable night, but Ilya was definitely disproving that theory. Not to mention the small detail that Shane was perfectly clean under the sheets, which meant the blond had taken all the care to clean him up while he passed out from exhaustion in the early hours of the morning.

The phone vibrated again.

[Group: Playdates]

J.J.: I saw his Instagram this week. Looks like he went to Paris for a friend's wedding.

J.J.: And I get back on Monday, Monnie. I'll take Elise so you can go enjoy the night with your head writer.

Simone: You are the best ex-husband ever.

Shane: Ilya is already back from Paris, but he's still on vacation from the agency.

Jackie: Changing the subject... What kind of grand activities are you entertaining yourself with on this blessed weekend when Liam went fishing with your dad, Shane Hollander?

Before he could even think of how to type a diplomatic reply to that, Shane felt a low, breathy laugh vibrate right against his neck. The slight startle made him jump a little on the mattress. He turned his face back, coming face-to-face with the Russian's amused blue irises watching him.

"Morning," Ilya murmured. His natural sleepy voice made his accent even thicker, drawn out, and incredibly hoarse.

"Good morning," Shane broke into a small smile and reached his arm back, pulling his face in to leave a soft kiss on his cheek. "You were reading my messages, you snooper."

"And what were you going to reply to them?" Ilya arched an eyebrow, the wicked, smug smile appearing on his lips. "That you're entertaining yourself with the best blowjobs of your existence? That you literally had the best fuck of your life? That you moaned until you were hoarse from how good it was to have nine inches inside you?"

Shane rolled his eyes, dropping the phone on the sheets, and let out a genuine laugh. He tried to turn to face Ilya, but bitterly regretted it mid-movement when the twinge in his hip reminded him of reality. He grimaced, letting out a pained grumble.

The Russian, instantly, slid his hand under the soft blankets and began to massage the side of the captain's iliac bone with his thumb, in an affectionate, silent apology.

"You promised you weren't going to tear me in half, you liar," Shane accused, his voice whiny.

"I did," Ilya retorted naturally, stealing a quick kiss from his lips. "I promised absolutely nothing about not breaking you, Captain."

When they finally gathered the courage to get out of bed, Shane noticed that Ilya was also walking with a slight limp. It was only then that the captain remembered the surgical pins the Russian had in his knee. A small structural detail that, judging by the intensity of the early hours, didn't seem to have made the slightest difference last night. For a fraction of a second, Shane's mind drifted, imagining almost fearfully what it would have been like if Ilya's knee were still one hundred percent intact.

After a supposedly "quick" shower—which lasted much longer than planned thanks to heated kisses under the warm water and bold hands wandering freely until scratchy moans tore from

both of their throats—the two went downstairs to prepare breakfast.

As he walked past the island, Shane caught sight of his own reflection in the mirrored photo panel that decorated the kitchen wall. He stopped instantly, tilted his chin to the side, and started counting. One, two, three... four darkened hickeys marking territory on his neck.

"Are you serious?" Shane pointed at his own neck, his voice loaded with comical indignation.

Ilya, who was perfectly focused on the wooden cutting board slicing fresh strawberries for the fruit salad, didn't even bother looking back.

"You don't have the right to say absolutely anything, Captain," the Russian shot back immediately, turning his face just enough to arch his light eyebrows.

Shane crossed his arms over his chest, already preparing a perfectly mocking reply. But Ilya simply dropped the knife and turned his back, pointing his thumb over his own shoulder.

Shane's mockery died in his throat. Under the clear, unforgiving morning light that flooded the kitchen, he could see clearly: the Russian's broad, pale back was marked by several long, red lines of deep scratches.

"Oh... my bad..." Shane murmured, looking away automatically, feeling his face heat up violently as he took a few steps toward him.

"Don't apologize," Ilya cut his embarrassment short right there. The Russian spun on his heels, wrapped one of his strong arms around the Canadian's waist, and pulled him effortlessly, anchoring his gaze in his brown eyes. "They're just marks. They are my physical proof that you really enjoyed last night."

The shameful heat in Shane's face was immediately replaced by a small, surrendered, and genuine smile. He wrapped his arms around Ilya's neck, snuggling into the hug.

"Yeah..." Shane whispered back, his voice soft before stealing a kiss. "I loved it."

Chapter 24: No longer a secret

Chapter Notes

yeah, it's over.

this is maybe a surprise to a bunch of poeple, but I honestly feel like I've done I what needed to do here.

there will be an epilogue, coming this next week, I promise, but as a whole story, I think I'm done.

It was very funny to see your comments freaking out about Jessica showing up out of nowhere, but It would never happen - there was a draft that I deleted where she did came back stalking Ilya, but that wasn't something that I wanted to follow, I wanted something simple and cute, as I did here.

Also you guys freaking out about someone showing at the cottage - only made me realize how traumatized with queer media we are, because ofc when everything's fine, something bad happen and there's a whole new plot line.

It was a great time writing it, once again, not my OG idea, I saw this one time on Pinterest and then lost the pin - still wanting to yeet myself cos of it - thank you all for being here, I really hold all of the frequent readers that take a bit to comment and I truly hope to see you guys more on my stories if I'm worthy of it <3

If you're interested, I've a brand new fic on my profile, it's called Centaurs' Paradise, it's a Farm Au of Hollanov - I love horsies and I love the boys, so why not unite them? I'm posting the cast on my tik tok - rhaenyz_ - and hope you guys enjoy.

Once again, thank you so much for your time
luv yah, uh!
- Theoz_

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

Shane spent the rest of the morning lying on the wooden deck, finishing his book, while Ilya floated comically across the lake on a gigantic inflatable orca floatie the captain kept stored in the pantry with the camping gear. The Russian sported a pair of sunglasses and held a cold, sweating beer bottle in his hand, making the most of the late-morning sun.

Despite the distance, Shane was strategically lying right at the edge of the deck, with one arm hanging over the water just so he could hold Ilya's hand. The two spent almost an hour distractedly playing with each other's fingers in an absurdly relaxing silence.

For lunch, they cooked together. And, while the vegetables finished sautéing in the pan, Shane ended up pressed against the granite countertop, with Ilya positioned right between his

legs, their mouths locked with zero intention of parting anytime soon. They ate, went back out to the garden, and lay down on the same lounge chair. Ilya ended up falling asleep with his face tucked into the Canadian's neck, while Shane read a few more chapters and softly ran his fingers through the blond's curls.

They only went back inside before the sky began to darken. They threw themselves onto the couch to watch a few more episodes of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, and Shane finally, to his own dismay, understood why on earth Ilya thought he was so much like Amy Santiago.

The Russian was lying down, his head comfortably settled in the captain's lap, while Shane kept his legs stretched out along the chaise section of the L-shaped couch. Peace reigned until, in the middle of the episode, Shane's phone began buzzing frantically with a group video call from Hayden and J.J.

He made a quick hand signal to Ilya. The Russian nodded, his eyes sparkling with amusement, and sealed his own lips in a silent promise to stay quiet. Shane accepted the call.

"Help," Hayden pleaded the second the three faces appeared on the split screen.

On the other camera, J.J. was once again in the bathroom, finishing wrapping a towel around his waist.

"I... Oh, no! Jean, don't you dare—AH, HOLY FUCK, A DICK!" Hayden yelled, squeezing his eyes shut.

Shane merely turned his face toward the glass wall, sighing deeply as he realized J.J. had indeed followed through on his terrible promise to answer the blond's next call completely naked. In his lap, Ilya looked up, his brow furrowed in absolute confusion. Shane had to bite the inside of his cheek to hold back his laughter.

"I warned you!" the giant defenseman shot back, tucking the towel in and propping the phone on the sink. "What the hell do you want?"

"The twins have a birthday party to go to on Monday afternoon and I don't have a fucking clue what to get the kids! They're twins, a boy and a girl," Hayden explained, parental panic stamped across his forehead. "And their parents are filthy rich, so the kids are the super picky kind."

"Man, you're filthy rich too. And you have three daughters and a son. What kind of wisdom do we have to offer you on this?" Shane shook his head, pointing out the flaw in his best friend's logic, while his free hand continued distractedly twirling one of Ilya's curls.

"I know! But one of my daughters likes tools and dirt-covered race cars, the other only likes pink things and princesses. And my son..." Hayden looked away from the camera for a moment, probably staring at little Arthur on the other side of the living room. "I only don't say anything about him because I made him and I love him unconditionally."

The statement was too much. Ilya ended up letting out a choked laugh and clamped both hands over his mouth in the exact same second.

Shane held his breath, his eyes wide, silently praying his friends hadn't heard.

"Who laughed there, Shane?" J.J. narrowed his dark eyes at the camera. "I thought Liam was camping with your dad this weekend."

"Wait... DO YOU HAVE A GUY OVER?!" Hayden jumped off the couch, his face pressing against the camera lens, his wide eyes giving way to a huge, euphoric grin. "My God, you horny bastard! You literally waited for your son to leave the house so you could get laid! And... by the way, settle a technical question for me: how does it wo—"

"Do not finish that question. Ever in your life," J.J. cut the blond off sharply. "Especially because the guy is right there listening to everything and that's wildly disrespectful, you animal."

"Oh, right, my bad... Hi, Shane's mystery boyfriend!"

"He's not my boyfriend, you idiots," Shane shot back quickly, feeling his face and the tips of his ears heat up instantly. In his lap, Ilya was shaking, fighting back laughter with all his might. Shane gave his shoulder a light tap. "Stop laughing, dammit."

"Hayden, explain to me again how Jackie agreed to marry you?" J.J. rubbed his temples, incredulous.

"I don't know either!" Jackie's voice echoed loudly in the background of the call, making Hayden laugh.

"The answer is obvious: I am undeniably gorgeous. I might not be the smartest guy in the world, but I play hockey for a living, so I don't need a lot of brains."

"And all your concussions definitely don't help either," Shane jabbed surgically.

"Oh, a thousand pardons to Mr. Captain 'I've Never Broken A Single Tooth Or Had A Concussion Playing Hockey' Hollander," Hayden rolled his eyes dramatically. "Focus, gentlemen! Gifts. Ideas. Suggestions. Save my life."

Ilya tapped Shane's leg gently, catching the captain's eye, and mouthed silently, *"How old?"*

"How old are the kids turning?" Shane passed the question along.

"Eight. The girl does ballet with the twins at the same studio," Hayden answered, flopping back onto the couch.

Shane looked down at the Russian. Ilya made a subtle gesture with his hands and gave a slight shrug, suggesting a tutu.

"Get something ballet-related for the girl, then. Some new shoes, a designer tutu," Shane suggested with confidence. Hayden scratched his chin, considering it.

"It's the mystery guy feeding you ideas, isn't it?" J.J. leaned closer to the camera, a smirk forming. "You're looking down every time before you speak..."

"Mind your own business. The focus is Hayden's problem," Shane deflected, his face turning even redder.

"True. Let's wrap this up so you can get back to your love nest in peace," J.J. made a sly face that had Hayden throwing his head back in laughter. "Does the boy do anything? Sports? Like any animals?"

"I think he plays basketball at school..." Hayden scratched the back of his neck, unsure.

"New basketball sneakers," Ilya mouthed, settling in with a lazy smile in Shane's lap.

"What if you get him a nice pair of basketball sneakers?"

