**Stockholm**

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/93107831.

| | |
|---|---|
| Rating: | Explicit |
| Archive Warning: | Graphic Depictions Of Violence |
| Category: | M/M |
| Fandom: | Heated Rivalry (TV) |
| Relationship: | Hollanov |
| Characters: | Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander |
| Additional Tags: | Mpreg \| Male Pregnancy, Violence, Russian Mafia, Abuse, Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Cocaine, Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander, Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov, Married Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Ilya Rozanov is Obsessed With Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov is a Menace, Jealous Ilya Rozanov, Possessive Ilya Rozanov, Bottom Shane Hollander, Pregnant Shane Hollander, Smut, Gay Sex, Oral Sex, Anal Sex, Top Ilya Rozanov |
| Language: | English |
| Stats: | Published: 2026-09-23 Completed: 2026-10-20 Words: 114,361 Chapters: 32/32 |

# Stockholm

by videotap3s

## Summary

Shane Hollander witnesses a poker game in which he is the prize.

In that same game, Russian mobster Ilya Rozanov discovers that he has won far more than just a poker game.

## Notes

This is my second story here, and I'm still trying to figure out how the tagging system works, so I'm sorry about that.

This story is already finished and published by me on Wattpad, but it's written in Spanish.

Kisses! 💕

# Chapter 1

The house was silent in a way that made you feel watched even when you were alone.

It was not a peaceful silence, but a heavy, imposed one, as if everyone living there had learned to move carefully so as not to disturb someone far more dangerous.

Shane had understood it from the very beginning. In that place, you didn't run, you didn't raise your voice, and above all, you didn't break things.

The first time he broke a glass, one of the men shoved him against the wall so hard that he was dizzy for two days. Nobody apologized; nobody asked if he was okay. Since then, Shane walked slowly, breathed quietly, and avoided looking too directly into anyone's eyes.

That night he was kneeling in the living room, carefully cleaning a whisky stain on the hardwood floor. His movements were quick but silent, focused.

His sleeves were rolled up, and a few strands of hair fell over his face, where his freckles became more pronounced whenever he was nervous.

And Shane was almost always nervous.

He heard footsteps approaching from the main hallway, and his body tensed immediately. He didn't need to look up to know who it was; he had learned to recognize that rhythm of footsteps: slow, assured, elegant.

He lowered his head even further.

"Good evening, Shane."

The voice was calm, soft, in perfect English.

Kang Min-jae always spoke like that, unhurried, as if the entire world had to adapt to his timing.

"Good evening, sir," Shane replied immediately.

Min-jae stopped in front of him. For a few seconds, he said nothing, and that silence was enough to make Shane's stomach knot up. He could feel the mobster's gaze on him, sweeping over him calmly, as if evaluating something that belonged to him.

"Lift your head."

Shane obeyed without hesitation. His eyes briefly met the man's before he lowered them again.

He was beautiful in an almost fragile way: delicate features, pale skin marked by freckles, a toned yet lightweight, ethereal body. That appearance had always drawn the attention of the

wrong people.

Min-jae tilted his head slightly as he observed him.

"You're still pretty, despite everything."

It wasn't a compliment.

Shane swallowed hard, unsure of what to say, so he said nothing.

The mobster adjusted his jacket with a relaxed gesture and looked around the living room, as if already thinking about something else.

"We have important guests tonight."

That formed a knot in Shane's chest. He had been through enough nights like this to know they were never calm.

When guests arrived, the house changed. It filled with smoke, heavy laughter, and armed men who talked business as if violence were an everyday triviality.

"I want you to behave," Min-jae continued.

"Yes, sir."

"No trembling, no crying. Don't make me look bad."

Shane nodded quickly, though his hands were already starting to shake against the damp rag he was holding.

"I won't, sir."

Min-jae watched him for a moment longer and, as always, noticed the fear even when Shane tried to hide it.

Finally, he crouched down in front of him and grabbed his chin with two fingers, forcing him to look at him. It wasn't a rough gesture, but it carried the weight of an order.

"You're very obedient, Shane."

The boy lowered his eyes slightly, without pulling away completely.

"Thank you, sir."

The mobster gave a faint smile—a subtle, controlled smile that never reached his eyes.

"Maybe tonight you'll get lucky."

Shane knit his brow slightly, confused. He didn't understand what he meant, but he didn't ask either; he had learned long ago that asking questions changed nothing.

From the back of the house, voices began to echo—doors opening, men entering, loud laughter mixed with the metallic sound of weapons resting on tables.

The atmosphere in the house shifted in a matter of seconds.

The night was just beginning.

•••

The room where the games were played was the largest in Kang Min-jae's house, but tonight it felt smaller than usual.

The air was heavy with smoke, alcohol, and dense conversations overlapping one another.

On the main table, there were already stacks of chips, half-empty glasses of whisky, and a couple of handguns laid out carelessly, as if they were everyday objects. The men surrounding the table talked loudly, laughing with the deep, thick laugh of people accustomed to violence and easy money, looking around with the confidence of those who knew no one there would dare challenge them.

Shane was standing next to his owner.

Min-jae had made him change before the guests arrived. The clothes he wore were light, far too small, and tight for the temperature of the house.

An open shirt that exposed part of his chest, and tight shorts that outlined his frame.

Shane already knew why he did it; it wasn't the first time he had been put there, close to the table, visible, as if he were part of the entertainment.

He felt the gazes even before he raised his eyes.

There were men who barely disguised it—some scanned him up and down while sipping whisky; others smirked directly in a way that made Shane's stomach churn. He kept his posture straight, his gaze lowered, and his hands joined behind his back, just as Min-jae had taught him: obedient, still, present.

"Is that the boy you were talking about?" asked one of the mobsters from the other side of the table, his voice already slightly slurred by alcohol.

Min-jae was in no hurry to answer. He finished arranging his cards first and only then looked up.

"Yes," he said calmly. "Shane," he added, resting a hand on Shane's abdomen, lightly stroking him there.

The man whistled softly.

"He's prettier than you said."

Laughter spread around the table. Shane felt heat rush to his face, but he didn't move. He couldn't.

"He's not for sale yet," Min-jae added smoothly.

The phrase didn't sound like a warning. It sounded like a statement of fact.

"Not yet," another man muttered, sparking more laughter.

The cards began moving across the table, and the game picked up its rhythm. The sound of clinking chips blended with voices and ice hitting the sides of glasses.

Every now and then, someone made a comment about Shane—low enough to sound like an inside joke, but loud enough for him to hear.

And he heard everything.

He tried not to look, but sometimes he would glance up briefly and catch those heavy expressions, sizing him up as if already calculating how much he was worth.

It was during one of those rounds that the parlor door opened, and the shift in the room was immediate.

It wasn't total silence, but a lull—a brief moment in which several gazes drifted toward the entrance.

A group of men entered first—large, dressed in dark clothing, attentive to everything happening in the room—and behind them appeared someone who caused even a few of the mobsters at the table to straighten their posture.

Ilya Rozanov.

He was taller than Shane had expected when he accidentally glanced up—imposing, with a heavy presence that seemed to fill the room around him.

His light brown hair fell in messy waves, and his light blue eyes moved across the room with a cold, analytical calm.

He wasn't smiling.

He walked to the table with steady steps, followed by two of his closest men.

Min-jae looked up, and for the first time all night, his expression changed slightly.

"Rozanov," he said.

Ilya gave a slight nod of his head.

"Min-jae."

His English had a thick accent, and some words came out slightly twisted, but he was perfectly understandable. He dragged certain syllables and seemed to choose what to say with care.

One of the mobsters chuckled.

"Thought you weren't coming, Russian."

Ilya shrugged casually.

"Lots of work."

His gaze was still scanning the table… until it landed on Shane.

It was subtle at first, barely a second longer than normal, but then he looked at him again, and this time he didn't avert his eyes.

Shane felt that weight immediately. It was different from the other gazes that night; it wasn't drunk or lewd in the same way. It was colder, more attentive, more dangerous.

Instinctively, he lowered his head again.

"Like the decor?" joked one of the men at the table, noticing where Ilya was looking. "Min-jae always brings out pretty things to keep the night interesting."

A few laughs broke out again.

Min-jae observed Ilya with calculated calm.

"He's part of the house," he said. "Nothing more."

Ilya took a moment to respond. His eyes returned to Shane for a split second before shifting back to the table.

"I see."

He finally sat down, placing his hands calmly on the table.

"Let's play."

The cards began to be dealt again, and the game continued, but the atmosphere had changed now. There was more focus, more tension in every move.

Ilya played mostly in silence—observing, betting without showing much on his face. Yet, every so often, his light blue eyes returned to Shane, and Shane began to feel it even when he wasn't looking directly at him. Something about that gaze made him nervous in a different way, as if something were starting to shift beneath the surface of the night.

•••

The night dragged on slow and heavy inside the gambling parlor.

Cigarette smoke accumulated near the ceiling, forming a grayish haze that slightly blurred the warm lights of the room.

Bottles emptied one after another, glasses were refilled without anyone asking, and the laughter became increasingly uninhibited. The game had been going on for hours, and although the table had been full at first, over time, some mobsters began to get up.

Some had lost too much money; others simply grew tired. But a few stayed to watch, because something in the air told them the night was going to end in an interesting way.

Shane was still standing next to Kang Min-jae, in the exact same spot he had been all night. His legs were starting to ache, but he didn't move; he had already learned that moving without permission was a mistake.

The eyes on him hadn't disappeared; in fact, with fewer people at the table, they seemed even more obvious. And among all those gazes, there was one that kept repeating itself.

Ilya Rozanov's.

The Russian played differently from the rest: he didn't talk much, didn't drink as much as the others, and almost never showed emotion when betting. His chips moved calmly, as if every decision had been mapped out before he even sat down. But every so often, his light blue eyes would lift and find Shane.

At first, Shane had tried to ignore it, but after the fourth or fifth time, he began to feel that weight even when he wasn't looking directly at him. It was uncomfortable, confusing—it wasn't a drunken stare like the others.

The rounds kept passing, and one by one, the players dropped out until finally, only two men remained seated face-to-face.

Kang Min-jae and Ilya Rozanov.

Around them, a few mobsters still watched, leaning against the walls or sitting on nearby armchairs with glasses in hand.

Nobody wanted to leave now.

"Well," one of the men said with a crooked grin, "now things are getting interesting."

Min-jae neatly arranged his cards and let out a light sigh, as though he were starting to get bored.

"This has gotten repetitive," he commented calmly.

Ilya barely looked up.

"Has it?"

"We win, we lose, we win again..." Min-jae rested an elbow on the table. "It's no fun anymore if there isn't something more important on the line."

A few eyes around the room lit up at those words.

Phrases like that always ended in something big.

Ilya didn't answer right away. His fingers toyed with a chip for a moment before he set it on the table.

"What do you propose?"

Min-jae smiled faintly.

"If I win this hand," he said, "I want your car."

There was a quiet murmur around the room.

One of the mobsters whistled.

"The Ferrari?"

Min-jae nodded slowly.

"The black Ferrari that the Ferrari company gave you as a gift—the one they custom-designed just for you."

A few men exchanged looks; that car was famous in certain circles—a costly, unique luxury.

Ilya leaned back in his chair. For the first time all night, he seemed to actually consider it.

For a few seconds, he said nothing. His gaze drifted across the table… and then rose straight to Shane.

The boy was still standing beside Min-jae in the posture he had been taught, but noticing Ilya looking at him again caused a small knot to form in his chest.

He didn't understand why that man kept staring at him so much.

Ilya kept his eyes on him for a few more seconds before speaking.

"Fine."

The conversations around them lulled.

"But if I win," the Russian continued, pronouncing the words in his imperfect English, "I want something too."

Min-jae looked at him with interest.

"What do you want?"

Ilya didn't take his eyes off Shane when he answered.

"I want him."

A few men smiled instantly.

Others let out soft chuckles.

Min-jae, on the other hand, let out a quiet laugh.

"Shane?"

"Yes."

The Korean mobster leaned back in his chair, clearly amused by the situation.

"I thought you were going to ask for money."

"I don't need money."

Ilya's answer was quiet and simple, which made several men in the room look at him with renewed attention.

Min-jae laughed again.

"Interesting." Then he turned his head slightly toward Shane. "Come here."

Shane moved immediately, as always.

He took a step closer to his owner's chair.

"Sit."

Shane's stomach tightened, but he obeyed without hesitation. He settled onto Min-jae's lap carefully, keeping his back straight.

The mobster rested a hand on his waist naturally, as if it were the most normal thing in that environment.

"Look," he said, addressing Ilya with an amused smile. "Now you want him even more, don't you?"

A few bursts of laughter echoed around them.

Min-jae leaned close to Shane's ear.

"Spread your legs."

Shane felt a wave of embarrassment rise to his neck, but he obeyed anyway. His hands rested gently on the table as he adjusted his position.

It was what he had been taught: don't think, just obey.

From the other side of the table, Ilya watched the entire scene without saying a word. His eyes had darkened slightly.

Min-jae looked back at the Russian.

"Alright," he said finally. "If you win... he's yours."

•••

The final hand began in a different kind of silence than before.

As the hours passed, the room had cleared out somewhat, but no one wanted to leave now. The men who remained stepped closer to the table or settled into nearby armchairs, drinks in hand, their attention locked on the two mobsters still playing.

The cards were dealt slowly.

Shane remained seated on Kang Min-jae's lap, his body tense and his eyes lowered, just as he had been taught. He felt his owner's hand resting firmly on his waist, serving as a constant reminder of his place. Yet, across the table, Ilya Rozanov's eyes remained fixed on him with an intensity that unsettled him more and more.

Ilya picked up his cards and glanced at them only once before laying them back down on the table. His face didn't change in the slightest.

Min-jae, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying the situation, as if the whole thing were an intriguing game he still had completely under control.

"Let's see if you're worth what was bet on you," he said with a calm smile, looking at the Russian.

The chips began to move again. First a heavy bet, then an even bigger one. The stack in the center of the table grew rapidly until the sound of clattering plastic filled the silence of the parlor.

"You like taking risks, Russian," commented one of the men watching the game from behind, a lopsided grin on his face.

Ilya didn't bother looking at him.

"I like winning."

Min-jae let out a short laugh, as if he found the response amusing.

The rounds progressed slowly, growing more tense by the second.

Shane felt his own heart beating in his throat. He didn't understand much about poker, but he understood the way the men were staring at the table; he knew something significant was

happening, and that somehow he was right in the middle of it.

Finally, the betting stopped, and the moment came to reveal their hands.

Min-jae was the first to do so, placing his cards on the table elegantly, confident in himself, as if he were accustomed to winning these kinds of hands. A few of the observing men murmured in approval.

It wasn't a bad play at all.

Min-jae looked up at Ilya with a faint smile that seemed to say everything was already decided.

"Not bad."

Ilya stared at the cards for a second. Then he picked up his own and set them down on the table with the same calm he had maintained all night.

Silence fell immediately. A murmur swept through the room; someone whistled softly under their breath.

"You've got to be kidding..."

Ilya's hand was better—much better.

For a few seconds, nobody spoke. The atmosphere tightened almost physically, as if the air had suddenly turned heavy.

Shane didn't understand the exact play, but he saw the expressions around the table and knew what it meant.

Ilya had won.

Min-jae sat frozen, staring at the cards on the table.

His smile faded bit by bit, his expression hardening until a muscle in his jaw clenched. Then, without warning, he shoved his chair back violently.

He stood up abruptly—the movement so sudden that the hand holding Shane disappeared instantly, causing the boy to lose his balance.

Shane hit the wooden floor hard, the impact knocking the air out of his lungs for a brief moment.

Min-jae's outburst didn't stop there.

"This is bullshit!" he snapped, slamming his open palm down on the table.

The impact sent several chips bouncing and caused glasses to rattle against the surface.

The tension in the room spiked instantly. Some of the men straightened up, while others already had hands near their holsters, alert to whatever might happen next.

Ilya didn't move.

He remained standing across the table, watching him with that unsettling calm he hadn't dropped all night.

"You lost," he said simply.

Min-jae spat out a short, anger-laced laugh and slammed the table again, this time shoving a pile of chips onto the floor.

"I wasn't betting seriously," he retorted, his eyes burning. "It was a joke."

One of the mobsters watching from the side chimed in, cautious yet unable to refrain.

"The rules are clear, Min-jae."

Min-jae snapped his head toward him with a glare that silenced the man instantly.

"Shut your mouth," he growled.

He then turned back to Ilya, still furious.

The atmosphere was on the verge of shattering. Ilya's men, who had remained motionless behind him until that moment, were now tense, ready to react if things spiraled out of control. They made no obvious moves, but the threat was there, silent.

On the floor, Shane lay still, knowing that getting up without an order could make things worse.

Min-jae looked down at him then with a mix of irritation and contempt, as though suddenly remembering that all of this had started because of him.

He took a step forward and, without much patience, nudged him with his boot to shove him out of the way.

"Get up," he told him harshly, though he didn't wait for him to do so before turning his attention back to the Russian. "He's just a boy," he added, as if trying to play down the value of what he had wagered.

Ilya finally stood up completely.

When he did, the contrast between the two men became even starker. He was taller, broader in the shoulders, possessing a presence that filled the room differently. He didn't look angry, but he looked entirely resolved.

"He's my boy now," he said in his imperfect English.

# Chapter 2

The drive to Ilya Rozanov’s mansion was long and silent; no one spoke during the entire journey.

The car moved along increasingly deserted streets as the city lights faded behind them. Shane sat in the back seat between two of the Russian’s men, his hands resting together on his lap and his gaze lowered. He didn't know exactly where they were taking him, but he didn't expect any explanations either; he was used to not receiving them.

In the front seat, Ilya looked out at the road with a calm expression, as if nothing that had happened during the poker game mattered at all. He didn't turn around once to speak to Shane, or even to look at him. To him, it seemed the matter was already settled, and somehow, that unsettled Shane more than any shouting would have.

When the car finally pulled up, it stopped in front of an enormous property. Shane barely raised his eyes as he stepped out, feeling a small knot form in his stomach.

The mansion was large, dark, and cold in its elegance. It was not a welcoming home; it was the kind of place that demanded respect from the outside.

Everything was too orderly, too clean. The exterior lights illuminated the stone path leading to the main entrance, and several men were already standing there, attentive to Ilya's arrival. One of them opened the car door for the Russian first.

"Boss."

Ilya stepped out without rushing and adjusted his jacket before starting toward the house. He didn't look back, but one of his men motioned for Shane to get out as well. Shane obeyed immediately.

His feet touched the ground, and the cold night air ran over the skin exposed by the light clothes he was still wearing. For a second, he hesitated over whether he should walk behind Ilya or wait for an order, but seeing that the other men were already staring at him, he decided to follow.

As he walked toward the mansion's entrance, he clearly felt their eyes on him. Ilya’s men were observing him with open curiosity—some with a slight smirk, others with more serious expressions—evaluating him just as the mobsters at Min-jae’s house had done. It was obvious they all knew where he came from, and they also knew what he was: a prize, an object won at a gambling table.

Shane kept his head down as he crossed through the main entrance. The interior of the house was just as imposing as the exterior: high ceilings, polished floors, and dark, impeccably arranged furniture. Everything was clean, neat, lacking the clutter and noise of the house he had lived in until tonight. There were no stray bottles on the floor and no smoke in the air.

The silence here was different—more controlled. Ilya walked through the main hall with firm strides, like someone who knew every corner of the place. Several men inside the house stepped aside to let him pass, greeting him respectfully.

"Boss."

"Good evening, Boss."

Shane followed a few steps behind, trying not to make a sound, feeling that every person he passed paused a second longer than usual to look at him. Ilya finally stopped in the middle of the hall and turned around for the first time since they had left Min-jae's house.

His eyes landed on Shane with a cold calm, as if he were only now remembering he was there. For a few seconds, he observed him without saying a word. Then he spoke.

"Stay."

Shane nodded immediately.

"Yes, sir."

The Russian looked him up and down once more, as if evaluating something, and then made a slight gesture with his hand toward the wide space of the hall and the nearby hallways.

"You can sleep in a corner."

The sentence was delivered with complete indifference, as if it held no importance. Shane reacted with nothing more than a faint nod.

"Yes, sir."

Ilya was already starting to turn toward the main staircase when he suddenly stopped again. He took a step toward Shane, leaning in close enough so that no one else could hear clearly what he was about to say. The Russian's voice was low.

"If a single thing goes missing... I'm cutting off your fingers."

Shane felt a chill run down his spine, but he didn't hesitate for a single second to reply.

"Yes, sir."

Ilya held his gaze a moment longer, as if checking whether he truly understood what he had just been told. Then he straightened up, turned on his heel, and began walking up the stairs toward the upper floor.

In a few seconds, he disappeared down the hallway. The men remaining in the hall exchanged a few glances, but no one said anything, and over time, each returned to what he was doing.

Shane stood still for a moment. Then he began walking slowly around the room, looking for a corner where he wouldn't be in the way.

He found one near a side wall of the grand living room, where the light was dimmer and the movement in the house was minimal. He sat down first, leaning his back against the cold wall, and then adjusted his legs, trying to make himself as small as possible.

The floor was hard, but that was nothing new to him. He rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes slowly, though exhaustion took a while to overcome the nervousness still thrumming through his body.

He had changed owners tonight, and he still didn't know whether that was going to be better or worse.

•••

Shane didn't know how long he had slept. His rest had been light, filled with moments where he woke up just enough to look around and confirm where he was.

The hard floor had left his body numb, and the early morning cold had seeped through the sleeves of the shirt he was still wearing. Even so, he was used to nights like this, so when he opened his eyes in the morning, he didn't complain.

The house was already awake. Footsteps could be heard in the hallways, doors opening and closing, low voices of men talking amongst themselves. It was a different kind of movement than at Min-jae's house—more orderly, less chaotic, but equally heavy with authority.

Shane took a few seconds to remember exactly where he was. Then he lifted his head slightly and looked toward the upper level of the hall.

At that moment, a door opened. Shane instinctively lowered his eyes, but not enough to miss what was happening.

Ilya Rozanov came out of his room, and behind him followed two women. They were elegant, well-dressed, still fixing their hair as they walked down the hallway with the confidence of those accustomed to places like this.

One of them whispered something that made Ilya let out a quiet, deep chuckle.

Shane watched in silence.

The Russian paused for a moment before the women went down the stairs. One of them stepped closer first, and he kissed her naturally, as if it were routine. Then the other did the same, and he kissed her too—briefly, but possessively.

He didn't seem to care that there were people in the house.

The women walked down the stairs chatting between themselves and headed toward the main entrance, where one of Ilya's men was already waiting to escort them outside.

Shane quickly lowered his gaze again, but not fast enough for Ilya not to notice he was awake.

The Russian began descending the stairs with easy steps. When he reached the hall, he stopped a few feet from where Shane was sitting on the floor.

He looked at him for a moment, as if remembering once more that he was now there.

"You," he said finally.

Shane barely raised his head.

"Yes, sir."

Ilya gestured with his chin toward the stairs.

"My room. Go clean it."

The order was simple. Shane nodded right away.

"Yes, sir."

He stood up quickly, ignoring the faint ache in his legs from sleeping on the floor, and walked toward the stairs without making a sound.

As he climbed them, he could feel the curious eyes of some of the men in the house following him.

The door to Ilya’s room was standing ajar. Shane pushed it open gently and stepped inside.

The room was large—much larger than he had expected. The enormous bed was still messy, the sheets rumpled, and some clothes were strewn near the edge of the mattress. Glasses sat on a low table, and the air held a mixed scent of perfume, alcohol, and the night before.

Shane carefully closed the door behind him and began doing what he had been told.

First, he tidied the sheets, gathered the clothes off the floor, and opened the curtains slightly to let the light in.

As he moved around the room, he tried not to think too much about anything, focusing solely on cleaning quickly and thoroughly.

It was when he bent down near the bed that he saw the rest. On the floor, near the edge of the mattress and beside the table, lay several used condoms—some still tangled in the sheets that had fallen.

Shane paused for a second. It wasn't something new to him; he had seen similar things before.

Even so, the act of having to pick them up one by one left an odd knot in his chest. He grabbed some tissue from the nearby bathroom and began gathering them carefully, avoiding looking at them for too long.

The room was silent, save for the soft rustle of the curtains and the gentle sound of his own steps against the floor.

At one point, while still bent over cleaning, his hand instinctively rested over his abdomen. The gesture was automatic.

His expression softened slightly, replacing the fear that usually lingered in his eyes.

He lowered his head a bit and spoke in a very low voice, barely a whisper that no one else could hear.

"We're going to be okay."

His fingers lingered on his stomach for a moment before he refocused on what he was doing.

Outside the room, Ilya Rozanov's house continued operating as usual. But for Shane, the morning had begun in a very different way.

•••

Night fell over the mansion with the same controlled calm that seemed to rule everything in Ilya Rozanov's household. The lights in the main dining room were on, and the long, dark wood table had been set with precision. It wasn't a loud or crowded dinner like the gatherings at Min-jae's house; here, everything was more measured, quieter, but the tension was just as palpable.

Ilya sat at the head of the table. Opposite him was another mobster, an older man in an impeccable suit with an easy smile, who had been talking business for a while while calmly drinking whisky.

The men of the house moved quietly through the dining room, attentive to anything their boss might need. Shane stood near a wall in silence. He wasn't participating in anything; he was simply standing there as he had been instructed.

Ever since dinner had started, the other mobster hadn't stopped looking at him. At first, they were quick, discreet glances, but as time passed, they became more blatant. Every time Shane moved to serve something or simply shifted his stance, the man's eyes returned to him. Ilya noticed it right from the start; he didn't say anything, but his expression turned colder.

The mobster dining with him kept talking as if nothing were amiss, though every now and then he smiled in Shane's direction, with the kind of interest that, in that world, meant exactly what it looked like.

"You have good taste in the company you keep," he remarked at one point, raising his glass.

Ilya didn't answer immediately. He took a sip of his drink and set the glass back on the table calmly.

"He's not for sale."

The man let out a short laugh.

"I didn't say he was."

Yet he looked back at him all the same.

Shane felt those gazes like a constant weight on his skin. He did nothing to provoke them, but he didn't really know what to do to avoid them either, so he simply kept his posture low and obedient, trying to blend into the background.

Even so, the atmosphere grew slightly tenser with every passing minute.

Finally, dinner ended. They spoke a bit more about business before the mobster stood up, adjusting his jacket while one of the house men stepped up to escort him to the exit.

Before leaving, the man looked at Shane one last time with a faint smile.

"We'll see each other again, I suppose."

Ilya didn't reply, but when the front door closed behind the visitor, the silence in the house shifted, growing heavier.

Ilya remained standing in the dining room for a few seconds, his jaw clenched. Then he walked toward where Shane was standing. The boy barely raised his eyes.

"Sir..."

Ilya stopped in front of him, the calm gone from his eyes.

"You belong to me," he said, his voice low but thick with anger. "You have no business offering yourself up like that to others."

Shane froze, confused.

"But sir... I didn't..."

The response was never finished. The slap landed fast; the strike made Shane’s head snap to the side and sent his body off balance. He fell to his knees against the floor, the dull thud echoing through the nearly empty dining room.

Ilya unbuckled his leather belt with a sharp movement.

"Cheap whore," he spat, his breathing heavy. "I’m going to have to teach you not to show yourself off like that."

Shane felt fear instantly surge through his body. He had been through things like this before and recognized the exact moment a punishment was about to begin. He scrambled back slightly across the floor, instinctively pulling away, and raised a hand as if that could stop anything.

"Please, no, sir..." he said, his voice trembling. "I'm carrying a baby."

Ilya's movement stopped dead. The belt hung loosely from his hand as he stared at him.

"What?"

Shane swallowed hard.

"I'm... pregnant."

For a second, silence filled the dining room once more. Ilya frowned, visibly annoyed, as if what he had just heard made no sense.

"What did you say?"

"I'm pregnant, sir."

The tension in the Russian's face shifted. It was no longer the exact same rage as before; now there was surprise, irritation, and something harder to define.

Ilya dropped the belt onto a nearby table with a sharp toss.

"And your previous owner didn't think to tell me something like that?" His voice came out louder this time. "What the fuck am I supposed to do with a servant's child? You're useless to me now."

The shout echoed through the room. Shane curled inward on the floor, lowering his head and instinctively wrapping his arms around his body. The fear remained heavy, because he didn't know what was going to happen now.

Ilya stayed in the dining room for a few moments more. His expression remained harsh, as if he were still trying to decide what to do with all of this. Shane stayed on the floor, huddled up, head down and body tense, waiting for a reaction that seemed delayed in coming.

Finally, the Russian turned on his heel and left without another word, his footsteps fading down the hallway.

Shane didn't move right away; he was used to waiting for clear orders before doing anything. Several minutes passed in which only distant sounds of the mansion could be heard: a door closing, low voices of men talking in another part of the house, the faint echo of footsteps.

Then Ilya returned.

Shane barely raised his head when he saw him appear in the doorway of the dining room. He didn't have time to react much further; the Russian walked straight toward him, his brow still furrowed, and grabbed him firmly by the arm.

He yanked him up off the ground all at once, as if he weighed nothing. Shane barely managed to catch his feet before Ilya began dragging him down the hallway without offering any explanation. He didn't say a word the entire way, and his grip didn't loosen for a moment.

They reached a side door that Shane hadn't noticed before. Ilya shoved it open and threw him inside the room with the same harshness with which he had hauled him up.

"Sleep there."

The order was blunt. Before Shane could say anything, the door slammed shut behind him. The click of the latch echoed through the quiet room.

For a few seconds, Shane stood still, trying to process what had just happened. Then he slowly raised his eyes and looked around.

The room was simple, but large. It had a window with light curtains, a wardrobe against one wall, and in the center, a bed.

A real bed—spacious, with clean sheets and a mattress that looked soft even from where he stood.

Shane stared at it for a few seconds, as if he couldn't quite believe that the order meant exactly what it seemed to mean.

For years, the only times he had been in comfortable beds were to please his previous owner or someone he was ordered to be with. Sleeping in one like this, without anyone demanding anything from him, was something he barely remembered.

He approached slowly. His hands touched the edge of the mattress first, carefully testing the softness of the fabric. Then he sat on the edge, still hesitating slightly, as if at any moment someone was going to open the door and tell him to get up. But that didn't happen; the house remained silent on the other side.

Finally, exhaustion won out over distrust. Shane laid down on the bed carefully, settling in slowly, as though his body took time adjusting to the feeling.

The mattress yielded beneath his weight in a way that made him let out a soft sigh he hadn't even realized he was holding in. Instinctively, he placed a hand over his belly and left it there gently, protecting that small secret that now accompanied him everywhere.

# Chapter 3

The day at Ilya Rozanov’s mansion started early.
Shane woke up when there wasn’t much light coming through the window yet, and for a few seconds he lay motionless, trying to figure out where he was.
The bed was still soft beneath him, something his body was not yet used to, and for a moment he felt a strange mix of relief and mistrust.
Then he remembered everything: the poker game, the collapse to the floor, the new house, the threat from the night before, and the baby.

His hand instinctively moved to his stomach before he got up.
He didn't have much time to think; as soon as he left the room, one of the men in the house spotted him in the hallway and gestured with his head for Shane to come over.

“Hey, you. Come here.”

Shane obeyed immediately.

The rest of the day passed in a way that was all too familiar. He was told to clean some rooms on the first floor, then to help clean up in the kitchen, and later to sweep the inner courtyard. Nobody spoke to him with kindness, but neither with the open cruelty he had known before; to them, he seemed to be just someone new in the house who had to do what he was told, and that was something Shane knew how to do very well.

He moved quickly and quietly, avoiding making direct eye contact with anyone. Still, he felt the gaze of the men in the house every now and then—some watched him with curiosity, others with a smile he didn't quite like, but nobody said anything.

Meanwhile, in another part of the mansion, Ilya spent the day busy.
There were brief meetings in his office, quiet conversations with a few of his men, and several phone calls that lasted long enough to keep anyone from getting too close.
At times, he walked through the hallways with a firm step, speaking Russian on the phone or discussing something serious with one of his people.

Every time Ilya crossed the foyer or the courtyard, Shane noticed, even as he tried not to look.
Ilya saw him too, but didn't call for him all morning or at noon. It was only in the afternoon, when the activity in the house seemed to have calmed down a bit, that one of the men approached Shane while he was cleaning a long table in the living room.

“The boss wants to see you.”

Shane’s heart skipped a beat.

“Yes.”

He left what he was doing and followed the man down the hallway until they reached a large wooden door. The man knocked twice and, after hearing a response from inside, opened it.

“Get in.”

Shane stepped in slowly.
Ilya’s office was spacious, with a large window behind the desk and several dark wooden pieces of furniture neatly arranged. On the desk lay a few papers, a glass of whiskey, and an ashtray.

Ilya was sitting behind the desk and looked up when Shane walked in.

“Close the door.”

Shane did so right away and stood in front of the desk, his head slightly bowed, waiting.

For a few seconds, Ilya said nothing; he just observed him with the same sharp attention as on that first night, as if he were still assessing him.
Finally, he spoke.

“Yesterday you said something.”

Shane raised his eyes slightly, not daring to look him straight in the face.

“Yes, sir.”

“About the pregnancy.” The word hung in the air. Ilya rested an elbow on the desk, studying him. “Explain.”

Shane swallowed before answering. He didn't know exactly how much he should say, but he couldn't lie either.

“I’m pregnant, sir.”

The Russian frowned slightly, as if the idea still annoyed him.

“Whose is it?”

Shane hesitated for just a second before answering.

“Kang Min-jae’s.”

The Korean mobster's name settled into silence between them.
Ilya let out a short exhale through his nose, clearly irritated.

“Of course.” He leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his hair to push it back as he thought. “How far along?”

“A month and a half, sir.”

Ilya stared at him for a few more seconds, calculating something in his head.

“So you already knew when you were over there.”

“Yes, sir.”

A moment of silence followed.
Shane didn't move; he just waited.
Ilya tapped his fingers softly on the desk, lost in thought. His expression was serious, but the rage from the day before was gone. He looked more annoyed by an unexpected complication.

“Your previous owner didn't say anything.”

“No, sir, he... he didn't know.”

“How convenient.”

The Russian looked at him again, this time differently, more analytically—as if he were now noticing something he hadn't considered before.

•••

The silence in the office had grown thick after Shane revealed how far along he was.

Ilya remained seated behind the desk, his fingers resting on the dark wood as he pondered.
He didn't seem in a rush to answer, but there was a clear irritation in his gaze, as if he were weighing an unexpected inconvenience in the middle of far more important matters.
Finally, he spoke.

“That can be taken care of.”

He said it in a matter-of-fact, practical tone, as though discussing a minor issue that could be resolved with a quick call or order.
Ilya had already returned his attention to some papers on his desk, taking for granted that the conversation was practically over.

Shane understood what that meant.
For a second, he froze, feeling fear surge up his chest. He knew that in this house he had no power to decide anything. He knew his place perfectly well.

But he also knew something else. He raised his eyes and, for the first time since arriving at the mansion, looked Ilya directly in the eyes without waiting for permission.

“No.”

The word came out low, but clear.
Ilya looked up immediately, surprise evident on his face.

“What?”

Shane swallowed. His hands were trembling slightly, but his gaze didn't drop this time.

“I’m not getting an abortion.”

For a few seconds, neither of them spoke.
The tension in the room shifted, as if something new had entered the space between them.
Ilya stared at him intently, trying to process whether he had actually heard what he thought he heard.

Shane remained standing in front of the desk, his body rigid, fully aware of the risk he was taking by saying such a thing, but he didn't back down.

Ilya narrowed his eyes slightly, amused.

“You don't understand your place in my house.”

The Russian’s voice was low now, far more dangerous than before.
Shane knew his place all too well.
He had lived like this for too long to be confused.

“I do know, sir,” he replied, his voice trembling just a bit. “But I’m not getting an abortion.”

Silence fell over the office once again.
Ilya observed him for several seconds more, perhaps waiting for Shane to drop his gaze or take it back, but that didn't happen. Shane remained there—trembling, yes, visibly afraid, but steady.
And that was what shifted something in the Russian’s expression.
First, a flicker of surprise appeared in his eyes, followed by something akin to curiosity, until finally, Ilya let out a short laugh.

“Well, look at you…” He leaned back in his chair, studying him even more closely than before. “You’ve got more backbone than I thought.”

Shane didn't know how to interpret that, so he said nothing.
Ilya’s eyes remained fixed on Shane, analyzing him intently, as if he were now seeing him in a completely different light.
The Russian softly drummed his fingers on the desk before speaking again.

“If you have that… thing,” he said at last, clear contempt laced in his voice as he referred to the baby, “I’m going to sell it as soon as it’s born. Is that what you want?”

The words landed cold in the room.
Shane felt the impact of the threat hit his chest, but he didn't look away this time. His fingers tightened slightly at his sides, and though fear remained firmly rooted in his stomach, something inside him refused to give ground.

“You won't touch my baby.”

The response came out firmer than he himself expected.
Ilya stared at him and then slowly leaned back into his chair, resting his back against the seat

with composure. A smirk reappeared on his face, more pronounced this time, as he watched him as if Shane had just said something utterly fascinating.

“I could kill you right now for that disrespect.”

He didn't say it in an exaggerated, threatening tone; he stated it as a simple fact.
Shane felt a chill run down his spine. He lowered his eyes to his hands for a moment, swallowing hard, fully aware of what he was doing by talking back like that. He knew very well that a man like Ilya needed no excuse to hurt someone.
Even so, he spoke.

“It’s all I have,” he whispered.

Ilya tilted his head slightly.

“What?”

Shane hesitated for a second, but raised his eyes again, not quite meeting his full gaze.

“My… my child,” he said softly. “It’s all I have.”

The Russian watched him in silence for a few seconds, his brow slightly furrowed, as if trying to grasp something that felt unnatural to him.

“Don't be an idiot,” he finally replied. “What kind of life do you want for that thing?”

Shane lowered his gaze again, but not out of total submission this time. It was more of a way to gather the courage to speak.

“It’s not a thing,” he murmured.

His voice was soft, almost fragile, but the conviction was still there.
Silence settled back into the office.

Outside, the house went on with its usual bustle, but inside the room, time seemed to stand still.
Ilya didn't take his eyes off Shane.

There was something about that mix of fear and firmness that clearly caught his attention. In his world, people either obeyed or defied openly, but he rarely saw someone so terrified stand their ground with such resolve.

The Russian rested an arm on the desk and leaned forward slightly.

“You know where you are, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know what I am.”

“Yes.”

Ilya observed him a moment longer.

“And yet you talk to me like that…”

It wasn't quite a reproach; it sounded more like curiosity.
Shane didn't answer right away. His hands clasped tightly together before he spoke again in a soft voice.