"Good one. I'll look up some exclusive models online and send them to you guys to approve," Hayden accepted the idea with relief. "Love you guys. Despite the free, unwanted view of Jean's dick at the start of the call."

"Complain one more time and I'll show it again, in 4K," the defenseman threatened, adjusting his phone. "Speaking of which, I'm feeling completely left out of the group now. Simone is dating, Shane is on a honeymoon getting laid, and I've got nobody! What the fuck is that?!"

"Dude, you sleep with a different girl in Montreal every week," Shane shook his head.

"I know! But I wanted to, I don't know... settle down a bit. Meet someone genuinely nice," J.J. shrugged.

Shane raised his eyebrows in shock. In his lap, Ilya made the exact same surprised expression. Hayden almost choked.

"Don't make that face, you idiots. I have feelings!"

"Bro, you haven't been in a serious relationship since you signed the divorce papers with Simone," Hayden pointed out the undeniable fact. "I've been married for almost ten years. Shane was your salvation in the bachelor club, because his last serious girlfriend before this was fucking Jessica, but then came Rose, and now this hidden gift-genius guy."

"He's not my boyfriend... We've only had three dates, for fuck's sake," Shane grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Uh-huh. But I bet a hundred bucks you two are sleeping cuddled up in the same bed tonight," Hayden wore a purely devilish grin. "By the way, a formal request to the hidden guy down there: don't break him too much, okay? We need Shane in one piece to lead the team next season."

That was the last straw. Ilya couldn't take it. The Russian let out a long, nasal laugh, muffling the sound against Shane's thigh, his whole body shaking.

"Are you daring to insinuate that your team Captain is the bottom in the relationship, Hayden?!" Shane shot back, sounding far more scandalized than he actually was.

"N-Never! Far be it from me!" The blond widened his eyes in mock panic, while, in the background of the call, Jackie's loud laughter echoed through their living room.

"I warned you not to go down that road," J.J. laughed, falling back onto the hotel bed.

"Why is your face practically glued to the phone, Jean?" Hayden asked, frowning as he saw the defenseman dangerously close to the camera lens.

"I'm browsing Instagram, shut up," J.J. rolled his eyes.

In that exact same millisecond, Ilya's phone, which was plugged into the charger on the arm of the couch right beside Shane's head, let out a clear, sharp chime of a notification. J.J. stopped moving and narrowed his dark eyes at the screen.

"Since we're already on a call, what do you guys think about taking the kids to a water park next week? The forecast says it's going to be blistering hot and I'd give anything to risk my life on a giant waterslide right now," Hayden suggested, completely oblivious to everything. Jackie's muffled voice chimed in from the background.

Another chime echoed from Ilya's phone.

"Jackie really wants to go," the blond continued, excited. "She said that at the park we usually go to, they have this virgin cocktail she loves."

"Sounds like a great idea," Shane agreed, trying his hardest to sound natural. "Last year Liam couldn't go because of a restriction from Jessica, so he's definitely going to love it."

Hayden nodded, already pleased with the plan's success.

Chime.

"Shane Hollander," J.J. broke his own silence suddenly. His voice sounded deep, investigative, his eyes locked onto the screen. "Answer me something."

"What?" The captain pulled his head back, panic starting to creep up his spine.

In his lap, feeling the vibrations, Ilya slowly reached out his arm to grab his own device and check what was coming through.

"What is that notification chime in the background of your call?" J.J. asked slowly.

Once again, the Russian's phone went *chime*.

"Because I just sent four ridiculous memes in a row via DM to a very, very specific person," the defenseman finished, a triumphant, dangerous grin spreading across his face.

Shane looked down immediately. Ilya looked back at the captain with an identical expression of pure shock, turning the screen just enough to show Shane the four Instagram notifications glowing with the name of Jean-Jacques.

"Who'd you send them to, man?" Hayden frowned, the last soul on earth to figure out what was happening.

"Let me just send one more to test a theory..." J.J. murmured, his fingers typing rapidly.

Chime.

"ILYA ROZANOV, GET YOUR ASS ON CAMERA RIGHT NOW!" J.J. roared at the top of his lungs, his victorious laughter already blowing out the call's audio.

[...]

Ilya pulled the heavy double doors shut with a soft click. When he turned around, he saw Shane settling under the bedsheets. The captain gave a slight wince, a physical reminder that his hips were still quite sore from the night before, but the expression on his face overflowed with an absolute lightness. It was a mix of exhaustion, pure relief, and the adrenaline from the last chaotic fifteen minutes of the call, in which he finally had to admit to his shocked friends that, yes, the "mystery guy" was Ilya Rozanov.

"I thought their reaction was going to be... I don't know," Shane murmured, shrugging his shoulders in an uncertain gesture, leaning back against the mattress. "I guess I just got used to always expecting a bad reaction from people... for anything related to me."

"They are your best friends, Shane. Why the hell would they react badly to something that makes you happy?" Ilya arched his eyebrows, approaching. He crawled over the mattress and slipped under the covers, settling in facing the Canadian.

"Yeah... you're right." Shane broke into a small smile, his brown eyes studying Ilya's face. Then, he hesitated, his voice dropping a tone. "What about you?"

"What about me?" the Russian asked, raising his hand to trace the line of the captain's jaw with the tip of his index finger, a lazy caress.

"You never... you never went out more than a few times with anyone. Never had a serious relationship before..." Shane stuttered slightly, stumbling over his own words out of nervousness. "And not that... not that we already have something labeled like that, far from it, but it's just... you always told me in no uncertain terms that you didn't want a commitment. With anyone. And..."

"Shane." Ilya cut off his train of thought, holding the Canadian's chin with a reverent softness between his thumb and index finger. "I never dated by my own pure choice. Because I never wanted to and, mostly, because I had never found anyone who was truly worth the effort of trying."

Ilya's blue gaze darkened with a raw sincerity, bathed only in the warm light of the lamp.

"And that whole conversation we had about 'taking small steps'... that goes for me a bit, too. Because yes, I almost never repeated dates with anyone. But, suddenly... I already catch myself thinking about what I'm going to cook for our fourth date."

Shane felt his chest warm in an indescribable way. He broke into a slow, incredibly tender smile, and leaned forward, leaving a chaste, lingering kiss on the Russian's lips.

"What was it you said to Liam that day at the hospital, when he had to get stitches in his arm?" the captain whispered, their faces millimeters apart.

"It's scary, but you are brave," Ilya replied in a breath, repeating his own advice.

"Yeah..." Shane nodded slowly, his heart beating strong and steady against his ribs. He leaned in again, closing the distance and joining his lips to Ilya's in a deep, warm kiss loaded with silent promises.

Sunday dawned over the two of them, and Shane discovered the wonders of slow, lazy morning sex. It started with his mouth—he brought Ilya to orgasm using only his lips and tongue, savoring every muffled groan against the pillow. Then, it was the Russian's turn to return the favor, working Shane's dick with a firm hand while two fingers slid inside him with a cruel patience, until Shane rolled his eyes back and arched his back, completely undone.

After a shower and breakfast, another blowjob—this time from Ilya, at the kitchen island, with Shane holding onto the counter and almost knocking the box of oatmeal onto the floor. Later, when they decided to enjoy the sun on the deck, Shane returned the favor in the middle of the yard, between the lounge chairs and the morning silence. For him, that was the best part. Who was going to complain? The loons?

And it only took the Russian recovering for them to go further, right there on the garden lounge chair—with no lube other than saliva and no condom, which resulted in Shane getting his back sticky, his body still trembling when Ilya pulled him into the lake.

In the cold water, they exchanged frantic kisses and slow handjobs, the contrast in temperatures drawing shivers and breathy laughs against wet skin. Maybe it was the silent euphoria of knowing that people already knew they were together. Or maybe it was the impending goodbye—Ilya would be leaving that afternoon, and they would spend a whole week without seeing each other.

But one thing was certain: Shane had never come so many times in a single day before noon. He felt like a teenager again, in the phase of discovering how many times he could masturbate in a day. Except, this time, he was having sex. And, God, it felt so good.

"I'll see you next Saturday..." Ilya murmured softly against Shane's lips, after putting his bag in the car, under the three o'clock afternoon sun. David and Liam were probably already getting ready to head back from camp at that point.

"That's too long..." Shane grunted, wrapping his arms around the Russian's waist. "I want your dick."

"You had it in your mouth half an hour ago, Shane." Ilya laughed, shaking his head.

"So what?" he shrugged. "I have an oral fixation. And I found something very good to keep in my mouth."

"*Gospodi, malyshka...*" Ilya murmured, leaning in and joining his lips to his in a lingering kiss. "As much as I want to stay, we both know I need to go."

"I know..." Shane sighed, his forehead resting against his. "Let me know when you get there, okay?"

"Yes, Captain."

Ilya kissed Shane's lips again. And then another, and another—two, three, four—until Shane pulled him by the back of the neck and pinned him against the black Jeep, turning the goodbye into one last hot, lingering make-out session, as if they could save the taste of each other for the rest of the week.

[...]

When Saturday arrived, this time it was Ilya who went to the penthouse. With Liam spending the night at a sleepover at Bash's house, Shane had the entire apartment to himself. And, as to be expected, right after dinner, they ended up becoming each other's dessert.

And for so long that, even with a whole floor of distance to the downstairs neighbor, Shane still prayed that his bedroom walls were truly soundproof. Ilya, in turn, made absolutely sure to test the acoustics of the room to the limit.

June ended and July dragged in. Shane and his friends traveled with the kids to the highly anticipated water park, staying at a luxury resort. The Canadian had to summon an immense strength within himself not to invite Ilya. Suddenly, in absolutely all the plans he made, a screaming part of him wanted the Russian around. That was exactly why the captain asked his agent, Farah Jalali, to closely monitor the public's reception to Scott Hunter's sexuality. Shane had the firm intention of coming out publicly very soon.

Not because of Ilya, but for himself. Shane wanted to have the exact same right that his teammates had to simply walk hand in hand on the street, have dinner at a nice restaurant, or enjoy a quiet afternoon in the park without the dread of being photographed and without the exhaustion of pretending they weren't a couple—even if he and Ilya still hadn't officially labeled anything up to that point.

The change came two weeks later. It was their eighth date, and the first time Shane would spend the entire night away from home, at Ilya's apartment, since Liam was spending a week in the countryside, being absurdly spoiled by David and Yuna. In the comfortable silence that followed their new favorite physical activity, Shane gathered his courage.

"Ilya..." he murmured, resting his chin on the Russian's bare, slightly sweaty chest, his index finger drawing invisible patterns between the various moles on his pale skin.

The Russian was still breathing a little heavily, but he opened his eyes instantly and stared at the Canadian. His face was bathed only by the bluish light of the television, which was playing some random sports commentator show on mute.

"*Da, malyshka...*" he replied with his deep voice, his large, hot hand softly caressing Shane's damp hair.

"It's been eight dates already. Almost two whole months..." Shane murmured. Suddenly, he could no longer maintain eye contact. It was something Dr. Park had already explained to him was very common and a fundamental part of his own experience as someone on the autism spectrum—a dual, recently acquired diagnosis, for both him and Liam, that had brought a lot of clarity to both of their lives. "I like this a lot. Us."

"Me too," Ilya agreed without blinking. For the brief moment Shane looked up again, he noticed the blond's gaze shining with a tender expectation. Ilya already seemed to sense exactly where that conversation was heading.

"I don't want to hide anymore," the captain vented, his voice gaining firmness. "Farah said the public's reception to Scott Hunter has been good, even though the League still doesn't quite know how to handle the fact that he's gay. But honestly? I don't give a damn about that. I want to speak up. I want to have the freedom to take you out to dinner at a nice place. I want us to go hiking on the weekends... I want to be able to go out, me, you, and Liam."

Shane slid his flat hand down until it stopped exactly over the small gold chain with the Orthodox crucifix resting on the left side of Ilya's chest, feeling the Russian's heartbeat under his palm.

"I want you to be my boyfriend."

The silence that followed that declaration seemed to stretch time inside Ilya's bedroom. The muffled sound of cars passing on the street and the almost imperceptible hum of the television became the only noises while Shane held his breath, his heart beating erratically against his ribs.

Ilya didn't answer immediately. Instead, the Russian raised his hand and covered Shane's hand, which still rested on his chest, intertwining their fingers with a firmness that bordered on devotion. Ilya's thumb caressed the back of the captain's hand, and when Shane finally gathered the courage to look up again, he found Ilya's blue eyes shining in a way he had never seen before—disarmed, immense, and loaded with an emotion so dense it was almost tactile.

"Are you absolutely sure of what you're asking, Captain?" Ilya whispered, his voice coming out hoarser than normal, a slight tremor betraying how much that moment meant to him. "Because, Shane... the moment you come out, your face is going to be on every headline. The sports media will be cruel, the paparazzi will try to invade your space with Liam, and me..."

well, I don't have the best reputation in the world in that scene. They'll dig up my past to try to get to you."

Shane frowned, the protective instinct he usually reserved only for Liam now extending with full force toward the man lying beneath him. He pushed himself up a little, resting his weight on his forearms so he could look down at Ilya, his expression serious and unyielding.

"I don't care what the media says. And I, more than anyone, know who you really are, Ilya. The past is in the past. I've spent the last ten-odd years of my life living in a state of constant alert, afraid of losing the most important thing in my world because I wasn't 'perfect' enough for the justice system's standards." Shane swallowed hard, his voice trembling slightly. "I'm not going to spend the rest of my life hiding the second best thing that ever happened to me because of newspaper headlines."

A small, trembling, and infinitely sweet smile broke Ilya's serious mask. The Russian took a deep breath, as if he were trying to absorb the impact of those words, before sliding his hand to the back of Shane's neck and pulling him slowly down.

"Did you just call me the second best thing that ever happened to you?" Ilya murmured, his lips brushing against Shane's, a breathy laugh escaping between them.

"Don't make me repeat it, because I might take back what I said and you'll go back to being just the annoying PR guy," Shane joked back, feeling his eyes well up with tears, the tension draining from his shoulders.

"*Gospodi*, I accept. Of course I accept, *malyshka*," Ilya replied in a single breath, closing the distance and kissing him with an intensity that almost took Shane's breath away.

It was a kiss different from all the others. It didn't have the ravenous urgency of their first dates or the desperation of them hiding. It was deep, anchored, and full of promises. When they pulled apart, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's, the two breathing in the same rhythm.

"Just for the record," the Russian whispered with his eyes closed, his fingers stroking the dark hair at the back of the Canadian's neck. "I was going to ask, too. I was just waiting for you to feel totally ready regarding the agency and the team. I had even already picked out the restaurant to do it at, the one you like the most and were going to order delivery from."

Shane laughed, the sound vibrating against Ilya's chest, and left a quick kiss on his jaw.

"Then I guess I ruined the surprise of our ninth date."

"You didn't ruin anything," Ilya opened his eyes, the dark blue softened by absolute affection. "You just fixed everything. And, Shane... thank you for letting me into your world. Yours and Liam's."

"Since we won't need to order delivery from the restaurant, after the press release comes out... we can go have dinner there in person."

"Yeah, we can."

Waves of pure relief washed over Shane's chest. He completely relaxed the weight of his body onto Ilya, settling his head into the perfect space between the neck and shoulder of his now boyfriend. With his hand intertwined with his and the calm rhythm of the Russian's breathing serving as his new anchor, the captain knew, with the peaceful certainty that only years of torment could bring, that no matter the size of the media storm they would face in the coming weeks, he was finally exactly where he was supposed to be.

[...]

"Liam!" Shane called from the bottom floor of the penthouse. It was the boy's last week of vacation, and he was a true ball of anxious energy, unable to wait for classes to finally start. "Come on, the food is almost ready!"

"I'm coming!" The boy's voice echoed before he came running down the stairs.

It was a quiet Thursday night. Shane had taken his son to soccer practice during the afternoon, the two of them got ice cream on the way home, and that was when the captain took the opportunity to drop the bomb that he had a very special person to introduce to him at dinner.

"What time is your boyfriend getting here?" Liam asked, genuinely curious, as he helped his dad distribute the plates and silverware on the dining table.

"In about twenty minutes," the Canadian replied, trying his hardest to sound casual.

In theory, there wasn't much danger. Liam already loved Ilya unconditionally, but he loved him as his favorite nanny, not as his dad's boyfriend. The three of them had even gone out together earlier in the week to a dog park, where Liam ran with Anya until they both collapsed on the grass out of pure exhaustion. Still, Shane's stomach was doing flips.

"But what is he like? You haven't told me anything other than that he's 'nice and funny,'" Liam grumbled, meticulously aligning the glass cups next to the plates.

"Well... he and I are the same height," Shane began, drying his sweaty hands on the dish towel. "He's blond. And has light eyes."

Liam stopped what he was doing and narrowed his eyes, getting straight to the point that really mattered:

"But does he like sharks and the ocean?"

That was, without a doubt, the most crucial question for the boy's approval, and Shane knew it perfectly well. However, before he could formulate an answer that did the Russian justice, the penthouse doorbell rang, cutting through the air.

"I'll get it!" Liam volunteered immediately, dropping the napkins and running.

"Liam, wait!" Shane tried to catch up to the boy, panic flashing in his mind, but it was already too late. Liam reached the entrance hall, turned the heavy doorknob, and opened the door, coming face to face with Ilya.

"Ilya!" The boy broke into a huge smile and hugged the Russian's legs right away, drawing a loud, surprised laugh from him.

"Hey, Akula." The blond didn't hesitate. He bent down and lifted Liam into his arms, squeezing him in a tight hug full of longing. "Is there still dirt in that hair of yours from rolling around in the park with Anya so much?"

"No, I got it cut, look!" The boy turned his head proudly, showing off the stylish fresh fade in his brown hair.

"Wow! It looks really good, man." Ilya laughed, putting him back on the floor carefully.

Over the Russian's broad shoulders, Shane could see the subtle tension locking up his posture. Ilya took a breath, smelling the aroma in the air.

"Smells good."

"Dad is cooking because his boyfriend is coming to dinner with us today," Liam shared, as if it were the biggest gossip in the world, while watching his former nanny take off his shoes at the entrance. It was then that the boy's big doe eyes darted down and he noticed Ilya was carrying something in his hands. "What's in that bag?"

Ilya closed the door behind him and crouched down, getting exactly to the boy's eye level. He broke into a small, meaningful smile.

"Remember on my very first day working here, I gave you a huge marine biology book?"

"I remember!" Liam nodded his head.

"It's been exactly a year since I first stepped into this penthouse, you know?" the Russian murmured, his voice soft, shooting a quick, bright glance in Shane's direction before returning his attention to the boy.

"That's true!" Liam gave an excited little jump, but then frowned, his brain processing the situation, and looked back and forth between Ilya and his dad. "Wait a minute. Does my dad's boyfriend know you too? Have you seen him before? What is he like?"

"I heard a rumor that your dad's boyfriend is a very handsome, extremely charming guy with a beautiful smile," Ilya teased, the irony bathed in affection.

Shane felt his heart beating way too fast against his ribs. The Russian held out the paper bag.

"Open it."

Liam didn't need to be told twice. He took the bag, reached in, and pulled out another marine biology book, even bigger and more detailed than the first one. The boy let out a contained shriek of joy and threw himself straight at the blond's neck again.

"Liam..." Shane finally managed to get his legs to move. He approached the two of them, while the boy was already trying to tear off the plastic wrap to leaf through his new discoveries. "Hey, little shark. Look at me for a second."

"Akula." Ilya rested his large hand protectively on the boy's shoulder, which made Liam stop fighting with the plastic and look up.

Shane crouched down next to them. He ran a trembling hand through his son's short hair, catching his dark gaze.

"Li..." the captain let out a deep sigh, trying to keep his voice steady. "We really want to know your opinion on something. Because, deep down, it's the only one that matters to us. Nobody else's opinion in the whole wide world is as important as yours."

Liam stared at his dad's tense face. The boy pursed his lips slightly, in that exact way Shane did when he was thinking deeply or when he had already figured out a problem. The boy turned his head toward the blond.

"Ilya is your mystery boyfriend, isn't he?"

Shane drew in breath so sharply that his lungs hurt. Still crouching, Ilya adjusted his shoulders, his mask of confidence giving way to a wide-open vulnerability.

"Yeah," Ilya replied in a whisper. He held the boy's gaze. "And what do you think about that, Akula? Do I have your permission to date your dad?"

Liam blinked. He looked at Ilya's apprehensive face. Then he turned his head and looked at Shane's terrified expression. And then, with the relentless tranquility and peculiar wisdom of a nine-year-old child, he shrugged and let out a long sigh, going back to tearing the plastic off the book.

"Wow, you two are so slow," Liam shook his head disapprovingly. "I always told everyone that I didn't want to have another mom. But I never said absolutely anything about not wanting to have another dad."

The silence that followed in the penthouse hallway was broken by a choked, wet laugh that escaped Shane's lips before he could contain it. It felt like a ten-ton freight truck had just been lifted off his shoulders.

Driven by the purest relief, the Canadian pulled his son into a hug so crushing that Liam let out a small grumble of protest, pressed against his dad's chest.

Ilya, in turn, threw his head back and let out a loud, genuine laugh, the sound filling the room. The Russian brought his hand to his face for a fraction of a second, discreetly wiping

the corner of his eyes, before looking back at the captain. The blue of his irises shone with an emotion so raw, reverent, and overwhelming that it made Shane's heart skip a beat.

"Okay, okay, you're crushing me!" Liam squeaked, untangling himself from his dad's arms with a little push, clearly much more concerned about leafing through his new marine biology book than with the emotional weight of that historic moment. "And the food is going to get cold. I'm starving."

Shane laughed, rubbing his face and wiping away a stubborn tear that had escaped down his cheek. He stood up first and, without hesitating, held out his hand to Ilya.

The blond accepted it right away. The Russian's strong fingers intertwined with Shane's with a possessive and affectionate firmness as he stood up. Ilya didn't let go of his hand. Instead, he pulled the Canadian a step closer and left a quick, loud kiss on his temple.

"The kid is right," Ilya murmured, his voice still a little hoarse, his thick accent dancing on the words. "And I definitely don't want to be responsible for letting my boyfriend's food get cold on my very first official dinner on the job."

Shane's face heated up violently, but a wide, radiant, and absolutely impossible-to-erase smile took over his lips.