“I have nothing else.”

The statement was plain, stripped raw.
Ilya kept staring at him in silence, that faint smile never quite leaving his face. He was genuinely intrigued—it was like watching a little rabbit surrounded by lions stand up to them, and for some reason, he liked it.

# Chapter 4

From early in the morning, the house was tense—more so than usual.

The men walked quickly through the hallways, spoke in low voices among themselves, and avoided making unnecessary noise. Something had happened during the night, something that had put Ilya in a terrible mood, and everyone knew it.

Shane noticed it as soon as he stepped out of the small room where he was now sleeping.

No one said a word to him, but the atmosphere was charged with an uneasiness he hadn't felt before.

One of Ilya's men ordered him to clean the main hall and then the kitchen, and Shane obeyed without asking questions, moving silently through the house.

As he wiped a rag across the long dining table, he heard firm footsteps approaching down the hallway. When he looked up, he saw Ilya.

The Russian was dressed entirely in black, wearing a long coat that made him look even more imposing. His face was stern, his jaw set, and his pale eyes were colder than usual. Several of his men walked behind him.

"Bring them," Ilya ordered in Spanish, with his marked accent.

The order was enough for two guards to appear, dragging in three beaten men.

They were disheveled, their clothes stained, and fear was clearly visible on their faces. They could barely stand on their feet.

Shane froze, rag in hand.

One of the guards glanced at him.

"Keep cleaning."

Shane immediately lowered his gaze, but he couldn't help listening.

The men were thrown to their knees in the middle of the room. One of them tried to speak before Ilya could say a word.

"Please… Mr. Rozanov, we can fix this…"

Ilya watched him in silence for a few seconds. His expression didn't change.

"Three months," he said finally. "Three months without paying."

"They attacked a shipment of ours, I swear, we…"

The Russian walked slowly around them, as if evaluating something in no rush. His presence was heavy, dominant, and none of the three men dared to move.

“They always have a story,” Ilya muttered.

One of the debtors began to cry.

“Give us one more week, please… just one week…”

Ilya stopped in front of him.

“One week,” he repeated, thoughtfully.

For a second, it seemed as if he were actually considering the idea.

Then he pulled out his gun with a quiet, almost natural speed.

The gunshot echoed through the room, and the man collapsed backward before he could even process what had happened.

The silence that followed was brutal.

Shane felt his stomach tighten, but he didn't raise his head. His hands trembled slightly as he pretended to keep wiping the table.

The other two men began to beg in desperation.

“No, no, please!”

“We’ll pay, I swear we’ll pay!”

Ilya didn't even look at them at first. He glanced down at the body on the floor as if it were something insignificant, and then spoke calmly.

“When someone owes me, they don't just owe me money.” He leaned down slightly toward one of the remaining men. “They owe me respect.”

The man was shaking so violently he could barely stay on his knees.

“We have it, sir… we always had it…”

Ilya let out a soft sigh, as if he were tired of the situation.

“No.”

He gestured to one of his men.

The guard struck the debtor in the back with the butt of a gun, forcing him to the floor. The other man began crawling backward on his knees, completely terrified.

“Please… please…”

Ilya raised the gun again and didn't hesitate.

The second shot was as sharp as the first.

Shane felt the sound pierce through his chest.

He gripped the rag tightly to keep his trembling hands from showing.

Only one remained. The last man was pale, sweating, staring at the floor as if he knew perfectly well what was coming.

Ilya walked up to him slowly.

“You actually paid,” he said.

The man snapped his head up, confused.

“Yes, yes, I paid, sir… I always paid…”

Ilya watched him with that cold gaze that seemed to measure a person’s worth.

“But you didn't warn me that your friends weren't going to pay.”

The man fell silent, and in that silence, he understood that he wasn't going to make it out alive either.

“Sir, I…”

Ilya fired again.

When the echo of the last shot faded, the room fell completely silent.

The Russian lowered the gun calmly, as if what he had just done were simply part of his daily routine. There was no rage on his face, no emotion, no remorse.

Just a heavy calm.

“Clean this up,” he ordered.

His men moved immediately.

It was then that Ilya’s eyes swept across the room and landed on Shane.

The boy was standing near the table, still, with his head down and his hands still holding the rag.

He had heard everything; he had seen enough.

Ilya watched him for a long moment.

Shane felt that gaze on him, and fear gripped his chest once more. In that moment, he understood something with absolute clarity: the man who was now his master wasn't just dangerous—he was a machine capable of killing without feeling a single thing.

•••

The rest of the day in the mansion went by like almost every other since Shane had arrived: working in silence, obeying orders, and avoiding drawing attention to himself any more than necessary.

After what he had witnessed that morning, the weight in his chest hadn't gone away.

The image of the men collapsing to the floor and the way Ilya had fired still flashed through his mind as he swept the hallways or wiped down surfaces. But in a house that size, there was always something to do.

At noon, one of the guards instructed him to help out in the kitchen.

Shane nodded immediately and walked over carefully, making no noise, unsure of what to expect.

The kitchen was huge, warm, and filled with aromas that contrasted with the rest of the mansion.

Large pots sat on the stove, bread was resting on a wooden table, and several dishes were being prepared at once. At the center of it all stood an older woman.

She was an elderly Russian woman with a straight back, gray hair pulled up in a neat bun, and strong hands that moved with confidence as she chopped vegetables. She had a quiet yet firm presence, like someone who had been managing the place for years.

When Shane walked in, she looked up and observed him for a long moment.

Shane lowered his head immediately, expecting an order or a harsh remark like the ones he was used to receiving from others in his position, but the woman simply smiled.

“You're the new one.”

Her Spanish had a thick accent, but it was perfectly clear.

Shane nodded.

“Yes… ma'am.”

She frowned slightly.

“Not ma'am. Galina.” Then she pointed toward a stack of dishes. “Wash those.”

Shane walked over right away and got to work.

For a while, the only sounds were the running water, knives against the cutting board, and the quiet bustle of the kitchen.

Still, the woman cast glances at him from time to time.

Finally, she spoke.

“I saw it today.”

Shane looked up slightly.

“Pardon?”

“This morning, when they brought the men in.”

Shane lowered his eyes again, unsure of what to say.

Galina let out a small huff, as if she already knew what was running through his head.

“Not the first time you've seen something like that, is it?”

Shane took a moment to reply.

“No.”

The woman nodded slowly, confirming a suspicion she had held.

She kept chopping vegetables calmly.

“Ilya has always been this way.”

Shane looked up a little, surprised by her tone. There was no fear in her voice, no criticism—rather, something resembling pride.

“Have you known him for a long time?”

Galina let out a low laugh.

“Since he was this tall,” she said, raising her hand to the height of a small child.

Shane stared at her, astonished.

“Really?”

“I was his nanny.”

The woman put down her knife for a moment and wiped her hands on her apron.

“His family lived in a rough place in Russia. Harsh winter, little money, lots of trouble. His mother worked all day, so I helped take care of him.”

Her expression softened slightly as she spoke, as if recalling distant memories.

“He was a big boy even as a child. Strong, always getting into fights with other neighborhood kids because they were picking on his brother.”

Shane listened in silence.

“Life wasn't easy back there,” Galina continued. “A lot of people think men like him are born monsters. But no—sometimes they just grow up in places where nobody teaches them any other way to survive.”

Shane didn't know how to respond to that.

He dried a plate carefully before speaking.

“Still… he's terrifying.”

Galina looked at him.

“Yes.”

She didn't deny it.

Silence fell over them again, but this time it wasn't uncomfortable. The kitchen felt like a different world inside the mansion—more human.

After a while, the woman spoke once more.

“What about you?”

Shane tensed slightly.

“Me?”

“How did you end up here?”

Shane stood still for a second with the plate in his hand. No one ever asked him things like that. Normally, no one cared.

It took him a moment to answer.

“I… I don't remember exactly when it all started.”

Galina didn't interrupt.

“Being used like this,” Shane continued softly. “Like an object.”

His eyes were fixed on the sink water.

“Sometimes I get sold… other times I get lost in bets. Like last night.”

Galina frowned slightly.

“Was it always like this?”

Shane shook his head slowly.

“No. Before… before, I had a home.”

The woman looked at him more closely now.

It took Shane a few seconds to keep going.

“When I was a teenager… I ran away.”

“Why?”

Shane hesitated.

“Because of a boy.”

The word came out as little more than a sigh.

“He was my boyfriend. I thought…” He paused, as if struggling to finish the sentence. “I thought he loved me.”

Galina said nothing.

Shane went on.

“When I moved in with him, he changed. At first it was small things… then he started bringing people to the house. He said we needed money.”

His voice was quiet, but steady—as if he had told this story in his head countless times, even if he rarely spoke it aloud.

“Then he started sending me off with other people. And when I wasn't useful to him anymore, he sold me.”

Galina remained silent for a moment.

“And that's how I kept falling into the hands of worse and worse people,” Shane finished.

The kitchen grew quiet again.

The woman moved slowly back toward the table, lost in thought.

“Ugly world,” she murmured at last.

Shane nodded.

A few seconds later, Galina spoke up again.

“You're pregnant.”

Shane snapped his head up, startled.

“How…?”

The woman gently pointed toward his posture.

“It shows.”

Shane looked down at his stomach almost instinctively, his hand coming to rest there without thinking.

For the first time in their entire conversation, something different appeared in his expression —something soft.

“Yeah.”

Galina watched him attentively.

“Are you happy about it?”

Shane took a moment to reply, but when he did, his voice sounded a bit different.

“Yes… I'm scared,” he admitted. “But… it also gives me hope.” His fingers stroked his belly gently, almost unconsciously. “Sometimes I wonder what they'll be like…” he said quietly. “If they'll have my freckles… or my eyes.”

Galina watched him in silence.

Shane offered a tiny smile—something he had barely done since arriving at the mansion.

“I want them to have a better life than this.”

The woman didn't reply right away, but after a few seconds, she nodded slowly.

•••

Night fell heavy over the mansion. After a full day of meetings, phone calls, and people coming and going, the house began to settle down.

A few guards still patrolled the hallways, while others talked in low voices in different rooms, but the daytime noise had faded away.

Shane was finishing tidying up one of the rooms when he heard firm footsteps approaching.

He didn't need to look up to know who it was.

“You,” came Ilya’s deep voice.

Shane turned around immediately, keeping his head low.

“Yes, sir.”

The Russian looked tired. His coat was unbuttoned, his shirt slightly disheveled, and his hair messy, as though he had spent hours outside. Even so, his presence remained just as imposing as ever.

“Come,” he ordered.

Shane followed him into a private lounge where Ilya usually rested or worked when he didn't want interruptions. It was a spacious room with large armchairs, a coffee table, and warm lighting that cast long shadows on the walls.

Ilya sat down in one of the armchairs and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Massage.”

Shane nodded right away.

He stepped closer with care and began working on Ilya's shoulders with slow, respectful movements.

He had learned long ago how to do it without being intrusive, without pressing too hard, always trying to anticipate what the other needed.

At first, neither of them spoke, but after a few minutes, Ilya broke the silence.

“Interesting day today.”

His voice carried a different tone now—more relaxed than during the day.

“Yes, sir,” Shane whispered, unsure of how else to respond.

Ilya let out a low, quiet chuckle.

“Killed a few idiots.”

He said it as if he were sharing a mild curiosity.

“One thought he could lie to my face. Another tried to run…”

Shane maintained the rhythm of the massage, focusing entirely on hiding whatever emotion he felt hearing those words.

But Ilya seemed to enjoy telling it.

“Do you know how he screamed?” the Russian continued with a hint of fascination. “Like a trapped animal.”

Shane didn't answer. His hands kept moving across the tense muscles of Ilya’s shoulders.

The Russian tilted his head back slightly, as if reliving the moment.

“People think they can negotiate when it's already too late.”

Then, with a casual motion, he reached inside his coat.

Shane caught the movement out of the corner of his eye. Ilya pulled out his gun and placed it on the coffee table beside the armchair.

The dark metal glinted beneath the lamp’s glow.

Shane saw it clearly, and his stomach clenched, but he kept massaging.

Silence returned for a few seconds.

Until Ilya spoke again.

“You'd love to grab it and blow my head off, wouldn't you, mm?”

Shane froze for a fraction of a second. His hands paused just before he caught himself, shaking his head frantically in obvious panic.

“No, sir.”

Ilya let out a huff through his nose, amused by the reaction.

“Of course not.”

Shane felt heat rush to his face. He lowered his eyes even further, desperate not to say anything that might escalate things.

“Stand in front of me.”

The order was calm, yet explicit.

Shane obeyed instantly, stepping away from the armchair and taking a few paces until he was standing right before him.

He kept his hands clasped together in front of his body, trying his best to remain still.

Ilya observed him for a few seconds.

Then he picked the gun back up from the table, holding it with one hand and twirling it slowly between his fingers, as if it were a harmless toy rather than something designed to end a life in a fraction of a second.

The Russian's gaze never left Shane.

“You're scared,” he finally said.

It wasn't a question; it was an observation.

Shane swallowed hard.

“Yes, sir.”

Ilya tilted his head slightly, studying him. He kept playing with the weapon, resting an elbow on the armrest as he watched him.

“Get undressed. You're going to serve me today, pregnant or not.”

“Yes, sir.”

Shane didn't wait for further instructions. Nakedness had long ceased to be a taboo for him the way it had been in the beginning; now he simply removed all his clothes without waiting for a second command.

He took off his shirt, then his shoes and socks, pulled down his pants, and followed with his boxers.

He stood completely naked, hands clasped together in front of him. He wasn't trying to cover up—it was simply a posture while awaiting further directions.

Ilya took him in thoroughly from head to toe without any shame, inspecting every inch of his skin, every freckle, every fine hair, even the tiny, barely noticeable bump on his lower belly —something so subtle it might have gone completely unnoticed by anyone who didn't know the truth.

“Do you know how to do everything?” he asked, looking him straight in the eyes.

“Yes, sir.”

Ilya smiled and nodded.

He set the gun back down where it was, unbuckled his belt, and unzipped his fly.

He took hold of his penis—not fully erect—with one hand, giving it a slow, lazy shake.

“On your knees. Suck it.”

Shane obeyed. He dropped to his knees before him, leaning in close enough for his nose to brush against Ilya’s shaft, and opened his mouth.

He started at the base, running his tongue along the length in slow, steady strokes, taking his time—just as he had been taught. He needed to give the impression that he was enjoying it, too.

Then he sucked gently on the tip while moving his hand slowly, feeling the erection harden between his fingers. He wrapped his lips around him, taking him in sections down to the base before pulling back up to repeat the motion.

Once Ilya was fully hard, Shane opened wide and took the mobster’s cock deep into the back of his throat.

He made sure to stretch his jaw, breathe through his nose, and remain careful while his tongue curled softly against the shaft.

Ilya watched him down there.

He had received plenty of blowjobs—tons of them, from men and women alike; he didn't care either way.

Most were good, some were average, others were just plain bad.

Shane's was far from bad. It was clear the boy was enjoying it, or at least putting every effort into doing it right. He sucked, moving his head in short thrusting motions, and even when Ilya heard him gag slightly, he didn't stop. He just kept sucking and clinging to him.

"If I feel your teeth, I'm pulling them out one by one, so watch it," Ilya told him—more as a casual reminder of who was in charge than a genuine threat, because the truth was Shane was doing a fine job.

Ilya leaned back into the armchair, savoring the moment: the compliant boy's lips and tongue, the touch of his hand, the muffled sounds, and the threads of saliva dampening his pants. It was simply a good show.

When Ilya felt he was close, he cupped the back of Shane's head, pressing it firm against his groin, and lifted his hips slightly, driving deep into the boy's throat.

"Swallow it," he ordered just as he began to come, shooting directly down the other's throat without letting him pull away.

Shane swallowed every drop he could despite choking, silently grateful when the Russian finally withdrew from his mouth.

For a moment, Ilya said nothing. He simply stretched his neck, feeling relaxed after an especially difficult day.

Shane remained on his knees before him, waiting.

"Well, this works. You're good at it," Ilya said after a long silence.

"Thank you, sir."

Ilya looked down and noticed Shane was flushed—not just from the physical exertion, but wearing a simple, ridiculous blush.

"Don't be so embarrassed. You love this—you even let someone get you pregnant."

As he spoke, Ilya leaned forward and rested his open palm against Shane's belly.

"Yeah," he said with a dark smile. "You let just anyone dump their seed inside here, like a container…"

“Sir…”

“I could have given you a better one,” Ilya said, locking eyes with him—intense and unreadable. “Maybe someday I will.”

Shane remained frozen on the cold floor, unable to tell whether that was a twisted threat or a promises.

# Chapter 5

The morning at the mansion started earlier than usual for some.

Ilya woke up with a grimace of annoyance, still half-submerged in sleep. The room was silent, with the heavy curtains letting in barely a sliver of grey dawn light.

For a moment, he lay there looking at the ceiling, breathing slowly, trying to get his head in order after another short night. He already knew he was in a bad mood.

With a abrupt movement, he sat up in bed and ran a hand over his face. He had very little patience at that time of day, and any discomfort irritated him more than usual—and by discomfort, one could understand that irritating, painful erection between his legs.

It frustrated him; he was no longer a teenager to wake up like that, and he really didn't want to deal with it himself. His expression shifted slightly as he remembered that he now had someone who could take care of it for him.

He reached for the phone on the nightstand and called one of his men.

"Bring him."

He didn't need to explain who he meant; the response on the other end was immediate.

•••

Meanwhile, in another part of the mansion, Shane was fast asleep.

He had had a rough night, and his body was still exhausted from the day before. The small room was dark and quiet when the door burst open, and two of Ilya's men walked in without asking for permission.

"Get up."

Shane barely had time to react. He was still disoriented when they grabbed him by the arms and practically hoisted him out of bed.

"The boss wants to see you now."

Sleep vanished instantly. His stomach turned the moment he stood up so quickly.

"I'm... I'm going," he muttered, trying to keep his footing.

But the men didn't wait long. They dragged him down the hallway almost as Shane tried to keep up with their pace.

The house was still quiet at that hour. The echo of their footsteps resonated on the polished floor as they advanced toward the mansion's private wing.

When they reached Ilya's room, one of the men knocked on the door and then opened it.

"Here's what you asked for, boss."

Ilya was sitting on the bed, visibly irritated. His eyes snapped up the moment Shane entered the room.

"Leave him and close the door."

The guards let go of Shane and left without another word. The door shut behind them.

Shane remained standing, still a bit unsteady, his breathing slightly accelerated as his body felt the full weight of his exhaustion. His hair was messy and his face pale.

Ilya observed him for a few seconds.

"You're moving slow."

"Sorry, sir."

Shane took a step closer to the bed, trying to regain his balance. A wave of dizziness hit his head, forcing him to lean on the edge of the mattress for support.

Ilya frowned.

"What's wrong with you?"

Shane took a deep breath, trying hard not to let the discomfort show too much.

"Nothing... I'm fine."

He wasn't fine at all; for a few days now, nausea would hit him out of nowhere, especially in the morning.

Ilya watched him with growing impatience.

"Take care of this," he ordered, gripping his erection over his underwear.

Shane understood what he was being asked to do. It was something he had been forced to do many times in his life with other people, something his body knew how to perform even when his mind refused to dwell on it.

He climbed onto the bed carefully, still feeling that uncomfortable dizziness tightening his stomach.

He took Ilya's penis and began to stroke him gently, trying to focus on the task, on doing what was expected of him.

But the nausea wouldn't go away.

Ilya watched him intently, waiting for him to carry out the order.

"Faster," he demanded after a moment, his tone harsh.

Shane tried to obey, though his breathing was becoming irregular. The smell of the room, the movement—everything mixed with that rising wave of sickness surging up from his stomach.

Ilya frowned again.

"Use your mouth."

The command was direct.

Shane nodded weakly, trying to lean a little closer, but the moment he bent his body forward, the dizziness hit him with full force. The world seemed to spin for a second.

"Wait—"

He didn't get to finish the sentence. The sickness won out instantly, and Shane had to pull away frantically, clapping a hand over his mouth before leaning over the side of the bed.

He ended up throwing up right there.

The sound shattered the silence of the room.

For a few seconds, no one said a word.

Shane sat there pale, breathing heavily, humiliated and trembling as he tried to recover. He knew perfectly well that something like this could infuriate someone like Ilya.

"I'm sorry..." he whispered, his voice faint. "I'm sorry, sir..."

The silence in the room lasted only a few seconds after Shane finished throwing up.

Ilya looked at him with an expression that rapidly shifted from annoyance to pure fury.

"What the fuck was that?"

The Russian's voice was no longer calm; it was heavy, dangerous.

Shane wiped his mouth with his hand, trembling.

"I'm sorry... I..." he tried to say, still dizzy.

Before he could finish, Ilya surged off the bed. The movement was fast, brutal, and before Shane could react, the blow landed.

Ilya's large hand slammed into his face with force, sending him losing his balance.

Shane fell to the side of the bed, dazed, his ear ringing.

"Son of a bitch!" Ilya growled, completely out of control.

Fear struck Shane's chest like a cold blade. He tried to get up immediately, desperate to fix what he had done.

"I'll clean it... I'll clean it right now..."

He scrambled on his knees toward the mess, searching frantically for something to wipe it with, his hands shaking violently. He was used to this kind of reaction, to this kind of punishment, and his body reacted on instinct: fix it, clean it, make the problem disappear.

But mid-movement, the dizziness hit him again, even harder.

Shane froze for a second, then slapped a hand over his mouth.

"No..." he whimpered.

He forced himself up as best he could and bolted toward the bedroom bathroom, barely making it in time before leaning over the sink and throwing up once more.

The bathroom door had been left open, and the sound didn't go unnoticed in the house.

In the kitchen, Galina snapped her head up at the noise, her eyebrows knitting together instantly.

She set down what she was doing and walked briskly down the hallway until she reached Ilya's room. She didn't bother knocking; she simply walked right in.

Reaching the bathroom, she found Shane leaning heavily against the sink, pale and struggling to breathe.

The older woman approached him immediately.

"Easy, boy," she said, her voice far softer than usual. "Slowly."

She rested a supportive hand on his shoulder while turning on the faucet so he could rinse his mouth.

Shane was trembling.

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to..."

"Don't speak now."

Galina was already looking for a towel when heavy, rapid footsteps approached.

Ilya appeared in the doorway, his face twisted with rage. His light eyes were stone-hard, his jaw clenched, clearly ready to keep venting his fury.

"What the hell is going on here?"

He took a step toward Shane, but Galina moved first, stepping firmly between them without hesitation.

Ilya barely had time to react before the old woman's hand flew out. The slap cracked loudly through the bathroom, and the silence that followed was brutal.

Ilya stood frozen for a second, his head slightly turned from the blow.

Shane opened his eyes wide in absolute shock.

Very few people in that house dared to put a finger on Ilya Rozanov, but Galina was the exception.

The Russian turned his head back to look at her, incredulous, fury still vibrating through his body.

He spoke in Russian.

"Why did you do that?"

Galina didn't budge from her spot. Her gaze was steady, almost defiant. She answered in Russian as well.

"He's pregnant. It's normal for him to throw up."

Ilya let out a short, humorless laugh.

"I don't care."

Galina's scowl deepened.

"It's even more normal if he isn't eating properly around here," she continued. "Feed this boy."

The Russian took a step forward.

"He's my slave."

The word sounded harsh in the room.

Galina didn't even blink.

"All the more reason you should take better care of him."

Ilya ground his teeth.

"I don't care what—"

The second slap landed even faster than the first. This time, the sound was even sharper.

Shane remained completely motionless, staring at the scene in utter disbelief.

Ilya didn't react immediately. He just took one deep breath, then another, swallowing down the rage that was clearly boiling inside him. His hands balled into fists for a second, but he

didn't raise a hand against the woman. Galina was practically the only person in the world who could stand up to him like that... and live to tell the tale.

•••

That day, contrary to what everyone in the house expected, Ilya didn't leave for work.

There were no meetings, no visits from business associates, and no cars driving in and out through the main gate for hours. The mansion was quieter than usual, though no one asked questions. When the boss made a decision, people simply complied.

Around noon, the gentle sun fell over the property's sprawling backyard.

The area looked more like a private forest than a standard garden—tall trees, stone pathways winding through lush greenery, a small vintage fountain, and elegant tables set under the shade of massive oaks. It was a manicured, peaceful place, almost surreal to anyone unfamiliar with Ilya Rozanov's lifestyle.

A long table had been prepared for him. Several dishes were served: meat, fresh bread, vegetables, fruit, wine. Everything arranged with precision.

Ilya sat at the table, draped an arm over the back of his chair, and scanned the surroundings for a few moments before starting to eat. But his mind wasn't entirely there; something had been nagging at him since this morning.

He wasn't a man given to second-guessing his actions. In his world, decisions were quick and consequences were simple. If someone made a mistake, they paid for it. Yet today, he found himself recalling the scene in the bathroom again and again.

The pale, trembling boy, and Galina's words.

Ilya took a sip of wine and set the glass back on the table. He let out a soft huff and, after a few seconds, glanced over at one of the guards standing a few yards away.

"Go fetch him."

The guard stepped closer.

"Shane, sir?"

Ilya nodded.

"Bring him gently. Don't shove him around."

The guard nodded immediately and left.

Ilya stared at the table a moment longer, as if still trying to decide whether what he was doing made any sense at all.

A short while later, Shane appeared walking down the garden path alongside the guard. It was obvious he was nervous; his steps were cautious, and he kept his head low as he approached.

When they reached the table, the guard withdrew without saying a word.

Shane stood before Ilya.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

Ilya looked up and studied him for a few seconds. The boy still looked fragile, though a bit more stable than he had that morning.

"Eat while I do."

Shane blinked.

"Yes, sir."

He hesitated for a second, looking at the table laden with food... and then did what his body was trained to do: he dropped to his knees in front of him.

He placed his hands on the zipper of Ilya's pants, ready to pull it down and start his work, but Ilya instantly scowled.

"What are you doing?"

Shane raised his head, confused.

"Uh..."

The Russian shook his head, almost incredulous.

"Eat... the food, you pervert."

Shane froze for a few seconds, clearly disoriented by the situation.

"Are you sure?"

Ilya gave him a dry look.

"Don't make me say it twice."

Shane hesitated one moment more before speaking.

"Where may I sit, sir?"

Ilya didn't answer with words; he simply grabbed one of the chairs beside him and pulled it back slightly, making a brief gesture with his hand. That was enough.

Shane looked at him in surprise, stood up, and carefully sat down.

He was tense, as if expecting to be told at any second that it was all a joke or that he was doing something wrong. But the food was right there, and he was hungry... starving.

At first, he ate slowly, with a certain bashfulness, taking a piece of bread, then some warm food. But as his body responded to the nourishment, hunger began to win out over fear.

His cheeks puffed out as he chewed, trying hard not to eat too fast.

Ilya watched him in silence. Every now and then, he took a bite of his own, but his attention remained mostly on the boy rather than his own plate.

He noticed how Shane tried to keep himself in check, how he seemed to measure every bite as if afraid it would be snatched away from him.

After a while, Ilya spoke.

"You're going to the doctor this week."

Shane's eyes shot up immediately.

"To check on the... thing."

The Russian made a vague gesture with his hand toward Shane's belly. Shane stared at him for a few seconds, then nodded in silence.

"Yes, sir."

And he went back to eating, a little calmer than before.

# Chapter 6

Shane spent almost the whole day with a knot in his stomach.

It wasn't from hunger this time—though he was still surprised by how full he had felt after eating in the garden with Ilya—it was something else, a mix of nerves, fear, and an anxiety he couldn't quite control.

That afternoon he was going to the doctor, and the thought had been spinning in his head since morning.

He hadn't seen one in years. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had taken him to be checked for his health and not for some other reason; for a long time, his body had simply been something others used or traded, and learning to think of it any other way felt foreign to him.

He was in the kitchen when Galina noticed his restlessness.

She was preparing something on the table, but observed him for a moment before speaking.

"You are walking like a scared mouse."

Shane stopped, a little embarrassed.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for breathing," she muttered.

Shane hesitated for a moment before voicing what was happening to him.

"I've never... been to a doctor for something like this."

Galina looked at him more intently.

"For pregnancy?"

Shane shook his head gently.

"For anything, really."

The woman let out a soft sigh, as if that answer confirmed something she already suspected.

"Well, then it is time."

Shane nodded, but the anxiety didn't go away; his hands moved nervously over the edge of the table.

Galina studied him for a moment and then made a decision.

"Come with me."

"Where?"

"To see what you're going to wear."

Shane blinked.

"What?"

The woman was already walking toward the hallway.

"You're not going to the doctor dressed as if you were picked up off the floor."

Shane hesitated, but followed her.

They walked through the quiet hallways of the mansion until they reached the wing where Ilya's rooms were located.

The silence was heavier there; it was obvious the Russian wasn't in the house at the moment.

When Galina opened the door to the walk-in closet, Shane froze.

"No... no, I can't go in there."

The woman looked at him as if he were exaggerating.

"Of course you can."

"If the master finds out..."

"I'll handle the master."

Shane swallowed hard.

"He's going to get very angry."

Galina scoffed.

"He gets angry just breathing, too."

Then she entered the closet without waiting any longer and began browsing through the hung clothes with natural ease.

The place was massive. Dark suits, dress shirts, coats—everything perfectly organized.

Shane stayed near the door, nervous.

"Really, I shouldn't..."

"Be quiet and come here."

The woman pulled a light-colored shirt from the hangers and held it up to the light.

"This might work." Then she grabbed a pair of trousers as well. "Try these on."

Shane still hesitated a few seconds before approaching. His hands trembled slightly as he took the clothes.

"They're way too big for me."

"I know," Galina replied. "That's why I'm here."

Shane changed carefully, feeling strange wearing clothes that clearly belonged to someone like Ilya. The fabric was quality, heavy, unlike anything he had worn in a long time.

When he finished, he looked down.

The shirt was huge on him.

The sleeves almost covered his hands, and the trousers were loose around his waist.

"See?" Shane whispered. "It doesn't work."

Galina observed him calmly.

"Wait."

She stepped closer and began tailoring the fit with practical movements—rolling up the sleeves, adjusting the waist with a belt she found nearby, tucking and draping the fabric so it wouldn't look so oversized on him.

Shane stayed still while she worked.

"Don't move."

"Okay..."

The woman stepped back after a moment to get a better look at him.

Shane looked up, somewhat insecure.

"Is it bad?"

Galina shook her head slowly.

"No."

She observed him for another second. The result was different from what Shane had expected; Ilya's clothes were still large, but now they fell in a way that highlighted his slender frame.

His dark hair fell messily over his forehead, and the freckles on his face stood out more in the light streaming through the window.

He looked... beautiful.

Shane looked at his hands, uncomfortable with the attention.

"I still think he's going to be angry..."

Galina let out a small huff.

"Let him be angry. A man whose diapers I used to change doesn't intimidate me." She then walked over and adjusted the shirt collar slightly. "Now you look like a person."

Shane lowered his eyes, shyly.

But deep down, for the first time in a long time, something inside him felt a little different. He felt... pretty.

•••

Late afternoon was falling when Ilya returned to the mansion.

The sound of the front door opening and his firm footsteps crossing the hall caused several men to raise their heads immediately. Ilya's presence always shifted the atmosphere of the house the moment he appeared.

Shane was in the hallway near the kitchen when he heard him arrive. He felt his stomach tighten instantly; he was still wearing Ilya's clothes, and the entire time he had been waiting, he hadn't stopped thinking about what would happen when the Russian saw him like this.

Ilya turned the corner of the hallway and caught sight of him.

He stopped dead in his tracks.

For a moment that seemed to stretch out too long, the Russian simply stood there staring at him. His eyes scanned Shane's figure without saying a word—the oversized shirt had been arranged by Galina so it didn't look untidy, and the trousers cinched with the belt made the fabric drape differently over the boy's body.

His dark hair was slightly tousled, and the freckles on his face stood out under the hallway light.

Shane immediately lowered his head, feeling the heat rise to his face.

Ilya kept staring at him for a few more seconds, as if caught off guard by something.

In an instant, the moment broke as his expression shifted, his brows furrowing.

"What the fuck is this?"

His voice returned to its harsh tone.

Shane took a small step back, nervous.

"I... I..."

Before he could explain anything, Galina appeared from the kitchen with her usual composure.

"It was my idea," she said.

Ilya looked at her with annoyance.

"He's wearing my clothes."

"Yes," she replied, unfazed.

The Russian looked ready to say something more, clearly irritated, but Galina raised her hand before he could continue and spoke to him in Russian with that firm tone that only she could use with him.

"Stop getting angry over everything, you're going to wrinkle before your time."

The silence that followed was brief, but tense. Shane stood still, expecting the situation to explode at any second.

However, Ilya merely grunted, visibly irked, and averted his gaze for a second.

When he looked back at him, his expression remained stern, but he didn't bring up the clothes again.

"Let's go. We're leaving."

The drive to the doctor was silent.

The car moved through the streets as the city lights began to flicker on. Shane sat in the back seat, staring out the window without saying a word.

He tried to stay calm, but his mind couldn't stop racing over what was about to happen.

Up front, Ilya was driving.

Every now and then he looked at him through the rearview mirror.

It wasn't obvious, but it happened often enough for Shane to notice; every time their eyes met in the reflection, Shane looked down again.

When they finally arrived at the clinic, one of the men opened the car door and Shane stepped out.

The place was quiet, brightly lit with white lights, and filled with a silence very different from that of the mansion.

A receptionist greeted them, somewhat nervous upon recognizing Ilya.

"Good afternoon..."

Ilya acknowledged her with a brief gesture.

"The appointment."

The woman nodded quickly and looked at Shane.

"You may go in."

Shane looked at Ilya for a second, seeking confirmation. The Russian gave a short nod.

"Go."

Shane walked into the examination room alone. The doctor was a middle-aged man with a gentle voice that contrasted sharply with everything Shane had experienced lately.

"Hello," the doctor said. "Come, have a seat."

Shane complied, somewhat tense.

The doctor asked a few simple questions and then prepared the ultrasound machine.

"Let's see how everything is doing."

Shane lay down carefully on the exam table. When the procedure started, he looked at the screen without understanding much of what he was seeing. It was all blurry shapes, shadows —something he couldn't quite interpret.

"There it is," the doctor said.

Shane frowned slightly.

"That?"

The doctor gave a soft smile.

"Yes, that's your baby, even if it looks like a little pea right now."

Then he adjusted something on the device, and a sound filled the room—fast, steady, small, yet unmistakable.

Shane froze completely.

"That's the heartbeat," the doctor explained. "It's beating very strong."

For a moment, the world seemed to stand still. Shane stopped trying to figure out the image on the screen and simply listened.

The sound of the heartbeat kept going, steady and strong.

"Everything looks good," the doctor continued. "The pregnancy is progressing normally."

But Shane barely heard him.

When the consultation ended and he left the office, he walked back toward the car in silence. Ilya was waiting for him outside and looked at him as soon as he approached.

Shane's eyes were glistening.

They got into the car and drove off again. For several minutes, no one said anything, until Ilya heard the first sob and glanced in the mirror.

"Stop making noise," he said in a dry tone. "You're irritating me."

Shane tried to hold it in, but he couldn't completely; tears kept streaming down his face without him being able to stop them.

Ilya frowned.

"Everything is fine," he added impatiently. "Why the fuck are you crying?"

It took Shane a few seconds to answer, his voice coming out quiet and trembling.

"I heard its heart... it's alive... inside me."

The sentence hung in the silence of the car.

Ilya didn't answer right away, but this time he didn't tell him to shut up either.

•••

The night at the mansion was much quieter than usual.

After the doctor's visit, Shane had spent the rest of the afternoon in his room, still carrying that strange feeling in his chest.

He couldn't stop thinking about the sound he had heard in the clinic; every so often, he brought a hand to his belly without even realizing it.

The door opened softly, and Galina walked in with her usual quiet step, holding something small in her hands.

"Are you awake?" she asked softly.

Shane sat up a bit in bed.

"Yes."

The woman approached and sat on the edge of the mattress. She then showed him what she was holding: a small plush frog.

It was old, clearly years had passed over it, but it was clean and well-kept, with long legs and a rather comical look.

Shane looked at it in surprise.

"What is it?"

Galina held it in her hands for a moment before handing it over.

"It belonged to Ilya when he was little," she said casually. "I kept it all these years."

Shane looked up, genuinely astonished.

"His?"

Galina nodded.

"I want you to have it, for your child."

For a second, Shane didn't know what to say. He took it carefully, as if it were fragile.

"Thank you..."

Galina observed him a moment longer, with that look of hers that seemed to understand more things than she voiced out loud. Then she stood up slowly.

"Get some rest."

When she left the room, Shane was left alone with the frog in his hands.

He looked at it for a few seconds, running his thumb over the worn fabric.

Then, almost instinctively, he lay back down in bed and rested the stuffed toy over his stomach.

"It's yours," he whispered softly, a small smile escaping him. "And with that, you already have more than I ever did."

He let out a gentle, brief, almost timid laugh.

The room was silent. Shane closed his eyes, and without intending to, his mind drifted back to the clinic, to the blurry ultrasound screen... and to the sound of the heart—that small, fast beat.

He stayed up thinking about it until exhaustion finally claimed him.

He didn't know how much time passed, but he woke up abruptly when he heard voices in the hallway—female voices.

Shane opened his eyes, still half-asleep, and lay still for a moment, listening. He sat up slowly.

For the past few days, Ilya had started allowing his bedroom door to remain open, so Shane got up carefully, walked to the doorway, and peeked out.

In the hallway, Ilya was walking up the stairs accompanied by three women. Their voices were soft, with low giggles echoing through the quiet house.

Ilya walked ahead, stern as always, but clearly leading them toward his room.

Shane watched them walk up for a moment.

Something stirred inside him—an uncomfortable feeling he hadn't expected to feel. It wasn't anger, exactly, but a strange sensation that was hard to name.

He stood there for a few more seconds, watching them disappear down the upper hallway, and then sighed.

"It's none of my business..." he murmured to himself.

He stepped away from the door and returned to bed. He picked up the plush frog again, set it on his belly, and laid down.

This time it took him a bit longer to fall back asleep, but eventually, the silence of the house and his fatigue dragged him back into slumber.

•••

The next morning, the house was much louder than usual.

Shane noticed it even before leaving his room; the voices carried from the main dining room, mixed with loud laughter and the clinking of glasses on the table.

It wasn't the usual environment of the mansion, where everything almost always operated with a quiet discipline around Ilya.

When Shane carefully walked down the stairs, the smell of coffee and hot food already filled the air.

He stepped into the kitchen and found Galina preparing breakfast as usual—calm, though her expression was slightly more tense than normal.

"Good morning," Shane said in a low voice.

"Good morning," she replied, looking at him for a second to check how he was doing.

At that moment, a boisterous laugh rang out from the dining room.

Shane turned his head involuntarily. From the open door of the kitchen, he could see part of the large dining table... and the chaos taking place there.

The three women from the previous night were sitting with Ilya, though "sitting" was quite a generous way to describe it.

One of them was practically draped over the back of Ilya's chair, playing with his hair.

Another was standing, walking barefoot around the dining room with a mug in hand.

The third was sitting right on the table, laughing.

All three were wearing barely any clothes—just underwear. The scene looked more like a party than breakfast.

Ilya sat at the head of the table, his shirt unbuttoned and the relaxed posture of someone who hadn't slept much, though he didn't seem to mind.

One of the women pressed a kiss to his neck while the other whispered something in his ear that made him let out a short laugh.

Then two of them began kissing each other, as if nobody else were watching.

Shane stood still, watching in silence.

On the table were plates of fruit, bread, open bottles, half-empty glasses... and in the middle of it all, Ilya leaning forward slightly to snort a line of cocaine straight off the tabletop.

He did it with the ease of someone who was accustomed to it, then wiped his nose with the back of his hand and took a sip of coffee.

From the kitchen, Galina observed everything with her arms crossed.

Shane stood beside her, motionless.

"He's getting worse," she finally said, her voice low but laced with clear disapproval.

Shane didn't answer immediately. He kept staring at the scene, somewhat bewildered by the intensity of it all.

In the dining room, one of the women pulled on Ilya to get him out of his chair, laughing, while another wrapped her arms around his neck. There were giggles, loud remarks, constant movement—it was complete chaos.

Shane lowered his eyes slightly.

"Is it always like this...?" he asked softly.

Galina let out a small sigh.

"No." She paused while calmly slicing fruit again. "But lately... yes, he's aimless."

Another loud laugh erupted from the dining room. One of the women pushed another onto a chair, and both began laughing as Ilya looked at them with a tired smile.

Galina shook her head slightly.

"This is going to end badly."

•••

The rest of the morning gradually quieted down.

The three women finally left around noon, saying goodbye with noisy kisses, laughter, and remarks that echoed down the hallway while one of the house guards opened the door for them.

When the main door closed behind them, the mansion returned to its usual silence—that heavy silence that always surrounded Ilya.

Shane was in one of the side hallways on the ground floor, near a window overlooking the garden.

He had gone there to get away from the noise and the lingering atmosphere in the house.

He still had that uncomfortable knot in his chest, unsure of why seeing all of that had affected him so much.

He was looking outside when he heard footsteps approaching.

Before he could react, a large hand grabbed his arm and turned him around slightly.

The Russian held him firmly, but he wasn't hurting him.

He stepped close enough for his presence to dominate the space around Shane.

Shane tensed immediately. Ilya tilted his head slightly toward him, leaning in close to his ear.

"You like watching me with whores all over me, huh?"

His voice came out low, barely a whisper, but loaded with an undeniable tone.

Shane shook his head quickly, nervous.

"No... no, sir, I didn't see anything..."

Ilya let out a quiet chuckle, as if he didn't quite believe him.

"Yeah, you like it."

His hand remained on Shane's arm, keeping him there, not letting him pull away.

A brief silence fell before Ilya spoke again.

"But I'm in a good mood today."

Shane looked up slightly, confused.

Ilya's smile appeared slowly—that smile that didn't always mean something good.

"So tonight, I'm going to let you do more than just watch me with whores."

Shane looked at him, not understanding.

The Russian observed him for a second, clearly enjoying his confusion.

Then his smile widened just a fraction.

"Tonight... you're going to be the whore."

And he let him go.

Ilya turned around without another word and began walking down the hallway as if the exchange had been completely normal.

Shane remained where he was, frozen, his heart beating faster than usual, not quite knowing what had just happened or what that was supposed to mean.

# Chapter 7

All day long, Shane had been restless.

He tried to keep busy with minor tasks—helping in the kitchen, tidying up his room, walking around the garden—but the feeling of anxiety wouldn't go away. Every time he tried to focus on something, his mind returned to the same thing: that night, he was going to be with Ilya.

The idea wasn't new to him; it had been part of his job for a long time, something he had learned to accept because he didn't have many options. Still, with Ilya, it was different. He didn't know exactly why, but it was. Perhaps because the Russian always seemed unpredictable, or because he never truly knew what to expect from him.

Several times throughout the day, he caught himself touching his belly without realizing it.

By late afternoon, he was already tired of waiting.

Night fell slowly over the mansion, and the atmosphere returned to that elegant silence that characterized the place.

The warm lights of the dining room turned on when Ilya sat down for dinner.

That night, he dined alone. The long table was set as always, with several dishes served, glasses, and food that probably no one else was going to touch.

Ilya ate unhurriedly, in silence, with the same calm, distant expression he almost always wore when he was alone.

When he finished, he set his utensils on the plate and took a last sip of wine before standing up.

He went up the stairs toward his room without saying a word to anyone.

His room was spacious, with large windows overlooking the dark garden and dim lighting that made everything look calmer than it really was. Ilya entered and closed the door behind him.

He poured himself a glass of whiskey.

The sound of the liquid pouring into the crystal filled the room's silence for a moment. He took a short sip as he walked slowly through the room, clearly relaxed after dinner.

Then he sat in the armchair opposite his bed, calmly took off his shoes, setting them aside, and unbuttoned the first few buttons of his shirt.

After a few minutes, he called for one of his men to go fetch Shane.

Shane arrived shortly after.

The walk to Ilya's room felt longer than it actually was. He felt his pulse racing slightly, though he tried to remain calm.

When the man accompanying him knocked on the door and received the order to enter, Shane took a deep breath before stepping inside.

Ilya looked up as soon as Shane crossed the threshold.

For a few seconds, he simply observed him.

"Did you eat dinner?" he asked naturally.

"Yes, sir," Shane answered, keeping his eyes downcast.

Ilya gave a single nod, as if that answer were enough.

Then he gestured toward the door with a slight tilt of his head.

"Close it."

Shane turned around and pushed the door until it was completely shut behind him. The soft sound of the latch clicking into place made the silence in the room feel even more pronounced, darker...

•••

Shane stood still, right by the closed door.

It wasn't the first time he found himself in a situation like this—in fact, these scenarios were the most common occurrence in his life—but Ilya made him nervous. Or perhaps it was the certainty of his pregnancy; he was terrified of what that man could do to his body while carrying a baby inside him.

Regardless, he knew he had no alternatives. He was in his hands, after all.

Ilya didn't seem concerned. He took a sip from his glass of whiskey and looked at him from the armchair.

There was nothing in his gaze, no trace of emotion whatsoever. He was just a man drinking whiskey, his white shirt half-unbuttoned, enjoying the view.

Finally, he set the glass aside and cracked his neck.

"Are there things you can't do in your condition?"

Shane swallowed hard, uncomfortable.

"I don't know, sir."

"I like to fuck hard, and I like to take it all the way to the end. If we start, I'm not going to stop—not even if you cry."

Shane took a deep breath and looked at the floor.

He could feel his body trembling under the gaze of a man so dark and powerful.

"Perhaps..."

Ilya raised an eyebrow and waited, but seeing that Shane didn't continue, he sighed.

"Get on the bed and strip for me. Show me what you've got."

Shane did as he was told without hesitation.

He walked over to the bed, climbed onto it, and began removing his clothes slowly, playing a bit with seduction, ending up completely naked in front of the Russian.

Ilya looked at him.

He paid attention to his spread legs, his flaccid yet pretty penis, the patch of pubic hair on his hips, the delicate curve of his abdomen, and his flat, almost hairless chest.

He approached the bed, sitting on the mattress close to Shane, unhurried, without taking his eyes off the body now offering itself solely to him.

He ran the back of his hand along Shane's legs, reaching his thighs before resting his fingers on his penis, which twitched slightly at the touch—a movement noticeable enough for Ilya, who smiled.

He continued downward, and when he touched his hole, Shane's legs closed slightly as a reflex.

Ilya looked up.

"Open your legs."

Shane did, though he could feel them shaking.

"You're going to open your legs for me every single time I say so, got it?"

Shane swallowed hard; he had heard that line far too many times to not know what would happen if he refused.

"Yes, sir."

Ilya stroked his entrance again. He wasn't rough, nor did he shove his fingers inside; he just played gently with the pad of his index finger, pressing slightly, drawing circles.

"How many men have you given this to?"

Shane closed his eyes and focused on breathing properly as Ilya added a second finger to his caresses, which were gradually becoming more invasive.

"Tell me," Ilya insisted, before leaning in and spitting directly onto his hole to slick his fingers' movements. "How many used you?"

Shane looked at him and gasped as he felt Ilya slowly slide the first finger in.

"I don't know, sir..."

Ilya seemed focused, working more of his finger inside, watching as the other's breathing deepened.

"You do know, unless you're like those whores from last night," Ilya continued, moving his finger back and forth, slowly. "Unless you've lost count of how many dicks you've taken... And personally, I think it's been a lot."

Shane shook his head as he felt a second finger enter him.

"Doesn't matter," Ilya muttered with his fingers fully inside. "I'm going to erase every trace of the ones before me."

Shane didn't know what that meant—or maybe he did, but he preferred to simply let himself be carried away. He knew it was always easier that way.

•••

Ilya kept prepping him, spitting on him occasionally to keep him lubricated right before working in a third finger.

When Shane was opened wide enough, Ilya withdrew his fingers.

He positioned himself between his legs, took off his shirt, and set it aside.

Shane looked at his body. He hadn't said it out loud, but he had been with many men before, yet none were like Ilya Rozanov. Ilya was simply... incredible.

Muscular, strong, his skin bearing marks from old wounds and scattered with moles.

Shane, who still didn't understand why his body continued to feel aroused despite everything he had been through, felt a wave of heat rise to his chest.

Ilya laid back beside him, resting his head against the headboard, and ran a hand over his own hard abdomen.

Then he brought it up to his chest and pressed one of his pectorals.

He looked at Shane, who was waiting for instructions, and gripped the back of his neck.

"Suck."

Shane had done it a few times before, though not often. Still, he didn't hesitate to adjust his position and open his mouth.

He began to suck Ilya's left nipple, closing his lips around it and drawing on it gently but firmly.

Every now and then, he let his tongue play with the nipple as it hardened, then resumed sucking without pause.

Ilya let his head fall back. He had his slave latched onto his chest while he pinched the other nipple himself, working himself up into an even deeper state of arousal.

"Enough," he said, pushing Shane's forehead back.

He unbuttoned his pants and took his dick in his hand.

It was so hard and swollen that it truly looked twice its normal size.

"See what you did to me, Shane?" he asked in a low tone that sounded deceptively innocent. "This is your fault. You did this to me, and you're going to fix it."

Shane nodded, but he wasn't sure which position Ilya wanted, so he remained still.

Ilya looked at him, his patience wearing thin far too quickly.

"Are you deaf or just an idiot? Sit on my dick right now. If I have to repeat myself, I'm just going to break you."

Shane obeyed.

He climbed on top of him, straddling him, guided Ilya's penis to align with his entrance, and began to sink down onto it—slow and measured, praying internally that Ilya would let him keep that pace.

Ilya allowed it. He simply crossed his arms behind his head and didn't take his eyes off the body now moving over his own.

•••

Shane rode him with force, holding onto the other man's chest as best he could, quickly finding a steady rhythm. He rose and fell without letting Ilya's dick slip out of him for even a second.

Ilya watched him. He could see his cheeks flushing red, how he bit his lips to keep from making too much noise, and how the shape of his own penis could almost be traced against Shane's lower belly whenever he leaned back slightly. It was a spectacle—something truly captivating to watch. The realization that this could be his private, daily show made him lose his mind.

With impressive speed, he grabbed Shane by the waist and flipped him onto his stomach on the bed.

Shane immediately got onto all fours, spreading his legs and burying his face in the pillows.

"Offer it up, whore. Come on," Ilya groaned behind him, stroking himself so as not to lose his erection.

Shane reached back with his hands, spreading his cheeks to expose his opening—so pink, wide, and raw that Ilya almost felt the urge to shove his whole hand inside.

It would be easy. Shane would most likely cry out in pain, but he could keep going until half his forearm was inside if he wanted to. After all, Shane belonged to him.

But then a thought—an irritating thought—crossed his mind.

"The thing..." he whispered more to himself.

Shane opened his eyes instantly and tensed up; he knew Ilya called the baby "the thing."

"What...?"

"Nothing. Shut up," he said before plunging back into him.

•••

Ilya stayed behind him, thrusting into him with force for long minutes.

He held him tightly by the waist with both hands, driving into him relentlessly.

He had come several times, which normally would have made him stop, but with the man currently in his bed, the opposite happened: the more he fucked him, the more he finished, the more Ilya wanted.

He grabbed Shane by the hair and forced him to look at him.

"This is the best dick you'll ever have in your life."

Shane, who was completely exhausted and enduring everything he could, let his eyes flutter shut.

Ilya let go of his hair, but shifted his hand to grip his jaw tightly.

Leaning his full weight onto Shane, he spoke close to his face.

"Say it," he demanded without breaking his rhythm. "Say my dick is the best you've ever had."

"Yo... your dick is the best I've ever had, sir," Shane said, feeling his legs tremble uncontrollably. He, too, had come several times, though he hated himself for it.

"Say how much you like getting fucked by Ilya Rozanov."

"S... so much."

"'Ilya Rozanov is the only one who can fuck me like this.'"

"I..." Shane tried. He really tried, but sheer exhaustion caught up to him.

His eyes closed, and he couldn't tell if he fell asleep or passed out, but he simply went out cold for the night.

•••

Shane slowly drifted back to consciousness.

At first, everything was confusing: the weight of the sheets, the unfamiliar scent of the room, the deep silence all around. His body felt heavy, sore, and strangely exhausted, as if he had been asleep for a long time.

Then he heard a soft voice nearby.

"Wake up slowly."

Shane snapped his eyes open.

It took him only a second to realize where he was... and fear instantly struck his chest. He sat up abruptly, too fast, looking around with wide eyes.

It was Ilya's room.

Ilya's bed.

"What...?" His voice sounded weak, nervous. "I..."

Galina was sitting on the edge of the bed with a calm expression, as if she had been expecting that exact reaction.

"Calm down," she said quietly. "Nobody is going to hurt you right now."

But Shane was still panicked.

"No... I shouldn't be here, he's going to kill me..."

"You passed out," Galina explained matter-of-factly. "He asked me to come."

That made him freeze.

The woman looked at him with a mix of firmness and patience.

"He ordered me to feed you well. For the sake of both of you, you're going to listen to him."

Shane blinked, still trying to process what was happening.

"Both of us...?"

Before he could overthink it, Galina stood up and brought over a tray resting on a nearby table.

When she placed it on the bed, Shane's eyes widened in surprise; it was a massive breakfast.

There was bread, fruit, eggs, juice, coffee, pastries—more food than he was used to seeing served for a single person.

"This is too much..." he whispered.

"The master left clear orders," Galina replied as she arranged the tray in front of him. "Eat a good breakfast, and do not move from this bed."

Shane immediately shook his head.

"No, I... I have to go back to my room."

Galina looked him dead in the eye, a gaze that left no room for argument.

"No."

Silence stretched between them for a few seconds.

Shane knew he didn't have much of a choice.

Ultimately, he lowered his gaze and picked up the fork.

He ate slowly at first, still somewhat uncomfortable, but as the minutes passed, he realized he was much hungrier than he thought.

As he ate, his mind drifted back to the previous night.

To Ilya.

To what happened afterward.

He had expected something different—some anger, a punishment, a harsh reaction for having fainted in the middle of everything. But instead... he had let him sleep, had called Galina, ordered a huge breakfast, and left him in his bed.

Shane frowned slightly as he bit into a piece of bread. That was... different. He couldn't quite make sense of it.

The day passed quietly—almost too quietly for the mansion.

Shane obeyed the order to stay in bed for several hours. Galina came in to check on him a couple of times to make sure he had eaten everything.

It wasn't until night fell that he allowed himself to get up with a bit more freedom.

He went to the bathroom, took a long, hot shower, and tried to relax; the water helped ease the tension in his body.

When he stepped out, he dried his hair and stood for a moment, looking around Ilya's room.

Taking a deep breath, he decided it was best to return to his own quarters.

He walked to the door, opened it, and stepped into the hallway.

Right at that moment, Ilya appeared at the end of the corridor.

The Russian spotted him immediately, stopped, and looked at him.

"What are you doing out of bed?"

His voice was calm, yet firm.

Shane froze in his tracks.

"I was... going to my room..."

Ilya held his gaze for a few seconds.

Then he spoke as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Get back in bed."

Shane hesitated for just a second.

"...Yes, sir."

He returned to the room without further argument.

He lay down again, this time on top of the covers, feeling somewhat awkward, unsure of what to do with his hands or where to look.

Ilya didn't enter right away; quite some time passed before the door opened again.

When he finally came in, the room was almost pitch black.

Shane was awake. He didn't say anything, but he felt it when Ilya walked in—the cold air that followed him and the soft sound of his footsteps on the floor.

Ilya moved silently through the room and then settled onto the other side of the bed, without turning on any lights.

For a moment, neither of them spoke; the darkness made everything feel even stranger.

Finally, Shane gathered a bit of courage.

"Thank you..." he said softly. "For not getting angry, sir."

Ilya sighed in the dark.

"I am many things," he answered after a moment, "but not a rapist."

Shane nodded in silence, though he knew Ilya couldn't see him.

"Thank you for the breakfast."

"Hm."

Silence settled over the room once more.

Shane thought the conversation was over, but he still wanted to say it.

"Tomorrow I'll go back to..."

"Let me sleep."

The response was curt, exhausted, and Shane closed his mouth immediately.

Shane knew he was probably talking too much, that it wasn't necessary to say anything else... but something inside him made him think that maybe Ilya expected to hear it. That maybe he wanted to hear it. So, even though he knew it was a bit manipulative, he said it anyway—because Ilya had asked him to earlier, and he hadn't done it then.

"And... yes, sir... Ilya Rozanov is the only one who can fuck me like this."

After saying it, Shane closed his eyes, feeling a strange, subtle satisfaction, as if he had fulfilled an obligation expected of him. It was simply a "duty," but in the dark, Ilya opened his eyes and couldn't close them again for a long time.

# Chapter 8

The morning started early for Ilya.

Unlike other days, he didn't linger at the house—he barely had time for a coffee, checked a few messages, and left accompanied by two of his closest men. The air was cold, and the city was still waking up as the black car pulled away from the mansion. From the outside, no one could have guessed what Ilya’s line of work truly entailed, but today was going to be a heavy day.

Their first stop was an old warehouse in the industrial zone—a large, half-empty shed where the sound of their footsteps echoed against the corrugated metal walls. One of Ilya’s men already had someone waiting. The man was in his fifties, nervous, and sweating despite the morning chill.

When Ilya entered the warehouse, total silence fell immediately. He walked toward him slowly, unhurriedly. He had a way of moving that made people grow tenser with every step he took.

"I gave you time," he said finally, his voice calm.

The man swallowed hard.

"Ilya… I… I’m getting the money together."

Ilya looked at him, expressionless.

"You’ve been getting the money together for three weeks."

"But I’m going to have it, I swear."

One of Ilya’s men let out a quiet chuckle behind them. Ilya raised his hand just slightly, and silence returned at once.

"They always say the same thing," he said, sounding almost bored. "They always think they have a little more time."

He took another step closer. The man instinctively began to back away, but one of the guards grabbed him firmly by the shoulder.

"Listen to me," the debtor said, growing increasingly frantic. "I have a family… I…"

Ilya tilted his head slightly, observing him.

"I have things to protect, too." He then glanced at one of his men. "Hold him."

The man pinned the debtor's hand to the table, and Ilya sliced off two of his fingers. The man screamed in desperation as blood gushed onto the surface.

Ilya dropped what he was holding onto the table and looked at him.

"Now you'll find the money," he said calmly. "Because next time, I'm cutting off a lot more."

The man was pale, breathing rapidly, and trembling uncontrollably.

"Yes… yes, I'll get it."

Ilya stared at him for a few seconds longer. Then he turned around and began walking toward the warehouse exit.

"Three days," he added before leaving.

The second matter of the day was different, but no less tense.

This time, it was a restaurant closed to the public, where one of Ilya's business associates had been dodging meetings for weeks. When Ilya walked in, the place was empty except for the man waiting for him at a table in the back—a young, well-dressed guy, but with the look of someone who knew he was in deep trouble.

"You made it," the guy said, trying to sound composed.

Ilya sat down across from him without replying. For a few seconds, neither of them spoke. The man sighed.

"Listen… this isn't what it looks like."

Ilya rested his arms on the table.

"Then explain to me what it looks like."

Silence fell over the table once again.

"I… I moved part of the money," the man finally admitted. "But I was going to put it back."

Ilya stared at him intently.

"People always think they can touch things that don't belong to them."

The man tried to keep his composure, but his nerves were obvious.

"It was a mistake..."

Ilya studied him for a few more seconds. Then he stood up from the table.

"No," he said calmly. "It was a decision. You made yours, and I'm making mine."

Without another word, he signaled his men to beat him. The two men grabbed the young associate and thrash him until he was left unconscious on the floor.

•••

Night had already fallen by the time they arrived at a house in a quiet residential neighborhood. The lights were on inside, and from the outside, it looked like a normal family home. That was precisely what bothered some of the newer men working for Ilya—they knew that whatever was about to happen in there was going to be anything but normal.

The man they were looking for answered the door, and as soon as he saw Ilya, his face drained of color.

"No…" he whispered. "No, please…"

Behind him in the living room was his wife—a woman who clearly had no idea what was going on.

"What's happening?" she asked from inside.

Ilya stepped in without rushing. His men closed the door behind them.

"I gave you chances," Ilya said, looking directly at the man.

"I'm trying to pay!" the man pleaded desperately. "I just need more time!"

Ilya took a few steps into the house, looking around as if evaluating the place.

"The problem," he said, "is that you don't understand how time works."

The woman began to realize that something was terribly wrong.

"Who are you people?" she asked, her voice tight with panic.

The man was on the verge of a full breakdown.

"Please… no… not in front of her…"

"Precisely," Ilya replied.

The silence that followed was suffocating.

Ilya raised his gun. The man dropped to his knees, crying and perhaps praying as he waited for the shot. The shot didn't take long to come... but it wasn't meant for him. Ilya blew his wife's head off, and she dropped dead instantly.

By the time they walked out of the house, it was pitch black outside. One of his men glanced at Ilya sideways.

"Are we heading back?"

Ilya adjusted his suit jacket calmly.

"Yes."

The car started up. It had been a long day, and it wasn't quite over yet.

•••

The day had left his body heavy with tension—it showed in the way he walked, the stiffness in his shoulders, and the cold gaze with which he crossed the hall without stopping to talk to anyone.

Some of the men standing there automatically stepped aside when they saw him pass. He went up the stairs without saying a word.

Once in the second-floor hallway, he paused briefly and looked at one of the guards.

"Send for Katya."

The guard nodded immediately.

"Right away, boss."

Meanwhile, Ilya walked into his bedroom. The room was in semi-darkness, lit only by soft lamps near the bed and the dim reflection of the night garden through the large windows. He took off his suit jacket with a sharp movement and tossed it onto a chair. Then he poured himself a glass of whiskey without even sitting down. He took a long swallow, as if trying to loosen something coiled tight inside him.

Yet, the tension remained.

A few minutes later, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Ilya said, his voice barely raised.

The door opened, and Katya walked in with the easy confidence of women who worked for him often. She was tall, wearing a short dress that left little to the imagination, and carrying a smile that was clearly meant to be seductive.

"You called for me," she said, approaching slowly.

Ilya looked at her from where he stood, glass in hand.

"Close the door."

Katya obeyed and turned back toward him, unhurried. She leaned against the edge of the table where the whiskey sat, leaning in slightly to look at him up close.

"You look tense," she murmured. "Had a rough day?"

Ilya didn't answer right away. She ran a hand slowly down his chest, trying to entice him.

"We can fix that."

Her tone was playful, provocative. She moved closer, brushing her body against his and kissing him near his jawline.

"You always like it when I come over," she whispered.

But something wasn't working. Ilya noticed it immediately, and the frustration ignited a spark of anger in him. Katya kept trying, swaying against him, dropping her voice, kissing him again.

"What's wrong?" she asked with a soft laugh. "You're distracted tonight."

Ilya clenched his jaw. His inability to get an erection wasn't common, and whenever it happened, it infuriated him.

"Shut up."

She didn't take him seriously at first.

"Come on…" she urged, placing her hands on his waist. "Just relax a little."

However, Ilya's silence began to grow dangerously heavy. The woman looked at him more closely now, registering the sudden shift in his demeanor.

"What's going on with you?"

Ilya set his whiskey glass down on the table with a hard thud.

"Nothing is working today," he muttered, more to himself than to her.

Katya tried to keep her smile intact.

"It's fine, sometimes—"

She didn't get to finish the sentence. A sharp slap sent her face snapping to the side from the sheer force of the blow. The crack echoed through the silent room.

For a second, nobody spoke. Katya brought a hand to her cheek, more shocked than anything else.

"Are you crazy?" she snapped, her voice thick with anger.

Ilya was already walking toward the door.

"Get out."

The word came out ice-cold, devoid of emotion.

"What?"

Ilya yanked the bedroom door open.

"I said get out."

The menace in his voice left no doubt that it wasn't a suggestion. Katya glared at him for a few seconds longer, clearly furious, but smart enough not to push her luck any further.

When the door shut again, the room fell back into silence. Ilya stood motionless in the middle of the room for a moment, breathing slowly, the irritation still burning beneath his skin.

•••

Once Katya was gone, quiet returned to the room.

Ilya remained standing in the exact same spot for a moment, staring at the closed door. The day's lingering tension was still trapped in his body, as if he couldn't shake it off. He ran a hand over his face, then walked slowly to the table to pour himself a little more whiskey.

He drank without rushing. The alcohol burned his throat, but it did little to improve his mood.

For a while, he stood there, gazing out at the dark garden through the window. The house was quiet at this hour; almost everyone had already gone to sleep. At any other time, he would have tried to distract himself differently, but tonight his mind kept circling back to the same person: Shane.

He let out an annoyed huff, as if the very thought bothered him. He knew it was late, and the boy was probably already asleep, but that didn't matter much to him.

He placed the glass on the table and left his room. The hallway was dimly lit as he walked up to the door of Shane's room. He didn't knock—he simply opened it.

The room was quiet. Shane was asleep in bed, lying on his side with the blankets slightly tangled around him. His breathing was slow and deep, seemingly completely unaware that anyone had entered.

Ilya closed the door behind him without making a sound and approached slowly.

First, he noticed something on the bed: the stuffed frog. He paused for a second, looking down at it. He recognized it instantly—it was impossible not to.

His expression shifted slightly. He picked it up with one hand, lifting it off the mattress; the worn fabric felt strangely familiar against his fingers. He stared at it for a few more seconds, his brow furrowing slightly. Seeing that frog there made him feel uncomfortable—it wasn't something he liked looking at, as if someone had dragged something out from deep in his past and left it right in the middle of his present.

He held it for a moment longer before placing it back down on the bed, right where it had been. He looked around, noticing that all of Shane's clothes were there in an open wardrobe, and it really wasn't much. He also noticed that Shane didn't have anything for the baby yet.

That was when his gaze drifted toward the nightstand, and there he saw the paper—the ultrasound.

Ilya leaned down slightly to pick it up. The paper crinkled softly as he raised it to the light. He looked at the image in silence, trying to make sense of what he was seeing, but the shapes didn't reveal much to him.

He frowned, studying it with closer attention, as if expecting it to suddenly make sense. But no—all he saw were smudges, shadows, something that clearly meant a great deal to others... but was still alien to him.

He stared at it for a few seconds more, then returned it to the exact spot where he had found it, next to the frog.

Finally, he looked back at Shane, who was still fast asleep, having not moved an inch. Ilya said nothing. He turned around and left the room in silence, closing the door gently behind him so as not to wake him up.

•••

The next morning, the house was quiet again. Sunlight filtered through the dining room windows, resting on the long table where Ilya was already seated. Breakfast was served as usual: strong coffee, bread, fruit, and a few hot dishes that one of the staff members had just set down.

This time, however, two places were set.

Shane appeared at the dining room doorway a few minutes later, looking somewhat hesitant —he hadn't expected to be summoned. When he saw Ilya sitting there waiting for him, he froze for a second before approaching.

Ilya looked up at him.

"Sit."

Shane obeyed without argument. He took his seat across the table rather stiffly, as if unsure of how to act in this setting. One of the men in the house placed another cup of coffee in front of him and quietly withdrew.

For several minutes, neither of them spoke. The only sounds were the quiet clinking of cutlery, coffee being poured, and the faint shifting of chairs. Shane began to eat because he knew Ilya was watching him, even if he didn't keep his head raised the whole time.

The silence grew heavy.

Until Ilya spoke.

"The frog."

Shane looked up instantly.

"It's mine," Ilya said, his tone calm yet firm.

Shane felt a small knot tighten in his stomach.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'll give it back..."

Ilya rested his fork against the plate and stared at him for a few seconds.

"I don't want it."

Shane blinked, confused.

"But don't ever take something of mine again."

Shane shook his head quickly, nervous.

"Sir, I didn't..."

Ilya cut him off before he could finish.

"Finish up," he said. His voice wasn't loud, but it left no room for debate. "We're going out."

Shane sat still for a few seconds, fork in hand. He didn't ask where—he knew there was little point in doing so.

Ilya was already standing up from the table. He picked up his coffee, drained it in one gulp, and straightened his shirt slightly before walking toward the dining room exit.

He offered no further explanation.

Shane remained seated for a moment, staring at the plate in front of him. Then he resumed eating, a little faster now, feeling a growing knot of anxiety tightening in his chest. He had no idea what was waiting for him today, and that made him deeply uneasy.

# Chapter 9

The car pulled to a stop in front of a large building with spotless glass windows and soft lights illuminating the interior even in broad daylight. It was one of those shops where everything looked expensive just from the outside. Shane noticed it as soon as they stepped out of the car; he looked at the place, then at Ilya, and then back at the shop again.

His first instinct was to refuse.

"Sir… I don't think this is necessary."

Ilya didn't even look at him as he adjusted his jacket and began walking toward the entrance.

"Get out."

Shane hesitated for another second, but ended up obeying.
He walked behind him with that uncomfortable feeling in his chest that hadn't quite left since they departed the house. He had no idea what they were doing there.

Inside, the place was quiet, elegant, with low music playing and employees who seemed to recognize them instantly. A woman approached with a professional smile.

"Good morning."

Ilya spoke first.

"He needs clothes."

The woman looked at Shane attentively, assessing him quickly.

"Of course, we can show him a few options."

Shane shook his head immediately.

"No, there's no need, I have..."

Ilya turned his head toward him, and that single look was enough for Shane to stop talking.

"Choose," the Russian said.

Shane swallowed hard.

"Sir, really, no..."

"Choose. You're pushing my patience."

His tone was no louder, but it was crystal clear.

The employee began bringing clothes from various racks and placing them on a nearby couch.

Shirts, trousers, something more comfortable, soft fabrics, neutral colors that seemed tailored for someone like Shane.
Shane stared at it all as if it were too much.

"It's too much..."

Ilya was leaning against a nearby table, watching him.

"Just choose."

Shane picked up one of the shirts carefully.

"I don't know which..."

"Try them all on."

The woman guided him toward the fitting rooms while Ilya stayed outside, browsing through a few other designs with a calmness that stood in sharp contrast to Shane's evident nervousness.

Several minutes passed like this.
Shane would come out wearing a different shirt, looking uncomfortable, trying to say it wasn't necessary, and going back inside whenever Ilya made a gesture for him to try another.

At one point, he stepped out in a light-colored shirt that fitted well across his shoulders and draped softly over his body.
Ilya looked at him a few seconds longer than usual.

"That one."

Shane lowered his gaze.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. We'll take every color in that style."

After selecting several more garments, just when Shane thought they were finally done, Ilya spoke again.

"Something's missing."

Shane raised his head, confused.

"What thing?"

Ilya was already walking toward another section of the store.

"For the baby."

Shane stood frozen for a second.

"Sir… it's too early."

Ilya didn't stop.

"Doesn't matter."

The baby section was even quieter—tiny clothes, blankets, soft items in pale colors.

Shane felt completely out of place there.

"There's no need to buy anything now," he tried to say again.

Ilya picked up a small piece of clothing from the shelf and looked at it.

"Pick something."

Shane shook his head.

"I don't know how to do this."

Ilya looked at him with limited patience.

"It's small clothing. It's not complicated."

Shane let out a small, nervous laugh.

"Yeah, but..."

He stared at the items for a few seconds. There was something surreal about being there with Ilya, looking at clothes for someone who hadn't even been born yet.

Finally, he picked up a small, soft blanket between his hands.

"This… maybe."

Ilya observed it for a moment.

"It's fine."

Shane held it carefully, almost surprised at himself for having chosen something.

The rest of the shopping continued a bit longer, with Shane increasingly unable to argue and more resigned to the fact that Ilya was going to keep insisting until they left with something.

When they finally stepped out of the shop, the bags were carried by one of the men accompanying them.

Shane walked beside Ilya, still feeling that knot of nerves in his chest.

"Sir…" he said finally.

Ilya barely looked at him.

"What do you want?"

Shane hesitated for a moment before speaking.

"You didn't have to do all this for us..."

Ilya kept walking without answering, because deep down he knew that was true—and it made no sense.

•••

The days began to shift in ways Shane hadn't expected.

It wasn't sudden; nobody announced it and there was no clear conversation about it. It simply started happening, little by little, almost without him realizing it.

At first, it was simple: Ilya started calling him over to eat with him.

The first time it happened, Shane thought he had misheard. One of the men in the house came to get him, saying the boss was waiting for him in the dining room.
Shane arrived cautiously, convinced it had to be about something else, but Ilya was already seated at the table, reviewing some documents while drinking coffee.

"Sit down," he told him without raising his eyes much.

From that day on, it became a pattern.

Silent lunches, quiet dinners where Ilya sometimes spoke on the phone or discussed business with someone while Shane ate across from him. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it was no longer hostile like before. Ilya remained the same in many ways—cold, direct, sometimes harsh in the way he spoke or gave orders—but there was something different. Shane noticed it in little details that no one else seemed to comment on. Whenever the staff brought out food, Ilya always motioned for Shane's plate to be served first.
If Shane took too long to eat or left something on his plate, Ilya would glare at him with that familiar stern expression.

"Eat all of it," he would say.

And Shane would end up obeying.

He also started taking him to his medical appointments without debating it much. He didn't ask if Shane wanted to go or if he was comfortable with it; he simply included him.

"We're leaving," he would tell him. "You have an appointment."

They barely spoke in the car. Ilya drove or checked his phone while Shane stared out the window with his hands over his stomach. But when they arrived at the clinic, Ilya always waited.

He didn't go inside with him, but he didn't leave either. He just stayed there, and that was something Shane didn't know how to interpret.

One day, while driving back from one of those checkups, Shane finally asked in a low voice:

"Why do you always come?"

Ilya took a few seconds to answer.

"I do whatever I want."

He didn't elaborate beyond that, yet somehow, the answer kept turning over in Shane's mind the entire way back.

•••

As the weeks went by, the household routine began settling around them in a way no one mentioned aloud, but everyone seemed to notice.

Shane started spending more time in the same spaces as Ilya—in the dining room, in the garden when the Russian went out to catch some fresh air after work, even sometimes in the living room while Ilya discussed business with his men. He didn't participate in those conversations, of course, but he was there, and no one questioned it.

At night, things changed too.

At first, Shane would return to his own room after being with Ilya. It was what he was used to, what he had always done with other men: once they finished having sex, he would get dressed and leave.

But with Ilya, something different started happening. One night, they simply fell asleep. Shane had stayed lying down, too exhausted to get up right away, and Ilya said nothing. He just turned off the light, and the silence of the room enveloped them.

The next morning, Shane woke up with a start when he realized where he was. He expected Ilya to get angry, but he didn't.

"Stop moving," the Russian grumbled half-asleep. "It's still early."

From then on, it happened more and more frequently. They didn't always talk afterward; many nights the room remained quiet, barely illuminated by the faint light filtering in from outside. Ilya moved little, but sometimes Shane would sense his presence close by—the weight of his arm, the warmth of his body when the night grew colder. And even though he was still the same dangerous man everyone knew, Shane began to notice something no one else seemed to fully see: Ilya was taking care of him, in his own way, without ever saying it out loud.

•••

That night, the house was too quiet.
Shane had been tossing and turning in bed for hours. He shifted to one side, then the other, adjusted his pillow, pulled up the covers, threw them off… but sleep just wouldn't come.

He had tried to convince himself it was normal. Ilya had left early and hadn't returned yet, which wasn't unusual for him—many nights he worked late or didn't come back until dawn.

Still, tonight felt different. Shane sighed and stared at the ceiling in the dark, finally realizing what was bothering him: he missed sleeping in Ilya's bed.

The thought made him uncomfortable, and he frowned, annoyed with himself. He didn't want to admit it, not even in his own head, but it was undeniable. Over the last few months, he had grown accustomed to the quiet of that room, the warmth on the other side of the mattress, even Ilya's heavy presence nearby. Now, he couldn't fall asleep without it.

"How ridiculous…" he muttered softly to himself.

He turned over once more, lingering like that for a long time, until he finally heard something down the hall. Footsteps, followed by the sound of a door closing further away: Ilya was back.

Shane froze for a few seconds, listening.
His heart began to beat a little faster, despite his best efforts.

He thought about ignoring it, about trying to sleep once and for all and forgetting the whole thing.
But he couldn't. He sat up in bed and stared at his bedroom door for a long moment, hesitating.
The idea of going up to Ilya's room felt insane, but staying there feeling like this didn't appeal to him either.

Finally, he sighed and got out of bed.

The hallway was dark and silent as he stepped out. He walked slowly, almost as if afraid someone might stop him, even though there was no one around.

When he reached the door to Ilya's room, he hesitated again before knocking softly.

"Come in," came the voice from inside.

Shane opened the door.
Ilya was in the room, having just arrived. He had taken off his jacket and was loosening his shirt as he walked toward a table with an open bottle. He looked up when he saw who it was.

"What's wrong?"

Shane stayed near the door, feeling somewhat awkward.

"I…," he hesitated for a second. "I wanted to know if you needed my… services."

The word came out with a certain shyness. Ilya looked at him for a few seconds.

"No. I'm tired tonight."