"Let's eat then," the captain agreed, guiding them toward the dining room.

When they settled at the table—Shane on one side, Liam at the head with the giant book already opened precariously next to his plate, and Ilya settled in his usual spot—the atmosphere felt exactly as it always had on all the nights they had shared under that roof over the last year. The same kitchen, the same smell of good food, the same little boy chattering about dorsal fins.

But, at the same time, everything was wonderfully different.

Underneath the table, Ilya's large, warm hand found Shane's leg, resting there with a naturalness that brought an absurd peace. And as the captain served dinner, listening to his son's and his boyfriend's laughter mingling through the house, he knew with crystal clarity that this was, by far, the best family he could have built.

All because of J.J.'s damn recommendation, but Shane would never admit it.

Chapter End Notes

also, the way the guys found out - irl story, my sister found out that two friend of hers were dating like that, by talking to one and sending memes to the other one and then hearing the notifications sound in the background of the call
i'll forever remember her scream, one the best laughs in my life

and another also, idk how to write endings, so I always think they're awful - I tried here

once again, new fic: Centaurs' Paradise

<3<3<3

Chapter 25: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

And we are done.

Enjoy some naughty scenes, some cuties, some tears and see yall <3

"And Shane Hollander recovers possession of the puck, slicing through the LA Queens' defense as if they were absolutely nothing! The Montreal captain is tearing up the ice, ladies and gentlemen! Ten seconds on the clock... Could this be the perfect birthday present for his son? A Stanley Cup for Montreal? Or rather, a present for his son and his fiancé?! Shane dodges a brutal bodycheck, passes the puck to Jean-Jacques, J.J. sends it back... Shane has possession, he has a clear view, he shoots... AND SCORES! THREE SECONDS ON THE CLOCK! THREE... TWO... ONE! THE MONTREAL METROS ARE THE STANLEY CUP CHAMPIONS!"

The sound of the final buzzer was completely swallowed by the explosion of noise in the Los Angeles arena. An avalanche of frustrated boos from the Queens fans clashed against the deafening, euphoric screams of the Metros crowd.

Shane barely had time to raise his arms before being violently crushed against the plexiglass by his teammates. Gloves, helmets, and sticks flew through the air. Buried under a mountain of ecstatic players, all the captain could do was laugh, breathless, and let himself be hugged.

He was twenty-eight years old. Four Stanley Cups on his resume. Two years having full, indisputable custody of his son. One year living the best and healthiest relationship of his entire life. Six months since he had publicly come out of the closet to the world, becoming, along with Scott Hunter, a partner in a charity foundation that funded sports for youth neglected by their families due to their sexuality or gender identity.

He was, without a shadow of a doubt, living the absolute peak of his life. In July, he was going to get married. Married to the love of his life.

When the gates opened and the players' families were allowed down to the rink, Shane's eyes scanned the crowd until he found Ilya's unmistakable blue irises. The Russian was standing at the edge of the rubber mat, his slightly fearful gaze fixed on the white, icy surface. Obviously, he was wearing heavy-duty sneakers, but it had been almost ten painful years since the last time Ilya Rozanov had stepped onto the surface of a hockey rink.

Shane bent his knees to skate over to him, but it wasn't necessary. Liam stepped onto the ice first.

The boy walked firmly and took Ilya's huge hand. The Canadian watched, his heart squeezing, as the blond's free hand flew instinctively toward his own fucked-up knee—a phantom reflex of an old pain—but he stopped halfway. An anchor and a safe haven, Liam pulled gently. Ilya let out a breath and took his first step onto the ice.

Shane met them halfway and braked sharply, kicking up a cloud of artificial snow before Liam jumped right at his neck.

"Hey!" The captain squeezed his son against his sweaty chest, laughing loudly. "How's this for a birthday present, huh, little shark? Not bad, right?"

"Since it's my present, can I wear your championship ring to school?" Liam asked immediately, his eyes shining with ambition.

"Only if you wear it as a bracelet, on your entire arm," Ilya teased, stopping next to them.

Liam scowled in an indignant grimace, making the two men burst out laughing.

"And you? How about a cup like this for your birthday?" Shane murmured, leaning toward Ilya.

With his skate blades, Shane was considerably taller, but Ilya didn't seem to mind the difference at all. The Russian smiled, tilted his chin up, and joined their lips in an affectionate, possessive, and undeniably passionate kiss.

On the giant jumbotron above them, the image of the two of them kissing was broadcast to the entire arena. The crowd exploded into a new wave of euphoric screams. After all, it wasn't just the Stanley Cup final. It was June. Pride month. And there was absolutely nothing left to hide.

"We're still going to the Santa Monica Pier for my birthday, aren't we? I'm finally tall enough to go on all the dangerous rides!" Liam interrupted, slapping his dad's arm as soon as he was put back on the ground.

Shane laughed, exchanging a knowing look with Ilya.

"Akula, you have asked that at least six times already. Just today," the Russian pointed out, crossing his arms with fake severity.

The boy let out a grunt of protest and, without asking permission, hugged the waists of both men at the same time, looping his arms around them and forcing a crushing group hug right there, in the middle of the ice.

"Just to be sure," Liam laughed, his voice muffled against Ilya's jacket. "You never know."

Soon Liam ran off across the ice to hug Hayden and J.J., leaving the two men behind, just observing the euphoria of the celebration around them. Ilya raised his hand, brushing the damp, sweat-plastered hair from Shane's forehead, before caressing his freckles with his thumb.

"What is it?" Shane smiled, turning his face toward him. But right after, he narrowed his eyes, staring at the top of his fiancé's head with fake disapproval. "I still can't believe you just shaved your head."

"It'll grow back. I promise that by the tenth of next month, the curls will be back and flawless for the wedding," Ilya laughed, holding the captain's waist softly under his jersey.

"Yeah, but what about until then? Where am I going to sink my hands when you're... making me forget my own name locked between four walls?" Shane teased, a purely wicked smile playing on his lips.

"*Gospodi, moya lyubov...*" Ilya widened his eyes in fake, scandalized modesty. "You can't say that kind of thing in public. I am a Catholic family man. I am saving myself for marriage."

"I am absolutely certain you would spontaneously combust if you stepped foot inside any religious temple, Rozanov," Shane shot back immediately.

Ilya let out a deep laugh, resting his forehead on the shoulder protected by the captain's hockey armor, and received an affectionate kiss on his temple right after.

"Ilya's here!" Liam's voice sounded louder, pointing back and making the Russian lift his head. Hayden and J.J. came gliding toward them.

"AH!" Hayden let out a shrill, genuine scream of terror as soon as he focused on the Russian. "Where the fuck is your hair?!"

"I took it off to wash. It's drying on the line," Ilya replied with frightening naturalness, crossing his arms.

Shane burst out laughing, giving his fiancé's shoulder a pat.

"Man..." J.J. stopped next to them, looking honestly and deeply horrified.

Right behind the two giant players came their kids and their moms, stepping onto the ice's rubber mat carefully.

"NO!" Simone gasped, widening her eyes and covering her mouth with both hands in a state of absolute shock. "Where are the curls? My golden curls?! No, Ilya, don't tell me you did this!"

"Guys, for the love of God, it's just hair!" Ilya laughed, turning his head and realizing Jackie's jaw had also dropped, looking at him as if he were a complete stranger.

"Look here, pay very close attention," Simone pointed her perfectly manicured finger at his face. "If you still have that egghead on your wedding day, I swear by all that is holy that I will walk into that ceremony and staple a wig to your head."

The lethal threat made the whole group explode into laughter in the middle of the rink, crowning the victory, the family they had chosen, and the absolute certainty that this was only the beginning of their happily ever after.

[...]

After Liam finally passed out from exhaustion in the hotel room, Shane and Ilya went out to the balcony. Snuggled against each other under the night sky, they watched the lights of the grandiose city of Los Angeles stretching to the horizon, a beautiful and silent view that contrasted with the euphoria of the arena earlier.

"Remember I mentioned that my legal team was filing a lawsuit to officially change Liam's last name?" Shane murmured after a long, comfortable silence. He was leaning back against the Russian's broad chest, feeling the calm rhythm of his breathing vibrate against his back.

"Uh-huh," Ilya murmured in response, his deep voice accompanying a slow sip from his glass of vodka on the rocks. "Did they manage to do it?"

"François suggested we also take advantage of the loophole and ask the judge to revoke Jessica's parental rights. Like, completely." Shane tilted his face back, meeting Ilya's blue eyes, which were now listening to every word with absolute attention. "She would basically stop being his mother. Legally speaking."

"But wouldn't that be something she herself would have to agree to and sign?" Ilya asked, his free hand resting protectively on his fiancé's shoulder.

Shane raised his own hand, covering his, and ran his thumb affectionately over the cold metal of his engagement ring.

"Not necessarily. If it were proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that she is a threat to Liam's well-being, the justice system would take my side. And... with that whole nightmare of her stalking him last year, the judge said all I had to do was ask."

Shane moved, turning to face the Russian, and rested his chin on his sternum. Ilya, in the same instant, set his glass aside on the balcony floor and wrapped both arms around the captain's body, hugging him.

"And I asked," Shane revealed softly, a monumental weight of almost an entire decade finally leaving his shoulders. "The judge's final decision came out this morning. Now, by all legal means possible, Jessica is a nobody in our lives."

"That is wonderful, *malyshka*," Ilya broke into a small, immensely relieved smile, his hand moving up and down Shane's back in a soft caress. But the Russian knew him too well. He narrowed his eyes. "But there's still something else there, isn't there? You have that exact little look on your face that you get when you're holding back more information."

Shane gave a shy smile and hid his face in his fiancé's chest, letting out a muffled giggle that made Ilya's body vibrate.

"It's just that... we both already know very well what our answers are going to be at the altar next month," Shane murmured, raising his vulnerable brown gaze to the blond once more. "But I wanted to know your answer to something else, too."

Ilya waited in silence. On the outside, he maintained his usual unyielding calm, but on the inside, he felt his heart accelerate dangerously in his chest. The dull thud against his ribs was almost as strong as on New Year's Eve, when he turned around in the middle of the team party and found Shane Hollander resting on just one knee on the floor.

"I wanted Liam to carry the last name Rozanov, too..." Shane's voice came out in a choked whisper, loaded with raw hope. "I wanted you to adopt him. Legally. As his dad."

Ilya's Adam's apple bobbed sharply as he swallowed hard. In the same instant, the Russian blinked rapidly, his light eyes instantly flooded with thick, silent tears that broke any remnant of his unwavering pose.

"How dare you think you don't already know the answer to that, Captain?" Ilya whispered, his voice completely hoarse and overflowing with infinite devotion, pulling Shane into a kiss that sealed, once and for all, the destiny of that family.

"I love you..."

"Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu."

[...]

Liam was completely focused, shooting a continuous stream of water from the stall's water gun to try and fill the target and secure the maximum score. Right behind him, Shane and Ilya watched, shoulder to shoulder, as the boy competed with deep concentration against several other children and their exasperated parents.

"Come on, Daisy!" a woman cheered loudly in the booth next to them. She was rooting for a little girl who appeared to be Liam's age. Just out of the corner of his eye, Ilya did a quick read: an impeccable bob cut, a designer bag on her elbow, and the exact posture of someone who regularly demanded to speak to the manager. A "Karen" in her natural habitat.