The answer was simple, and Shane nodded, but he didn't leave.
Ilya narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Then go to sleep..."

Shane looked down at the floor, clearly nervous.

"Yes… it's just that…"

Ilya waited.
The silence stretched for a moment while Shane struggled to find the words.

"I couldn't sleep," he admitted finally.

"Not my problem."

Shane gave a small nod, accepting that, but still didn't move.

Ilya observed him with impatience.

"What do you want?"

Shane took a deep breath before saying it.

"Sir… can I sleep with you?"

Ilya stared at him for a few seconds, as if weighing the request.

"For what? I don't want to fuck tonight, I already told you."

Shane gave a small shrug.

"I don't know…" he admitted, somewhat embarrassed. "Just… sleep."

Ilya let out an annoyed huff.

"Fine. But stop talking and don't move around too much. I'm tired tonight."

It took Shane a second to react, surprised that he had agreed.

"Yes, sir."

He approached the bed carefully and lay down on his usual side, trying not to make too much noise or move around.

Ilya turned off the light shortly after, and the room fell silent once again.

•••

The next morning, daylight was already streaming through the large windows when Shane walked out of the bathroom.
He was drying his hands with a towel when he raised his head and saw that Ilya was already awake, sitting on the bed.

The Russian looked at him for a few seconds.
His gaze naturally drifted down toward Shane's body, stopping at his belly.

It was noticeable now—his stomach was rounder than before, visible even beneath the lightweight fabric of the t-shirt he was wearing.

Ilya frowned slightly.

"It grew all of a sudden."

Shane blushed immediately, lowering his eyes toward his own belly and running a hand over the fabric with a touch of shyness.

"Yeah…" he said softly. "You can tell more now."

A quiet moment settled over the room.
Shane kept looking down at his bump, still a little embarrassed… but also with the faintest smile he couldn't entirely hide, and Ilya, though he wouldn't admit it to himself, didn't take his eyes off that smile for quite a few seconds.

•••

The kitchen was filled with the smell of chocolate and melted butter.

Shane was sitting on the table, gently swinging one leg while distractedly licking a spoon covered in chocolate.

At five months pregnant, his bump was already impossible to hide: round, well-defined under the loose fabric of the white t-shirt he was wearing.
The denim maternity overalls hung loosely around his torso but carefully hugged the curve of his belly.

He looked comfortable like that, almost domestic—something that a few months ago would have been unthinkable in that house.

Galina moved around the kitchen with the ease of someone who knew every corner of the place.
She had flour on her hands and was focused on the cake she was preparing on the counter, occasionally looking over at Shane, as if verifying his presence there had become natural now.

"Don't eat it all before I finish," she told him with a light smile, without looking directly at him.

Shane licked the spoon again, exaggerating the gesture slightly like a child caught stealing sweets.

"No promises."

Galina let out a quiet laugh.
Between them, a sense of trust had slowly formed, almost without either of them realizing it. They spent many hours together in the kitchen or around the house while Ilya was away, and over time Shane had begun to talk more, to relax.

"I don't remember the last time I baked a cake for him," Galina remarked as she poured the batter into a mold. "Ilya doesn't celebrate his birthdays."

Shane tilted his head slightly.

"Never?"

"He never liked those things."

A quiet moment settled while Galina adjusted the pan.

"But this one is different," she added afterward. "Thirty… it's an important number."

Shane looked at the cake with genuine interest.

"He's going to love this."

He said it with a soft, sincere smile, as if he could genuinely imagine Ilya reacting to it.

Galina looked up at him and stared a moment longer than necessary.
Shane was glowing; pregnancy had transformed his expression in a strange, warm way. There was a sparkle in his eyes that hadn't been there before, and his hand rested almost unconsciously on his bump while he kept playing with the spoon.

Galina let out a faint sigh.

"Shane."

He looked up right away, still smiling.

"Yes?"

Galina hesitated.

"Ilya isn't…"

She stopped mid-sentence, her hands freezing on the counter.
For a second, it seemed like she wouldn't continue, but finally, she spoke again, more slowly.

"He isn't a good man."

Shane didn't answer right away. He just looked at her.
Galina lowered her eyes slightly, as if it pained her to say it.

"He was so sweet when he was a boy…" she murmured. "And good. He had a huge heart."
She swallowed before continuing. "But he became corrupted."

The word hung suspended in the kitchen air.
Shane set the spoon down gently on the table.

"Gali…"

"I wouldn't want you getting so close to him," she finished.

Shane smiled a little more, though not mockingly—rather like someone who knows that what they're being told has already arrived far too late.

"Gali…" he repeated softly. "I sleep with him every night, I eat with him, I'm… like his pet that he takes everywhere." He gave a slight shrug. "I'm already close to him."

Galina shook her head immediately.

"I don't mean that." She leaned slightly against the counter, looking at him sternly. "I mean I don't want you to… fall in love or anything like that."

Shane's smile faded.
It didn't disappear completely, but it shifted.
He lowered his eyes to his bump, and for a moment his fingers moved gently over the denim fabric, as if searching for a bit of comfort there.

"No," he said finally, in a low voice. "Of course not."

Galina observed him for a few more seconds, trying to read his expression.
Shane picked up the chocolate spoon again, though this time he didn't seem as distracted as before.
Deep down, very deep down, he knew that perhaps… his feelings for Ilya had already begun to take root just a little, and that was something he wasn't ready to say out loud yet.

•••

The house was quiet when Shane walked down the hallway carefully, holding the cake with both hands.
The tray was a bit heavy, and he tried not to tilt it as he moved toward Ilya's office.

The door was ajar, and the light from inside illuminated the wooden floor.
Shane took a deep breath before knocking softly with his knuckle.

"Come in."

Shane stepped inside.

Ilya was sitting behind his desk, with several documents and a glass of whisky to one side.

He raised his eyes as soon as Shane appeared, and his gaze shifted first to the cake, then to Shane.

The round belly was obvious even under the denim overalls and the loose white t-shirt. Shane had started moving with extra care lately, but he no longer carried that constant tension from before when he was near Ilya; there was something different between them now.

Shane set the cake down carefully on the desk.

"Galina and I made it for you."

Ilya frowned immediately, as if annoyed by it.

"What is this?"

Shane smiled a little, sincerely.

"Happy birthday, sir."

The Russian let out a low huff, clearly irritated.

"I don't celebrate birthdays."

"I know," Shane said calmly. "But we made it for you anyway."

The Russian stared at him for a long moment, with that permanent scowl on his face.

"Wasting time on stupid things."

Even so, he picked up the knife Shane had brought along and cut a slice.
Shane watched him with quiet satisfaction.
Ilya took a bite, said nothing for a few seconds, then cut another piece.

"Sit down," he ordered, pointing to a chair.

Shane obeyed and settled in carefully. Ilya pushed the plate toward him.

"Eat."

"Thank you, sir."

They ended up eating together in silence for a while. The mood was strange, but not uncomfortable.
Ilya looked up every now and then to glance at him, and finally spoke.

"You're going to burst."

Shane looked up from his plate.

"What?"

"You're fat."

Shane sighed softly.

"I'm pregnant."

Ilya made an indifferent gesture.

"Honestly, I don't know why I allow this. It's useless to me."

Shane looked down at his plate for a second, but didn't reply. Then, suddenly, he remembered something.
His eyes widened slightly.

"Oh, sir…"

He stood up carefully.
Ilya looked at him, frowning.

"What?"

Shane blushed slightly.

"I… now… I think I can."

Ilya didn't understand what he meant. He watched him with a mix of suspicion and curiosity until Shane unfastened one of the straps of his overalls and lifted his t-shirt a bit.

The motion made Ilya freeze. Shane's chest was a little more swollen—something the pregnancy had gradually changed in his body.

Shane held one breast with his hand, somewhat shyly.

"What are you doing?" Ilya asked, though he couldn't tear his eyes away.

"The other night, in bed, you said… you wanted to try it," Shane explained, somewhat embarrassed. "But I didn't have any yet… though today I felt damp, and…"

Carefully, he squeezed his nipple slightly with his fingers.
For a second, nothing happened, and then, a tiny drop of milk appeared and trickled down.

The silence in the room grew thicker.
Ilya stared intently at him, his expression shifting in a subtle but clear way, and he leaned back in his chair.

"Fuck…" he muttered, almost to himself.

He didn't take his eyes off what he had just seen.

Shane looked at him with a small smile he couldn't hide.
There was a hint of pride in his expression, as if he had just discovered a strange new ability of his own body.

Ilya held his gaze for a few seconds, then lowered his eyes to the glass of whisky in his hand.
He seemed to think quickly, then held out the glass toward him.

"Express whatever you can."

Shane blinked, surprised.

"In there?"

"Yes."

There was a moment of hesitation. Shane looked at his own chest, then at the glass.
He knew that milk was meant for the baby.
He also vaguely remembered a few things told to him at the clinic about not overstimulating too early.

But he knew something else, too: he wanted to please Ilya, and lately, almost without realizing it, doing so had begun to come naturally.

He took the glass carefully.
The amber liquid shifted slightly inside the crystal as he held it.

Shane took a deep breath, a bit nervous, and adjusted his lifted t-shirt again. His fingers found his nipple once more, this time with more intention, trying to repeat what he had done before.

At first, nothing happened. Ilya said nothing, but his eyes were fixed on every movement.

Shane squeezed again, with more patience, and then a small squirt came out, landing into the whisky with a soft, barely perceptible sound.

The color of the drink shifted slightly, turning a bit lighter as it slowly blended.

Shane let out a quiet sigh, somewhat embarrassed but also satisfied to have accomplished it.

He tried once more, but almost nothing else came out.

"I think that's all," he said finally, holding the glass out to him.

Ilya took the glass without taking his eyes off him. He swirled it slowly, watching the liquid blend inside.
There was something strange in his expression—it wasn't quite amusement, nor anger; it was something else, something darker… and clearly turn-on.

He swirled the glass once more before bringing it to his lips, tasted it, remained silent for a few seconds, and then finished the drink.

•••

A short while later, the room was in dim light.
Outside, the house was silent, but inside the bedroom, the air felt charged.

Ilya was clearly aroused since what had happened in the office.
He had downed another glass of whisky and now seemed to possess a nervous, almost aggressive energy, pacing around the room as if unable to stay still.

Shane was sitting on the bed when he approached.
Ilya looked at him for a second, and without saying much else, began tugging at his clothes with his usual roughness, his hands firm and impatient, as if needing an outlet.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard tonight…" he growled in a low, raspy voice, completely consumed by lust.

Shane barely had time to react before he was laid back against the mattress, with Ilya leaning over him, stripping his clothes off with quick movements.
The denim of the overalls and the t-shirt were pushed aside as Ilya positioned himself over him, breathing heavily, clearly desperate to have him.

But just as he was completely focused on him, he felt a sudden thud against his abdomen.

Ilya froze dead in his tracks.

"What the fuck was that?" he yelled, pulling back sharply as if he'd been attacked.

Shane blinked… and then let out a low, inevitable laugh.

"The baby kicking."

Ilya stared at him with a very strange mix of shock and horror.

"What do you mean, kicking?"

Shane gave a slight shrug as he adjusted his half-removed clothes.

"It just… moves."

Ilya ran both hands through his hair, completely bewildered.
He took a step back as if needing distance to process it.

Shane observed him with a smile he couldn't quite contain.

"I can turn on my side so you don't feel it…"

Ilya looked at him with an expression of utter disgust, almost offended by the suggestion.

"My hard-on is gone, Shane," he said flatly. "A fucking baby just kicked me."

Shane laughed again, a bit harder this time. The situation was so absurd he couldn't help it; seeing Ilya Rozanov, who intimidated half the world, completely unnerved by a kick from inside a bump… had something almost endearing about it.

But then it happened again—the baby moved once more, and this time Ilya saw it. The skin of Shane's belly shifted slightly, a soft but unmistakable ripple under the dim light.
Ilya stared at it, transfixed.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me…" he muttered.

Shane looked down as well, gently stroking his bump.

Ilya took a small step closer, still wearing that expression of utter disbelief.

"I… don't like that at all."

The baby moved again.

Ilya scowled and spoke up sharply, pointing at the belly as if negotiating with an actual person inside.

"You win. I'm not fucking your dad tonight and I'm never drinking your milk again, just stop doing that."

The silence that followed was surreal, because almost immediately… the movement stopped. Shane froze completely, Ilya did too, and they both looked at each other.

Ilya finally spoke, still staring at the belly.

"That was the creepiest thing I've ever seen in my life…" he said slowly. "And I've seen a lot of creepy things in my life."

Shane smiled softly, running his hand over his bump again with a affectionate touch.

"Sometimes he calms down when he hears voices."

Ilya looked at the belly again, still processing the whole thing, clearly at a loss for what to do with that piece of information.
Shane, on the other hand, was looking at him, thinking that perhaps this intimidating, violent man could also be charming—even without knowing it.

# Chapter 10

The room was silent when Ilya opened his eyes.

The morning light filtered through the curtains, leaving the bedroom in a soft calm.

It took him a moment to orient himself, still heavy with sleep, until his gaze landed on Shane.

Shane was sleeping on his side, but facing him. During the night he had moved closer without realizing it, and now the entire curve of his body was right in front of Ilya. The t-shirt he was wearing had ridden up slightly while he slept, exposing his belly, and now his rounded stomach pointed directly at him.

Ilya knit his brow slightly.

He still didn't entirely like the idea of a baby being in there; it was a thought he found uncomfortable, something that didn't quite fit with his way of seeing the world.

Even so, he didn't look away. He stayed there, watching the gentle movement of Shane's breathing—how his chest and belly rose and fell slowly. There was something strange about such a peaceful scene, so different from what usually filled his life.

Then he saw it: a faint flutter beneath the skin.

Ilya narrowed his eyes a little, concentrating, and something moved again, clearer this time—a small pressure from the inside that slightly deformed the surface of the belly.

His hand moved across the sheet almost without thinking. He brought it slowly toward Shane's stomach and held it a few inches away.

He didn't touch it; his hand remained suspended in the air, hesitating.

The movement returned, a bit stronger this time, and right then Shane made a small, restless gesture in his sleep, as if something were bothering him. He furrowed his brow and let out a low, uncomfortable sound.

Ilya watched this for a second, then leaned a little closer to the belly and spoke in a low voice, barely a whisper.

"Your father is sleeping." His tone was different from usual—softer, lower. "Don't wake him up... he's unbearable when he's awake."

The movement inside the belly grew fainter, as if it were actually calming down.

Ilya observed it intently for a few seconds... and without realizing it, a small smile appeared on his face. It was minimal, almost involuntary, but just at that moment, Shane shifted and his eyes slowly opened.

Ilya reacted immediately. His expression changed, the smile vanished, and he sat up in bed with the casualness of someone who hadn't been doing anything out of the ordinary.

By the time Shane fully woke up and looked at him, Ilya was already sitting up, serious as ever.

"Get up," he said in a firm tone. "I want breakfast."

Shane, still half-asleep, nodded.

"Yes, sir."

He adjusted himself carefully, pulling his t-shirt down without fully realizing what had happened earlier, and began to get out of bed as the morning started moving slowly through the house.

•••

Ilya left early that day.

The house returned to that particular calm it always had when he wasn't around: less tension in the hallways, quieter voices, slower movements.

Shane finished his breakfast and then, almost out of habit, ended up in the kitchen with Galina, which was where he spent most of his time lately.

Galina was peeling vegetables when Shane walked in. She barely raised her eyes and gave him a faint smile.

Shane made himself comfortable on the tall stool next to the counter, with the natural ease of someone who already felt comfortable there.

His denim overalls once again hugged the curve of his five-month belly, and as he spoke, he rested his hand over his stomach almost without noticing.

"It moved a lot this morning," he commented, still amused. "I think Ilya doesn't like it at all."

Galina let out a quiet laugh.

"I don't think he likes many things in general."

Shane smiled.

"That's true... but still..." He paused to think for a moment. "It's strange."

"What is?"

Shane looked at her.

"Sometimes it seems like he actually cares."

Galina kept chopping, but she was listening attentively.

"This morning," Shane continued, "I was still half-asleep, but I could swear he was talking to my belly."

Galina looked up.

"Really?"

Shane nodded, a soft smile on his face.

"He said something like... not to wake me up." He laughed softly. "And that I'm unbearable when I'm awake."

Galina shook her head, though she couldn't help smiling a little.

"That's new."

Shane rested his elbows on the table and started talking more.

First it was something small—a comment about how Ilya had tried the cake the night before.

Then he remembered something else, and then another thing.

"When we went to buy clothes..." he recounted, "he looked angry the whole time, but he still didn't leave until I picked things out. He just stood there watching me as if he were... I don't know."

"As if he were what?" Galina asked.

Shane hesitated for a second.

"As if he were making sure of something."

Galina kept working in silence as he talked.

"And when we go to the doctor... he always stays. He never comes in, but he doesn't leave either." Shane looked down at his belly with a soft smile. "He didn't have to do that."

Galina knew she shouldn't interrupt him because she understood what was happening. She saw it in the way Shane spoke, in his tone of voice, in that spark that appeared every time he mentioned Ilya.

"And sometimes..." Shane continued, "he's very rough, yes, but then he does strange things, as if he doesn't know how to be... normal."

Galina looked up at him right then. Shane was completely absorbed in talking.

"For example," he went on, "last night he was angry, but he still served me cake, and when he said I'm fat..." he laughed, "well, that was very him."

Galina smiled faintly, but inside she felt something heavier settling in.

Shane kept talking.

"It's hard to explain," he said after a while. "But when I'm with him... I don't feel... in danger."

That made Galina pause for a moment.

"You don't?" she asked gently.

Shane shook his head.

"No." He thought for a second. "On the contrary."

Galina observed him in silence because she knew. She knew exactly what was happening right in front of her.

Shane was starting to fall in love. It showed in every word, in every gesture, in the way he talked about Ilya as if he were someone who could be understood, even forgiven. And that saddened her, but she said nothing. She simply went back to chopping vegetables with slower movements.

"Do you know what the worst part is?" Shane added, almost in a whisper.

"What?"

"I think he doesn't even realize some of the things he does."

Galina let out a faint sigh, so light he wouldn't notice.

"Ilya has never been good at understanding what he feels," she finally said.

Shane smiled a little.

"Yeah... I think so too."

Galina looked down again, and while Shane kept talking about him with that almost involuntary tenderness... she felt a quiet bitterness settling in her chest, because she knew this wasn't going to end well.

•••

That night, the house lacked the calm of recent days, and Shane noticed it almost immediately.

There was more movement in the hallways—men coming and going, voices heard from different parts of the house. Some staff members carried bottles, while others set things up in the large room at the back.

Shane was in the living room when he began to sense it all. At first, he thought perhaps Ilya had returned with guests or that it was some work matter, but the atmosphere felt different.

There was a heavier energy.

He got up slowly and walked to the kitchen, where he found Galina arranging trays with glasses.

"What's going on?" Shane asked, looking around. "Everything feels... weird."

Galina looked up at him.

For a second, she hesitated.

"There's a poker game tonight."

Shane froze completely.

His expression changed in an instant, though he tried to hide it. He lowered his gaze to the floor, as if he were merely processing the information, but inside, something tightened in his chest.

He knew what that meant—he knew it all too well.

Galina's words brought memories he preferred to keep buried flooding back into his mind.

Rooms filled with smoke, unpleasant laughter, men looking at him as if he were part of the table, as if he were just another object in the game.

He remembered those nights when he was the prize, when he had to smile even if he didn't want to, when unfamiliar hands touched him without even asking, while other men laughed around them.

He felt a chill run up his spine.

Galina was watching him closely.

"Shane..."

He snapped his head up quickly, trying to regain a normal expression.

"Oh..." he forced a small smile. "Right."

But Galina knew him well enough to notice something was wrong.

"Are you okay?"

Shane nodded right away.

"Yeah, yeah, I just... didn't know you guys did that here."

Galina set the tray down on the table.

"It doesn't happen every day."

Shane nodded again, but this time his hand had moved on its own to his belly, resting there in a protective, almost unconscious gesture.

The house kept moving around them. Voices grew louder, footsteps echoed, and laughter drifted in from the main room.

Shane swallowed hard.

"Does Ilya... always play?"

Galina looked at him for a moment before answering.

"Yes."

Shane lowered his gaze again, trying not to overthink it, trying to convince himself that things were different now, that everything had changed since he came to this house. But memories weren't easy to ignore, because he knew very well what could happen at a poker table like that.

•••

The house fully transformed once the guests began to arrive.

Shane stood at one side of the large room, near one of the columns, watching in silence.

The lights were lower than usual, and the air slowly filled with cigar smoke and deep voices blending together.

Large, well-dressed men, some accompanied by bodyguards who remained near the walls.

Shane had seen many of them before, but even so, each arrival made his body tense a little more. His hands rested over his belly almost without him realizing it, as if that gesture helped him stay calm.

Then he saw him.

He walked in accompanied by two other men, carrying that arrogant composure Shane remembered all too well—tall, dark suit, jet-black hair perfectly styled, and a cold gaze that seemed to analyze the entire room the moment he crossed the threshold.

Kang Min-jae.

Shane felt the air catch in his chest for a second.

Min-jae scanned the room... until he found him, and his eyes locked onto him, refusing to turn away.

Time seemed to slow down for a moment. Shane felt that familiar, sickening feeling in his stomach, as if he had suddenly been pulled back to another place, another time he thought he had left behind.

Min-jae offered a slight smirk—and it wasn't a kind smile. It was the same one Shane remembered from those nights when he had to stand near the table, waiting, pretending to be comfortable while they evaluated him like a piece of the game.

The Korean man's gaze traveled down slowly, stopping on his belly, where it lingered for a few seconds.

Shane felt heat flush his face, a mix of shame and tension.

He shifted his body slightly, as if doing so could hide something that was already impossible to conceal.

Galina appeared near him at that moment.

"Shane," she said softly, "if you want, you can go to your room."

Shane immediately shook his head, though his voice came out quieter than usual.

"No... I'm fine."

But he wasn't.

In the center of the room, the poker table was already set up. Cards, chips, and bottles of alcohol took their places as the men began sitting around it.

Ilya appeared shortly after.

His presence shifted the mood instantly. He walked toward the table with his natural confidence, greeting a few men with a mere nod.

When he saw Min-jae, he paused for a second.

The two men stared at each other with a silent tension that lasted only a few moments.

"Rozanov," the Korean said, his voice smooth but laced with something sharp.

"I'd say I didn't expect to see you," Ilya replied, "but that would be a lie."

Min-jae smirked slightly.

"It's always interesting coming to your games." His eyes drifted back toward Shane. "I see you kept something of mine."

The room grew a little quieter around them.

Ilya didn't even look toward Shane when he answered.

"Won is won."

Min-jae rested his hands on the table, watching him calmly.

"Curious. I thought you would have gotten tired of it by now."

Shane felt that gaze on him once more. Every time he raised his eyes slightly, Min-jae was looking at him.

Especially at his belly, as if it were something he couldn't quite bring himself to believe.

The games started shortly after.

Cards were dealt, chips clinked together, and stakes raised slowly. The noise in the room filled up again with chatter, brief laughter, and heavy glasses pouring alcohol.

But Shane could barely focus on any of it, because every now and then, when he looked up... the Korean was still staring at him.

Shane swallowed hard and brought his hand back to his belly, feeling a faint movement from within, as though the baby could also sense the tension in the room.

From the table, Min-jae tilted his head slightly, watching that gesture, and smiled once more.

•••

The game had been going on for a while when it happened.

Chips clinked against each other, men spoke in low voices, and smoke gathered over the table.

Shane remained in the same spot near the wall, trying to stay unnoticed, but Min-jae wouldn't stop staring at him.

At one point, the Korean set his cards down on the table and leaned back in his chair, looking directly at Ilya.

"Rozanov," he said calmly. "Can I talk to him?"

The chatter around them dimmed slightly. A few men raised their heads with curiosity.

Ilya didn't even turn his head right away; he was shuffling chips between his fingers, wearing that cold expression he usually had during games.

"What for?" he asked emotionlessly.

Min-jae gave a faint smile.

"I just want to say hello... for old time's sake."

A brief silence followed.

Ilya finally raised his eyes toward Shane for a second, assessing him, then looked back at the Korean.

"Make it quick."

He said nothing else.

Shane felt his stomach drop.

Min-jae stood up with an irritating calm and walked toward him. His footsteps echoed softly across the floor, but to Shane, they sounded far too loud.

When he stopped right in front of him, he was standing close.

Too close.

Shane lowered his eyes, unable to help it, his breathing growing shallow.

"Shane," the Korean said, as if savoring his name. "It's been a while."

Shane didn't answer.

Min-jae tilted his head slightly, taking a better look at him. His eyes traveled down once again to the belly that was now impossible to ignore.

"Well, well." The tone he used made Shane's shoulders tense up instantly. "I didn't expect this."

Shane tightened his fingers against the fabric of his clothes.

"I..." he tried to say something, but his voice failed him.

Min-jae let out a low laugh.

"Relax, I didn't come to take you back." He glanced toward the table, where Ilya was watching them without intervening. "That's your problem now, Rozanov."

A few men smiled uncomfortably.

But Min-jae looked back at Shane, his expression turning darker.

"Though I must admit..." he said slowly, "...seeing you like this is interesting."

Shane took a half-step backward, almost unconsciously.

That seemed to amuse the Korean.

"I still scare you," he whispered.

Shane didn't answer; the fear was all too obvious on his face.

Min-jae leaned in a little closer to him, close enough so that his voice was meant for Shane alone.

"I remember how you used to open your legs for me..." he said with a twisted smile. "Always so willing."

Shane's body went rigid all at once.

A couple of men near the table stopped talking entirely.

Min-jae reached out his hand, and Shane reacted too late—the Korean's hand came to rest over his belly.

The contact was gentle, almost casual, but Shane trembled.

Min-jae felt that shiver beneath his palm and let out a quiet laugh.

"Look at what I did to you," he said, scanning him up and down. "You're quite the pregnant bitch."

Shane lowered his head, his breathing erratic. His hands remained still at his sides, as if he didn't know what to do.

The room was silent now.

Min-jae leaned his head even closer to Shane's ear.

"Pregnant by me."

He said it in a tone heavy with both disgust and mockery.

From the table, Ilya didn't move or say a word; he simply watched.

Min-jae's hand lingered for another moment over Shane's belly, as if verifying something. Shane continued to tremble, unable to pull away completely.

Finally, the Korean withdrew his hand calmly and looked at him one last time with that same evaluating stare he had always held over him.

"Although..." he added with a half-smile, "...you look worse now. Too used up."

Shane clenched his jaw, trying to stay on his feet.

Min-jae returned to the table as if nothing had happened, and Shane stood there frozen, his heart hammering wildly against his chest.

•••

When the last car pulled away and the front door closed, the house fell into a heavy silence.

A silence different from other days.

The lights in the main room were still on, but there was no more laughter, no clinking chips, no smoke hovering over the table. All that remained were half-empty glasses and the lingering echo of what had transpired hours before.

Ilya was still standing near the table, his hands resting on the back of a chair. He hadn't moved much since the guests started leaving.

He was quiet and tense; the rigid set of his shoulders and his clenched jaw made even the air around him feel dangerous.

Shane watched him from the doorway of the room.

He had waited a bit before approaching. He wasn't sure if he should, but staying alone in his room tonight felt impossible after everything that had happened.

He took a deep breath and walked slowly toward him, taking every step with care, gauging Ilya's reaction.

When he was a few feet away, he stopped.

"Sir..." he whispered.

Ilya didn't answer, nor did he even look at him.

Shane swallowed hard.

"Can I go to sleep?"

The silence stretched for a few more seconds.

"You can go to your room."

The reply was dry and cold.

Shane stayed completely still upon hearing that. His fingers moved nervously against the fabric of his clothes as he stared at Ilya's back. He hesitated, but spoke anyway.

"Can I... stay with you?" he asked quietly. "I promise I won't move much..."

"You liked seeing him, didn't you?"

The words hit like a sudden blow.

Ilya finally turned his head to look at him.

His eyes were hard.

Shane blinked, confused.

"What...?"

But Ilya was already walking toward him.

"You let yourself get fucked by that guy," he said with contempt. "You enjoyed it so much that you let him do that shit to you."

His gaze dropped directly to Shane's belly.

The gesture felt like a strike; Shane felt something tighten painfully in his throat.

For a moment, he felt like crying, because Ilya's words made everything rush back into his head at once.

The locked rooms, the orders, the constant terror, the times he had to stay completely still even when it hurt, even when he wanted to run away—the hands that forced him to smile in front of people who treated him like he wasn't even human.

He remembered the pain, the fear, how utterly alone he had been.

But he said nothing; he just stood there with his eyes cast down.

Ilya observed him in silence for a few more seconds, something dark in his expression.

"It disgusts me that this kid belongs to that guy," he continued, his voice lower now, yet just as harsh. "So as soon as it's born..."

"No."

The word came out firm.

Even Shane was surprised to hear himself speak like that.

Ilya froze and looked straight at him.

"What did you say?"

Shane raised his head. His eyes were glistening, but he didn't back down.

"No."

The silence that followed was suffocating.

"You are my property," Ilya finally said. "And that bastard inside you is too. I'm not letting it live in my house."

Shane took a deep breath.

"Then let me go."

The response was so simple that for a moment the room went deathly quiet. Ilya looked at him... and then let out a chuckle.

"As soon as it's born," he said, "I'm going to take it from you and give it away to whoever I see first."

The words hung suspended in the air.

Shane felt a dull blow to his chest.

Instinctively, he brought both hands over his belly, shielding it.

"No," he repeated, lower this time, but with the exact same resolve.

The silence remaining between them was thick, heavy with things neither was fully voicing.

Ilya kept staring at him with that cold severity in his eyes.

"Do you need to keep a souvenir of your Korean lover?" he spat at last, his tone dripped in disgust. "Huh? Did you like him so much that you want to keep...?"

"I didn't like him!"

Shane's shout sliced through the air of the room.

It was so sudden, so loud, that even he seemed startled by it. He had never shouted at Ilya like that—he had never shouted at anyone like that—but he couldn't stop.

"I never liked him!" he repeated, his voice breaking. "That man raped me every single day!"

The words echoed in the empty room.

Ilya stood completely still, staring at him.

Shane was shaking now, tears streaming down his face without him being able to stop them.

"I had to open my legs for him like he said," he continued, pointing toward the door where Min-jae had left, "because if I didn't, he would kill me!"

His breathing was ragged, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

"Do you think anyone could ever like that?!"

Ilya didn't answer; he just stared at him.

And for the first time since he had met him, Shane didn't see contempt in his expression... but something far more complex, something that seemed to have left him entirely speechless.

But Shane wasn't finished yet; there was too much built up inside him.

"I had to let him do things to me that you can't even imagine," he said, his voice trembling. "They hurt my body... they used it... and I had to smile."

He raised a hand to his face, trying to wipe away the tears, but they kept falling.

"Because if I didn't, they would kill me."

The room was completely quiet now; not even a sound came from the rest of the house.

"And unfortunately, I got pregnant by that horrible man," Shane continued, lowering his voice without losing his resolve. "Yes."

He glanced down at his belly for a second, placing his hand over it.

When he looked back up at Ilya, there was something different in his eyes.

"But this baby isn't his," he said. "It's completely mine." His voice wasn't shaking as much anymore. "And I love it."

Ilya didn't move.

"And I won't let you hurt it," Shane added. "You'll have to hurt me first."

For several long seconds, neither of them spoke.

Shane took a deep breath, as though only then did the weight of everything he had said crash down on him. Then he took a step back, and another.

Without breaking eye contact with Ilya until the very last moment, he turned around and walked down the hallway.

His steps were fast now, almost desperate.

He went up the stairs without looking back and entered his room, closing the door carefully, as if he lacked the strength to do it any other way.

Ilya remained in the main room, in the exact same spot. He hadn't moved since Shane finished speaking.

The words kept ringing in his head.

He raped me every single day.
I had to open my legs for him...
If I didn't, he would kill me.

Ilya clenched his jaw, something tightening in his chest in a way he hadn't expected.

It wasn't anger like before; it was something else—uncomfortable, raw, and impossible to ignore.

He looked at the doorway where Shane had left, and for the first time in his life, he felt like the worst person in the world.

# Chapter 11

The house woke up quiet, but inside Ilya, everything remained restless. The truth was that he had only managed to catch a few scattered minutes of sleep during the night. Every time he closed his eyes, Shane's words returned with a bothersome clarity, as if he were still standing right in front of him in the living room.

He had spent hours pacing around his office, then through the hallway, and at some point, he had stood still, staring out the window while the sky was still dark.

He wasn’t used to thinking too much about what he did with other people; in his world, things were simple: power, control, quick decisions. The people under his authority obeyed, and that was enough.

But what Shane had said didn’t fit into that logic.

Ilya remembered the way he had screamed—it wasn't a whim, nor a tantrum; it was something that came from much deeper. He had seen fear in Shane many times, yes, but he had also seen something else that night: pure exhaustion… and accumulated pain.

The sentence kept returning over and over again.

*That they forced him.*
*That he had to smile.*
*That if he didn't, they would kill him.*

Ilya rested his hands on the edge of the desk and lowered his head for a few seconds, breathing slowly. Then, the thought he had been avoiding surfaced: perhaps, to Shane… he wasn't all that different from that man.

He didn't like the idea at all; it brought a strange discomfort, something that felt far too much like guilt—an emotion that rarely visited him.

He clenched his jaw.

He remembered the first time he had touched him without asking.
He remembered all the times he had made decisions for him, all the nights Shane simply obeyed, without anyone actually stopping to ask him if he wanted to.

In his head, that had always been normal, but now it didn't feel so simple anymore, and that kept him thinking for hours.

•••

Shane, meanwhile, tried to carry on with his routine.
He got up early even though his body felt heavy. He had slept poorly, waking up several

times with that restless feeling he couldn't shake from his chest. The conversation from the night before had left a strange void in him, as if something had broken inside the house.

Still, when he stepped out of his room, his behavior was the same as always: minding what he said, complying, not causing trouble.

In the kitchen, Galina was already awake. When she saw him come in, she watched him carefully. Shane moved just as he always did—making tea, tidying up a few things… but there was something different about him. He seemed quieter, the way he used to be in the beginning.

"You didn't sleep well," she finally said.

Shane looked up for a second and offered a faint smile—a small one that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I'm fine," he replied.

Galina didn't push, but she kept watching him as he leaned against the counter for a moment, as if he needed to gather his strength.

"Yesterday was… hard," she murmured.

Shane didn't answer right away. He lowered his gaze to his hands and moved them slightly over his belly in an almost automatic gesture.

"Yes," he said finally, in a low voice.

After that, they changed the subject, though both knew the important conversation remained hovering between them.

•••

Throughout the day, Shane kept moving around the house as usual. He helped with a few chores, spent some time sitting in the garden, and talked briefly with Galina about simple things, as if trying to maintain a sense of normalcy.

But he was more subdued. He didn't talk about Ilya as much as before; he didn't mention little things about him or make timid comments about what he liked or disliked. He simply complied, and Ilya noticed.

Ilya had decided to stay at the house that day, which was unusual for him. Partly because he had business to attend to there, but also because he couldn't get the previous night's conversation out of his mind.

Several times he observed him from afar. He saw how Shane walked more slowly, how he sometimes paused to think before doing something, how he seemed to measure every gesture —and something about that made him uncomfortable.

In the afternoon, he finally called him into the office.

"Shane."

The name resonated calmly, but with authority. Shane appeared at the door almost instantly.

"Yes, sir."

Ilya looked at him for a few seconds before speaking.

"Come here."

Shane entered without asking questions. He stood behind the armchair where Ilya was sitting and began to massage his shoulders, as he had done so many times before. His hands moved with their usual skill, carefully pressing the tense muscles.

For several minutes, neither of them spoke. The silence was different from other times.

Before, Shane used to say something small—a question, a timid observation, anything to break the quiet; sometimes he would even chuckle softly at something trivial.

Not that day. He only worked.

Ilya closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the pressure of those hands on his shoulders, but his mind wouldn't relax.

"You're quieter than usual," he finally said.

Shane paused for barely a second before responding.

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't ask for an apology," Ilya replied, opening his eyes.

Shane lowered his gaze.

"I'm fine, sir."

The answer sounded automatic. Ilya studied him for a few seconds, but said nothing more. After a while, he stood up from the armchair and looked at him with that expression Shane already knew so well.

"Come with me."

Shane nodded. He knew what it meant, and he didn't refuse.

•••

In the bedroom, Shane acted just as he always had. He responded to what Ilya wanted, followed every cue, stayed close when pulled in, and didn't protest for a single moment. He fulfilled his role in bed as well, moving, making the effort to give the pleasure asked of him —but there was something different. Ilya began to notice it bit by bit.

Before, even in those moments, Shane sought some form of connection. He would linger close afterward, speak in low tones, or fall asleep beside him as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

This time, no. When it was over, Shane got up calmly and dressed slowly, avoiding making too much eye contact with Ilya.

There was silence again.

"Do you need me to do anything else, sir?" he asked.

The distance in the question was glaring. Ilya observed him for a few seconds.

"No."

Shane nodded, walked to the door, opened it, and left without another word.

Ilya remained sitting on the bed with the strange realization that something had irrevocably changed.

That night, the house fell quiet once more, and Shane didn't appear at his bedroom door. He didn't ask if he could sleep there; he didn't seek his usual place in the bed.

In his own room, Shane settled in as best he could, trying to find a comfortable position. His body ached a little, and sleep was slow to come. Even so, he forced himself to stay there, because asking to sleep with Ilya… now felt different.

•••

The next morning, Ilya noticed it as soon as he saw him.
Shane was in the kitchen, leaning against the counter while waiting for the tea water to boil. His hair was a bit messy, his eyes looked tired, and his skin was paler than usual. He didn't seem to realize he was being watched.

Ilya stood at the doorway for a few seconds in silence, evaluating him. There was something in the way Shane was breathing—slower and heavier—and in how he occasionally brought a hand to his belly as if trying to soothe a discomfort.

Finally, he spoke.

"You're unwell."

Shane raised his head immediately, as if only then noticing his presence.

"No, sir, I'm fine."

Ilya didn't move from his spot.

"You don't look it."

Shane lowered his gaze again and focused on the tea, pouring it carefully so as not to spill.

"It's just a little dizziness," he said. "Sometimes it happens."

The way he said it was calm, but distant. There was none of that small, nervous smile that usually appeared when he tried to downplay something.

Ilya frowned slightly.

"We're going to the doctor."

Shane looked up.

"It's not necessary."

"I don't care. We're going."

The tone wasn't particularly harsh, but it left no room for argument either.