The Russian straightened his posture at the exact moment the stall's siren went off. Liam had scored the most points.

"That's it, buddy!" Shane cheered, taking a step forward to ruffle his son's hair.

Ilya, however, stayed behind, his eyes fixed on the woman. The girl in the next booth stomped her foot, sulking over her defeat, and the mother huffed, visibly indignant.

"You can pick any of the plushies from the top shelf, champ," the stall attendant pointed out, breaking into a sweet smile.

"The blue dolphin!" Liam pointed without hesitation. The young woman quickly grabbed the giant, fuzzy plush.

When the little girl saw that Liam was going to take the dolphin she wanted, her indignation turned into a tantrum. The mother, puffing out her chest with self-righteousness, marched straight toward them. Ilya didn't even think; with a sidestep, he positioned himself as an impenetrable wall right in her path.

"Excuse me," the woman demanded, her voice loaded with harshness and privilege.

Shane lifted his head, turning his attention to the situation at the same moment.

"Yes?" Ilya replied. The tone was polite, but his blue eyes were pure ice, his hands relaxed in his pants pockets.

"My daughter, Daisy, wanted that dolphin plush," the woman informed him, as if the simple fact of having verbalized that desire was a universal order that needed to be fulfilled immediately.

"And?" Ilya shot back, his expression perfectly blank. He watched with some amusement as the woman's face twisted in shock and indignation at the audacity. "My stepson won the game fair and square. And he chose the prize he wanted. We have absolutely nothing to do with what your daughter wants or doesn't want."

"But it would be very nice and polite of him to give the plush to her, don't you think?"

"No," Ilya answered dryly, cutting the conversation short.

Behind them, Shane took the plush from the young woman at the stall. The attendant, noticing the scene brewing perfectly well, gave a subtle nod to a coworker, who slipped away toward another corner of the pier. Shane handed the giant dolphin to Liam and held his son's hand, who was too happily clinging to his prize to notice the tension a few feet away.

"No?!" the woman gasped, incredulous.

"No. We have nothing to do with it, ma'am," Ilya repeated patiently, breaking into a cold smile, purely designed to provoke.

The woman crossed her arms.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Should I?" the Russian raised an eyebrow.

"My husband is a very, very respected lawyer around here."

Ilya let out a nasal laugh, shaking his head.

"Then your question should have been: 'Do you know who my husband is?'. Because you, apparently, are nobody." The Russian watched her face turn dangerously red, but he didn't

back down a millimeter. "And, if we're here playing a game of measuring our husbands' jobs, you should know that mine has an entire legal team at his disposal. But that hardly matters, because the plush is going to stay with my son. Have an excellent day."

Ilya turned his back to leave, considering the conversation over. The woman huffed, her nostrils flaring.

"Listen here, you little fa—"

It was at that exact moment that two park police officers arrived at a brisk pace, stopping strategically between the woman and Shane's family before she could finish the slur.

"Is everything alright here, gentlemen?" the older sergeant asked with a voice of authority.

"They stole my daughter's plush toy!" the woman yelled, pointing an accusing finger.

"Mr. Hollander?" The younger officer blinked, ignoring the woman completely. His mouth fell open in shock. "Wow... I watched the Finals last night! Congratulations on the Stanley Cup, sir!"

Ilya felt an uncontrollable urge to laugh as he watched the woman's face deflate and lose all its color, her eyes wide as she finally processed that she had just picked a fight with someone famous and filthy rich.

"What was it we did to your daughter again, ma'am?" Ilya asked, turning his face back to her. His voice was slow, drawn out, and lethally provocative.

The woman swallowed hard. Her pose of superiority evaporated.

"M-my mistake," she stammered, turning around and almost tripping over her own feet.

"Come, Daisy. Now!"

"But the dolphin..."

"Forget about the fucking dolphin, Daisy, let's go!"

The officers continued blocking the path, waiting until the two of them disappeared into the crowd on the pier. Some people around were looking on curiously, while others were already pulling out their phones to take stealthy photos of Shane.

"I imagine that, since we arrived in time to stop the verbal assault, you won't want to press charges, right, Mr. Hollander?" the sergeant asked politely.

Shane shook his head in denial, pulling Liam a little closer to his own legs.

"Today is my son's birthday, officer. I have much better priorities to deal with than frustrated people," Shane replied, his voice perfectly calm.

"Then everything is settled, have a good time," the sergeant nodded, touching the brim of his cap.

"Mr. Hollander... if it isn't asking too much on my part..." The young officer started, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Do you want a picture?" Shane gave an understanding smile.

The young man nodded frantically, his eyes shining.

"Sergeant?" He looked at his superior seeking permission.

"Go ahead, kid. It's not every day you run into an NHL champion on the morning shift," the older man permitted with a wave.

Ilya pulled Liam closer to him, protecting him from the cameras, while the young guy stretched out his arm in his blue uniform and took a smiling selfie next to the Montreal captain. As soon as the officers thanked them and walked away, peace reigned once again.

"Ilya... that woman was going to call you a..." Liam started, his voice quiet, holding the dolphin against his chest as he looked at the blond's face.

Ilya crouched down immediately, getting to the boy's eye level, and adjusted the collar of Liam's t-shirt with all the care in the world.

"Akula, listen closely. That woman is nobody worth a single second of our time," the Russian spoke in a mild and serious way. "Just think about it: how sad and empty must her life be for her to be so bothered by two unknown men who kiss each other, like me and your dad?"

Liam pressed his lips together, processing the wisdom of the words. He looked in the direction where the woman had fled, then turned his dark gaze back to Ilya.

"That's true. It doesn't make any sense," the boy agreed firmly, shaking his head. He adjusted the dolphin under his arm and shrugged. "And, besides, her daughter's aim was terrible. She was never going to win anything."

Ilya let out a loud, genuine laugh, while Shane shook his head, laughing proudly at his son.

"It really was, kid," Ilya agreed, leaving a loud kiss on the boy's hair before standing up and intertwining his hand with Shane's, ready to continue the best birthday ever.

They went on dozens of other rides along the pier. Shane, as always, avoided all the ones that involved extreme heights, using the lame—and perfectly convenient—excuse that someone needed to stay on solid ground to hold the giant plush dolphin. With that, the captain used his free time to take several photos of Liam and Ilya screaming their heads off together on the roller coasters.

In a moment of calm, he opened Instagram and posted a photo of the two of them smiling at the top of the Ferris wheel, illuminated by the California sunset. The caption was simple and direct: "1+ Cup and my two loves ❤️".

In a matter of minutes, his phone began vibrating non-stop with thousands of likes. Several League players flooded the comments, congratulating the captain on the Stanley Cup and

sending happy birthday messages for Liam turning ten. Soon after, a notification from Rose popped up at the top of the screen: "If you guys dare to leave LA without coming to see me, I swear to God I'll kill you both and keep full custody of Liam for myself."

Shane let out a nasal laugh and typed a quick reply, already securing a lunch with his friend for the next day.

Back at the hotel suite, peace finally reigned. With a full belly after an exaggerated dinner of Italian pasta and a whole bowl of tiramisu, Liam was sprawled on the living room couch, almost falling asleep while watching some random TV show. Shane had taken refuge on the balcony, enjoying the night breeze to finish replying to some emails on his phone, when he was interrupted by Ilya, who slid the glass door open and threw himself into the chair next to him.

"What is it, Kiwilya?" Shane asked, without thinking too much.

"*Kiwi-Kiwilya?!* " The Russian's jaw dropped instantly.

Shane locked his phone screen and let out a loud laugh, laughing even harder when he saw the expression of deep, dramatic offense stamped on his fiancé's face.

"Kiwilya?! Are you serious, Shane Hollander?"

"Yes! You look like a fuzzy little kiwi with this shaved head growing out," Shane teased, reaching out to pat the top of his head.

But the blond blocked the movement with a quick, indignant smack to the Canadian's hand.

"No. Do not touch my hair. Not after this unforgivable offense," Ilya dramatized, crossing his arms with a severe scowl that didn't match the amused gleam in his blue eyes at all.

"Kiwilya... *Gospodi*. That's it, it's over. I want a divorce."

"We haven't even gotten married yet, you idiot," Shane shot back, his eyes almost tearing up from laughing so hard.

"That's not a problem. Vegas is right next door. We rent a car right now, drive there, find an Elvis Presley in the middle of the night, get married tonight, and sign the divorce papers tomorrow morning," Ilya retorted, pointing a finger in his face. "Nobody calls me a kiwi and gets away with it, Captain."

[...]

"My God..." Yuna covered her mouth slowly with both hands as soon as she opened the front door, her dark eyes wide. "You cut your hair."

"I did," Ilya pressed his lips into a contained smile.

"It looks..." Yuna took a good few seconds trying to search her mind for a diplomatic word.

"Like a kiwi," Shane finished, laughing out loud as he took off his shoes in the hall.

Yuna covered her mouth again, this time hiding a smile and holding back her laughter.

"I came to make a formal return of your son. I don't want him anymore," Ilya dramatized, lightly pushing the captain into the house, while Liam laughed, untying his own sneakers.

"It's not bad, but it's... very different," Yuna finally explained herself, stepping aside to let them fully inside. Then, she turned her face to her son and scowled. "And stop teasing him on his birthday, Shane!"

"Ow!" Shane rubbed his shoulder, hit by a quick and accurate smack from his mother.

In the kitchen, the smell in the air was absolutely divine. David had always been a great cook, and the gratinated lasagna that had just come out of the oven proved it. That was a night of logistical dispersion: after dinner, Shane and Ilya would go straight to the cottage on the lake; David and Liam would leave at dawn to camp and fish for the weekend; and Yuna, finally, would have three whole days of peace at a luxury spa—a Mother's Day gift from Shane that she had strategically saved to use on that exact week of an empty house.

"Less than a month until the big day, huh?" David commented with an excited smile, settling in at the head of the table.

"I'm going to spend the entire week of the wedding medicated, with my phone completely turned off, and ignoring everything and everyone," Shane warned, serving himself a generous slice of lasagna.

"When are you guys coming back from your trip again?" Liam asked with his mouth full. He tried to hide it, but couldn't conceal his abandoned-puppy look. An expression very similar to Anya's, who was strategically positioned under the table, salivating in anticipation of any crumb.

"The twenty-fifth, Li," Shane replied, his gaze softening sweetly. "And you're going to be just fine here being spoiled by Grandma and Grandpa."

"Do honeymoons always take this long?" the boy grumbled, and the adults laughed lightly at his whining.

"Your grandmother and I were gone for a whole month on ours," David replied. "But your dad can't stand being away from his own bed for more than two weeks."

"I really can't," Shane shook his head in agreement. "Not to mention that the water in Europe is terrible, full of hard minerals that ruin everyone's hair and skin."

"And yet, you're marrying a European of all people. Look at what an ironic and funny fate," Yuna teased from the other side of the table, raising her wine glass.

"A European who, at this exact moment, looks like a kiwi."

Ilya dropped his fork onto his plate with a dull thud. He crossed his arms and stared at Shane, who was laughing freely, without the slightest shadow of guilt on his face.

"Is this your passive-aggressive way of saying I can never cut my hair like this again in my life?" the Russian narrowed his eyes.

"Yes," Shane replied with a perfectly cynical smile.