Shane hesitated for a few seconds. Before, in other situations, he probably would have insisted a bit more or tried to softly convince him. This time, he simply nodded.

"As you wish, sir."

•••

The ride to the doctor was silent.
Shane spent most of the time staring out the window, his hands resting on his belly. Ilya drove without speaking, though every now and then he glanced over at him, gauging whether he looked worse. He didn't know exactly why he had insisted on accompanying him this time; before, he would simply send him with someone from the house or wait in the car. But after everything that had happened… it hadn't felt right to do that.

When they arrived at the clinic, Shane got out of the car carefully. The dizziness was still there—not severe, just annoying. Ilya walked by his side all the way to the reception, something that caught the secretary's attention, as she glanced briefly at them before telling them where to wait.

Shane sat down. Ilya stood for a few moments before sitting as well.

"If you feel worse, say so," he said.

Shane nodded.

"I'm fine."

The answer sounded distant once again.

When they were finally called, Shane stood up slowly. He entered the examination room, and for the first time since he had started going there, Ilya walked in with him. The doctor noticed

immediately.

"Good morning," he greeted. "How are you feeling today, Shane?"

"Fine… a bit dizzy, nothing more."

The doctor nodded as he reviewed some papers.

"That's normal at this stage, but we'll check on you anyway."

Shane made himself comfortable on the examination table while the doctor prepared the equipment for the checkup. Ilya stayed to the side, in silence, watching everything closely.

The cold gel on his belly made Shane take a deep breath, and seconds later, the monitor began showing the image of the baby moving gently.

The doctor smiled slightly.

"Everything looks good."

Shane looked at the screen attentively, as he always did during these checkups. There was a mix of focus and tenderness in his expression that was hard to hide.

The doctor moved the probe a bit.

"In fact… today we can see something else."

Shane frowned slightly, curious.

"What is it?"

The doctor looked at the screen for a few more seconds and then spoke naturally.

"It's a girl."

The silence that followed was brief, but filled with something gentle.

Shane blinked.

"A…?"

"A baby girl," the doctor confirmed with a small smile. "Everything is in perfect order."

Shane looked back at the screen, and for a moment, his expression shifted. It wasn't an exaggerated reaction, but something lit up in his eyes—a mix of surprise and a deeper emotion. His hand carefully rested over his belly.

"Hello…" he whispered, almost without realizing it.

Ilya observed in silence. He didn't say anything for several seconds, but something in his expression had softened slightly—not enough to lose his usual coldness, but enough for the

change to be noticeable.

"Is she alright?" he finally asked, addressing the doctor.

"Yes," the man replied. "Everything is in perfect condition. We just need to continue with the checkups and make sure he gets enough rest."

Ilya nodded slowly.

"He will rest."

The doctor continued explaining a few more things about this stage of the pregnancy and the necessary care. Ilya listened attentively, asking a couple of specific questions—something the doctor hadn't quite expected.

"What foods should he avoid now?"
"How much should he walk?"
"If he gets dizzy like this again, when should we be worried?"

Shane listened to him speak, a little surprised. Before, Ilya hadn't shown such interest in those details.

When they were finished, Shane wiped the gel off his belly and sat up again. Ilya handed him a paper towel without saying anything—a small but attentive gesture.

However, Shane didn't react much to it. He thanked him with a slight nod, but his attitude remained reserved.

On the drive back, Ilya drove more slowly than usual.

"If you feel sick again, say so," he said at one point.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't stay quiet."

Shane looked out the window.

"I'm not staying quiet."

The response wasn't aggressive, but it marked a clear distance. Ilya noticed and stayed silent for the rest of the trip.

•••

Ilya Rozanov almost never apologized—neither with words nor with obvious gestures.

But throughout that entire day, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about the conversation from the night before and the way Shane had looked at him after saying all those things.

Something in his mind kept shifting uncomfortably, like a piece he had never needed to consider before. So he did the only thing he knew how to do: handle things.

From his office, he made several brief phone calls. His tone was the same as always: direct, cold, efficient. He gave instructions, confirmed schedules, and requested that a few things be prepared without offering much explanation.

When he finished, he stared at the phone for a few seconds before setting it on the table. He wasn't sure if it would be of any use, but it was what he knew how to do.

•••

That night, the house was quiet once more.
Shane had retired early to his room. He didn't feel physically ill like he had in the morning, but he was tired. He had spent some time sitting on the bed with several small garments resting on his legs—pink clothes, some new, others simple things he had found around the house or that Galina had brought him. He looked at them carefully, touching the fabrics as if trying to imagine his daughter wearing them.

There was something soft in his expression at that moment, something that appeared every time he thought about the baby.

That was when he heard the knock on the door.
Shane raised his head, confused. Ilya never knocked; he always just came in.

He stayed still for a second before answering.

"Come in."

The door opened and Ilya appeared in the doorway. For a moment, neither spoke. Ilya looked briefly around the room, his eyes stopping on the clothes Shane had laid out on the bed. Shane noticed and shifted the garments slightly, as if suddenly embarrassed that he was seeing them.

"Do you need something, sir?" he asked.

Ilya didn't answer right away. He observed him a moment longer and then spoke.

"We're going out."

Shane frowned, clearly surprised.

"Going out?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Get ready," Ilya replied. "I'll wait for you downstairs."

Shane hesitated for a few seconds, looked at the clothes on the bed, then looked back at Ilya.

"Alright, sir. I'll be right down."

Ilya gave a faint nod and stepped back from the room, closing the door quietly.

Shane remained sitting for a few more moments, staring at the door. He didn't quite understand what was happening.

Finally, he folded the clothes neatly on the bed and stood up. He went to the closet to find something to wear—something simple but presentable. As he changed, his mind kept trying to guess what Ilya could be planning; it wasn't common for him to take him out of the house like this, especially without explaining anything.

When he finished, he went downstairs.
Ilya was already waiting near the front door, wearing his coat. When he saw him approach, he looked him up and down for a second, as if assessing whether he was dressed warmly enough.

"Ready?"

"Yes, sir."

They stepped outside together. The night air was crisp, and the car was already waiting.

Ilya opened the door for Shane to get in first—something that made Shane look at him a second longer than usual before taking his seat.

•••

During the drive, silence settled between them once more, but it wasn't quite the same silence as before. Shane looked out the window, watching the city lights pass by, trying not to overthink the reason behind this unexpected outing.

Every now and then, he felt Ilya's gaze on him, as if he were checking on something, measuring his every reaction.

The car moved through streets Shane didn't recognize. The city lights grew sparser as they drove away from the areas he knew. There were low-rise buildings, warehouses, and workshops closed at that hour. The driver drove calmly, following directions Shane clearly didn't understand.

Inside the car, it was getting a bit cold. Shane was wearing oversized sweatpants and a loose sweater he had grabbed in a hurry before coming downstairs. In his room it hadn't seemed like a bad idea, but now, with the night air seeping in every time the car turned and the temperature dropping, he realized it wasn't warm enough.

He tried to hide it by crossing his arms slightly, but the faint shiver was noticeable.

Ilya saw it, then unhurriedly took off his black overcoat.

"Put it on."

Shane looked up, surprised.

"It's not necessary, sir."

"Put it on."

Ilya was already draping it over his shoulders. The coat was heavy and large, still holding the warmth of Ilya's body. To Shane, it felt like a protective shield he hadn't expected.

"Thank you…" he whispered, lowering his eyes as he adjusted the sleeves.

Ilya didn't reply, but his gaze remained on him a moment longer before turning back toward the front.

•••

The car continued moving for a few more minutes until it finally pulled up in front of a large, dark metal warehouse in a fairly isolated area, and the engine cut out.

"Let's get out," Ilya said.

Shane followed him out of the car. The night air was cold, and the place was almost completely quiet, save for some distant city noise.

There were two of Ilya's men near the warehouse door, looking as though they had been waiting. Shane felt a strange sensation in his stomach as they walked toward the entrance; he didn't know exactly why, but something in the atmosphere felt different—more tense.

Ilya stopped right before opening the door and turned to face him. For a moment, he looked at him in silence, as if structuring what he was about to say.

"There are many things in this world I don't understand."

Shane watched him without interrupting. It wasn't like Ilya to speak like this.

"But love isn't one of them," Ilya continued, his voice low and firm, the way it sounded when he was serious. "You said you love the baby."

His eyes shifted briefly to Shane's belly, now covered by the heavy overcoat.

"And I respect that."

Shane said nothing, but his expression tightened slightly, as if he didn't know where the conversation was heading. Ilya looked back at the door.

"And I also respect justice."

Then he opened it.

The warehouse door slid open with a metallic rattle that echoed through the vast, dark interior. The lights inside were already on, illuminating the space with a cold clarity.

Shane took a step inside and froze.

In the center of the room sat a chair, and bound to that chair was Kang Min-jae.

His hands were secured behind his back, his body tightly tied, a cloth gagging his mouth. His face showed obvious signs of a recent beating—one of his eyes was swollen, and dried blood smeared the corner of his lip.

Two of Ilya's men stood nearby, watching over him.

Min-jae barely raised his head when he heard the door open. His eyes landed first on Ilya… and then on Shane.

Shane felt his entire body go rigid. He couldn't move; he couldn't speak for a long, agonizing second. His breath hitched in his throat.

"What is this, sir…?" he finally asked, his voice low and laced with disbelief.

Ilya took a step closer behind him, placing his hands on Shane's shoulders. Then, he leaned in slightly toward his ear.

"A gift," he whispered softly.

Shane kept his eyes locked on Min-jae, unable to look away, his whole body trembling with tension.

"He's all yours."

•••

The interior of the warehouse was larger than it appeared from the outside; the hanging lights illuminated the place with a cold clarity that left few corners in shadow.

The air smelled of metal, dust, and something denser that Shane didn't want to identify right away, but the first thing that caught his attention wasn't Min-jae... it was the table.

It stood a few paces away, long and metallic, and upon it sat a collection of objects that made Shane's stomach drop instantly.

Knives of various sizes, some fine and others heavy, a hammer, pliers, short chains, and more tools that didn't seem to have been placed there by chance.

Shane stood frozen. Ilya's black overcoat was still draped over his shoulders, far too big for him, making him look even smaller in front of everything before him.

Min-jae had begun shifting in the chair.

He tried to speak through the gag, making tense, desperate sounds.

When he saw that Shane wasn't reacting, he turned his gaze urgently toward Ilya.

Ilya, however, walked calmly toward the table.

"You can come closer," he said, looking at Shane over his shoulder. "He won't do anything to you."

It took Shane a few seconds to move, but he did. Each step was slow and heavy, as if his body hesitated to follow his mind.

He stopped in front of the table and stared closely at the objects, feeling a knot tighten in his chest.

"I don't understand..." he whispered finally.

Min-jae made noise from the chair again, trying to get Ilya's attention.

The Russian mobster didn't even look at him.

"You understand perfectly," Ilya replied calmly. "This man hurt you."

Min-jae shook his head violently, trying to deny something he couldn't explain with his mouth covered.

His eyes were fixed on Ilya now, filled with something Shane had never seen in him before: total fear.

Ilya picked up one of the knives from the table, lifting it slightly to inspect the edge under the light, before setting it back down, as if simply presenting options.

"You can choose whatever you want," he said.

Shane looked at him, bewildered.

"Choose...?"

"Yes." Ilya gestured briefly toward the table. "You can do whatever you want to him. Nobody will stop you."

Min-jae began straining against his bonds, making more frantic sounds. His eyes darted rapidly between the two men, trying to make sense of what was happening.

A chill ran down Shane's spine.

"Sir..." he said in a low voice. "I don't..."

Ilya stepped a little closer to him.

"I gave you justice as a gift." The word hung in the cold air of the warehouse. "This man thought he could do whatever he wanted with you," Ilya continued, his tone firm yet controlled. "Now he can't move without your permission."

Min-jae tried to speak again, his muffled sounds turning into something like pleading as he directed his gaze toward Ilya.

Ilya finally turned his head toward him, glanced at him for barely a second, and then ignored him once more.

"You can start with something small," he said, turning his attention back to Shane. "There's no rush."

Shane kept staring at the table, his hands trembling slightly because a part of his mind remembered far too much—it remembered the fear, the pain, the nights he had wished someone would do something to stop that man. But another part of him couldn't imagine doing what Ilya was suggesting.

"It's not that easy, sir," he murmured.

Ilya tilted his head slightly.

"For me, it is."

Shane looked at him, his expression a mix of anguish and disbelief.

"You think this is going to fix something."

Ilya didn't answer right away.

"No," he said finally. "But it will even the score."

Min-jae began moving with greater desperation in the chair when he saw Shane still standing frozen in front of the table, his eyes fixed on the tools as if they were beyond comprehension.

Shane had tried many times to imagine confronting Min-jae, telling him everything he could never say, reclaiming a part of himself... but this was different. This was raw, direct, inevitable violence, and he couldn't do it.

He shook his head slowly.

"No," he said, his voice tight. "I'm not doing this..."

Ilya didn't react immediately. He remained silent, observing him, studying him with that cold gaze that seemed to measure everything.

"You don't want to hurt him," he murmured.

Shane swallowed hard.

"Not like this..."

Min-jae let out a muffled sound, as if he had suddenly found a sliver of hope.

His eyes widened, shining with anxiety, and he shifted in the chair again.

Shane turned his gaze away from him, unable to hold it for long.

"I'm not like you," he added, almost in a whisper.

Ilya let out a slow breath through his nose.

He didn't seem angry; he seemed... bored.

He leaned slightly over the table, his eyes scanning the objects as if deciding what to do with them now that the initial plan no longer interested him.

"What a waste," he said at last.

The shift in attention was so abrupt that it took them a second to realize it.

Min-jae was the first, because Ilya finally turned toward him—and when he did, the atmosphere in the warehouse shifted instantly.

The Korean began shaking his head urgently, trying to speak through the gag.

His eyes darted between Ilya and Shane, as if searching for someone to pull him out of there.

Ilya walked slowly until he was standing right in front of him.

"Relax," he said quietly, devoid of emotion. "Nothing has happened yet."

Min-jae shook his head even harder.

Then Ilya gestured to one of his men, and in silence, one of them approached and removed the gag.

Min-jae gasped for air, as if he had been holding his breath for too long.

"Ilya..." he said quickly, his voice trembling. "Listen, this isn't worth it."

Ilya didn't answer; he simply stared at him.

That made Min-jae speak even faster.

"He's just a slave," he continued. "He's nothing important. If the problem is..." He glanced fleetingly toward Shane, a mix of contempt and fear in his eyes, "...that thing in his belly, I'll take him away when it's born and that's the end of it."

The air in the warehouse froze.

Shane felt the blow of those words as if his chest had been hollowed out.

But the worst part wasn't that. The worst part was seeing Ilya's face, because something changed. He didn't raise his voice, he didn't make a sudden gesture, there was no explosion—he simply stood still, watching him.

Ilya's light eyes turned dark in a way that was hard to explain, as if something deep had closed inside him.

"Just a slave?" he repeated in a low voice.

Min-jae swallowed hard; in that moment, he realized he had said the absolute worst thing he could have said.

"Ilya, listen..."

But Ilya was no longer listening. He turned calmly back to the table and picked up the hammer—heavy, dark metal, with a firm grip in his hand. He held it for a moment, almost absentmindedly, as if testing its weight.

Shane watched him, feeling something cold run down his spine.

"Sir..." he whispered, not knowing exactly what was about to happen.

Ilya turned back toward Min-jae and smiled a dark smile.

"Tell me something," he said calmly. "When you touched him... did you also think he was worth nothing?"

Min-jae began shaking his head in desperation.

"No, no, I didn't mean..."

The first strike was fast and sharp.

The sound of the hammer against Min-jae's knees echoed through the entire warehouse with a brutal, hollow crack that made Shane feel his heart jump in his chest.

The scream that followed was gut-wrenching. Min-jae doubled over as far as his bonds allowed, his breathing turning into a trembling wail as he tried instinctively to pull his knee away, but it was impossible.

Ilya didn't seem rushed. He held the other knee in place with one hand, pinning it down.

"I don't think you heard me," he said in the same calm voice.

The second strike was harder.

The crunch that accompanied it made one of Ilya's men look away for a second.

Min-jae screamed again, completely out of control now, tears streaming down his face.

Shane took a step back.

"Sir, no!" he said, horrified.

But Ilya didn't even glance at him. He was focused, methodical, as if this were simply a task.

"Tell me," he repeated. "Which part of him was it that was worth nothing?"

The third blow landed while Min-jae tried to speak through his sobs.

His knees were already deforming under the impacts; beneath his pants, the shape was collapsing as the hammer descended with terrifying precision.

The warehouse filled with a chaotic blend of sounds: the screams, the ragged breathing, the metal striking bone—and amid it all, Ilya's voice remained low and controlled.

"Because I see him differently." He raised the hammer once more. "I see something you didn't know how to protect."

Shane stood paralyzed. He didn't know if he wanted to stop him or if he was terrified to get too close, because now he understood something he had only suspected until that moment: Ilya wasn't doing this for fun, but he wasn't faking it either. He was truly punishing him, and he was doing it with a calmness that was scarier than anything else.

•••

Shane couldn't look away. He had tried to after the first few blows, when the sound of the hammer began to blend with the Korean's screams, but something kept him rooted to the spot. Perhaps it was horror, or perhaps the need to truly understand Ilya without the layers he usually showed him when they were alone.

And what he saw chilled him to the bone. Ilya wasn't out of control; he wasn't furious. He was... enjoying it.

Not in a loud or exaggerated way, but in a far more unsettling manner. His breathing was steady, his posture relaxed, and a dark, deep satisfaction gleamed in his eyes, as if this fit him perfectly, as if he were in his element.

The hammer fell one last time, and then Ilya finally released the Korean's legs.

Min-jae was no longer screaming like before. Now the sounds coming from him were weaker, broken, heavy with pain.

Ilya wiped a drop of blood that had splattered his cheek with the back of his hand, and only then did he look at Shane.

"See?" he said with an almost gentle calm. "It's not that complicated."

Shane felt a knot in his stomach.

"No," he answered softly. "For me, it is."

Ilya watched him for a moment longer, as if trying to read something on his face. Then he set the hammer down on the table with a soft clatter.

"You can still do it," he added. "He's still alive."

Min-jae barely raised his head, desperate to catch any opportunity.

"No... please..." he gasped, looking at Shane. "Tell him to stop... tell him to stop..."

Shane didn't answer. His gaze had returned to Ilya, and now that he was closer, he noticed something else: the blood staining his white shirt. There were small flecks on the collar, on the chest, on his rolled-up sleeves.

Ilya didn't even seem to notice.

"Come," he said again, with a slight gesture toward the table. "Pick something. I set this up for you."

Shane took a step back.

"I don't want to."

The silence that followed was short, but heavy.

Ilya tilted his head slightly, as if accepting that answer... even if he didn't share it.

Min-jae seized that moment.

"Ilya!" he said in a desperate, threadbare voice. "Listen to me... we can fix this."

That made Ilya look back at him, and this time he walked over slowly.

The sound of his footsteps echoed on the warehouse floor as Min-jae tried to push himself upright in the chair, though the pain made him tremble violently.

"Fix it?" Ilya asked.

"Yes... yes..." Min-jae breathed with difficulty. "Money, lots of money. Whatever you want."

Ilya stopped in front of him.

"You think this is about money?"

Min-jae swallowed hard, desperate to find anything that would work.

"We can make a deal... I can disappear... you'll never see me again..."

Ilya smiled faintly, but it wasn't a kind smile—it was cold.

"You're still not understanding."

Min-jae began to tremble harder.

"Then tell me what you want."

Ilya didn't answer immediately. He leaned in close to him.

The proximity made Min-jae tense up completely, breathing fast, his body rigid against the bindings.

"I wanted you to learn something," Ilya said in a low voice. "But it seems you're not a very good student."

Then he placed a hand on the back of the Korean's neck, pulling him closer.

Shane felt the air in the room grow even heavier, because he had heard of this—the gesture, its meaning.

Ilya brought his face close to Min-jae's and gave him a deep, firm kiss right on the mouth.

Min-jae let out a ragged scream, full of panic. He knew perfectly well that he had just received the kiss of death.

"No, no, please! Ilya, no!"

Ilya straightened up slowly.

For a second, he looked at the Korean, who was now completely shattered, weeping, trembling, begging without a shred of dignity left.

Then he turned to his men, the blood on his shirt contrasting sharply with the absolute calm of his voice.

"Finish the job."

The men moved immediately.

Min-jae began screaming again, trying to break free, thrashing desperately in the chair as the men's shadows closed in.

Shane could no longer look at the table. His eyes were pinned on Ilya.

Ilya, on the other hand, appeared composed, as if everything had returned to its proper place.

•••

The ride back was silent—not because Ilya was particularly quiet (he actually spoke a couple of times with the men driving), but because Shane could barely process what he had seen.

The hum of the engine, the city lights passing by the window, and the constant movement of the car felt distant, as though he were trapped inside a bubble.

When they arrived at the house, everything felt strangely normal again.

The front door opened, the guards moved with their usual routine, and the interior was warm, well-lit, and quiet. Nothing like the warehouse.

Ilya walked straight inside, taking off his jacket.

"I need to change," he muttered, looking at his shirt with a subtle grimace of annoyance. "I hate when blood dries like this."

It was a practical, almost domestic comment.

Shane looked at him, still carrying that strange feeling in his chest.

"Does it bother you... the blood?"

Ilya glanced at him out of the corner of his eye.

"The shirt," he corrected calmly. "It was a good one."

He took off the garment casually and handed it to one of the men to take away. His demeanor was exactly the same as always—serious, calm, controlled—as if what had happened were nothing out of the ordinary.

That night, the house was very quiet. The long hallways and soft lighting seemed to cushion the outside world.

Shane went to his room, still shaken, and sat on the bed.

He wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to feel.

A few minutes later, someone knocked on the door.

Ilya looked different without the tension of the warehouse on him.

His hair was still damp from the shower and he wore comfortable clothes, yet his presence filled the space just as it always did.

For a second, neither of them spoke.

It was Ilya who broke the silence.

"Do you want to sleep with me tonight?"

The question didn't sound like an order, nor was it casual. It was direct, almost simple.

Shane hesitated for barely a second, but something in him—perhaps exhaustion, perhaps the need not to be alone after what he had witnessed—made him nod.

"Yes."

•••

Ilya's bedroom was spacious and quiet. Heavy curtains filtered the city light, leaving the room in a gentle twilight.

They got into bed without many words.

At first, Shane thought he wouldn't be able to sleep; his mind kept drifting back to the warehouse, to the sound of the hammer, to the look in Ilya's eyes at that moment.

But when Ilya settled behind him, drawing close enough for his presence to feel steady and warm against his back, something in Shane's body began to relax.

Ilya said nothing; he simply wrapped an arm around him as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and against all odds, Shane fell fast asleep.

•••

The next morning, soft light poured through the kitchen window.

Galina was there as always, organizing a few things while speaking with one of the house staff.

When she saw Shane walk in, she immediately looked up and noticed something in his expression.

"Didn't sleep well?" she asked.

Shane sat down across from her.

"I slept... too well."

Galina frowned slightly.

"That doesn't sound like a problem."

Shane took a deep breath before speaking.

"I was with the master last night."

Galina didn't look surprised.

"Yes, I know."

Shane rested his elbows on the table, running a hand over his face.

"I saw him yesterday."

Galina's expression shifted slightly, growing more attentive.

"Where?"

"At the warehouse..."

A brief silence fell.

Galina set down what she was doing and sat across from him.

"Ah."

Shane hesitated a few seconds before continuing.

"There were... things. Tools and... my former owner."

Galina observed him calmly, without interrupting.

"I didn't want to do anything," Shane said. "I couldn't. And he..." He swallowed hard. "...he did it anyway."

Galina sighed softly.

"Of course he did."

Shane raised his eyes to her.

"Of course?"

She looked at him with a mix of understanding and patience.

"Shane, to Ilya, that was a gift."

Shane frowned.

"A gift?"

"Yes," Galina said quietly. "In his world, that is justice. If someone hurt you, you pay them back. He doesn't think of it as cruelty."

Shane shook his head slightly, still trying to process it.

"But he was..." He searched for the right words. "...it seemed like he enjoyed it."

Galina didn't deny it.

"He probably did."

That left him silent for a moment.

"Then he's worse than I thought."

Galina tilted her head gently.

"No. He's different from you, but not worse."

Shane looked at her.

"He did it because he believes it's the right thing to do," she continued. "That's how everything has worked for him since he was a boy. That's how he was raised; that's how he survived."

Shane remained thinking about that for a long time. In the afternoon, he found Ilya in one of the offices.

He was reviewing documents with that quiet concentration he always had when he worked. He seemed completely in control of everything.

Shane stood at the doorway for a few seconds before speaking.

"Sir."

Ilya looked up immediately.

"Yes?"

Shane took a few steps into the room.

"I wanted to ask you something."

Ilya set his pen down on the desk.

"Ask."

Shane took a deep breath.

"What happened to... him?"

The silence that followed was brief. Ilya observed him for a second and then reached into his pants pocket.

He pulled out a small object and set it on the desk, pushing it gently toward Shane.

It was an elegant, heavy ring with a design Shane recognized right away: the ring Min-jae always wore.

"It's mine now."

Shane stared at it.

"Because...?"

"Because I killed him."

The way he said it was simple, without drama, as if explaining a normal, logical rule.

Shane picked up the ring carefully, turning it between his fingers. It took his mind a few seconds to sort through everything he was feeling.

"I didn't want..." he said finally, his voice low. "I'm not a violent person."

Ilya watched him closely.

Shane looked up at him, a genuine sincerity in his expression.

"But... thank you."

Ilya looked at him for a long moment, as if measuring those words. Then he gave a single nod. He didn't say anything else, but for someone like him, that gesture meant a great deal.

•••

That same night, Shane was already in bed, lying on his side against the pillows, when Ilya entered while talking on the phone.

He wasn't speaking softly; he was arguing.

The Russian flowed fast and strong, in that deep tone that filled the room even when Shane couldn't understand a single word.

Ilya paced back and forth, barefoot, his brow furrowed and his jaw tight as he responded to whoever was on the line.

Shane watched him in silence, slowly getting used to that side of him. There was something distinct about how Ilya spoke in his native language: more intense, more direct, more... alive.

But then Shane felt something—a movement, and then another.

Shane let out a small, surprised breath, lowering his hand to his abdomen.

The baby was moving a lot—a whole lot.

"Uh..." he muttered, chuckling softly to himself.

While Ilya continued arguing, Shane rested his palm against his belly, feeling the movements repeat, insistent and almost restless.

"Yes, yes... I know," he whispered as if speaking to her. "He's yelling a lot, isn't he?"

Ilya abruptly ended the call a few seconds later.

He hung up and tossed the phone onto the nightstand with a weary gesture.

He ran a hand through his hair before stepping toward the bed.

"Idiots," he muttered under his breath.

Shane looked at him with a gentle smile.

Ilya frowned slightly when he noticed it.

"What is it?"

Shane let out a soft laugh.

"She's going crazy."

Ilya raised an eyebrow.

"Who?"

Shane slid his hand over his belly in a affectionate gesture.

"The baby. She hasn't stopped moving since you started talking."

Ilya looked at him with genuine curiosity now.

"Really?"

"Yes," Shane said, smiling quietly. "I think she recognizes Russian."

That made something shift in Ilya's expression. It wasn't a full smile, but it was a softening that relaxed his face.

He sat on the bed and leaned in slightly toward him.

"Let me see."

Shane pulled his shirt up just enough for him to get closer. The gesture was natural between them now, though it still held a quiet intimacy.

Ilya rested his large hand carefully over Shane's belly and waited.

A second later, the baby moved again.

Ilya raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Hmm."

Shane laughed softly.

Ilya then leaned in a bit further, bringing his face closer.

When he spoke, he did so in Russian, his voice much lower than the tone he had used on the phone—a completely different voice.

"Ну что ты там делаешь, маленькая?" (Hey little one, what are you doing in there?) he murmured. "Уже командуешь?" (Already taking charge?)

Shane looked down at him, and in that moment, something inside him shifted. Seeing Ilya like that—so large, always so serious, leaning over his belly, talking to the baby in his native tongue with such unexpected gentleness—was a sight that sparked a warm, deep feeling in his chest that he couldn't ignore.

Ilya kept speaking for a few more seconds.

"Спокойно… я здесь." (Relax… I'm right here.)

The baby moved again under his hand.

Shane let out a soft breath, barely realizing he was smiling.

Ilya noticed, looked up, and their eyes met.

They stayed like that for a long moment.

Shane didn't avert his gaze this time. Ilya observed him attentively, as if trying to figure out exactly what was happening in his expression.

"What?" he asked softly.

Shane hesitated briefly before answering.

"Nothing… it's just that…"

He didn't finish the sentence, but Ilya seemed to understand anyway.

He straightened up slowly, rising from where he was leaning over his belly until he was right in front of him, far too close.

Shane felt his breathing shift slightly.

Ilya noticed that too.

Their gazes remained locked, the silence stretching between them, heavy with something new.

Ilya raised a hand carefully and rested his fingers against Shane's cheek, almost asking without words if it was alright.

Shane didn't pull away, and that was enough. Ilya leaned in slowly and kissed him.

When their lips met, the kiss was soft at first, almost cautious. It lacked the brutal intensity one would expect from someone like Ilya.

It was... surprisingly tender.

Shane closed his eyes for a moment, feeling a warmth spread from his chest throughout his entire body.

Ilya kissed him patiently, as if discovering something important.

When they parted, they remained very close, breathing the same air. And both of them knew that something had changed forever—because that had been their first kiss.

# Chapter 12

Shane opened his eyes slowly that morning.

At first, he stayed still, staring at the ceiling, trying to settle his body after a night that had been deep yet strange; he wasn't exactly feeling bad… but he didn't feel entirely well either. There was an uncomfortable pressure in his chest, a slight heartburn creeping up his throat, and the constant feeling of movement in his belly, as the baby girl was particularly active that morning.

He let out a soft sigh, placing a hand over his belly as he tried to adjust himself into a better position on the bed.

"Well… so you're awake," he murmured in a very low voice, almost to himself.

He tried staying on his back for a few more seconds, but the heartburn grew a bit worse, so he slowly turned his body onto his side.

That was when he saw Ilya, who was still asleep.

He was lying with his back turned to him, breathing slowly, with that heavy calm he only possessed when he was truly resting. The sheet was pulled low, revealing his broad back, marked by muscles and a few scars Shane had noticed before, but had never observed so closely.

He stayed there looking at him for a long time.

There was something almost hypnotic about seeing him like that, without the constant tension that accompanied him when he was awake, without that hard glare, without the heavy decisions he carried all the time—it was just Ilya, asleep.

The baby moved again, stronger this time, as if settling in.

Shane placed his hand over his belly for a second, a faint smile touching his lips, and then looked back at Ilya's back. That was when he saw it: a scar longer than the rest, crossing part of his back in an irregular line—older, deeper.

Without thinking too much about it, Shane lifted his hand.

He did it slowly, careful not to wake him, his fingertips barely grazing the scar with a very soft, almost curious touch. It wasn't a full stroke, but rather a light contact, as if he were tracing something that told a story.

Ilya moved, and Shane froze instantly, but the Russian didn't wake up right away. He only shifted his breathing slightly and adjusted himself against the pillow.

Shane pulled his hand back… and after a second, touched the scar again, even more softly this time.

It was then that Ilya opened his eyes and slowly turned his head sideways, looking directly at Shane.

His eyes were still heavy with sleep, but his attention was completely present.

Shane immediately drew his hand back, almost as if he had been caught doing something wrong.

"Sorry," he said quickly, in a low voice. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Ilya didn't answer right away; he just observed him for a few seconds, still adjusting in that half-asleep state.

Then he spoke in the low, raspy voice of someone who has just woken up.

"You didn't wake me."

Shane hesitated slightly.

"I was looking at…" He made a subtle gesture toward his back. "The scar."

It took Ilya a second to realize which one he meant, and then he released a short breath through his nose.

"Ah."

A brief silence settled between them.

Shane didn't press; he thought that perhaps it wasn't something Ilya wanted to talk about, but Ilya continued.

"That one was Alexei, my brother."

Shane blinked softly.

"Your brother?"

Ilya nodded slowly, still lying on his side facing him.

"We were kids," he said. "Younger than we should have been for that kind of thing."

Shane listened calmly, without interrupting.

Ilya didn't talk much about his past, and when he did, it was usually in short sentences; but right now, he seemed more willing to go on.

"We had to learn fast," he continued. "In my house, nobody grew up normal."

Shane frowned slightly.

"Your father?"

Ilya held his gaze.

"He was mafia." He said it without beating around the bush. "I know," he added after a moment. "You already guessed it."

Shane didn't deny it.

"A little… those things tend to be inherited."

Ilya adjusted his head on the pillow, looking toward the ceiling now.

"My father was… respected, feared, depending on who you asked. And he raised us as if the world were a constant war."

Shane listened in silence.

The room remained quiet, filled only with the soft sound of their breathing and the baby's occasional small movements.

"Alexei was always different from me," Ilya went on. "More impulsive, more… angry."

"More?"

That brought a faint chuckle from Ilya, and he turned his eyes slightly toward him.

"I learned to control it a bit better."

"What happened to your parents?" Shane asked carefully.

Ilya took a few seconds to answer.

"They died." He didn't say it with drama, just as a plain fact. "My mother first. My father didn't last long after."

Shane noticed something in his voice—something very subtle, almost imperceptible.

"And you and Alexei were left alone?"

Ilya nodded.

"With the business, with my father's people, with Galina… with everything."

He went quiet for a moment, as if remembering something he wasn't voicing out loud.

"That's when the problems between us started," he finally added.

Shane watched him closely.

"Why?"

Ilya thought about it for a second.

"Because he believes I took something that belonged to him."

"The power?"

"Yeah, I suppose."

"Is that why he attacked you?"

Ilya gave a small shrug.

"It was a fight."

The way he said it made it clear that to him, it was almost normal.

Shane rested his head back on the pillow, looking at him with a different kind of calm.

"It must have hurt."

Ilya looked at him again.

"Yeah. Like everything."

It was a simple answer, but an honest one.

Right at that moment, the baby moved again, stronger than before. Shane winced slightly and placed his hand over his belly once more.

Ilya noticed immediately.

"Again?"

Shane sighed.

"She's very restless today."

Ilya reached out and placed his hand over Shane's, right on top of his bump.

"Maybe she's listening."

Shane offered a faint smile.

"Maybe."

The silence in the room remained soft, almost warm, as though the morning were taking its time to unfold.

Ilya was still lying on his side in front of Shane, head resting on the pillow, observing him with that peaceful gaze that rarely made an appearance. The usual harshness in his face was gone; he was more relaxed, more open after speaking about things he usually kept to himself.

Shane hesitated for a moment and then, slowly, raised his hand again.

His fingers touched the scar on Ilya's back once more. This time it wasn't just a curious touch, but a deliberate stroke, carefully tracing the irregular contour of the mark, as if trying to memorize it.

Ilya didn't move; he let him do it. Shane slid his hand a bit further, tracing the broad expanse of his back, the other smaller marks, the muscles that tensed ever so slightly under his touch.

All the while, Ilya watched him, his eyes tracking every movement of Shane's hand.

After a while, he spoke.

"I am just like all the rest."

The statement fell softly into the air, yet it was heavy with a deeper meaning.

Shane understood right away what he meant—he was referring to the men who had owned Shane before, his previous masters, the people who had dictated his life for years. And the worst part was that Shane couldn't say with absolute certainty that it wasn't true, at least not in the way Ilya would want to hear it.

Shane lowered his gaze for a moment, thinking of how to answer without lying.

The baby shifted again under his hand, giving him a few seconds to gather his thoughts.

Then he looked back at him.

"I'm okay here," he whispered.

Ilya stared at him for a long moment after that.

His eyes seemed to be searching for something in Shane's face, gauging the truth behind those words.

"You can leave if you want to," he finally said. "I won't keep you."

The sentence was quiet and direct, but to Shane, it felt as though the world had stopped for a second.

*Leave.*

It wasn't something he could answer quickly. It had been years since he was free—years in which every decision had rested in someone else's hands. His life had been a closed space with rules, with fear, with day-to-day survival. And now Ilya was telling him that he could walk away.

Shane looked up at the ceiling for a moment, breathing slowly, trying to picture it—imagining himself walking out of that house, out of that world, with no one stopping him.

The idea was so vast it felt almost unreal, but when he looked back at Ilya, he felt no desire to leave.

Shane shook his head. Ilya said nothing, merely looking at him as something in his expression softened ever so slightly, even as he tried not to let it show too much.

Shane placed his hand back onto Ilya's back, now in a calmer manner, as if that contact had become second nature.

A few seconds passed like that, and then Ilya moved, shifting closer to close the remaining space between them on the bed.

His large hand rose to Shane's face, gently touching his cheek, just like the night before.

Shane didn't pull away. This time, neither of them hesitated as much; Ilya leaned in and kissed him.

It was a slow kiss, more grounded than the first, yet just as gentle. It carried no rush or excess force; it was deep in another way, as if confirming something that was already there between them.

Shane closed his eyes for a moment, feeling that familiar warmth spread through his chest once more.

When they parted, they stayed close, breathing together.

•••

Night fell quietly over the house, and the atmosphere was very different from the previous days—everything had definitively begun to change.

Shane was reclining on the large sofa with a blanket over his legs and one hand resting idly on his bump. The baby had been moving a lot during the day, but now she seemed calmer, though every now and then she let out soft, gentle nudges.

Ilya was sitting beside him—or rather, half-slouched, taking up quite a bit of space as usual, with his arm resting over the back of the sofa and his brow furrowed as he watched the screen.

The movie had been playing for about twenty minutes, and he already looked annoyed.

"This makes no sense," he grumbled softly. "Nobody would do that."

Shane smiled faintly, without taking his eyes off the screen.

"It's a movie."

"It's stupid," Ilya insisted. "Look at that. If the guy just turned around, it would all be over."

Shane let out a soft laugh.

"Not everything has to be logical."

Ilya glanced at him sideways.

"Yes, it does have to be logical, otherwise we'd all go insane."

Shane returned his attention to the movie, but every so often he glanced back at him, amused. There was something almost adorable about how grouchy he got over things like this, though Ilya certainly wouldn't appreciate being described that way.

On the screen, the characters continued with a dramatic scene that Shane was clearly enjoying.

Ilya, on the other hand, huffed again.

"Ridiculous."

Shane finally turned his head toward him.

"You could stop watching."

"No," Ilya said. "Now I want to see what stupid thing they do next."

That made Shane genuinely laugh this time.

For a moment, neither of them spoke; only the sound of the movie and their quiet breathing filled the room.

Shane looked at Ilya's profile, illuminated by the glow of the television. Without thinking too much about it, he reached out, his fingers touching Ilya's hair, lightly fixing a stray lock.

Ilya froze at first, and then something in his expression shifted. His shoulders relaxed slightly, and instead of pulling away… he leaned into the touch.

He didn't say it out loud, but he clearly liked it.

Shane continued running his fingers through his hair with calm movements, threading them through the soft curls while keeping his eyes on the screen.

Ilya let out a low breath and settled closer, resting part of his weight against Shane in a way that was almost a cuddle—something that would have seemed unthinkable to anyone looking in from the outside.

"The movie is still terrible," he murmured.

"I know," Shane replied with a light smile. "I'm still enjoying it."

Ilya didn't argue this time, and they stayed like that until it finished.

Later, when they went to the bedroom, Shane's exhaustion was quite evident.

He moved slower, and the heavy weight in his body was clear.

"You're uncomfortable," Ilya said as they walked in.

"A little," Shane admitted. "My belly feels… heavy today."

He placed his hand over his bump again, wincing slightly.

Ilya didn't say anything at first. He simply set about organizing the bed, taking several pillows and carefully arranging them behind Shane's back, placing another beneath his arm, adjusting everything until the position was more comfortable.

"Try like this."

Shane settled in with a long sigh.

"Ah… yes, much better."

Ilya watched for a moment to make sure he was truly comfortable before lying down beside him.

The room grew quiet once more.

After a few seconds, Shane spoke.

"I've been thinking about something."

Ilya turned his head toward him.

"What?"

Shane hesitated slightly.

"The baby..."

Ilya placed a hand over his belly almost out of reflex.

"What about her? Is something wrong?"

Shane looked up at the ceiling for a moment before speaking.

"Maybe… she'll have Asian features."

He said it in a strange tone, tinged with a bit of insecurity.

Ilya observed him attentively.

"Probably," he answered naturally.

Shane blinked, surprised by how direct the response was.

"Yeah?"

Ilya gave a slight nod.

"Yeah."

A short silence followed.

Shane lowered his gaze toward his bump, thoughtful.

"I don't know if that…" he started to say. "Sometimes I wonder if…"

He didn't finish the sentence, but the guilt in his voice was clear enough.

Ilya understood anyway. He looked at him for a few seconds more before speaking again.

"When she's born," he said calmly, "I'll tell her that her eyes are beautiful, just like yours."

Shane looked up, catching his breath for a moment.

Then, slowly, a blush crept up his face.

"Ilya..." he murmured, almost smiling.

Ilya, on the other hand, let a rare, slight smile slip onto his face.

"You once said the baby is only yours. Let's keep thinking of it that way."

Shane didn't know what to reply, but something in his chest felt warm again.

Ilya leaned in closer then, closing the distance between them.

"Don't worry so much," he said softly, and kissed him.

•••

The following days began to feel different inside the house.

Nothing massive or dramatic had happened, but something between Ilya and Shane had unmistakably changed. It was something that didn't need to be explained out loud—it showed in their lingering glances, in the smiles that appeared for no reason, in the little things that hadn't been there before.

That morning, Shane was sitting in one of the armchairs in the living room, an open book in his hands that he hadn't actually been reading for several minutes.

The baby moved every now and then, and he placed a hand over his belly with that automatic gesture that had become routine.

Ilya was standing in front of him, ready to leave, but he didn't seem to be in a rush. In fact, he had been staring at him for several seconds.

Shane looked up and caught him watching with that rare expression that had been appearing so often between them lately—a mix of curiosity and something softer.

"What?" Shane asked, half-laughing.

Ilya shook his head slightly.

"Nothing."

But he kept looking at him, and Shane ended up smiling.

"You're being weird."

"So are you."

That got a quiet laugh out of both of them, as if the conversation were lighter than it actually was.

Ilya stepped closer, resting a hand on the back of the armchair near Shane.

"I have to go out for a bit."

"I know," Shane replied. "You always leave at this time."

Ilya looked at him with a faint smile that barely registered, and then lowered his gaze toward his bump.

Without a word, he leaned down and kissed Shane.

Then he bent down further and kissed his belly.

Shane let out a small, surprised laugh.

"Ilya…"

"In case she's listening," he said with complete seriousness.

That made Shane look at him with that smitten expression that had been showing up frequently lately.

From the kitchen, Galina was watching. It didn't look like she was staring directly, but in truth, nothing in that house escaped her notice. And what she was seeing… she didn't like. Not because it was something inherently bad, but because she recognized that look on Shane. She had seen it before on other people—it was the look of someone who finally felt safe,

someone who was starting to be happy. And she wasn't sure if that, in this context, was a good thing.

•••

When Ilya returned late in the afternoon, Galina was waiting for him near the hallway that led to his office, leaning against the wall as if she just happened to be standing there.

Ilya saw her right away.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Galina stepped closer.

When she spoke, she did so in Russian, in a low, firm voice—not to intimidate, but to ensure the conversation stayed strictly between the two of them.

"What are you doing with him?"

Ilya's brow furrowed slightly.

"With whom?"

"Don't play dumb with me," Galina said. "With Shane."

Ilya looked at her for a few seconds.

"Nothing."

Galina shook her head.

"No, it's not nothing." Her voice turned graver. "That boy has suffered too much."

Ilya didn't answer immediately.

Galina continued.

"They brought him into this world broken. They used him, hurt him, treated him as if he were worth nothing. And now I look at him…" She paused briefly. "…and he's starting to believe he can stay here."

Ilya observed her in silence.

"The baby too," she added. "That little girl deserves to grow up in something better than this."

The hallway was quiet; only the distant sounds of the house lingered in the background.

Finally, Ilya spoke.

"I already let him go."

Galina frowned.

"What?"

"I told him he could leave," Ilya explained calmly. "That I wouldn't keep him."

"And?"

"He wants to stay. That was his choice."

Galina stared at him for a long moment after hearing that.

"And what do *you* want?"

The question hung floating between them.

It took Ilya a moment to answer—not because he didn't know the answer, but because he wasn't used to stating those kinds of things out loud, though speaking in Russian gave him a certain resolve.

"I want to protect them."

Galina studied his face carefully, searching to see if there was any hesitation in him.

"Both of them," Ilya added. "Him and the baby."

Galina finally let out a sigh.

"Then swear it to me."

Ilya hadn't expected that word, but he didn't reject it either.

"What?"

"That you will follow through on that," Galina said. "That you won't let this place destroy them like it always does."

Ilya locked eyes with her, his expression turning completely solemn.

"I swear it."

Galina held his gaze for a few seconds more, as if gauging the strength of that promise.

Then she nodded slowly.

"Good."

And with that promise, Galina felt the weight in her chest dissolve—not so much because of the words themselves, but because of the look in Ilya's eyes: a soft look she hadn't seen in him for many years.

# Chapter 13

By the time Shane reached his seventh month of pregnancy, there was no way to hide it, not even under loose clothing.

His belly was large, round, and evident in every movement he made. Walking took him longer, and he often ended up leaning against walls or furniture to get comfortable.

The entire house had adapted to his rhythm, but the one who had adapted the most was Ilya, without a doubt.

That morning, Shane was in the main living room, carefully seated on the most comfortable sofa in the house. He had several pillows surrounding him because lately, it was hard to find a position that didn't make his back ache.

The baby girl was moving a lot. Shane had one hand resting on his bump, following one of her movements with a faint smile.

"Easy, sweetie," he whispered. "It's not time yet."

He wasn't alone; Ilya was standing right in front of him, watching him the way he almost always did lately.

Shane looked up and caught him again with that fixed gaze he knew so well and secretly adored.

"What?" Shane asked, smiling slightly.

Ilya didn't answer, but his eyes slowly dropped toward Shane's belly before drifting back up to his face.

"Nothing."

Shane arched an eyebrow, amused.

"You say that a lot, and it's almost never true."

Ilya took a few steps closer, smiling—giving him that specific smile meant only for him—and stopped right in front of him.

For a few seconds, he simply observed him, as if registering every tiny detail: the exhaustion in his eyes, the way he was propped up, the way he cradled his stomach.

It was a look that never went unnoticed because it was always too intense, totally focused on him.

Shane looked down, slightly flushed, though he was slowly getting used to that kind of attention.

"You're looking at me weird again."

"I'm not looking at you weird."

"How are you looking at me, then?"

Ilya tilted his head slightly.

"Like someone looking at something he cares about."

Shane didn't know how to respond to that for a second. The baby kicked hard, and he made a small grimace, placing both hands over his belly.

"Ow..."

Ilya reacted instantly.

"What happened?"

He dropped to his knees in front of him in a second, his full attention locked onto Shane.

"Nothing, nothing," Shane said quickly. "She just kicked hard."

Ilya carefully placed his hand over Shane's bump, treating it as something both fragile and priceless—because, in truth, it was.

"She's active today."

"Very."

Ilya left his hand there for a while. It was something he did more and more often now, no longer feeling strange to him.

"She takes after me," he said.

Shane looked at him, amused.

"How so?"

"She won't sit still. I might not be her father, but I've been here from the beginning. Some of me had to rub off on her."

That made Shane laugh softly. Ilya looked up at him, his expression shifting slightly, softening.

There was something undeniably obvious to anyone who looked at them right now: Ilya was completely in love.

He didn't say it out loud, but it showed in everything: in how he couldn't stop looking at him, in how he always found an excuse to touch him—tucking his hair back, holding his hand,

resting his palm on his bump to feel the baby. Even his men had noticed it. Shane was his weak spot, and Ilya no longer cared to hide it.

"Did you eat?" Ilya asked suddenly.

Shane let out a soft sigh.

"Yes, I ate."

"When?"

"A little while ago."

Ilya looked at him as if testing the truth behind his answer.

"I'll order more food."

"Ilya..."

"You need to eat more. You can't be weak right now."

Shane watched him with patience and affection—something he had learned to cultivate around him.

"I am eating, I promise."

"You can eat more."

"I can't breathe if I eat more, Ilya. I'm going to burst; she leaves no room for anything else."

That kept Ilya quiet for a second before he let out a low breath.

"Fine."

Even so, he adjusted one of the pillows behind Shane's back. He truly couldn't stop worrying about him.

"Thank you," Shane said.

Ilya remained there, kneeling in front of him.

"Are you in pain?"

"My back hurts a little."

"I'm calling the doctor."

Shane immediately shook his head.

"There's no need."

"There is a need. I don't want to take any risks."

"Seriously, it's not necessary. My poor back just has to carry a huge belly; it's completely normal."

They looked at each other for a few seconds until Ilya finally sighed.

"I'll believe you... for now. But I'll be watching."

Shane smiled and reached out to stroke his curls.

"How generous of you."

Ilya reached over and tucked a lock of hair behind Shane's ear with a very gentle touch. It was something he did almost unconsciously now.

"Do you know what I was thinking?" Shane said after a moment.

"What?"

"That when she's born... I don't know how you're going to react."

Ilya frowned slightly.

"Why?"

"Because you're already so involved."

Ilya looked him straight in the eyes, more certain than ever.

"She's my daughter too now... in a way. That's how I feel."

Shane felt a sudden warmth in his chest hearing those words. He didn't say anything right away, but it was written all over his face: he was in love too, and knowing this man loved his daughter filled him with happiness.

"I know."

The baby moved again under Ilya's hand.

"Did you feel that?"

"Yes," Shane answered. "She does it all the time now. Especially when you're close... I think she likes your voice."

Ilya gently rested his forehead against Shane's belly for a moment.

"You're making yourself heard a bit too much."

Shane looked at him tenderly.

"She's learning from you."

Ilya lifted his head.

"Then we're going to have trouble."

Shane laughed again, his eyes locked onto Ilya's, bright with emotion. Shane didn't hesitate to caress him again, and Ilya narrowed his eyes slightly at the touch.

After a while, Ilya finally stood up, but he didn't go far. He sat beside him on the sofa, close enough that their legs touched, and draped an arm around his shoulders, holding him carefully.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yes."

"Tell me if you're not."

"I always tell you."

"Good."

Shane rested his head on Ilya's shoulder. There was a profound tranquility in the way they were together now.

"You know you're being very protective, right?" Shane whispered.

"I've always been protective."

"Maybe. But I never thought you'd be like this with me."

Ilya didn't argue with that because it was true. Shane had changed something inside him, and so had the baby.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," Ilya said finally.

Shane raised his head slightly to look at him, his eyes completely clear with emotion.

"Nothing matters more to me than the two of you."

Shane felt his heart race, and without thinking too much, he leaned in and kissed him. Ilya responded instantly, as if he had been waiting for it all day.

•••

That morning started a bit differently.

Shane had woken up earlier than usual, uncomfortable, gripped by that strange feeling he sometimes got when his stomach felt too heavy or when the baby decided to move endlessly.

He had tried to get up slowly, but ended up sitting on the edge of the bed, breathing calmly while cradling his belly.

Ilya noticed right away, waking up almost instantly when he saw Shane wasn't lying beside him.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his voice still thick with sleep.

Shane turned his head toward him slightly.

"Nothing serious... I think I just slept awkwardly."

But Ilya was already pulling back the sheets.

"Are you in pain?"

"My back a little... and I feel slightly dizzy."

That was enough. Ilya didn't argue or ask further questions; he simply made a decision.

"I'm not doing anything today."

Shane blinked.

"What do you mean you're not doing anything?"

"Nothing."

"Surely you have things to do."

"Nothing more important than this."

Shane let out a soft sigh, though he couldn't hide a small smile.

"You're exaggerating."

"No. I want to spend the day with you."

Ilya was already arranging a pillow behind Shane's back, careful not to jostle his bump too much.

"Stay sitting for a moment," he said. "I'll get you some water."

Shane watched him walk away and couldn't help but think about how different everything was now.

Months ago, Ilya was intimidating, cold, dangerous. Now, he was still all those things... but with him, he was different. He was warm, attentive, protective, and loving.

When he returned with the glass, he sat in front of him and waited while Shane drank.

"Better?"

"A little."

"Good."

Shane placed a hand over his stomach, which fluttered faintly at that moment.

"I think someone else decided to wake up early too."

Ilya rested his hand over Shane's automatically.

"She always does that when you don't feel well."

"Maybe she can feel it."

"Then she's smart already."

Shane let out a quiet laugh, looking at him fondly. He loved how oblivious Ilya was to how beautiful he could be whenever he let his guard down.

After a moment, Ilya grabbed his phone and issued a few brief commands. He canceled meetings, postponed events, and delegated responsibilities. Shane watched him while he spoke.

"You really took the day off..."

Ilya hung up.

"Yes."

"You didn't have to, Ilya. It's the final stretch of my pregnancy; feeling like this is normal."

"I know. I just want to spend time with my man and his giant belly."

Shane looked down, touched and amused at the same time.

"Thank you."

Ilya stepped closer and kissed his forehead gently.

The rest of the day passed in total tranquility. They had a late breakfast. Ilya insisted on bringing everything to Shane in the main living room, where sunlight poured in through the high windows. He had prepared the space with pillows and blankets, even moving a side table closer so Shane wouldn't have to reach or get up.

"This seems excessive," Shane said, looking around.

"It's not."

"Yes, it's too much."

"No. I want to give you the best."

Shane laughed.

"You're relentless, you know that?"

"And you are seven months pregnant."

"That doesn't mean I'm made of glass."

"I'm going to care for you as if you were."

Shane shook his head in amusement as he settled back into the cushions.

When the baby kicked again, Shane let out a low groan, and Ilya appeared instantly.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," Shane said, laughing softly. "She just moved."

"Tell me anyway."

"You're always watching."

"Yes."

And it was true. Ilya was constantly watching him—sometimes without realizing it, other times very intentionally.

Galina noticed it all from the living room doorway. She had come to check on them, but remained leaning against the frame, watching the scene in silence.

Ilya was sitting close to Shane, his hand resting on his belly while they talked about simple things. Nothing important. Just quiet moments.

That... wasn't something she had seen in him very often.

Shane looked up and saw her.

"Gali, hi."

"Good morning," she said, stepping inside with a soft smile.

She approached Shane first, as she usually did.

"How are you feeling today?"

"A little better."

Galina looked at his huge bump fondly.

"She's growing fast."

"Too fast," Shane said. "I don't even know how to sit anymore."

Galina chuckled softly.

"It's normal."

Ilya kept his hand resting there, hardly moving it. Galina noticed it, just as she noticed the way Ilya looked at Shane when he spoke. It was obvious—glaringly obvious.

"I've never seen you like this," she said suddenly, looking at Ilya.

He frowned slightly.

"Like what?"

"At peace... happy."

Shane looked at him curiously, while Galina offered a gentle smile. Ilya didn't answer immediately, but Shane did, his expression giving it away.

"I think he is happy."

Ilya glanced at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Don't speak for me."

Shane leaned toward him with a sly smile.

"Then say it yourself."

Ilya let out a breath.

"I'm fine, yes."

Galina raised an eyebrow.

"Coming from you, that's practically a declaration of love."

Shane laughed, while Ilya looked at her with resignation and patience.

"You're having far too much fun."

"A little."

Ilya offered a broad smile and gently stroked the bridge of Shane's nose with the back of his finger.

"I might actually like it when you laugh."

Shane smiled, locking eyes with him as he leaned his head back against the sofa.

"And I might actually like that I got to meet you."

Ilya stared at him for a moment and kissed him tenderly, completely surrendering to this new feeling of belonging to someone else.

After a while, Galina sat down with them, and they chatted about simple things: names for the baby, how Shane was sleeping, whether the nursery was ready.

At one point, the baby delivered a sharp kick. Shane let out a small gasp of surprise.

"Ah!"

Ilya was already leaning over him.

"Are you okay?"

Shane took his hand and pressed it onto his bump.

"Wait."

Right at that second, the baby moved again. Ilya froze, his eyes widening slightly.

"She's so strong..."

"Told you."

She kicked again. Ilya let out a low, rare laugh—something Galina had almost never heard from him.

"She's going to be strong enough to defend herself... though she'll always have my men watching over her, of course."

Shane looked at him tenderly.

"She's going to hate you so much..."

"I can live with that. What I can't live with is feeling like she isn't safe."

Galina watched the scene with a warm expression, and when Shane rested his head on Ilya's shoulder while Ilya kept his hand over his bump, she smiled genuinely.

Shane looked happy and safe, and that was something he deserved after everything he had been through. Galina knew Shane deserved the entire world—and she also knew Ilya would give it to him without a second thought.

•••

Sunlight poured through the large living room windows, and the atmosphere was quiet, barely interrupted by the distant sounds of men moving around the property and low

conversations from the staff.

Shane was leaning back on the sofa, his head resting against Ilya's chest. Ilya had an arm wrapped around him, his hand resting on the massive bump that fluttered every now and then.

Galina had returned to the kitchen, ready to finish up and take an afternoon nap, when something shattered.

First came a dull, distant impact—something heavy, like metal hitting metal.

Ilya heard it before anyone else, his body tensing instantly. Shane felt it.

"What's wrong? What was that?"

Ilya didn't answer yet. Then came the second sound, unmistakable this time: a gunshot, followed by another, and another.

In less than three seconds, the house erupted into chaos.

"ATTACK!" one of the guards shouted from outside.

Then came the full barrage—automatic gunfire, shattering glass, shouting.

Ilya reacted instantly, springing up and grabbing Shane by the shoulders.

"Get up."

Shane went pale.

"What's happening, Ilya?"

"We're under attack."

At that exact moment, a volley of bullets ripped through the exterior wall of the living room, the deafening sound echoing through the house like thunder. Galina rushed into the room.

"Get down!"

Ilya's men were running through the hallways armed, returning fire through the windows and the front entrance.

Outside, several black SUVs had breached the perimeter. Armed men were dismounting, firing relentlessly, and at the front of it all stood the man who had waited for this moment for months: Han Jisoo, Han Minjae's younger brother.

His face was cold, twisted with pure hatred.

"Nobody leaves this house alive!" he yelled in Korean as they pushed forward.

He had gathered men, weapons, and time, and had finally decided to strike for one single reason: vengeance.

Inside, bullets began tearing through the windows. Ilya took Shane's face in his hands.

"Listen to me."

Shane was trembling.

"The baby..."

"I will protect you."

Galina appeared with a gun in hand. She had learned to shoot years ago, and while she didn't love doing it, she knew when it was necessary.

"They came through the front and the side entry."

Ilya was already calculating every variable in his head when another burst of gunfire shattered the living room glass, and one of his men collapsed in the nearby hallway.

The deafening roar of gunfire reverberated everywhere. Shane gripped Ilya's shirt tightly.

"I'm scared."

Ilya looked him in the eyes, and for the first time on that quiet day... the dangerous man everyone knew returned.

"Nobody is going to touch you."

At that moment, one of his men came running up.

"They want the whole house," the man said. "They came with everything they've got."

Outside, machine guns continued to hammer the mansion. A bullet struck a chandelier in the living room, sending glass showering down. Shane flinched violently, and the baby jolted inside his belly.

Ilya held him firmly.

"We're going to the safe room. Stay behind me."

"But your men..."

"My men know how to fight."

Ilya snatched a weapon from a side table and glared toward the entrance where the gunfire kept raging.

"But they don't know who they're fucking with."

•••

The roar of gunfire was relentless. The entire house vibrated with every burst of automatic fire, the shouts of men running through corridors, and the sound of falling glass.

The air thick with dust, smoke, and the sharp bite of gunpowder.

Ilya kept Shane right behind him, almost glued to his back. One hand held his weapon; the other constantly reached back to touch Shane, ensuring he was still there.

"Don't separate from me," he said, his voice low but steady.

Shane was deathly pale, one hand instinctively covering his belly while the other clutched Ilya's shirt.

"I'm right here..."

Another round echoed down the hallway in front of them, and one of Ilya's men fell against the wall. Everything was happening too fast. Then they saw them: Han Jisoo's men had breached the perimeter.

Three of them rounded the side corridor, firing blindly. Ilya reacted before they could get a clear sightline, firing two sharp, precise shots.

One fell instantly, and another tried to return fire before being taken down by another guard. The third fled back toward the main hall.

"Stay behind me," Ilya ordered.

But Shane stayed close. The chaos pressed in on them, and then, through the smoke, Han Jisoo appeared.

He stepped forward, weapon raised, his eyes burning with fury. When his gaze landed on Shane behind Ilya, his face twisted into something even darker.

"There you are..." he said with a crooked smile. "You dirty whore, look at the mess you made. This is all your fault."

A cold chill ran down Shane's spine. Ilya took a step forward, placing his body completely between them.

Jisoo raised his gun, but he never got the chance to pull the trigger. Ilya's shot came first, a precise hit straight to the head.

Han Jisoo's body slammed backward against the floor with a heavy thud.

For a second, time seemed to freeze. But the fight wasn't over. One of Jisoo's men, mortally wounded on the ground near the entrance, raised his gun in a final, desperate attempt and pulled the trigger.

The shot was sharp and sudden. The bullet wasn't aimed at Ilya—it was directed somewhere else: Galina.

She was standing a few meters away, covering the hallway with her weapon to secure their route to the safe room. The bullet caught her square in the chest. Her body jerked from the impact before collapsing to the floor.

"Galina!" Shane screamed.

Ilya's gun slipped from his hand. The deafening noise of the shootout seemed to vanish from his mind.

For a moment, he didn't move. He just stared, unable to comprehend what he was seeing.

Galina was on the ground. Blood was pooling beneath her.

Then he snapped, sprinting toward her.

"No!" His voice cracked completely. "Gali!"

He dropped to his knees beside her with desperate force.

"No, no, no...!" He pulled her into his arms. "You can't leave me, Galina..." His voice was no longer that of the cold leader everyone feared. "Please..."

Shane froze a few steps back. He had never seen Ilya like this. Never.

Ilya pressed his hand against Galina's wound, but he already knew it was useless. His breath hitched uncontrollably.

"No... no..." He shook her gently. "Gali... listen to me..." Tears filled his eyes. "Open your eyes. Don't leave me..."

But Galina didn't respond. Gunfire still echoed in distant parts of the house, but around them, a strange silence had settled. Ilya began to shake.

"You can't leave me..." he whispered again.

And then he broke. He wrapped his arms tightly around her, as if he could keep her from slipping away.

"Нет… Галя… не уходи…" (No... Galina... don't go...) he choked out through his sobs. "Ты не можешь уйти… слышишь меня…?" (You can't go... do you hear me...?)

His voice was low, broken, completely shattered.

"Я здесь… я здесь…" (I'm here... I'm here...)

Shane felt a massive knot form in his throat because he understood something in that exact moment: Galina wasn't just staff in the house; she was family to Ilya.

Ilya pressed his forehead against hers, still clinging to her, unable to let go.

"Ты обещала…" (You promised...) he whispered, his voice cracking. "Ты всегда была рядом…" (You were always by my side...)

His shoulders shook as he wept in silence. For the first time since Shane had known him... Ilya looked completely destroyed.

The echoes of gunfire were still reverberating through other parts of the house, but in this hallway, time felt frozen.

Ilya's men continued to secure the area, running through corridors, shouting orders, checking to see if any of Han Jisoo's men were still alive. The sound of violence was still real... but to Ilya, it no longer mattered. He remained on his knees, holding Galina in his arms, unable to pull away.

His breathing was ragged, broken, his face soaked with tears he didn't even bother to hide. His forehead remained pressed against hers, his hands holding her tight as if he could still protect her from the world.

Shane watched him from a few steps away, his heart aching. Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward. Walking quickly was difficult with his heavy bump, but he pushed through until he reached Ilya's side.

For a second, he didn't say anything; he just watched. Then, he carefully lowered himself to his knees beside him. Ilya didn't even seem to notice he was there, continuing to whisper in Russian, his voice barely above a breath, as if speaking to someone who could still hear him.

His hands were trembling. Shane reached out and gently laid a hand on Ilya's back. Ilya tensed slightly at the touch, and Shane wrapped an arm around him from the side, pulling him close with care and resting his head against Ilya's shoulder.

"Ilya..."

Shane's voice was soft, deeply comforting.

"I'm right here."

Ilya didn't answer right away, but his breath hitched even harder.

"I couldn't..." he choked out, his voice entirely broken. "I couldn't save her."

Shane tightened his embrace slightly.

"It wasn't your fault."

"She was my responsibility."

"No."

Ilya shook his head weakly, refusing to let go of Galina.

"She was always with me..." he said with difficulty. "Always."

Shane understood. He had seen how much she meant to him.

"I know, my love."

Ilya closed his eyes, trying to bottle up the pain, but it was impossible.

"This shouldn't have happened..."

Shane slowly rubbed Ilya's back, stroking him gently.

"Ilya..." he whispered. "She knew who you were."

Ilya didn't answer.

"She knew you would try to protect her," Shane continued softly. "She knew how much you loved her."

That made Ilya pull Galina's body a little tighter for a second.

Shane shifted closer, pressing his body against Ilya's. His large bump rested against Ilya's side.

"You're not alone."

Ilya turned his head slightly toward Shane, his eyes red and lost.

"I'm with you," Shane repeated. He reached up and, with extreme care, touched the arm Ilya was using to cradle Galina. "It's okay to cry," he whispered.

Ilya let out a shaky exhale that felt like it had been trapped in his chest forever, and finally dropped his forehead onto Shane's shoulder.

His massive, powerful frame trembled. Shane held him with everything he had, keeping his arms around him, softly stroking his back while he wept.

"I'm here..." Shane repeated softly. "I'm right here with you."

And for a long time, amid the ruin of the house and the aftermath of the attack, Ilya simply stayed like that—clinging to Galina, and held by Shane.

# Chapter 14

The cemetery was almost empty when the ceremony began.

The sky was a dull, uniform gray, as if the day itself were in mourning.

The air was cold and heavy, and everything seemed to move with a strange slowness, as if even time were respecting the moment.

The damp earth gave off that distinct smell that always accompanies burials, and the silence among the few people present was deep, uncomfortable, filled with something no one quite knew how to put into words.

Ilya stood in front of Galina’s coffin.

He didn’t move, he didn’t speak; he hardly seemed to breathe.

His posture remained straight, imposing as always, but there was something broken in the way his gaze was fixed on the dark wood. His eyes weren't focused on anyone else—not even on the people who had come to say goodbye. It was as if the whole world around him had drifted far away, completely out of reach.

Shane was by his side.

He had walked slowly to that spot, taking care with every step because of the weight of his seven-month belly, but he hadn't considered staying behind for a single moment. He knew Ilya needed him, even if he wouldn't say it out loud.

One of his hands rested almost instinctively over his bump, while the other hovered near Ilya’s arm, not touching him just yet—as if respecting that quiet space where Ilya seemed to be locked away.

The priest spoke in a low, measured voice, saying words that at any other time might have carried more weight.

He spoke of farewells, of rest, of memory, of the people who leave footprints in the lives of others. But to Ilya, all of it arrived muffled, distant. His attention was completely fixed on the coffin—on Galina, the woman who had been by his side for so many years. The one who had been in his life even before many of the people who worked for him today even knew him; the one who had scolded him, cared for him, protected him, and understood him when almost no one else did. And now she was right there, still forever.

Shane watched him carefully. Since everything had happened, Ilya hadn't cried again like he did that night, but that didn't mean the pain had lessened. On the contrary, it seemed to have become something heavier, quieter—like a massive stone lodged in his chest.

Gently, Shane finally reached out and took his hand. He didn't say a word; he just held it.

Ilya didn't react right away, but after a few seconds, his fingers squeezed lightly around Shane's, as if that simple contact were the only thing still tethering him to the present.

The ceremony continued in silence. One by one, some of the men from the house stepped forward to say goodbye, though none spoke for long.

Galina was respected, and everyone knew what she meant to Ilya; no one wanted to offer empty words.

When the time came to lower the coffin, the sky darkened even further.

The wind picked up slightly, and then the first few drops began to fall. At first they were sparse, scattered, barely noticeable, but gradually the rain grew steady, soaking the fresh earth around the grave.

People began to shift uncomfortably.

A few men exchanged glances, waiting for a sign from Ilya to leave, but Ilya didn't move. He kept watching as the coffin descended slowly.

Shane felt a tight knot in his chest seeing him like that.

The rain was starting to drench their coats and hair, but Ilya didn't seem to care in the slightest.

As the minutes passed, people began to respectfully slip away, one by one, leaving the grounds increasingly empty. No one wanted to push him; no one dared ask him to leave.

Soon, only a few men remained standing at a distance, along with Shane.

The rain was falling harder now.

The drops beat down against the earth, the now-covered coffin, and the flowers left on top of the grave.

Shane took a deep breath and stepped a little closer to Ilya.

"It's raining pretty hard," he said softly.

Ilya didn't answer right away.

His eyes remained glued to the spot where Galina was buried.

Water ran down his face, mixing with what might have still been the remains of tears.

Shane waited a few seconds before speaking again.

"We should go back home."

This time Ilya did react. He didn't turn completely toward him, but his voice came out low and flat.

"You go back."

Shane's brow furrowed slightly.

"I'm not leaving without you."

Ilya finally looked at him, and in his eyes was an immense exhaustion, a deep pain that seemed to have hollowed him out from the inside.

"I need to stay."

The rain kept coming down, colder with every minute.

Shane observed him in silence for a moment, seeing clearly how hard all of this was on him. Ilya wasn't someone who showed weakness easily, but losing Galina had struck something incredibly deep within him.

"You don't have to do this alone," Shane said gently.

Ilya gave a barely perceptible shake of his head.

"I'm not alone." He glanced briefly at Shane's belly. "I have you… and her."

Shane felt a dull ache in his heart hearing that, but he also understood what Ilya needed—just this moment, just this place.

"Then I'm staying with you," he said finally.

Ilya looked at him again, this time with a softer light in his eyes, though the pain remained.

"No. You'll get sick if you stay out in the rain."

"I don't care."

"I do."

Shane fell silent for a beat. He knew arguing with Ilya right now was pointless, but he couldn't bring himself to leave him either.

Ilya turned back to Galina's grave.

The rain pounded heavily on the freshly turned dirt, darkening it.

"Just a little while," he murmured. "Then I'll go home."

Shane watched him for a long moment.

Then he let out a soft sigh and gave his hand a gentle squeeze before letting go.

"Alright… but don't take long."

Ilya offered a faint nod.

Shane stayed by his side for one last moment, motionless, as if refusing to break that final shared quiet.

Then, with slow steps, he began to walk away.

Heavy rain poured down over the empty cemetery.

And Ilya remained there, standing before Galina's grave, without moving an inch.

•••

The house returned to a bustle of activity after the funeral, but it was a different kind of movement than before. Everything functioned as it should: the men kept watch, doors opened and closed, phones rang, orders were carried out. To an outsider, anyone would have said that nothing had truly fallen out of order.

Ilya remained the same in that regard.

He gave clear instructions, reviewed reports, and spoke to his men in his usual firm tone. No one saw him waver; no one saw him lose control. But Shane did. Because when Ilya thought no one was watching, his look would change. His eyes would fix on a spot for no reason, or he'd pause a few seconds too long before answering a simple question. At times, he seemed to be somewhere else entirely, far away from the room he was in.

That afternoon, Shane was watching him from the living room sofa while Ilya spoke with two of his men near the large table.

Shane had a blanket over his legs, and his huge belly rose beneath the fabric, shifting every now and then as the baby repositioned herself. He absentmindedly stroked his bump, but his focus was entirely on Ilya.

Ilya brought the conversation to an end with a short gesture, and the men dismissed themselves.

Once left alone, it took him a few seconds to realize Shane was watching him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Shane shook his head softly.

"Nothing."

Ilya gave him a look that clearly meant he didn't believe him.

Shane let out a quiet sigh and shifted on the sofa.

"You're acting… off."

Ilya's brow creased slightly.

"You always tell me that."

"Because it's true."

Ilya walked over and sat across from him, resting his elbows on his knees.

"I'm fine."

Shane looked at him in silence for a few seconds.

He knew it wasn't true.

But he also knew Ilya wasn't going to break easily.

"You don't have to pretend with me," he said finally, his voice gentle.

Ilya met his eyes.

For a long moment, he didn't answer.

Then he lowered his gaze to Shane's belly, which shifted again right at that moment.

Instinctively, he reached out and rested his hand there. It was an automatic gesture, almost necessary.

"I'm not pretending," he said after a while.

Shane didn't directly contradict him; he simply rested his hand over Ilya's.

"It's okay if it hurts."

Ilya didn't respond to that, but he didn't pull his hand away either.

The rest of the day passed in that strange stillness. Shane kept him company in silence, often just by being near. Ilya rotated between moments of total focus on work and others where he seemed to freeze without realizing it.

Even so, every time Shane shifted or winced from the weight of his pregnancy, Ilya was right there—adjusting a pillow, asking if he needed anything, or absently stroking his belly as if doing so calmed him down too.

Night arrived slowly, and the house finally fell quiet.

When they went up to the bedroom, Shane was exhausted. The pregnancy was taking a heavy toll on his body at this stage, and the emotional intensity of the day was catching up with him as well.

Ilya helped settle him into bed with care, arranging pillows behind his back and placing another beneath his legs.

"Is that okay?" he asked.

"Yes, my love."

Shane watched him as Ilya moved around the room, turning off one of the lights. There was a heavy tension lingering in the air.

Ilya stood still for a moment, looking out the window where soft rain was still pattering against the glass.

Shane observed him quietly.

"Ilya."

He didn't reply right away.

"You can talk to me."

Ilya rested a hand on the edge of the nightstand, his shoulders tensing slightly.

"I don't know what to say."

Shane shifted a bit to get comfortable and offered a gentle beckoning gesture.

"Come here."

Ilya hesitated for a second, but ultimately walked over and sat on the edge of the bed.

The silence stretched on for a few moments, and then something inside him finally gave way.

It didn't happen all at once; it was as if a pressure he had been carrying inside for days was slowly starting to release.

Ilya ran a hand over his face, letting out a long, slow breath.

"She…" he started, his voice cracking slightly. "Galina was with me since I was practically a kid."

Shane listened without interrupting.

"When everything was… worse," Ilya continued. "When I still had nothing."

His gaze was lost in some distant memory.

"She was the only person who would tell me when I was doing something stupid."

Shane smiled faintly, with a touch of sadness.

"I can imagine."

Ilya let out a quiet breath that was almost a dry laugh.

"She yelled at me a lot." The silence returned for a moment. "But she was also…" Ilya swallowed hard. "She was always there."

His hands tightened slightly over his knees.

"When no one else trusted me… she did."

Shane placed a comforting hand on his arm.

Ilya kept talking, his voice dropping lower now.

"The first time I got shot, she was the one who brought me to the doctor. She didn't even ask any questions—she just yelled at me the entire drive there."

Shane looked at him with a mix of tenderness and heartache.

"She always used to say I was going to die young if I kept going like that."

"Well…" Shane murmured softly, "she wasn't completely wrong. That's something I worry about too."

That drew a small, subdued laugh from Ilya—his first in days—though his expression quickly shifted back.

"It shouldn't have happened," he said under his breath. "I was supposed to protect her."

Shane shook his head gently.

"Ilya…"

"I brought her into this world," Ilya continued. "Into this life, into this house." His eyes glinted with unshed tears again. "And she died because of it."

Shane squeezed his arm tightly.

"She died protecting something she loved."

Ilya fell silent.

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if that thought hurt him and brought him comfort all at once.

Quiet settled between them, the rain continuing to patter softly against the windowpane.

After a while, Shane spoke up again.

"I was thinking about something."

Ilya looked at him.

"What?"

Shane hesitated briefly before speaking.

"Maybe…" he gently stroked his bump, "we could name her after her."

Ilya's brow furrowed slightly.

"After Galina?"

Shane nodded slowly.

"Yes."

The baby kicked right at that moment, as if responding.

Shane let out a soft smile.

"I think she would have liked that."

Ilya stared at Shane's belly, then raised his gaze back to his face.

He said nothing for a few seconds, but something in his expression shifted—turning softer, warmer.

"Galina…" he repeated quietly.

Testing out the name.

Shane nodded.

"That way, she'll always be with us."

Ilya lowered his gaze back to Shane's stomach, resting his hand there with immense care this time.

"I think…" his voice sounded steadier now, "she would have found it amusing."

Shane smiled.

"Yeah, I think so too."

Ilya kept his hand over Shane's bump for a long time, and though the pain remained—heavy and real—for the first time since the funeral, he seemed a little less alone.

•••

The weeks dragged by with a heavy slowness, as though time itself had grown thicker since Galina's death.

The house settled back into its routine, but something had fundamentally changed for everyone. Galina's absence was felt in the smallest details: in the quieter kitchen, in the

hallways where her voice used to echo as she gave orders or scolded someone, in the way some of the men avoided looking at a certain door that used to always stay open.