Dinner went on lightly, punctuated by occasional jokes about Ilya's new haircut, frantic updates about the wedding preparations, and a bouncy Liam, extremely excited about his important mission of walking down the aisle with the rings alongside Anya.

As a true test for Shane's karma, Ilya had chosen J.J. as his best man, alongside Svetlana as his maid of honor. When the giant defenseman received the formal invitation in the middle of the locker room months ago, he let out a deafening scream of joy and made absolutely sure to rub it in the captain's face that this wedding was only happening because of him, since it was J.J. who had recommended Ilya for the nanny job. Shane just waited patiently for his friend's ego trip to end before handing his own invitation to Hayden, asking the blond to be his best man, with Jackie by his side.

Simone, for her part, had appointed herself the official bodyguard of the event. She had already warned everyone that she would spend the entire party armed with a full glass of red wine, ready to accidentally "bump" into any crazy guest who dared to show up wearing white. Her argument was flawless: even at a wedding without a bride, any woman in white would clearly be asking for trouble.

Shane closed the door to his old childhood bedroom with the utmost care. Liam was already passed out on the bed, with his camping backpacks packed in a corner. When the captain reached the entrance hall, Ilya was already waiting for him in his jacket, holding Anya's leash.

"Have a good rest at the spa, Mom," Shane murmured, hugging her quickly.

"I do not want to hear the word 'vendor' for at least a whole week, are we understood?" Yuna warned in a deadly serious tone, before pulling Ilya into a warm hug.

After saying goodbye to David, the two stepped out into the cold night. They settled the dog in the back seat of the car, and Shane took the wheel, leaving his parents' quiet street behind and hitting the road toward the cottage on the lake.

"You know your parents are fully and absolutely aware that we're going to use these next three whole days just to have sex, right?" Ilya broke the silence, turning his face to watch him with a deliciously provocative smile on his face, illuminated by the car's dashboard.

"We live with a young child at home. That's literally the least we're expected to do when he's not around," Shane argued, his posture perfectly straight, his eyes fixed on the road. The pragmatic answer drew a deep laugh from Ilya, who reached out his arm and rested his large hand possessively on the Canadian's thigh while he drove.

"And you know your parents had that exact same thought when you were younger and lived under that roof with them, don't you?"

Shane grimaced instantly. Suddenly, David's wonderful lasagna seemed to want to do a U-turn in his stomach out of pure horror. Ilya let out a loud, wicked laugh seeing the panic stamped on his fiancé's face.

"I hate you deeply."

"First: see how fun it is when the joke is at your expense? Second: we both know that's the biggest lie in the world," Ilya murmured, his voice dropping an octave.

The Russian continued his teasing, his hand sliding slowly, creeping dangerously up the inner part of the captain's thigh, leaving a trail of heat over the fabric of his pants. Shane let out a heavy, trembling sigh, his fingers gripping the leather of the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white, silently praying they would arrive at the lake house soon.

[...]

Shane had already allowed himself to imagine his entire life by Ilya's side. Every summer in that house, the slow mornings, the hot nights, the laughter echoing between the wooden walls. There, in that moment, it was just the two of them—amidst sighs, moans, and the silent intimacy of two people who already knew every inch of each other's bodies.

Shane had won the Stanley Cup less than a week ago. His body displayed the marks of the conquest: bruises scattered across his ribs, contusions on his shoulders, his skin still sensitive in some spots. And the celibacy rule that he hadn't even tried to follow during the playoffs.

"Ah, fuck..." Ilya moaned when Shane wrapped his lips around his glans and ran his tongue around it, slow and teasing.

Ilya was completely right to fear for his life when Shane became a blowjob expert. He had become one. And the Russian didn't dare complain.

"Shane..." the name escaped in a weak sigh, under the golden light of the bedside lamp, in the master bedroom. No sound other than the work of Shane's mouth and Ilya's increasingly loud moans. The Russian's hips moved on reflex, and Shane gasped, flattening his hands against his chest, feeling the muscles contract beneath his fingers, the racing heartbeat under his palm.

With dexterity, he began moving his mouth up and down Ilya's rigid member, drawing out increasingly loud, hoarse grunts. Ilya grabbed Shane's hair, thrusting into his mouth, his thighs trembling at the hot, tight sensation of his fiancé's throat wrapping around his dick, sucking with precision, as if he knew exactly what to do to take him apart.

Ilya's hand closed tighter in Shane's dark hair, guiding the rhythm without rushing, but with a growing urgency that was evident in the movement of his hips, his increasingly irregular breathing, the broken moans that escaped him.

Shane didn't look away. He watched Ilya through his eyelashes, his brown eyes darkened, his cheeks hollowing with every descent, saliva running down the corner of his mouth without him caring. He wanted that—he wanted to feel Ilya fall apart because of him, he wanted to be the reason for every tremor, every muffled curse.

"*Blyat...* look at me..." Ilya asked, his voice hoarse, almost inaudible.

Shane obeyed, holding the intense blue gaze as he sucked him deeper, relaxing his throat and going down as far as he could, feeling the tip touch the back. Ilya arched his back, his free hand gripping the sheet tightly.

"That's it... like that..." The Russian moaned, his control slipping. "You're perfect..."

Shane moaned around his length, and the vibration tore another guttural sound from Ilya. The blond's body tensed, the muscles in his abdomen popping as the pleasure built up, threatening to overflow. He tried to pull Shane away gently, as if warning him, but his fiancé only grunted in denial, intensifying the pace.

"I'm going to... Shane..." Ilya warned, his voice trembling, on the verge of collapsing.

Shane didn't stop. He held firmly onto Ilya's thighs and swallowed him to the base, and it was enough. The Russian let out a deep groan, almost a muffled roar, as he came in Shane's mouth, his body trembling in successive waves of pleasure.

Shane swallowed it all, unhurriedly, sucking up every last drop, until Ilya shuddered with hypersensitivity and pulled him up, joining their lips in a slow, grateful kiss.

"You are a menace," Ilya murmured, panting, against Shane's mouth.

Shane smirked, his lips still red and swollen, and replied:

"You're the one who taught me."

Ilya laughed softly and flipped them on the bed, completely ignoring Shane's throbbing, leaking member, just to look him in the eyes. He brought two fingers to his mouth and sucked them slowly, without looking away, before reaching down and circling the Canadian's entrance with the wet tips.

Shane gasped audibly, spreading his legs wider, his fingers grabbing the back of his fiancé's neck and pulling him into a deep, wet kiss, where he tasted himself on Ilya's tongue. The first finger slid in slowly, drawing a trembling shiver from the captain's entire body.

"My captain..." Ilya murmured, moving his lips down his jaw. "My champion..."

"Yes... your champion."

"The fourth cup... you are greedy, Mr. Hollander."

Shane let out a breathy moan, rolling his hips against the finger filling him, and soon felt a second one join the first, patiently making room. His head fell back against the pillows, his eyes closing for a moment before reopening, fixed on Ilya's.

"Because I knew you were going to fuck me afterward." Shane panted, scratching his fiancé's shoulders, his body moving on its own. "Break me, Rozanov. Fuck me like there's no tomorrow."

Ilya grunted, extremely tempted. His fingers were still moving inside him, curling slightly, teasing.

"That is for the honeymoon."

Shane let out a panting laugh, challenging him with his gaze.

"Why not now and on the honeymoon?"

Ilya stared at him for a moment, the blue of his eyes almost black with desire. And then he caved—as he always caved when it came to Shane.

Without warning, Ilya increased the pace of his fingers, the thrusts becoming audible and wet, hitting Shane's prostate dead-on. The captain moaned loudly, his back arching, his fingers digging into his fiancé's biceps, his eyes rolling back.

Grunts mixed in English and French escaped his lips, and Ilya buried his face in Shane's neck, kissing and biting without mercy, marking the sweaty skin with his mouth. The rhythm of his fingers remained cruelly fast, relentless.

"I-Ilya... oh, fuck! I'm going to..."

"Don't even think about it," the Russian growled against Shane's earlobe, his fingers sinking to the limit and scissoring inside.

Shane whimpered, his entire body trembling, his legs closing instinctively around Ilya's hips.

"You're only going to come with me inside."

The voice was low, possessive, and made Shane's stomach churn with desire. He nodded, unable to form words, biting his lower lip hard as Ilya curled his fingers once more, hitting that exact spot, drawing out a sob of pleasure.

"That's it..." Ilya murmured against Shane's skin, his lips trailing along his jawline until they found his mouth. "You held out for so long. Now hold on a little longer for me, champion."

Shane let out a trembling moan, his entire body on fire, every nerve on edge. Ilya withdrew his fingers slowly, watching his fiancé's face contort at the sudden loss. Before Shane could protest, the Russian had already settled between his legs, pulling him closer.

"Look at me," he asked, his voice hoarse.

Shane opened his eyes, his pupils dilated, his face flushed, his lips parted. Ilya leaned in and kissed him with a devastating slowness, as he slid his own member between Shane's cheeks, spreading the pre-cum and lube, unhurried.

"I want you to feel every centimeter," he murmured against his fiancé's mouth. "I want you to remember this when you're hoisting the next cup."

Shane laughed, panting:

"You're too dramatic."

"And you love me like this."

"Unfortunately."

Ilya smirked and, without breaking eye contact, started pushing. The head of his dick forced the entrance, and Shane held his breath, his hands moving up to the Russian's shoulders, his nails leaving marks. The sting was minimal, familiar, and the pleasure of being filled by Ilya again outweighed any discomfort.

"Fuck..." Shane moaned, his voice drawn out.

Ilya advanced little by little, unhurriedly, his thumbs tracing soft circles on the hot skin of Shane's thighs, his lips distributing light kisses across his face, his neck, his chest. When he finally slotted himself in completely, they both let out a breath at the same time, foreheads resting together, hearts beating in sync.

"My champion..." Ilya whispered, his blue eyes overflowing with something too deep to be just desire.

"Yours..." Shane replied, his voice breaking. "Always yours."

Ilya started moving, and the outside world disappeared. Skin to skin, without a condom—this was the part they both liked best. They used protection to make cleanup easier later, but in that state, post-Stanley Cup victory, on Ilya's birthday, a mess was exactly what they wanted to make.

"Fuck me... fuck me, birthday boy." Shane moaned against Ilya's lips, feeling the pace pick up immediately, as he wrapped his legs around his fiancé's waist and pulled him back against himself.

"Uhhh, Shane..." Ilya grunted, squeezed by the other's hot muscles, but without slowing down. The pleasure was too intense, and he refused to slow down now.

With a quick movement, he unhooked Shane's legs from his waist and lifted them over his shoulders. The Canadian let out a sound of pure approval, his eyes shining with lust as Ilya sought support—not on the mattress, but on the headboard.

The new position allowed him to go even deeper, and the first thrust tore a muffled scream from Shane, his hands gripping the sheets tightly. Ilya stared down at him, his blue eyes ablaze, his body tense with pleasure and control.

"Like this?" he asked, his voice hoarse, almost challenging.

Shane could barely answer. He only managed to nod, his lips forming a silent "yes," as his body opened up even more to receive him. And Ilya didn't need anything else. He started moving again with force, deep, tireless—each thrust drawing increasingly louder, more surrendered sounds from the captain.