Ilya threw himself back into work with intensity—perhaps even more than before. He spent hours in his office settling matters, meeting with people, and reorganizing operations following the attack.

To anyone watching, he looked like the same leader he had always been: steady, efficient, cold when necessary. But Shane knew it was just his way of pressing forward, of refusing to sit still with his memories for too long.

That afternoon, Shane was in the living room, propped up on the large couch that had practically become his.

At this late stage of the pregnancy, his belly was massive, heavy, and round in a way that made it obvious birth was right around the corner.

It was hard for him to get up on his own, hard to sleep, hard to even find a comfortable way to sit.

Surrounded by several pillows, he breathed more deeply than usual while absentmindedly rubbing his stomach.

The baby was moving around quite a bit.

"Yeah, I know…" he murmured with a small, tired smile. "I'm uncomfortable too. Not much longer now."

The living room door opened right then, and Ilya walked in. He had been working all day, but the moment he saw Shane, the look on his face changed instantly. It was something that had become second nature: no matter how busy or consumed Ilya was, Shane always managed to break through that barrier of focus the second he was in front of him.

Ilya approached without saying anything at first. He stopped right before him and studied him for a few seconds.

"You're tired."

Shane raised an eyebrow.

"That wasn't a question."

"It wasn't."

Shane let out a short laugh.

"Yeah, I'm tired. This little person weighs way too much."

Ilya carefully placed a hand on his belly, and the baby shifted almost immediately.

"She's strong."

"She's huge," Shane corrected. "I don't think I have any space left inside me."

Ilya sat down beside him.

Neither of them spoke for a few moments.

Ilya seemed lost in thought, and Shane caught onto it.

"What's on your mind?"

Ilya looked up at him.

"I was thinking about something… if we name her Galina…" he said, "I want her to have my last name."

Shane blinked, caught off guard.

"Your last name?"

Ilya nodded.

"Rozanov."

The silence that followed wasn't tense; it was heavy with emotion.

Shane looked at him closely.

"Are you sure?"

Ilya held his gaze.

"Yes."

Shane lowered his eyes to his bump.

Ilya's hand was still resting there—large, steady, and protective.

"So she'd be… Galina Rozanova," Shane murmured softly.

Ilya gave a slow nod.

"If that's what you want."

Shane looked back up at him.

His eyes were soft, brimming with emotion.

"I love it."

Ilya didn't add anything else, but his posture relaxed slightly, as if that single decision carried far more weight than it let on.

Shane offered a gentle smile.

"I think she would have been thrilled."

Ilya pondered that.

"Yeah."

The baby gave another kick beneath his palm.

"You felt that, right?" Shane asked.

"I felt it."

Shane chuckled under his breath.

"She's already giving her seal of approval."

•••

The days dragged on, growing progressively slower and heavier for Shane. By this point, he was moving very slowly through the house and frequently needed help standing up. Ilya was constantly watching over him, even while keeping up with his heavy workload.

Every night, he made sure to carefully settle Shane into bed, surrounding him with supportive pillows.

Late one night, the house was completely quiet. Most of the men were either asleep or posted on guard duty outside.

Shane was sound asleep at first, but suddenly something jolted him awake—a pain unlike any of the dull aches he'd felt before. This was sharp, intense, and deep.

He opened his eyes slowly, confused at first, taking a few seconds to register that something wasn't right.

He drew a sharp breath, and the pain hit again, stronger this time.

"Ah…"

He brought a hand to his belly. The baby hadn't been moving much for the past few days, but now there was an intense pressure—a strange, tight sensation rolling through his entire body.

"Ilya…" he murmured, still half-asleep.

Ilya was lying right beside him and woke up immediately at the sound of his voice.

"What's wrong?"

Shane took a deep breath, trying to collect himself.

Another pain surged through him, impossible to ignore this time. He leaned forward slightly, clutching the bedsheets.

"Ilya…"

Ilya was instantly fully alert.

"What is it? Are you in pain?"

Shane nodded as another contraction settled in, clearer and sharper now.

Shane closed his eyes with a wince, and then it clicked.

When the wave passed, he looked up at Ilya again.

His voice came out low, but steady.

"Ilya… the baby's coming."

For a split second, Ilya froze completely, processing what he had just heard.

Then he bolted out of bed in an instant.

"We're going to the hospital right now."

•••

The drive to the hospital was a blur of tense silence and ragged breaths.

Ilya drove with absolute focus, his knuckles white on the steering wheel, but his eyes darted to Shane every few seconds. He didn't look like the cold, ruthless man who could orchestrate dangerous operations without batting an eye—he was visibly terrified.

Shane leaned forward slightly in the passenger seat, practicing the breathing techniques he'd been taught during his prenatal checkups. Every so often, a harsh contraction forced him to shut his eyes tight and dig his fingers into his seatbelt.

"Breathe with me," Ilya said, though his own voice carried a slight tremor.

Shane managed a weak, breathy laugh.

"I think… I'm the one who's supposed to be saying that."

Another contraction hit.

Shane clenched his jaw, and Ilya pressed harder on the accelerator.

"We're almost there."

The moment they passed through the hospital doors, everything dissolved into chaotic motion: nurses, doctors, rapid-fire questions, a wheelchair, blinding fluorescent lights. But Ilya didn't leave Shane's side for a single second; he never let go of his hand.

Inside the delivery room, the atmosphere was warm yet charged.

Monitors chimed, footsteps hurried, and the medical team issued calm, precise instructions.

Shane lay back, drenched in sweat, hair clinging to his forehead, breathing heavily through the exertion.

Ilya stood right beside the bed, still gripping his hand tight. For the first time in a long while, he looked genuinely frightened.

Not because of a fight.

Not because of enemies.

Because of something entirely different.

"Shane…" he whispered, leaning in close. "I'm right here."

Shane looked up at him.

His eyes were glassy, but he offered a small, weary smile.

"I know."

Another contraction struck, much stronger than the ones before.

Shane squeezed Ilya's hand with everything he had.

"Ah… fuck…"

Ilya didn't even register the swearing; he was far too dialed in on Shane.

"Breathe… just breathe with me," he repeated frantically.

Shane looked at him, equal parts exasperated and amused.

"You're so hovering…"

"Yeah, I know."

"Well… it's helping right now."

The doctor stepped up to check on him.

"Everything's progressing well. Not much longer."

Ilya narrowed his eyes slightly.

"How long is 'not much longer'?"

The doctor gave a gentle smile.

"That depends on her… and on him."

Shane let out a huff.

"Great."

More time slipped by.

The pain rolled in like heavy waves, closer and closer together. Shane was running on fumes, but he pushed through. Ilya kept hold of his hand, occasionally brushing damp strands of hair behind his ear, or leaning in so Shane could rest his forehead against his during the worst of the contractions.

At one point, Shane forced his eyes open and stared at him intently.

"If we ever… want to do this again…" he panted out between breaths, "remind me to say no."

Ilya let out a nervous, breathless chuckle.

"I'll remind you."

"I'm serious."

"I know."

Another contraction cut him off.

Ilya felt Shane's grip tighten fiercely, and he didn't pull back a single millimeter. The doctor checked him again and gave a decisive nod.

"Alright, it's time."

The energy in the room shifted instantly into absolute focus.

"Shane, listen to me," the doctor said calmly. "When I tell you to, I need you to push."

Shane nodded, drawing in a ragged breath.

Ilya leaned right down beside him.

"I'm right here."

"Don't leave," Shane whispered.

"Not a chance in hell."

The prompt came.

Shane pushed with every ounce of strength left in his body, the intense strain showing in every muscle. Ilya watched him with a raw blend of awe and sheer worry that he didn't even attempt to hide.

"That's it, doing great," the doctor urged.

One more push, then another—and then, a small, fragile sound cut through the room: a sharp little cry.

The heavy air in the delivery room cleared in an instant.

Ilya went completely motionless, his eyes widening.

The doctor carefully lifted the baby.

"Congratulations."

They quickly wiped her down as her soft crying filled the space.

"She's a healthy little girl."

Ilya remained rooted to the spot, looking completely lost on what to do next.

A nurse gave him a warm smile.

"Dad? Would you like to come closer?"

Ilya snapped out of his daze. He didn't know whether to correct her and say he wasn't the father, but in that moment, none of that seemed to matter anymore. He stepped forward slowly and looked at her.

She was tiny—so incredibly tiny—wrapped snugly in a blanket.

Her skin was soft, her eyes narrow slits just like Shane's, and dark hair was plastered to her tiny head.

Ilya swallowed hard.

"She's… so small."

The nurse chuckled softly.

"They all are at first."

Shane lifted his head slightly from the pillow.

"Can I see her?"

They brought her over, carefully placing her on his chest.

The baby made a faint snuffling noise and instinctively snuggled close.

Shane stared down at her, his eyes brimming with raw emotion.

"Hey there…" he whispered. "Galina."

Ilya stood right beside them, watching the two of them.

Something in his face softened entirely.

The fear was still there, but beneath it was something vastly greater—pure, unadulterated tenderness.

"She has your eyes," he said softly.

Shane offered a tired smile.

"I hope she gets your strength."

Ilya hesitated for a beat.

Then, with agonizing care, he extended a single finger near the baby's tiny hand.

Galina's little fingers instinctively curled around his.

Ilya froze completely, and Shane looked up at him.

"Looks like she's already chosen you."

Ilya let out a quiet, disbelieving breath, almost overcome with emotion.

"She's too little to choose."

"Doesn't seem like it."

Ilya gazed down at her for a few moments longer, his voice dropping softer than it had ever been.

"Privet, malenkaya Galina… я здесь." (Hello, little Galina… I'm right here.)

# Chapter 15

The house came back to life, but it was a different kind of life than before; the sound that now dominated everything was the crying of a newborn.

Galina had been home for barely a few days and seemed to have boundless energy for crying. She was small, delicate, with slanted eyes that she barely opened at times, as if the world were still too big for her, but her voice was strong... very strong.

That morning, the crying started before dawn.
Shane was sitting on the bed, hair disheveled, shirt unbuttoned, holding the baby in his arms. The room was dimly lit by a faint lamp because it was still dark outside.

Galina cried with a wrinkled face, moving her little arms in desperation.
Shane sighed, exhausted.

"Shh… shh… easy, easy…"

He rocked her gently against his chest, walking slowly around the room because standing still only seemed to make things worse. His steps were still slow; his body remained heavy from the delivery, and getting a good night's sleep had become almost impossible.

"You just ate…" he murmured softly, looking down at the baby. "There's no way you're hungry again already."

Galina responded with another loud cry, and Shane closed his eyes for a second.

"Alright… alright, it's okay."

He sat back down on the bed and adjusted the baby to nurse her. Galina latched on right away, still making small fussing sounds in between.
The room returned to silence… or at least a relative silence, as the soft sound of the baby feeding filled the space.
Shane looked down at her, his eyes softening.

"You're so tiny…" he whispered. "Did you know that? Tiny and all mine."

The baby didn't answer, obviously, but the tension in her body loosened a bit.

For a while, everything was peaceful, but it didn't last long.

Later that same day, Ilya had already left for work.
He had spent some time with them in the morning before heading out, watching the baby with a mix of fascination and nervousness that still hadn't faded. But responsibilities called, and though he tried to come home earlier now, some days it was simply impossible—and today was one of those days.

Shane was in the living room.
The house was large, but today it felt far too quiet… except for Galina, who was crying once again.

Shane sat on the couch with the baby in his arms, rocking back and forth slightly. He had dark circles under his eyes, a look of fatigue that wouldn't go away, and a blanket draped over his shoulders because he was always a little cold.

"Galina…" he said patiently, "sweetheart, we've tried everything."

The baby cried louder, and Shane let out a deep sigh.

"You ate… I changed you… I put you to sleep… you woke up again…"

He lifted her slightly to look at her; Galina's face was red from the effort of crying, and Shane felt himself starting to get a bit overwhelmed. He wasn't angry with her, just utterly exhausted.

He stood up carefully and began pacing the living room again.

"Alright… let's try this."

He leaned her against his shoulder and gently patted her back.

"Shh… shh…"

For a few seconds, she seemed to calm down, but suddenly she burst into louder tears again.

Shane let out a long, almost resigned sigh.

"Alright… alright… I get it, today isn't going to be a peaceful day."

He walked over to the large living room window and looked outside for a moment. The garden was quiet; a few of the men around the house were talking among themselves in the distance. Life went on, but inside him, an overwhelming exhaustion was building up.

He returned to the couch and sat down.
Galina kept crying.
Shane rested his head against the backrest for a second.

"I promise you I'm trying everything," he murmured, half-laughing out of sheer exhaustion. "You're a very demanding boss."

The baby waved her tiny hands in the air as the crying continued, and Shane took a deep breath.

"Alright… let's try again."

He adjusted himself to nurse her once more.
This time Galina took a little longer to latch, but eventually, she did. Shane held her carefully,

watching her tiny head and delicate eyelashes, his expression softening once more.

"Even if you cry all day…" he whispered, "you're beautiful."

After a while, the baby finally fell asleep.
The shift was so sudden that Shane took a few seconds to realize it and looked down.

"Really?"

Galina was fast asleep now, breathing softly.
Shane let out a quiet sigh of relief.

"Thank you."

He held her for a few more minutes without moving, as if any slight motion might break the fragile miracle of silence.

When he finally carried her to the portable crib they had set up in the living room, he did so with extreme delicacy. He settled her in and waited.

Galina shifted a little… but stayed asleep.
Shane slowly sank into the couch and closed his eyes. But the silence lasted barely five minutes before the crying started right up again.

Shane snapped his eyes open and looked at the crib.

"No…" he said under his breath, incredulous. "You've got to be kidding me."

Galina was crying again.
Shane ran a hand over his face and let out a tired chuckle.

"Alright… you win."

He stood up once more and carefully picked her up.
Just then, the front door opened, followed by familiar footsteps: Ilya was back.

Shane was standing in the middle of the living room holding the crying baby when Ilya walked into the entryway. Ilya froze for a second taking in the scene.

Shane had messy hair, a rumpled shirt, and an exhausted expression… yet he was still rocking the baby with endless patience.
Ilya approached slowly.

"Has she been like this for long?"

Shane looked at him with a mix of relief and exhaustion.

"Hours."

Ilya frowned slightly.

"Did you sleep at all?"

Shane thought about it.

"I'm not sure."

Ilya held out his arms.

"Give her to me."

Shane hesitated for just a fraction of a second, as if reluctant to let her go, but finally handed her over.
Ilya held her carefully, still getting the hang of it.
Galina kept crying for another moment… and then began to settle down.
Shane looked at him, astonished.

"Traitor."

Ilya raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe she just wanted to see me."

Shane let out a tired laugh.

"Right, I'm sure that's it."

Ilya looked at Shane more closely, lowering his voice.

"You're exhausted."

Shane didn't deny it; he just sighed.

"A little."

Ilya drew the baby closer to his chest and rocked her gently.

"Come here," he said. "Sit with me."

Shane walked over and collapsed next to him on the couch.
For a few seconds they stayed silent, just the three of them together.

The baby calmed down completely.
Ilya looked down at her in awe; she had been in the world for a week now, and yet to him, she still felt like a miracle.

"She's very loud."

Shane rested his head against Ilya's shoulder.

"You have no idea. It's been like this all day."

Ilya turned his head slightly toward him and kissed his forehead.

•••

During the day, Shane did everything he could to soothe a newborn who seemed to never tire of crying. But at night, when the front door opened and Ilya's heavy footsteps echoed through the house, something curious usually happened: somehow, the baby would calm down.

That night, Shane was pacing the living room again with Galina in his arms.

The baby was crying stubbornly, her small face scrunched up from the effort while her little arms flailed impatiently.

"Galina…" Shane murmured with patience that was running dangerously thin. "I don't know what you want, sweetie, you're driving me crazy."

The baby responded with another loud wail.
Shane let out a long sigh and pressed his cheek against the little girl's head, swaying gently to try and soothe her.

"I think you're waiting for someone," he added softly. "You like it when he comes home, don't you?"

Just then, the sound of the front door opening echoed down the hallway, followed by low voices, firm footsteps, and the familiar sound of someone taking off a coat.

Ilya appeared in the living room doorway a few seconds later, still carrying the chill of the outside air on his face and the stern expression he brought from work.

The first thing he saw was Shane pacing with the baby, and the second was the crying.

Ilya tossed his coat onto a chair and walked over without saying much. His gaze shifted attentively from Shane to the baby.

"Has she been like this long?"

Shane looked at him with relief he barely bothered to hide—every time Ilya arrived, everything magically settled down.

"A while."

Ilya naturally held out his arms, as if he already knew what to do.

Shane carefully passed Galina over. The moment the baby was leaned against Ilya's chest, the change was immediate.

He lowered his voice right away, using that gentle tone that seemed reserved strictly for her.

"Privet, malenkaya… easy now."

The baby whimpered a bit more, but the crying slowly began to taper off. Shane watched the scene from the couch where he had finally dropped down, as though his body had suddenly remembered how exhausted it was.

"I don't understand how you do that," Shane said after a few seconds.

Ilya paced slowly around the living room while rocking her gently—slow, deliberate movements that contrasted wildly with his massive frame and dangerous reputation.

"Maybe she likes my voice."

Shane gave a faint smile.

"Maybe she knows you're intimidating and prefers to behave."

Ilya glanced at him sideways but didn't reply. Instead, he kept watching the baby with almost hypnotic intensity. He was completely besotted with her.

After a moment, he looked back at Shane.

"Did you eat?"

Shane took a second to answer.

"Something."

Ilya narrowed his eyes slightly, clearly unsatisfied with that answer.

"We'll deal with that in a minute," he said calmly.

The baby was almost asleep now. Her movements had slowed down, her breathing turning even and quiet. Ilya offered a small smile as he held her carefully, still learning every little gesture.

Shane watched them from the couch with a mix of tenderness and fatigue.

"I spent an hour trying to do that," he remarked.

Ilya raised an eyebrow.

"Clearly, she needed a professional."

Shane let out a soft, tired laugh.

"Right. The baby whisperer."

Ilya took a few more steps around the living room, leaning down to gently kiss the top of Galina's head; it was at that exact moment that the baby made a strange little noise.

A second later, she spit up milk directly onto Ilya's shoulder.

A brief silence fell. Shane blinked a couple of times before an inevitable laugh escaped him.

"No… no way."

Ilya froze completely, staring straight ahead as if still processing what had just happened. Then he slowly looked down at his shirt: it was covered in spit-up.

Shane was openly laughing by now.

"She picked you."

Ilya looked down at the baby, who was sleeping peacefully as if nothing had happened, completely oblivious to the disaster.

"Betrayal," he murmured with utter gravity.

"Welcome to my world," Shane replied, still amused.

At that moment, Ilya's phone started ringing.
He carefully pulled the device from his pocket, trying not to disturb the baby too much. He checked the screen, and his expression shifted slightly.

"Perfect," he muttered.

He answered as he walked toward the hallway, still holding Galina against his chest… and still covered in spit-up.

"What's going on?" he asked in a low voice.

The person on the other end started speaking fast. Ilya's brow furrowed as he listened, irritation clearly building up.
However, looking down at the baby sleeping soundly against him, he kept his voice down to a restrained, low growl.

"No, I told you that was getting handled today."

He listened for a few more seconds, his jaw tightening.

"I don't care about the excuse."

From the living room, Shane watched the scene with a poorly concealed grin. Ilya was pacing slowly down the hallway, gently swaying the baby while arguing on the phone… covered in spit-up.

"Listen to me carefully," Ilya whispered in a tone that was unmistakably threatening, despite being low. "If that problem is still there tomorrow, I'll fix it myself." He paused. "And you won't like how."

The baby shifted slightly, nestling against his chest. Ilya automatically lowered his voice even further.

"I'm dead serious."

Shane couldn't help but chime in from the living room, half-laughing.

"Ilya… you're covered in throw-up."

Ilya turned his head to look at him with an expression somewhere between resigned and mildly annoyed.

"I know."

He returned to the phone.

"I'll call you tomorrow."

He hung up and stood still in the hallway for a few seconds, looking down at the baby resting peacefully on him. Then he let out a sigh, accepting his fate.

Shane stood up slowly and walked over to him.

"Hand her to me for a second and go change."

Ilya gently shook his head.

"If I move her now, she'll wake up."

Shane looked at him with a soft smile.

"You are completely wrapped around her finger."

Ilya looked back down at Galina, taking in her small, peaceful face. When he spoke, his voice softened into the tone reserved only for her.

"Probably… and around yours, too."

•••

By the time Galina turned one month old, the house began to settle into a new rhythm. The baby didn't cry as much as before; she slept for longer stretches, and her awakenings were a bit more predictable.

Shane was still tired, of course, but he no longer felt like he was surviving minute by minute. There were peaceful moments now, real pauses in the day—like this afternoon.

Lunch was served in the garden, something Ilya had insisted on because the weather was pleasant and the sunlight filtered nicely through the trees in the backyard.

A large wooden table occupied the center of the patio, surrounded by a calm that wasn't always common in that house.

Shane sat in one of the chairs, holding Galina.
The baby was awake and calm, wrapped in a light blanket.
Her eyes surveyed everything with a serious concentration that always brought a smile to Shane's face.

Ilya sat across from them wearing sunglasses, leaning back in his chair.

He had been holding his phone to his ear for a few minutes, listening to someone with a level of patience that was clearly wearing thin.

Shane knew that expression well; it wasn't going to last much longer.
Galina began to get a little restless, making soft fussing sounds. Shane carefully adjusted her and unbuttoned his shirt slightly so she could nurse.

"Come here," he murmured softly. "Time to eat."

The baby latched on immediately, quiet and focused.

The garden remained quiet for a few more seconds until Ilya spoke up.

"No," he said firmly into the phone. "I told you that stays untouched."

There was a pause while the person on the other end spoke.
Ilya tilted his head slightly, still calm, but his jaw clenched.

"Listen to me carefully: if anyone puts their hands where they don't belong again, I'll break their fingers one by one before cutting off their hand."

Shane glanced up at him briefly, fully accustomed to these types of conversations… though he always preferred they didn't happen right in front of the baby.

Galina was nursing peacefully, but when Ilya raised his voice slightly, something curious happened: the baby stopped eating, turned her head just a bit, and looked at him.

She didn't cry, she didn't get scared; she simply watched him, a tiny wrinkle forming between her small eyebrows as if she were evaluating what she was hearing.

Ilya kept talking.

"Don't give me excuses," he continued. "If I have to come down there personally, I will. And when I arrive, the next conversation won't be over the phone—it'll be with someone tied to a chair while I slowly explain which body part they lose first."

Shane let out a quiet sigh.
Galina kept staring at him.
Ilya paused to listen to the response, and in that moment, he noticed something.

He lowered his head slightly and saw the baby staring right at him with that little furrowed brow that was already becoming her default expression whenever something caught her

attention.
Ilya went silent a second longer than the person on the phone expected.

"Hold on," he murmured.

He pulled the phone away from his ear slightly and looked down at Galina.

She didn't break eye contact.

Ilya slowly reached out and stroked her cheek with the tip of his finger, with a gentleness that contrasted absurdly with what he had been saying just seconds ago.

"Sweetheart…" he said in a low voice, "these people only understand things this way… and a few others…."

"Ilya!" Shane immediately protested.

Ilya glanced up at him from behind his sunglasses.

"What?"

"Don't say things like that in front of her."

Ilya looked back down at Galina, who was still observing him with the same serious expression.

"I'm not going to lie to her. When I'm not around, all of this is going to be hers, and I don't want her depending on anyone."

"My god…"

Ilya returned to his phone call.

"Are you still there?" he asked, bringing back his stern tone.

The person on the other end started talking rapidly again.

Ilya rested his elbow on the table, his voice hardening once more, though no longer as loud.

"I'm only going to explain this one last time. If that shipment isn't where it needs to be tomorrow, I will come find you myself. And when I do, you'll wish the only problem was losing money."

Shane looked back down at Galina.
After a few seconds, the baby went back to focusing on eating, as if she had decided the matter was no longer that interesting.

Shane smiled a little.
Ilya kept talking.

"Don't push me," he added with dangerous calm. "Because when I get bored, the only thing that entertains me is the sound of snapping bones…"

He listened for a few more seconds.
Then he spoke again, his voice chillingly cold.

"If I have to describe in detail what happens to someone when they're left without air inside a shipping container in the middle of the ocean, I will. But I'd prefer we don't reach that point."

Shane looked at him again, half-exasperated.

"Ilya…"

Ilya raised a hand in a "give me a second" gesture as he continued listening.

Finally, after a few more seconds, his expression relaxed slightly.

"Good. Then get it done," he said. "And make sure the next time we talk, it's to tell me everything is settled."

He hung up, and silence returned to the garden at last.
Ilya placed his phone on the table and took off his sunglasses. His eyes went straight back to Galina.

The baby was quiet now, focused on finishing her meal.

"She's observant," Ilya commented.

Shane let out a soft laugh.

"She's your daughter."

Ilya leaned forward slightly and stroked her cheek gently once more.

"She's already judging me."

Shane smiled.

"Or even worse… she's learning."

Ilya smiled, and Shane could have sworn he saw a gleam of pride in his eyes upon hearing that.

# Chapter 16

The house was quiet that night, a different kind of quiet than before—more domestic, more alive.

Ever since Galina turned four months old, the nights had changed again; it seemed that every month everything shifted. Now she was sleeping better, waking up less, and that had begun to give Shane and Ilya back something they hadn't had in a long time: time for themselves. But it had also reawakened the accumulated desire, which was, admittedly, a lot.

Shane was in the bedroom, finishing arranging the blanket in the crib they had placed near the bed.

Galina was fast asleep, her mouth slightly ajar and her tiny fists clenched against her chest.

When Shane turned around, Ilya was leaning against the doorframe watching him. There was something different in his gaze that night, something Shane recognized right away, because he had been feeling it himself for weeks: a tension they couldn't hold back anymore.

"Is she asleep?" Ilya asked softly.

"Yes," Shane replied. "Finally."

Ilya nodded, but didn't move from his spot, his eyes locked on Shane.

Shane noticed and smiled faintly.

"What's wrong?"

It took Ilya a second to respond; even from where he stood, he could feel an electric current running through his whole body.

"I've been looking at you like this for four months."

Shane raised an eyebrow, amused but also fully aware of what was happening between them.

"Don't exaggerate... we do things sometimes."

Ilya took a step into the room, closing the door gently behind him.

"Things that aren't enough for me."

The air in the room shifted slowly. Shane felt it in the way Ilya walked toward him, in how his presence filled the space.

Shane rested a hand on the dresser behind him.

"You're... dark tonight."

"No," Ilya said in a low voice. "I'm tired of waiting."

Shane let out a nervous little laugh.

"Waiting for what?"

Ilya reached him and stood very close.

"For you."

The silence that followed was heavy.

Shane looked him in the eye, and for a second both seemed to remember all the times in those months they had stopped halfway: exhaustion, the baby, the fear of waking her, life changing around them.

But the desire hadn't gone away; it had built up.

Shane swallowed, feeling a rush of heat inside.

"Ilya…"

Ilya rested a hand on Shane's waist and pulled him a little closer.

The touch was enough; Shane exhaled slowly.

"God…" he muttered, feeling how that light touch warmed him. He was still amazed at it, at how he was capable of getting so turned on despite everything he had been through, but that was just how it was, and the reason was clear: Ilya Rozanov drove him crazy.

Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's.

"You have no idea how much I want you. I can't take it anymore."

Shane let out a low, nervous laugh and bit his lip slightly.

"Yes, I do."

Ilya kissed him, and it wasn't a soft kiss like the ones they had been sharing over the past few months. It was intense, deep, as if they were both reclaiming something they had missed for way too long.

Shane responded immediately, grabbing Ilya's shirt and pulling him closer, their tongues battling while their bodies pressed so tightly together they seemed like one.

"I miss you," Shane whispered against his mouth, unbuttoning his pants.

"I'm right here," Ilya answered.

Ilya was already rock hard; Shane felt it as Ilya gently pushed him onto the bed, never stopping the kiss, his breathing growing heavier.

There was urgency in their movements, a kind of desperation kept under wraps for too long.

Shane looked at him, his eyes shining with desire.

"You're completely hard," he said, reaching in to take Ilya's dick in his hand and moving his fingers a bit, feeling the outline of his veins, so terribly swollen with heat.

Ilya placed his hands on either side of Shane on the bed, leaning over him.

"I can't think when you're this close."

Shane let out a breathless laugh.

"Liar."

"No," Ilya said. "Seriously."

He leaned in closer.

Shane could feel how tense he was, his fingers gripping him like a rod made of anything but human flesh, completely rigid.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard tonight..." Ilya added in a low voice.

Shane reached up and grabbed the back of Ilya's neck, pulling him down again while continuing to stroke him with his other hand.

"Then do it fast. I can't take it anymore, I want you inside me."

The tension between them spiked instantly.

The kisses grew rougher, more urgent.

Shane tugged at Ilya's shirt, and Ilya responded by gripping his waist tightly, as if he were truly struggling to keep control.

"Shane…" Ilya whispered against his neck.

"Yes," Shane answered, his breathing fast. "Yes, I know."

They were both completely lost in the moment. After so long, the desire felt stronger, more electric.

Ilya was practically draped over him, pressing his body against Shane's.

"I want to hear you moan so bad," he said softly.

Shane felt like his dick was going to explode—wet, restless, and desperate.

"I'm going to moan your name until I can't say anything else."

Ilya was about to answer when a sound broke the silence—a familiar little whimper.

Both froze and looked toward the crib. Right on cue, Galina started to cry.

Shane closed his eyes for a moment, completely crushed by frustration.

"Unbelievable."

Ilya remained motionless over him, clearly processing what had just happened.

The crying grew louder. Shane opened his eyes and looked at him.

"Our daughter is calling for us."

Ilya dropped his forehead against Shane's shoulder, letting out a long, frustrated sigh.

"I respect her a lot… I love her very much... but this timing was not ideal."

Shane started laughing.

"Go get her before she wakes up the whole house."

Ilya got off the bed slowly, still wearing that mix of frustration and desperation on his face.

"This isn't over."

Shane looked at him with a tired but crystal-clear smile.

"No, definitely not."

•••

Ilya picked her up while Galina kept crying.

The crying, though loud, wasn't frantic; it was more of that insistent demand they were getting to know so well. Ilya held her against his chest and walked slowly around the room while Shane sat up in bed, still breathing a bit heavily from what had just been interrupted.

"I think she's hungry again," Shane said with a tired half-smile.

Ilya looked at the baby, then at Shane.

"I've been hungry for months and I don't cry like that."

Shane let out a quiet laugh and reached out his arms to take her. As soon as Galina was in his arms, the crying subsided into small whimpers. Shane settled back against the pillows and naturally pulled up his shirt, guiding the baby so she could feed.

The room fell quiet again, except for Galina's soft breathing and the calm sounds of the night outside.

Ilya, on the other hand, was far from calm.

He stood beside the bed, watching them.

His eyes shifted from Shane to the baby and back to Shane with intense focus. He had tried to cool down when he got out of bed, but the built-up desire hadn't faded; if anything, it felt worse now that he was trying to ignore it.

Shane noticed right away.

He looked up at him with an expression that blended amusement and subtle teasing.

"What?"

Ilya shook his head, slowly exhaling.

"Nothing."

"Liar."

Ilya ran a hand through his hair, clearly trying to pull himself together.

"I'm trying to act like a reasonable person."

Shane smiled.

"And how's that going?"

Ilya looked straight at him.

"Terribly."

Shane looked down at Galina for a moment to make sure she was settled, then looked back up. There was something in his expression that made it clear he wasn't exactly calm either.

"You have to wait," he whispered.

Ilya let out a low, disbelieving laugh.

"That's literally what I've been doing for months."

"A little longer," Shane replied softly. "Just until she falls back asleep."

"I was never a patient man."

"Well," Shane said, looking at Galina, "I guess a four-month-old baby is teaching you to be one."

Ilya rested a hand on the edge of the bed, leaning in slightly toward him. He lowered his voice, as if the baby could understand every word.

"You have no idea how hard it is to look at you like this and not touch you."

Shane raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, I do."

Ilya sighed and straightened up, forcing himself to take a few steps back to avoid further temptation.

He walked over to the window, rested his hands on the frame, and stared out into the dark garden, trying to clear his head.

Behind him, Shane continued to feed Galina patiently. The baby had completely calmed down, focused on eating with that serious little face she usually made.

"She's quiet now," Shane said after a while.

Ilya looked over his shoulder.

"Don't tell me that yet."

Shane smiled.

A few more minutes passed in silence until Galina finally began drifting off again. Her body relaxed, her movements slowing.

Shane waited a bit longer before carefully lifting her up.

He walked over to the crib and laid her down gently, adjusting the blanket with the delicate touch of someone who had learned how to do it without waking her.

Ilya watched every move.

When Shane finally turned back toward him, the atmosphere between them shifted again.

No more distractions.

They looked at each other for a few seconds before Ilya moved first.

He crossed the room in a few quick strides and grabbed Shane by the waist, pulling him close all at once. Shane let out a surprised gasp that instantly turned into a lower, heavier breath.

"Turns out you're not that patient after all," Shane whispered.

"No," Ilya answered. "I have zero patience left. I need to fuck you."

"And I want you to fuck me," Shane whispered, kissing his neck. "I haven't been able to think about anything else for a while."

Ilya pulled him even closer, pressing Shane hard against him.

"Say that again."

"I want you to fuck me so hard," Shane said under his breath, giving him a teasing smile. "Ruin me, Ilya."

Ilya let out a short, dangerous laugh.

"Don't provoke me like that."

"Why?" Shane replied, leaning into his ear. "You love it when I do."

The tension flared immediately. There was something far more direct in the way they spoke now—rawer and more honest after keeping it bottled up for so long.

Ilya pressed his forehead to Shane's.

"You don't know how bad I crave you."

Shane met his eyes.

"Yes I do, because I feel the exact same way."

Ilya kissed him again, this time holding nothing back. The kiss was deep, wet, and dirty.

Between kisses, Shane murmured something with a mischievous smirk meant purely to drive him over the edge.

"If we stop again now… I swear I'm going to lose it."

Ilya chuckled softly.

"I'm not stopping."

Shane raised an eyebrow slightly.

"I'd like to see that... we probably have fifteen minutes before she wakes up and..."

Shane couldn't finish his sentence; Ilya kissed him again, and this time, he didn't stop.

•••

The bed was shaking so hard that, even though it was made of solid oak, it threatened to slam right into the wall.

Shane was on his side, legs spread and tangled in the sheets, sweating, panting, with Ilya buried so deep inside him that his whole body felt like it was dissolving.

Ilya didn't stop, fucking him deep and hard in a steady rhythm.

With one hand he held Shane's waist firmly from behind, keeping him anchored under his weight, while his other hand covered Shane's mouth—Shane was completely incapable of

keeping his moans quiet, and Ilya wasn't about to let Gali wake up early.

As he kept thrusting, hand still over Shane's lips, Ilya slipped two fingers into his mouth, and Shane didn't hesitate for a second to suck on them eagerly.

Ilya watched him and smirked, leaning down to bite his neck and whisper in his ear.

"Such a whore..."

Shane closed his eyes. Years ago, hearing someone call him that or treat him that way would have been deeply humiliating.

But now, the word had changed. There was no dark malice behind it anymore; it was just an agreement, something that turned them both on, a simple game in moments like this.

He kept sucking Ilya's fingers and rolling his hips to match each thrust, while Ilya continued covering his neck in marks.

When they switched positions, Ilya ended up on his back.

Shane climbed on top of him and began riding him, taking heavy, deep plunges that kept the bed thumping against the wall.

Ilya held him with both hands, staring up at him, utterly spellbound.

"Tell me who you belong to," Ilya demanded, reaching up with one hand to wrap around Shane's throat, squeezing lightly.

"I'm yours."

"Nobody else's?"

"No one... no one else," Shane moaned as his orgasm hit.

Shane came all over Ilya's chest while Ilya came deep inside him—though, at Shane's request, he had managed to roll on a condom seconds before they started.

When it was over, they lay side by side, breathless, sticky, and completely blissed out, enjoying the silence—a silence that was soon broken once more by a soft, familiar cry.

•••

The first light of morning was barely filtering through the curtains when Ilya opened his eyes.

For a few seconds he lay still, adjusting to the quiet of the house. Beside him, Shane was fast asleep, hair messy against the pillow, breathing slowly, completely exhausted.

Then he heard a faint rustle from the crib.

Ilya turned his head immediately. Galina was wriggling around, still half-asleep, making those soft little sounds that always came right before crying.

Before she could actually start wailing, he was already sliding out of bed.

Barefoot, in sweatpants, and still shirtless, he crossed the room and picked her up gently.

"Shhh…" he whispered softly. "We're not waking up Dad."

The baby made a tiny face, but didn't end up crying. Ilya naturally settled her against his chest, holding her securely with one strong arm.

He glanced back at Shane, who remained sound asleep.

"Let's go downstairs," he whispered. "Let him rest a bit."

He walked down the stairs quietly, moving with that surprisingly gentle grace he only ever showed with her.

The house was still quiet and chilled with early morning air. In the kitchen, he rested Galina on his shoulder for a moment while he opened the freezer; Shane had carefully stored several bags of breast milk. Ilya picked one up, staring at it for a second as if the whole reality of it still amazed him, and began warming it up.

"Your dad is very organized," he told the baby with a faint smile. "Way more than me."

Galina looked at him with those wide, attentive eyes that were already beginning to follow him everywhere.

"You know something?" Ilya continued as he prepared the bottle. "There was another Galina in my life before you."

The baby made a small noise, almost as if answering him.

Ilya set the bottle in the warm water and adjusted her in his arm.

"She was Russian like me. One day I'll take you to Russia, the three of us will go... anyway... the other Galina was pretty much all I had when I was a kid." His voice grew softer, quieter. "She was my nanny, but really she was like... family."

He paced slowly around the kitchen while waiting for the milk to warm up.

"She taught me how to read before anyone else even tried. She made me soup whenever I came home covered in bruises... and she always told me I was going to end up in trouble."

A small smile touched his face.

"And she was right."

When the bottle was ready, he tested the temperature on his wrist and sat down with Galina in the office.

The curtains were slightly parted, letting in the gentle morning light.

He settled into the large armchair and brought the bottle to the baby's mouth.

Galina started drinking right away.

"There you go," he murmured. "Easy now."

For a few minutes he didn't say a word, just watching her. Sometimes it seemed surreal to see him like this: massive, stern, shirtless and covered in old scars... holding a tiny baby with such tender care.

The phone started vibrating on the desk.

Ilya let out a soft sigh.

"They're already bothering us, Gali."

He answered with one hand while keeping the bottle perfectly still with the other.