The pace became wild. Ilya's thrusts came strong, deep, almost brutal, each one drawing a louder, needier moan from Shane. The headboard banged against the wall in a constant, muffled sound, mixing with the noise of sweaty bodies meeting relentlessly.

Shane kept his legs over Ilya's shoulders, his body folded under his fiancé's weight, his hands digging into the sheets as if they were the only thing keeping him tethered to reality. His eyes were rolled back, his lips swollen and parted, and a chaotic mix of English and French escaped his mouth—pleas, curses, Ilya's name repeated like a prayer.

Ilya didn't slow down. The muscles in his back contracted with every thrust, sweat running down his forehead, his shoulders, dripping down his chest. He watched Shane with a devouring intensity, his blue eyes almost black, his jaw tight, grunts coming from deep within his chest.

"So deep..." Shane gasped, his voice breaking. "Fuck, Ilya, you're going to split me in half..."

"That's what you wanted, isn't it?" The Russian thrust harder, making the entire bed shake. "To be fucked like there's no tomorrow."

Shane let out a sob of pleasure, his nails scratching Ilya's back, pulling him closer, deeper inside.

"That's it... don't stop... don't stop..."

Ilya let go of the headboard with one hand and held Shane's waist firmly, adjusting the angle and going back to hammering that exact spot. The Canadian's body arched, a torn scream escaping his lips as his legs trembled violently.

"There, right there, fuck, don't stop, Ilya, please, please..." Shane begged, tears pooling in the corners of his eyes from so much pleasure.

Ilya lowered himself, pressing his chest flush against Shane's, without ever slowing the pace. He kissed his forehead, his cheek, the corners of his lips, and whispered against his mouth:

"Come with me, champion. I want to feel you squeeze around me."

It was enough. Shane's body stiffened, his internal muscles contracting in overwhelming spasms around Ilya, and he came with a long, guttural moan, the pleasure bursting in white waves behind his eyes. He felt the heat of his own cum between their sweaty bodies, but it

was nothing compared to the sensation of Ilya still fucking him through the orgasm, prolonging every second.

Shortly after, Ilya buried himself to the base one last time, his entire body tense, and came inside Shane with a hoarse grunt, the pleasure stripping him of every ounce of control. He collapsed on top of his fiancé, both of them panting, trembling, glued to each other, the room smelling of sex, sweat, and victory.

For a long moment, no one said anything. They just breathed together, their hearts gradually slowing down, their bodies still connected, sated and exhausted.

Shane was the first to speak, his voice hoarse and sleepy, his fingers distractedly tracing the outline of the crucifix on Ilya's chest:

"Happy birthday."

Ilya laughed softly, without the strength to move, and kissed the crook of Shane's neck.

"Best present of my life."

[...]

The best part of being alone at the cottage was that clothes were practically optional. And they were alone. Alone and horny.

So, before Shane could even finish his breakfast, he was already bent over the kitchen island, being taken from behind hard, his hair pulled back and his eyes rolled back with pleasure.

"Fuuuuck, Ilya..." Shane moaned, holding on tightly to the cold marble of the counter, his hips meeting his fiancé's thrusts, following the intense and deep rhythm. "That's it, that's it, that's it..."

"Come, come for me, Shane," the Russian growled against the skin of his shoulder, biting down hard as he slid his hand to Shane's member, stroking him in the same rhythm as his thrusts.

Shane's moans became loud and erratic, his voice choked, his whole body trembling. Ilya fucked him with precision, hitting that exact spot with every thrust, driving them both toward the edge.

"Come, fuck, come with me..." Ilya grunted, his voice hoarse and urgent.

That was the tipping point. Shane came first, the pleasure exploding in violent waves, clenching around Ilya, who followed right after with a deep groan, burying himself to the base and spilling inside him.

The two stayed there for a moment, panting, bodies pressed together, the smell of coffee mixed with sex taking over the kitchen. Shane let out a weak laugh, his forehead resting against the counter.

"I just wanted to eat my toast."

Ilya laughed against his back, lightly nibbling the back of his neck.

"And I wanted to eat you... with my dick."

Later on, down by the lake, things were a bit calmer. Ilya was lying on Shane's chest, his body heavy and warm, while the captain read one of his new books, his fingers distractedly running through his fiancé's shaved blond hair.

Shane couldn't tell if Ilya was asleep or not, but he continued the caress anyway, his eyes scanning the lines with a concentration that soon began to crumble.

Softly, Ilya stirred, settling himself better over Shane's abdomen and on the lounge chair. The Canadian turned the page, and that was exactly when the story between the two characters started to really heat up. Reading something like that with his extremely tasty fiancé lying on top of him was not easy at all.

After a few moments, trying to convince himself that they were just letters printed on paper, Shane noticed Ilya slowly lift his head and stare at him.

"Are you reading a sex scene, Shane Hollander?" he asked, his Slavic accent loaded with amusement.

"No...?"

"Then what is this here?" Ilya felt the growing bulge in Shane's swim trunks, drawing a surprised gasp and a low laugh from the captain. "I'm trying to take a comfortable nap and you're poking me with this."

"As if you cared."

"Keep reading."

The order came firm, his blue eyes fixed on his. Ilya kissed Shane's abdomen, moving down slowly, and the shiver was immediate. The Russian's hands were already pulling his trunks down, exposing the erection that was growing without any rush.

Shane swallowed hard, the book still open in his hands, his fingers a little shaky. But he did as he was told: he kept reading—even with his voice breaking, even feeling Ilya's mouth trail over the hot skin of his hip, his thighs, and then...

The book almost slipped from his fingers.

The first touch of Ilya's tongue at the base of Shane's member drew a trembling sigh. The book wobbled in the Canadian's fingers, but he refused to let it go—partly out of

stubbornness, partly because Ilya's order still echoed in his mind: 'keep reading'.

"Out loud," the Russian requested, his voice low, breathed against the hot skin.

Shane blinked, his face already flushed.

"You're kidding..."

"I'm not."

Ilya licked again, now from the base to the glans, slow, teasing, and Shane had to bite his lip to not moan too loudly even knowing that the two of them were completely alone. The Russian's hand held his thigh firm, keeping him open and exposed.

Shane took a deep breath and returned his eyes to the page, his voice coming out cracked and broken as he tried to make sense of the printed words. It was an intense scene, loaded with lust and desire, and every sentence seemed to echo directly against his own reality—Ilya's hot mouth going down his length, the heat of the sun on his skin, the soft sound of the lake's waves in the background.

"He pulled him close... and..." Shane swallowed hard, his voice trembling, "...and whispered against his mouth..."

Ilya swallowed him completely, until his nose brushed against Shane's hair.

The moan that escaped Shane was long and drawn out, his head falling back, the book now gripped tightly between his fingers. Ilya moved up and down with a lazy cadence, his mouth hot and skilled, his blue eyes looking up at him, tracking every reaction.

"Keep going, champion," he murmured, pulling back just enough to speak, his hand wrapped around the base of Shane's dick, pumping slowly. "I want to hear your voice."

Shane let out a panting laugh, his face completely red, but he obeyed. He read another line, then another, his voice becoming less and less steady, the words getting lost in small moans whenever Ilya went back to sucking him. Gradually, the book slipped to the side, forgotten, as Shane's hands grabbed onto Ilya's blond hair.

"Never cut your hair again," he whispered, his legs trembling. "I don't have anything to pull."

Ilya just moaned in response, the vibration traveling up his entire length, and Shane knew he wouldn't last much longer.

[...]

"Repeat after me: I, Shane Hollander..."

"I, Shane Hollander..."

"Take you, Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov..."

"Take you, Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov..."

"To be my lawfully wedded husband. To love and respect you, until death do us part."

"To be my... my lawfully wedded husband. To love and respect you... until death do us part."

Shane really didn't want his voice to crack like that, but everything around him seemed to have disappeared. The guests, the impeccable decor, the ambient sound... everything narrowed down to the man standing in front of him, holding his hands with the same desperate firmness as he was.

"Ilya, now you," the officiant instructed. "I, Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov..."

"I, Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov..."

"Take you, Shane Hollander. To be my lawfully wedded husband."

"Take you, Shane Hollander. To be... to be my lawfully wedded husband."

"To love and respect you, until death do us part."

"T-To love and respect you... for long beyond death."

When a solitary tear escaped and rolled down Ilya's face, Shane couldn't take it. He let go of one of the Russian's hands just to wipe it away with his thumb, laughing in a trembling, wet way. They were both shaking from head to toe, and yet, each tried with all their might to be the other's anchor.

"And, to seal this commitment, the rings, please."

A soft melody filled the air. The two turned their faces to the end of the long aisle of chairs. From there came Liam, walking slowly as he carried the small velvet pillow in one hand and, in the other, Anya's leash.

Shane felt his knees weaken. He gripped Ilya's forearm tightly, and the Russian kept him firmly on his feet. Right behind Shane, at his best man post, Hayden discreetly touched the captain's back to give him support, even though the blond was crying profusely, almost at the same level as the grooms.

As soon as they reached the end of the aisle, Anya sat down politely—perfectly adorable in her little baby-blue outfit that matched the decor's palette. Liam climbed the small steps and held out the pillow. Shane took his ring, and Ilya took his.

Before anything else, the two pulled the boy into a crushing hug. Shane bent down, placing a lingering kiss on his son's hair and murmuring how much he loved him, followed immediately by Ilya, who did exactly the same.

Liam dried his eyes quickly with the back of his hand, pulled away with a smile, and went to take his place next to Hayden at the altar. With their hands a little steadier, Shane and Ilya finally exchanged rings, and the officiant pronounced the most anticipated words of the day.

"And with this material symbol, I declare the marriage between Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov formalized!" he announced, his voice echoing with solemn joy. "You may kiss!"

Neither of them could say who pulled who first. The kiss was urgent, deep, and overwhelming, drowning amidst the deafening applause and cheers of all the guests, Anya's excited barks, and the whistles of pure euphoria from Shane's teammates. Ilya wrapped his arms around the Canadian's neck, while Shane grabbed his waist, dipping the Russian backward in a classic Hollywood kiss, which only made the crowd cheer even louder.

"I love you so much..." Shane murmured against his husband's lips, smiling amidst the uproar.

"*Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu, moy muzh,*" Ilya whispered back, his smile so wide it barely fit on his face.

"A round of applause for Mr. and Mr. Hollander-Rozanov!"

Ilya didn't hesitate for a single second. He held out his hand, and Liam ran over to them, throwing himself forcefully into their arms. This time, Anya decided she was also part of that hug, jumping up and licking all three of them unceremoniously.

In the midst of all the noise and celebration, Liam lifted his face, looking directly at Ilya.

"Can I call you dad now?" the boy asked, his voice just loud enough for them to hear.

If Ilya thought it was physically impossible to cry more than he already had that day, he was sorely mistaken. The Russian bent down, hugging the boy and burying his face in his shoulder with everything he had.

"Of course you can, *Akula...*"

[...]

The sharp squeal of microphone static suddenly echoed through the wedding tent. All the guests turned their heads toward the band's stage, which had stopped playing so the speeches session could begin. Shane regretted approving that idea the exact millisecond he saw who was the first to step onto the stage. It was Hayden.

"Oops. Good afternoon, everyone," Hayden began, holding the microphone with one hand and a half-full glass of champagne in the other, receiving a murmur of greetings from the audience. "Someone on the organizing team made the very grave mistake of giving me free rein to speak into an open microphone, having almost an entire decade of friendship with

Shane under my belt. But it's fair. He gave a speech at my wedding and I... well, I honestly never thought I'd one day have the chance to return the favor."

Soft laughter rippled across the room, while Shane, sitting at the head table holding hands with Ilya, raised his free hand and flipped his best friend off.

"Shane Mildred Hollander. I know that's not your real middle name, but I couldn't care less right now," Hayden smiled, his voice taking on a more nostalgic tone. "You are the brother I never had, and mind you, I have three. You were my first friend in the NHL locker room. The two of us, two nineteen-year-old kids, fresh meat right out of high school and thrown to the lions in the adult world. I still remember to this day when I asked you to a party and you said no. Said you had to go home because you had 'much more important' plans."

Hayden paused, looking directly at their table.

"At the time, I just thought you were a fucking bore, pardon my French. But then, that exact same week, I found out they really were much more important plans. You had a son. A little boy, with your freckles, your hair, your nose. All you. And not for a single minute did the thought occur to me that that boy could have come from two people, because he always seemed to be uniquely and exclusively yours. Until... until he wasn't anymore. Until about two years ago, when this handsome Russian who looks like a Calvin Klein model and was pretending to be a nanny from a fancy agency, arrived at your house and, suddenly, what already seemed to fit together became even more complete."

The silence in the tent was absolute, filled only by the affection in the blond's voice.

"I admit I was very scared when you came out as gay. You are my best friend, and we all here know the toxic culture of the locker room very well. I myself, in the past, have talked a lot, a lot, a lot of shit. And my biggest nightmare became seeing my best friend suffer for loving... Or worse, depriving himself of love forever. But little did I know that the bastard already told me he was gay with several dates under his belt with this gorgeous guy right next to him, right?"

Hayden laughed, raising his glass toward Ilya.

"I joked many times saying I wouldn't leave Ilya alone in my house with my wife even if I were dead. Because Jackie has a very specific 'type': tall, blond men with light eyes. And, well... you just need to have two eyes in your head to look at Ilya and realize that, next to him, I am the ugly duckling of the story. So, thank goodness my best friend saved my marriage and kept the hot nanny all to himself! I couldn't be happier for you two, my beloved Hollanov! And yes, that is exactly what we call you guys in the group chat when you're not around. A toast to the lovebirds!"

Everyone raised their glasses in an ovation, while the indignant voices of Jackie, J.J., and Simone echoed, cursing Hayden for revealing the group's secret nickname. At the head table, Ilya laughed silently, with his face hidden in Shane's shoulder.

"We really should change our last names to Hollanov, don't you think? Or maybe Rozander?" the Russian whispered in his ear, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

"Be quiet," Shane lightly pushed his husband's shoulder, laughing along as he took a long sip of his champagne.

The general laughter subsided when the next person took the stage: Svetlana.

"*Bozhe moy...*" The redhead murmured into the microphone, adjusting a curl that had escaped from her extremely elegant bun. She took a deep breath, holding her cosmopolitan glass full to the brim.

"Hi, everyone. To those who don't know me yet, I am Svetlana Vetrova, Ilyushka's childhood best friend." She started the speech already making Ilya let out a groan of embarrassment and cover his face with both hands, while new laughter echoed through the tent.

"The two of us grew up together in Russia. Our *papas* were best friends, same with our *mamas*. Ever since I was five years old, he has been the insufferable older brother I didn't know I needed to have. We have seen the worst sides of each other and... well, I hope that, standing up here today, I can be the closest thing to having the person that we both—but especially he—would most like to be here today. I am absolutely certain that Irina would have prepared an incredible speech for the newlyweds, or she would have played one of the wonderful songs she composed on the piano for your waltz."

Ilya's chest rose and fell sharply. He lowered his hands, his blue eyes shining with unshed tears. Shane squeezed his hand under the table.

Svetlana smiled affectionately, but the teasing tone soon returned.

"Growing up with Ilya, we all got tired of hearing the classic phrase: 'I don't date because simply no one is worth the effort.' And now... just look at him. Eating his words beautifully, with a thick gold band on his left finger and completely surrendered to his former boss. I admit that many of my provocations calling Shane 'hot' right in front of Ilya were a planned tactic to make him open his eyes to the filet mignon he had on his own plate. And it worked! I am very happy that you jumped headfirst into this too, Shane... But know right now that the friendship policy is clear: I do not accept returns. You chose to marry him, now he's your problem. He has given me enough trouble for too long."

She raised the red glass.

"It's been twenty-three years of friendship putting up with this creature, and I hope you share at least triple those years together as a married couple... Until you are very old and gray. I mean..." Svetlana narrowed her eyes, looking from David to Shane. "Analyzing the genetics here... since David has a great head of hair, only you are going to go gray, Shane. Because Ilya's dad was completely bald, so he won't even have hair to turn white."

The speech that had started out threatening to draw tears from everyone ended in an explosion of widespread laughter. Ilya turned red, calling Svetlana every name possible in Russian while he raised his glass and, with the other hand, flipped his best friend off, exactly as Shane had done minutes before.

The next to take the stage was J.J. The gigantic defenseman was holding a half-empty beer bottle and was already swaying from side to side, the effects of the alcohol loosening his posture and making his French-Canadian accent even thicker.

"Bonjour!" he bellowed into the microphone, breaking into a huge smile as he received the chorus of replies from the audience. "About three years ago, Simone and I—" he pointed with his beer bottle to his ex-wife, who was watching him calmly sitting next to her current boyfriend "—desperately needed a nanny for our little princess, Elise. Monnie is an actress, travels all the time to shoot, and I am a hockey player, which means I travel as much as she does. We went to an elite agency, read excellent reviews, and evaluated dozens of candidate profiles until we laid eyes on a name we both liked: Ilya Rozanov."

He pointed the neck of the beer directly at the newlyweds' table.

"Initially, I confess I acted like a lion over him. Even with Charlotte's brilliant recommendations on his file, I am a father. I needed to form my own opinion."

On the other side of the tent, Charlotte Marleau, sister of Cliff Marleau, the imposing captain of the Boston Raiders, laughed loudly at the table where she was sitting next to her wife, her two sons, and her own brother.

"I know very well that Cliff was exactly the same way when it was his turn!" J.J. joked, drawing a laughing, agreeing nod from the Boston captain. "But, to my absolute surprise, Ilya turned out to be an even better guy than I could ever expect."

The defenseman cleared his throat, straightened his posture as much as the beer allowed, and narrowed his eyes, pointing his index finger with a lethal firmness toward Shane.

"And that is exactly why I, Jean-Jacques Dagenais, recommended Ilya to Shane. And, voilà! Two years later, we are all here getting wasted at their wedding. So, pay close attention: ME! It was me, Jean-Jacques, the great cupid of these two, and I will accept absolutely no other version of this story today!"

A wave of laughter echoed through the tent, while the guests applauded the audacity.

"Seriously now..." J.J. softened his expression, looking at the two with genuine affection. "I couldn't be happier to see you two finally married. Building the much-dreamt-of family cliché with a house, kids, a dog, and a little white fence in the yard. *Je t'aime, mes amis.*"

All the guests raised their glasses in a warm ovation. At the head table, Shane laughed, shaking his head in surrender and agreement, before downing the rest of his champagne in one go.

[...]

Two years later.

"DAD, COME QUICK!"

Liam's voice echoed so desperately through the cottage that both Shane and Ilya dropped whatever they were doing in the same second. Shane, who was in the kitchen finishing putting the dishes away, tossed the dish towel onto the counter. Ilya, who was taking advantage of the quiet to smoke on the wooden deck, while Anya chased dragonflies by the lake, put his cigarette out in the ashtray in one single motion.

"What is it?! What happened?! Who's hurt?!" Shane shouted, almost tripping on the step leading down to the living room. He would have fallen flat on his face if it weren't for Ilya's reflexes, who was right behind him and grabbed him firmly by the waist.

When the two finally looked at the center of the room, the panic evaporated into the air, being immediately replaced by absolute shock.

Little Irina was standing, alone, in the middle of the fluffy rug, her little eyes concentrated as she tried to calculate the distance toward Liam.

"Come on, Irusha..." Liam encouraged her in a whisper, holding his arms out, kneeling on the floor.

The baby swayed back and forth, almost falling onto her diaper on the rug, but determination shone on her face.

"Ilya..." Shane gasped, gripping his husband's shirt sleeve tightly. Beside him, the Russian already had his phone up, the camera recording every millisecond. "That was exactly what I was going to tell you."

Irina managed to take her first step. Then her second. She swayed dangerously once more, and Liam reached out his hands, almost catching her to keep her from falling. But then she steadied her chubby legs and took a third. A fourth. And, with a high-pitched giggle, threw herself straight into the protective embrace of her twelve-year-old big brother.

"You walked!" Liam laughed out loud, lifting his little sister off the floor.

In the same instant, Shane and Ilya threw themselves onto the rug next to their kids.

"You walked for the first time, princess!" Shane's voice was choked up, his eyes overflowing with emotional tears.

Ilya wasn't much different. The Russian sniffled quietly, delicately adjusting his daughter's dark curls.

"*Moya malen'kaya printsessa...*" Ilya murmured, leaning in to leave a long, loud kiss on her hair. The little girl giggled, genuinely happy with her own achievement. But then, she placed her little flat hand on the blond's face and pushed him away.

"Papa, *net!*" she protested.

Irina's boundaries regarding overly smothered kisses were very clear, but for the two of them, sometimes it was simply impossible to resist squeezing her.

"Sorry, *moya lyubov*," Ilya laughed, kneeling on the rug, and took her from Liam's lap. The older boy didn't waste any time and immediately hugged Shane's neck, crushing his dad.

"Want to try walking again? *Da*?"

"*Da*!" she nodded her head firmly. Then, she stretched her little arm toward Shane. "Dada."

"You want Dada's help? Okay, come here." Shane dried his face quickly and took her from Ilya's lap.

Liam ran and positioned himself on the other side of the large wooden coffee table. Ilya, without missing a beat, quickly sent the first video to the family group chat and opened his camera again, already starting to record the next step.

"Go to Li. You can do it," Shane encouraged.

"Come on, Irusha!" Liam held out his hands.

The chubby baby rested her little hands on the edge of the coffee table to gain stability and put strength into her legs. Shane looked to the side, his eyes still blurred with tears, and met Ilya's gaze overflowing with love, shining from behind the phone.

Shane's device vibrated on the rug.

[Group: Hollanders]

Yuna: WHAT?! NO!

David: My left ear is still ringing from the scream your mother let out in the living room.

Yuna: I simply DO NOT ACCEPT that she is already walking! I haven't even gotten used to the fact that this child already knows how to talk!!!!

Ilya: Do you want to come have dinner here at the lake to see it in person?

David: We are already in the car, heading to the grocery store to buy things.

Yuna: Ilya, make her stop walking right now! I need this hold-the-baby-girl moment with my granddaughter!

End Notes

I saw a post on Pinterest about as if Ilya was Shane's son babysitter, and that completely took over my brain - unfortunaly I lost the pin (rage is bubbling in my body), but let it be known that I had this idea based on that

see yall

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!