"What."

His voice shifted—firmer, colder.

"No, listen to me carefully... that is non-negotiable."

Galina kept drinking, completely unbothered, but every now and then her tiny hand reached up to touch the nearest thing: the gold chain around Ilya's neck.

The cross caught the morning light.

Ilya let her play with it while he kept talking on the phone.

"I don't care what they told you," he continued, dead serious. "You move that today, not tomorrow. And if anyone has a problem with it... we'll handle it another way."

He paused, listening.

"Exactly. You understand me now. That's what I like to hear."

He hung up and immediately dialed another number.

For several minutes he issued instructions in a low but commanding tone, taking care not to raise his voice too much with the baby in his arms. At times he paced around the office while she drank her bottle, completely calm against his chest.

At one point, Galina managed to get a good grip on the cross, tugging on it in fascination.

Ilya finished his call and looked down at her.

For a few seconds, he just watched her playing with the chain.

"Hey…" he murmured softly.

He touched her tiny hand with his finger.

"That cross isn't a toy."

Galina looked at him intently, as if sizing him up.

Ilya offered a faint smirk—that rare smile almost nobody ever got to see.

"But one day it's going to be yours."

He gently smoothed back a stray lock of hair that had fallen onto her forehead.

"When you're older. Much older."

The baby went right back to her bottle, perfectly content, while the morning light fully filled the room and the house slowly began to wake up.

# Chapter 17

The morning was gray and humid at the port; the air had that heavy smell of metal, salt water, and fuel that always remained floating between the docks.
The stacked shipping containers formed long, cold hallways, like walls of colors faded by time.
Enormous cranes moved slowly along the tracks, creaking as they unloaded cargo from the ships that had arrived during the early hours of the morning.

Ilya walked through that steel labyrinth with a firm step, accompanied by two of his men who stayed a few meters behind.

He wore a dark coat over his clothes, hands in his pockets, and the calm yet alert expression of someone who knew exactly where he stood.
In front of one of the open containers, the other group was waiting for him.

The Italian was leaning against a black pickup truck, calmly smoking.
He was a man in his fifties, elegant even in that dusty and noisy place, with his gray hair neatly combed back and a long coat that looked far too expensive for the port.
When he saw Ilya approach, he gave a faint smile.

"Finally, we meet face to face."

Ilya gave a short nod.

"It was about time."

The Italian threw the cigarette to the ground and crushed it with the tip of his shoe.

"They say a lot of things about you."

"They say too many things about everyone."

The man let out a brief laugh.

"That’s true too."

For the next few minutes, they talked inside the container, away from the harbor wind.
There were open boxes, papers on a makeshift table, and one of the Italian’s men checking numbers on a tablet.

The conversation was direct and straightforward—routes, percentages, territories that neither of them wanted to turn into an unnecessary problem.

Ilya spoke little, but when he did, his voice carried that confident tone that made it clear he was not negotiating from a position of weakness.
The Italian observed him with interest as he listened.

"You’re younger than I imagined," he said at one point. "But I understand why they respect you."

Ilya rested a hand on the metal table.

"Because I deliver on what I promise."

There was a short silence, and the Italian smiled.

"I like that."

After a while, they finally reached an agreement. The men around them began to relax just a bit—that almost imperceptible shift that happens when tension is no longer necessary.
The Italian closed the folder with the documents and took a step toward Ilya.

"So, we’re clear then."

"We’re clear."

They shook hands in a firm, measured grip.

"I like simple agreements," said the Italian. "The kind that avoid problems."

"Me too."

The man looked at him for a second longer and then gestured to one of his companions.

"Bring that."

One of the men opened a small leather bag and pulled out a sealed package.
The Italian held it in his hand, looking at it with an almost knowing smile before offering it to Ilya.

"A token of appreciation."

Ilya looked at the package.

"It wasn't necessary."

"I know," replied the Italian. "But it’s good—very good."

Ilya took the bag, lightly testing its weight in his hand.

"So, you want to impress me?"

The Italian let out a low laugh.

"I want you to remember this meeting in good spirits."

They made themselves comfortable on some boxes inside the container, away from the wind.
One of the men prepared a small, clean metal surface on top of a box and set everything up

naturally, as if it were part of a ritual that had already taken place many times in these kinds of encounters.

Ilya watched the fine white powder as they opened it.
The Italian raised an eyebrow.

"I promised you it was good."

Ilya had tried cocaine before; it wasn't anything new to him, but it wasn't a constant habit either—more of an occasional thing, specific moments when the environment, the company, or the stress of certain decisions pushed him to accept it.

The Italian took some first.
Then it was Ilya’s turn, and the sensation hit quickly, much cleaner than he had expected.

Ilya rested his hands on his knees, exhaling slowly as a small smile appeared on his face—a rare sight for him.

"Well..."

The Italian looked at him, amused.

"See?"

Ilya looked up.

"Yeah, it’s good."

"Told you."

There was a moment when both of them simply sat there, the distant noise of the port drifting in through the container's open door, the cranes moving like slow monsters in the background.
The conversation began to flow differently now, a bit more relaxed.

"How did you end up here?" asked the Italian.

Ilya settled back on the box.

"Working."

"We’re all working," the other replied. "But some go further than others."

Ilya looked at him calmly.

"I don't plan on staying still."

The Italian smiled.

"That's what I like to hear."

Over the next few minutes, they talked about new routes, ports where each held influence, and a few names it was better to avoid.
The cocaine was truly pure—it was evident in the clarity with which Ilya's head seemed to focus, and at the same time, in that energy that began to course through his body.

The Italian observed him in silence for a moment.

"You have a strong presence," he said. "Not many can walk into a place like this and make everyone listen."

Ilya leaned his back against the container wall.

"It's not presence; it's reputation."

"Which is earned over time."

"And with decisions."

The Italian nodded slowly.

"Exactly."

The port wind blew hard outside again, rattling a metal chain against one of the nearby containers.
Ilya looked toward the opening of the container for a second, lost in thought.
Then he looked back at the Italian.

"This agreement is going to work."

The man smiled.

"I hope so, because if it works... we're both going to make a lot of money."

Ilya slightly held up the bag he had been given earlier.

"And good things, too."

The Italian let out another laugh.

"Exactly."

•••

The following days began to shift in a way that was almost unnoticeable at first.

After that meeting at the port, Ilya returned home as usual.
He greeted Shane, picked up Galina when he heard her stirring in her crib, and spent the rest of the afternoon with complete naturalness, as if nothing had happened.

However, somewhere in his mind, that clean, powerful sensation he had felt in the container among the docks lingered on.

He said nothing; he knew perfectly well that Shane wouldn't like it—not with the baby in the house, not with everything they were building—and in truth, Ilya was convinced of something very simple: he could control it.

To him, it wasn't a downward spiral or a problem; it was an occasional thing, something he used when he wanted to.

The next day, while working at one of his warehouses, the thought resurfaced.

The office was cluttered with papers, route maps, and phones that wouldn't stop ringing.

Outside, the men were moving cargo and shouting instructions amidst the noise of the trucks. Ilya was sitting behind the desk reviewing numbers when he opened the bottom drawer. Inside was the bag the Italian had given him; he looked at it for a few seconds and then calmly pulled it out.

There was no urgency in his movements; it was almost methodical.
He took a flat surface from the desk, lined up the white powder with a metal card, and formed a straight line with precision.
Then he leaned down and snorted.

The sensation returned fast, like a clean surge that cleared his mind. Ilya closed his eyes for a second and exhaled slowly, resting a hand on the desk.

"Good..." he muttered to himself.

Minutes later, he was back on the phone, issuing orders with absolute clarity, as if his mind were working even faster.

That was the beginning.

At first, it was spaced out: a line during work, another after closing a deal, another when the day had been too long.
Always in places where nobody asked too many questions: his office, the car, an empty warehouse.
Never at home—that much was clear to him. When he walked through the front door, he left that part outside.
He played with Galina, talked to Shane, sat in the kitchen like any other night.

No one would have guessed that just a few hours earlier, he had been leaning over a makeshift table somewhere in the city, taking another line.

But as the weeks went by, something began to change.
Ilya started doing it more often.

It didn't seem out of control in his eyes; it simply became part of his routine.

Before an important meeting, he would open the small case he now carried with him.

If he had to handle a complicated problem, he would pause for a moment, prepare a quick line, and snort it with the same casual ease with which others lit a cigarette.

On one occasion, he was in an underground parking garage, inside the car, waiting for a contact to arrive.
The engine was off, and the dim yellow overhead light barely illuminated the interior.
He took the case from his jacket pocket and opened it. With confident, almost automatic movements, he prepared a line on the hard cover of the case.
Then he leaned over, snorted it quickly, and wiped the surface clean with his thumb.

He rested his head against the seat and let his breath out. His heart began to beat a little faster; his mind turned sharp, focused.

"Perfect," he said in a low voice.

Minutes later, he was out of the car, talking to someone as if nothing had happened.

Another time, it happened in an empty warehouse, late at night.
He was reviewing a complicated delivery and arguing with one of his men when he motioned for him to wait.

"One second."

He went into the back office, closed the door, pulled out the case, and prepared another line.
He snorted, quickly rinsed his nose at the small sink there, and stepped back out.

"Alright," he said. "Let's keep going."

No one dared to ask him anything.
To everyone, Ilya remained the same: firm, dangerous, focused. In fact, many thought he was even more active than before, more sharp, as if he were always one step ahead.

But the truth was that he was doing it more and more.
With almost every important task.
Sometimes even without a real need for it, and meanwhile, at home, Shane suspected nothing.
Galina kept growing, laughing, grabbing hold of the gold chain hanging around her father's neck whenever he picked her up.
Ilya remained gentle with her, protective of Shane.

But in the moments he was alone, when no one was watching, the small case would reappear.
Open.
Line up.
Snort.
And he always thought the same thing: *"I can control it."*

•••

The house was quiet that night, except for the soft sound of Galina's small hands slapping against the wooden floor as she crawled down the hallway.
At nine months old, she was already moving everywhere with tireless curiosity, stopping to touch everything she found: a chair, the edge of a rug, the leg of a table.

Shane was following close behind from the kitchen, drying his hands with a dish towel while smiling tiredly.

"Hey, explorer... where are you going now?"

Galina let out a tiny, happy sound and kept advancing determinedly, turning into the hallway that led to Ilya’s study.

The door was slightly ajar.
Shane didn't think much of it at first, assuming Ilya was working, as he had been many nights lately.
But as he approached to pick up the baby before she went into the office, something caught his attention—a movement inside and a brief sound on the desk.

He pushed the door open, and the scene instantly became clear.
Ilya was sitting behind the desk, leaning forward.
On the surface was a prepared white line, and he had just snorted it, raising his head right as Shane stepped in.

For a second, neither of them spoke.
Galina patted the door from the floor with her hand.
Shane picked her up almost automatically, but his gaze remained fixed on Ilya.

"What is this?"

His voice came out colder than he intended.
Ilya stayed still, watching him. He didn't seem surprised, just... caught sooner than he had planned.

"Shane..."

"No," he cut him off. "Don't just say my name like it's nothing. What are you doing?"

Anger began to show on his face, in the tension of his shoulders.
Galina, oblivious to everything, settled against Shane’s chest and looked around the room with curiosity.

Ilya rested his hands on the desk and leaned back slightly in his chair.

"It’s just to take the edge off."

Shane looked at him, incredulous.

"Really? That’s what you’re going to tell me?"

Ilya held his gaze calmly.

"I deal with things every day that you'd rather not imagine. Sometimes I need to... relieve a little pressure."

"No," Shane replied, shaking his head. "Don't lie to me. That's not relieving pressure, Ilya."

The silence in the study grew heavy.
Galina reached her hand toward the desk lamp, fascinated by the light.
Shane held her closer while continuing to stare at Ilya.

"Since when?"

Ilya hesitated for a second, but then answered with partial honesty.

"For a little while."

"How long is 'a little while'?"

Ilya exhaled.

"A few weeks."

Shane closed his eyes for a moment, clearly trying not to lose his temper.

"We have a baby crawling around the house," he said finally. "And you're doing this."

"I don't do it here when you two are around," Ilya responded quickly. "This is the first time that..."

"It doesn't change anything."

Shane's voice wasn't a yell, but it was weighed down with real anger.
Ilya watched him closely; he knew how to recognize when Shane was truly upset, and this time, he was.
He stood up calmly from his chair.

"Listen to me."

Shane didn't answer.

"I'm not losing control," Ilya continued. "It's not something that's ruining my life. I manage it."

"That's what everyone says," Shane shot back immediately.

Ilya took a step toward him.

"I'm not everyone."

Shane looked straight at him.

"I don't want this in our house."

Ilya lowered his voice.

"It’s not in our house."

Shane pointed at the desk with his eyes.

"I just saw it, Ilya."

A tense silence fell over them.
Ilya held it for a few more seconds, and then his expression shifted slightly, softening in that way he used whenever he truly wanted to get close to him.

He approached slowly.
Galina looked at her father and smiled, understanding nothing of the conversation.
Ilya gently touched her head before looking at Shane again.

"Shh, take it easy..." he murmured. "I’m not going to do anything that harms us."

Shane was still upset, but his breathing was starting to slow down a little.

"I want you to stop," he said finally. "Seriously, Ilya, I don't want this."

Ilya looked at him for a few seconds.
Shane waited.

"Promise me you’ll stop."

The word hung clear between them.

*Promise me.*

Ilya took another step closer, close enough that they were almost touching.
He gently placed a hand on Shane’s waist and leaned in slightly toward him.

"Hey..." he murmured.

Shane frowned, but he didn't pull away.
Ilya kissed his cheek first—slowly, with that calmness he knew would undo him.

"You’re so tense."

"Don't change the subject," Shane replied, though his voice no longer had the same harshness.

Ilya gave a faint smile and brushed his forehead against his.

"I was thinking about something today..."

Shane looked at him suspiciously.

"What?"

"A trip."

Shane blinked, taken by surprise.

"A trip?"

Ilya nodded.

"To Greece."

The word caught him completely off guard.

"Greece?"

Ilya seized that small moment of distraction and kissed him again, this time on the lips, soft yet lingering.

"Yes," he whispered near his mouth. "The three of us."

Shane blinked again, trying to keep up with the shift in topic.

"Why Greece?"

Ilya raised his hand and touched the cheek of Galina, who was now entertained looking at the papers on the desk.

"Because I've always wanted to go," he said. "And because I picture myself walking around there with the two of you... and I like it."

The image seemed to settle in Shane's mind.

"It could work..." he said slowly. "For Gali's first birthday."

Ilya's smile grew a little broader.

"That's what I was thinking."

Shane was already looking down at the baby.

"Nine months... yeah, it could work, in three months."

Ilya nodded, watching him intently as he spoke.

"Somewhere quiet," Shane continued. "Near the ocean... she's going to love the beach," Shane said, smiling now.

Galina slapped the desk enthusiastically, as if approving of the plan.
Ilya looked at her with a warm expression.

"She’s going to love it."

Shane looked back up at him.

"But seriously, Ilya..." he began.

Ilya kissed him once more, gently cutting him off.

"We’re going to go," he murmured. "The three of us."

And while Shane began to picture the trip, talking about dates and what they could do once they were there, he didn't notice that Ilya had never promised to quit.

•••

The afternoon sun fell golden over the white houses and blue domes of the small island village.

From the terrace of the rented house, the sea stretched to the horizon—calm, brilliant, and of a deep blue that seemed almost unreal. Shane was sitting on the terrace floor on a light-colored blanket, with Galina in front of him.

The baby, who was already taking unsteady steps, wore a lightweight dress that fluttered in the warm breeze. In front of her sat a simple little cake they had bought that very morning from a local bakery.

"Well..." Shane said, smiling. "You're officially one year old."

Galina looked at him with wide eyes, far more interested in touching the low table than the cake, but she still let out a happy little sound.

Ilya was leaning against the stone railing of the terrace, a glass of wine in hand. He wore a light-colored shirt with the sleeves rolled up and his sunglasses hanging from his collar.

He watched the scene with a quiet smile he rarely showed in front of anyone else.

"I can't believe she's already a year old," he said.

Shane looked up at him.

"Me neither."

Ilya walked over and crouched beside them, resting an arm on his knee.

"Just a little while ago, she was this small," he said, holding two fingers together to mark the size.

Galina immediately reached her hand out toward the gold chain that always hung around his neck. Ilya let out a low laugh.

"Always the same thing."

Shane laughed too.

"It's the first thing she goes for."

The afternoon was peaceful, without guests or noise—just the three of them, the Greek sea, the soft wind moving the terrace curtains, and the distant sound of waves crashing against the rocks.

Shane lit the small candle they had placed on the cake.

"Alright, we have to sing," he said.

Ilya raised an eyebrow.

"Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

Ilya sighed dramatically, but settled down beside him. They sang softly, almost laughing as they did. Galina looked back and forth between them, fascinated by the flickering flame. When Shane carefully blew out the candle, the baby clapped clumsily.

"That counts," Shane said with a laugh.

Ilya scooped her up into his arms and spun her gently in the air.

"Happy birthday, маленькая."

For a while they stayed there, eating cake, taking photos, and watching the afternoon slowly fade into a pink sunset over the sea.

Later, when the sun had already set and the sky was full of stars, Shane was in the bedroom getting Galina ready to go out for dinner at a harbor restaurant. The baby was half-asleep after so much activity during the day.

"Come on, birthday girl," Shane whispered, adjusting her clothes. "A little while longer and then you can sleep."

Ilya had gone down to the house’s small study to check a few messages before leaving. Shane took a few extra minutes with the baby and then decided to head downstairs as well.

The house was quiet, illuminated by warm lights. When he reached the door to the study, he found it slightly ajar and pushed it gently open.

Painfully, the scene was all too familiar. Ilya was leaning over the desk, the same case open in front of him. He had just snorted a line and raised his head as Shane walked in.

The silence fell heavy between them. Shane felt something tighten in his chest.

"No..." he whispered at first, his voice barely audible.

Ilya stayed still. Shane took a step into the room, his jaw tight.

"I can't believe you're doing this here, today."

Ilya slowly straightened up.

"Shane..."

"Today is our daughter's birthday." Shane's voice was already heavy with anger. "And we're on a trip together, in Greece, with her." He pointed at the desk. "And you're doing this?"

Ilya calmly closed the case, though his expression had hardened slightly.

"Don't make a scene out of something that isn't one."

Shane looked at him as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"It's not a scene?"

"No."

"Ilya!"

The word came out louder than he intended. Galina shifted slightly in his arms, but didn't wake up completely. Shane immediately lowered his voice, but the anger remained.

"I'm begging you to stop this."

Ilya watched him in silence for a few seconds.

"I'm not losing control."

"That's exactly what you always say," Shane replied. "Always."

The atmosphere in the study grew tense. Outside, the sea wind could be heard softly tapping against the windows. Shane took another step closer.

"I don't want this in our lives, Ilya."

Ilya ran a hand over his face, as if trying to stay calm.

"It's not a constant thing..."

Shane let out a short, humorless laugh.

"I just caught you doing it right before going to dinner with your family."

Ilya didn't answer right away. Shane looked at him, his eyes glistening with frustration.

"Please..." he said finally. "Stop it. I'm asking you seriously. I've seen this happen to a lot of people. I know how it ends."

The silence between them grew heavier. Ilya met his gaze.

"It's not a problem for me."

"It is for me."

Ilya took a deep breath and stepped toward him.

"Listen to me."

Shane didn't move.

"I'm not going to let this ruin us," Ilya continued. "But I'm also not going to pretend I don't have pressure on me all the time."

"We all have pressure," Shane answered. "But not everyone does this."

Ilya lowered his voice slightly.

"I can manage it."

Shane shook his head.

"I don't want you to manage it. I want you to quit."

There was a long moment where neither spoke. Finally, Ilya sighed.

"I'll cut back."

Shane stared at him.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Are you serious?"

Ilya nodded slowly.

"I won't do it like before."

Shane watched him, trying to read if he was being sincere.

"I need you to understand something," Ilya continued. "I'm not a mess. I'm not spiraling. I just... need to take the edge off sometimes."

Shane was still hesitant, but his anger began to blur with exhaustion.

"Promise me you'll cut back."

Ilya held his gaze.

"I'll cut back."

The answer wasn't exactly what Shane had asked for, but in that moment, he needed something to believe in. He took a deep breath.

"Alright..." he said finally, though tension lingered in his voice.

Ilya stepped closer and placed a hand on his arm.

"Let's go have dinner," he murmured. "Let's not ruin Gali's birthday."

Shane looked down at the sleeping baby in his arms and then back up at Ilya.

"This isn't over."

Ilya nodded slowly.

"I know."

And even though the argument had settled, something in the air between them had shifted—though neither truly knew how much.

•••

~~A few years later~~

Galina's fourth birthday arrived almost before they realized it. The house was filled with colorful balloons and drawings taped to the living room walls.

Gali had insisted on helping decorate, though her help had mostly consisted of taping crooked ribbons and leaving open markers on the table.

Shane hadn't corrected her; he liked seeing those little imperfections because they made everything feel more alive. He liked feeling that his daughter was completely free.

From the kitchen, the little girl's laughter echoed as she ran up and down the hallway.

"Daddy, look!" she suddenly shouted.

Ilya appeared from the study with a tired but genuine smile. Galina threw herself directly at him, wrapping her arms around his legs with all the strength she had.

"I'm looking," he replied, bending down to pick her up. "I always look at everything you do, my love."

Galina settled into his arm as if it were her natural place; at four years old, she still did it, even if she was no longer as light as before. She wrapped her arms around his neck and began telling him about the cake they had chosen.

"It has stars," she said excitedly. "And blue."

Ilya listened attentively, as if nothing else mattered in that moment.

"Blue stars... that sounds very pretty," he murmured.

The girl giggled. Shane watched the scene from the kitchen doorway. For a few seconds, the image was exactly what he had always wanted: Ilya holding their daughter, Galina babbling endlessly, and the house bathed in the afternoon light streaming through the windows.

Ilya was still like that with her—protective, attentive, almost completely devoted to his daughter.

Galina adored him; she followed him around the house, sat on the floor of his study while he worked, brought him toys to show him, and asked him to pick her up whenever she was tired. Ilya simply made it clear that she was the light of his eyes.

But three years had also passed, and in those three years, something else had grown in silence.

Ilya had never cut back.

At first, Shane had fought furiously. The arguments had been long, exhausting—sometimes in hushed tones so Galina wouldn't hear, other times in the middle of the night when the house was dead silent.

He had begged, he had gotten angry, he had tried to reason with him, he had tried to convince him to seek help, but Ilya always said the same thing: that he could manage it, that he wasn't out of control, that he knew what he was doing.

Over time, reality began to show itself in small, repetitive ways. Shane started recognizing the signs without needing to ask: the dilated pupils when he came home late, the surge of excessive energy on certain nights—talking fast, pacing around the house as if he couldn't stay still—or other times, the exact opposite: silent, tense, his jaw clenched, locked away in his study for hours.

And then there were those moments when he seemed almost... euphoric, too bright, hyperactive, as if everything around him were moving at double speed.

Shane had learned to witness it in silence—not because it was alright, but because he was tired of having the same fight over and over, tired of feeling like he was talking to a wall, tired of the quiet dread that settled in his chest every time he saw the case appear on the desk or disappear into the pocket of Ilya’s jacket.

And yet, they still loved each other; that was true, too. There were nights when Ilya would sit on the living room floor to play with Galina, completely focused on building block towers for her to knock down with a laugh. There were mornings when he made breakfast and kissed Shane on the forehead as if nothing were broken.

Those moments kept everything afloat, but something inside Shane had been wearing down, slowly and surely.

That afternoon, while finishing the preparations for the party, Shane noticed something off in the way Ilya walked around the house—that slightly hurried pace, that coiled energy in his body. But he said nothing; he just watched him for a few seconds longer before returning to the kitchen.

A little while later, Galina was sitting at the dining table wearing a party hat that was slightly too big for her. The blue-star cake sat in the center of the table.

"Now!" Galina said, clapping her hands on the table in excitement. "Now!"

Ilya stood behind her, a hand resting on the back of her chair. He was smiling, but Shane noticed his eyes again—that intensity he now recognized instantly.

Shane felt that familiar weariness tighten in his chest.

"Not yet, my love," Ilya told her, kissing her hair. "Daddy has to step away for a little bit, and then you can blow out the candles when your friends get here."

"Okay, Daddy, but come back fast, okay?"

He picked her up right away, as always.

"Of course, princess."

Shane watched them from the other side of the table. In that moment, he felt two conflicting emotions at once: the deep love that still existed between them... and that quiet exhaustion he no longer knew how to put into words. Because deep down, Shane knew something that hadn't been clear three years ago: Ilya wasn't just using occasionally anymore. Ilya was an addict. And though no one said it out loud, that truth hung in the room with them, hidden behind the balloons, the blue-star cake, and Galina's laughter.

•••

The afternoon was filled with noise and movement.

The garden had transformed into a small world for children: balloons tied to chairs, low tables with colorful cups, makeshift games scattered across the lawn and the porch.

The kids' voices blended with soft music playing from a speaker and the quiet chatter of parents watching from the shade.

Shane moved constantly from one spot to another. He poured juice, handed out plates, answered questions, helped a toddler who had tripped, and comforted another who was upset about losing their turn in a game. He did it all almost automatically, with a smile that sometimes seemed genuine and other times clearly forced.

And... every so often, he looked toward the house. Ilya still hadn't shown up.

At first, Shane had tried to convince himself that Ilya was just finishing something up in his study or on a work call, but as the party progressed, all the guests arrived, and Galina kept

asking for her father, Shane's patience began to fray.

Galina ran among the kids with her birthday crown sitting crookedly on her hair. She was happy and thrilled by the crowd of friends and games, but every so often she would stop and look toward the back door.

"Is Daddy coming?" she asked, walking up to Shane and taking his hand.

Shane crouched in front of her and adjusted her crown.

"Yes, my love, he's coming."

But as he said it, he looked at his watch again. The anger inside him was building—slow, but steady.

One of the mothers came over with a polite smile and a glass in hand, complimenting how nice everything looked and how well-organized the party was.

Shane replied politely, but he could barely focus on the conversation. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he was running the whole event alone while the birthday girl's other father was nowhere to be found.

When the front gate finally opened, Shane snapped his head up immediately. Ilya walked into the garden.

The moment Shane got a clear look at him, he felt his chest tighten. The way he walked, the expression on his face, the intensity in his eyes... Shane knew him too well not to realize what was happening: Ilya was high—clearly way too high.

He was trying to act natural, even smiling as he walked over, but it was obvious. And not just to Shane: several of the mothers nearby looked up and watched him with that awkward expression people get when they notice something off and don't know how to react.

Ilya kept walking over anyway, as if nothing were wrong. Galina was the first to see him.

"Daddy!" she cheered, running toward him.

Ilya picked her up right away, spinning her around in the air as he always did.

"Happy birthday again," he said with a wide smile.

But Shane was already walking toward them, and he wasn't smiling. He stopped right in front of Ilya, looked him dead in the eye for a second, and spoke in a low, firm voice.

"Come with me."

Ilya met his gaze.

"Right now?"

"Right now."

The atmosphere around them tightened slightly, though the kids kept playing, oblivious to what was happening. Shane grabbed Ilya by the arm and guided him into the house without another word.

They walked into the study, and the door clicked shut behind them with a heavy thud. The contrast was instant: outside were the happy shouts of children; inside, the room's silence felt oppressive.

Shane whirled around to face him, all his built-up frustration bursting out at once.

"What is wrong with you?" His voice came out sharp, heavy with rage. "You show up completely high to Galina's birthday?" he continued. "Have you no shame? Everyone can see it!"

Ilya watched him from near the door, solemn, but keeping his voice level. Shane began pacing around the study, unable to stand still.

"Three years, Ilya. Three years of telling you the exact same thing. Three years of fighting over this!"

Ilya spoke calmly.

"I'm not making a scene out there."

Shane stopped dead in his tracks and stared at him, incredulous.

"You don't need to make a scene! It's written all over your face. Your pupils are dilated, Ilya, your jaw is locked!" He stepped closer, pointing toward the garden with a frustrated gesture. "The mothers saw you. Do you understand that? Do you have any idea how embarrassing that was for me?"

Ilya frowned slightly.

"Don't exaggerate."

That single word was enough to make Shane explode.

"Exaggerate? Are you seriously telling me I'm exaggerating?"

His voice echoed through the study. He was breathing heavily, his face tense with accumulated rage.

"I'm exhausted, Ilya," he said finally. "Exhausted of this, exhausted of seeing you like this, exhausted of pretending nothing is wrong!"

Ilya watched him in silence.

"I'm not hurting anyone," he answered at last.

Shane took another step, standing right in front of him.

"You are hurting yourself. And you are hurting us."

A heavy silence fell between them. Outside, the kids continued to shout and laugh, completely unaware of what was happening inside the room.

Shane held his gaze.

"Listen to me carefully," he said, lowering his voice to a tone of absolute authority. "Either you quit this shit... or you forget about Galina and me."

Ilya didn't answer right away. He stared at him for a few seconds that felt far longer than they actually were. Finally, he spoke.

"I'm not quitting."

The response struck Shane right in the chest. It wasn't the answer he hoped for, nor the one he needed to hear, but he didn't back down. Pain flickered in his eyes for a split second, but he managed to hold his ground.

"Then listen to me very carefully," Shane said in a low, cold voice. "I'm taking my daughter and leaving today... and you are never going to see us again."

Outside, the party went on. Inside, everything was on the brink of shattering for good.

# Chapter 18

The building was old and narrow, with a small elevator that made a metallic clanking noise every time it stopped on a floor.

Shane stepped out of it carrying Galina in his arms, a backpack slung over his shoulder. In his other hand, he held a set of keys that still didn't feel familiar to him.

A few days had passed since Galina's birthday—strange, tense days, filled with silence and difficult decisions that Shane could still feel weighing heavy on his body.

The hallway smelled of fresh paint and dust that, for some reason, never seemed to go away.

Shane stopped in front of a white door, much simpler than any of the ones he had opened over the past few years.
He looked at the number fixed on the wood as if he needed to convince himself that this place was now his, or that it had to be.

Galina rested her head on his shoulder, tired.

"Are we home?" she asked in her soft voice.

The question pierced right through his chest.
Shane took a deep breath before answering.

"Yes… well… for now, yes."

He turned the key and opened the door.

seasonal, inside the apartment was still almost devoid of life.
There were moving boxes stacked against the walls—some open, others sealed tight with tape.
A couple of pieces of furniture that had arrived first: a small sofa, a coffee table, a lamp that wasn't plugged in yet.

The light coming through the window was dim, from an afternoon that was already starting to fade into evening.
Shane walked in slowly, as if the place were fragile.
He shut the door with his foot and walked to the center of the makeshift living room. Galina raised her head and began looking around with curiosity.

"It’s tiny," she said.

Shane couldn't help a faint, sad smile.

"Yeah… a little bit."

He lowered her gently to the floor.
Galina took a few steps among the boxes, touching some of them with her hands as if they were part of a new game.

"Where’s my room?"

Shane looked toward the short hallway that led to the bedroom.

"Over there," he said. "Let’s go check it out."

They walked together to the open door. The bedroom was simple: a half-made bed, a rolled-up rug in a corner, and several boxes containing Galina's things, marked with her name in marker.
Galina walked in and spun around.

"Are we going to live here?"

Shane leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. For a moment he didn't answer; he had the feeling that every question from his daughter weighed more than it should.

"Yes," he finally said. "For a little while."

Galina nodded as if accepting the information without questioning it too much. She was still young, but there was something in the air that confused her.
After a few seconds, she spoke again.

"What about Daddy?"

The question came straight out, no roundabout ways.
Shane felt a knot tighten in his throat.
Galina was looking at him with that same calm expression as always, expecting a simple answer—to her, the world was still simple.

"When is Daddy Ilya coming?" she asked.

Shane averted his eyes for a moment, as if looking for something among the boxes that wasn't there. He ran a hand over his face, exhausted.

"Daddy…" he began to say, but the sentence trailed off halfway through.

He crouched down in front of her to get at eye level.
Galina was playing with the zipper of the backpack he had left on the bed.

"Daddy is…" Shane hesitated again. "He’s at the big house."

Galina frowned slightly.

"But we live there."

The phrase was so simple that it hurt even more.
Shane felt his chest tighten. He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind his daughter's ear.

"I know, sweetheart."

A small silence stretched between them.

"Is he coming later?" she asked.

Shane looked at her for a long second. His eyes were tired, holding a damp sheen he tried hard to control; he didn't want to lie to her, but he didn't know how to tell her the truth either.

"No… I don't know," he answered with soft honesty.

Galina observed him, trying to make sense of something she couldn't quite name yet.

"Is he mad at me?"

Shane shook his head slowly.

"No…" he said. "Daddy and I… just… need some time."

The explanation sounded clumsy even to his own ears.
Galina said nothing for a few seconds. Then she simply stepped forward and hugged him.

Shane wrapped his arms around her instantly, holding her with an almost desperate strength. He rested his cheek against her head and closed his eyes.

The apartment was quiet—so different from the house they had lived in until just a few days ago.
So different from the life they had just left behind.

After a moment, Galina spoke again, still holding him close.

"Can we open my toys?"

The question was small, everyday, as if she were trying to make everything feel normal again.

Shane exhaled deeply.

"Yes," he said softly. "Let’s do that."

He stood up, took one of the boxes with Galina’s name written large on it, and brought it to the living room. They sat on the floor among the moving boxes as night began to fall outside. As he carefully peeled away the tape, Shane felt something crystal clear and painful all at once: the life he knew was broken, and now he had to learn how to start over.

•••

The first night in the apartment was much longer than Shane had imagined.

Galina fell asleep relatively quickly—the day's fatigue, the move, the open boxes everywhere, and the built-up emotion finally wore her out.

Shane had made her bed as best he could, tucking her in with a clean sheet and her favorite pillow.
He stayed sitting on the edge for a while, watching her breathing turn slow and steady.

When he was sure she was deeply asleep, he turned off the light and closed the door quietly.

The silence in the apartment was different from the one in the big house, because this wasn't just quiet—it was an emptiness.

Shane paced around the living room between the boxes, not really knowing what to do with his own body.
He tried sitting on the couch, but got right back up.
He went into the small kitchen, opened the fridge, closed it without taking anything out, stared out the window, and started pacing again.

The anxiety wouldn't leave him alone.

Finally, he ended up sitting on the floor, leaning against one of the unopened boxes.
He had been holding his phone in his hand for a while; the screen lit up again with a new message from Ilya.

Shane stared at it for a few seconds before opening it.

"i'm sorry"

That was the first one, followed by another:

"Please talk to me"

A few minutes later, another one arrived.

"I can't be without you guys"

Shane felt his chest constrict. His fingers tightened around the phone, but he didn't type a thing. He didn't know what to say, and he didn't trust himself to stay strong if he answered.

The screen lit up once more:
"Shane, I need us to go back, I'm going to fix this"

That sentence made something inside him snap.
He brought a hand to his mouth to muffle the sound as he broke down crying.

The tears came without restraint—silent, yet intense.

His body curled inward a little, as if trying to shield itself from something invisible. He didn't want Galina to hear him; he didn't want anyone to hear him.

He cried like that for several minutes, struggling to breathe, staring at the phone that kept vibrating every now and then with new messages he didn't open.
Ilya kept writing, but Shane didn't reply.

He turned off the screen and set the phone face down on the floor.

The night crept forward slowly. At some point, he lay down on the couch, but he barely slept; every time he closed his eyes, the argument from the birthday party flashed back into his head as if it were happening all over again.

•••

By the time the morning light finally began filtering through the window, Shane was already awake.
He got up feeling heavy-bodied, his face worn out, his eyes swollen.

The apartment was still cluttered with boxes left to unpack.
He tried to focus on something practical, something to bring order to his mind.
He started unsealing one of the living room boxes with a small utility knife, pulling out books, a few of Galina's toys, things he didn't quite know where to place yet.

While arranging items on the table, he heard Galina’s voice—but she wasn't talking to herself.

Shane frowned and raised his head.

He walked over toward the front door, which had been left ajar because he had opened it earlier to let some fresh air in.

Galina was standing in the hallway, and in front of her, just across the threshold, was a little boy around her age.

"What’s your name?" Galina asked with curiosity.

"Mateo," the boy replied.

Shane walked up to them, a bit surprised.

"Gali…" he said gently.

Galina turned around.

"Daddy, he lives here," she said, pointing at the boy with total ease.

Right then, the sound of a door opening came from the neighboring apartment, and a man stepped out into the hall.

He was tall, in his mid-thirties, with slightly messy hair as if he had just woken up too. When he saw the kids talking, he paused for a second.

"Mateo," he said with a calm smile. "Making friends already?" He then looked at Shane. "Sorry if he’s bothering you," he added quickly.

Shane shook his head right away.

"No, not at all."

There was a brief awkward silence at first—the typical beat between two strangers who just bumped into each other.
The man extended a hand.

"I’m Hayden."

Shane shook it.

"Shane."

Mateo was peering into the apartment with curiosity, just as Galina had done the day before.

"We moved in yesterday," Shane explained. "Well… we've been in the process for a few days."

Hayden nodded.

"We’ve been here about a year," he said. "That one," he pointed to Mateo, "will talk to anyone."

Mateo shrugged, as if that were obvious, while Galina watched him with interest.

"I have a lot of toys," she announced suddenly.

Hayden smiled.

"Sounds like an invitation."

Shane couldn't help a faint laugh—his first genuine one since yesterday.

"Yeah… I guess so."

Hayden glanced for a moment at the boxes inside the apartment.

"Moving with a kid is total chaos," he commented. "If you need anything… tools, whatever… I’m right there," he gestured to his door.

There was something straightforward and kind in the way he spoke that made Shane relax a little.

"Thanks," he said. "Honestly… yeah, we’re still trying to settle in."

Galina and Mateo were already chatting again as if they had known each other forever.

"Do you want to see my room?" she asked.

Mateo looked up at his dad.
Hayden raised his eyebrows with a smile.

"If Shane says it’s okay."

Shane hesitated for a second… but then nodded.

"It’s okay."

The kids ran inside the apartment giggling softly, leaving Hayden and Shane alone in the hallway.
For a moment, neither spoke.
Then Hayden broke the silence in a calm tone.

"If it makes you feel any better… my first day here, I had boxes everywhere too."

Shane leaned his shoulder against the doorframe.

"I still don't quite understand how I ended up here," he admitted with a tired little smile.

Hayden looked at him a bit more intently, as if sensing there was something bigger behind those words, but he didn't pry.

"Well…" he said finally. "Sometimes new places help."

Shane took a deep breath.
Maybe he wasn't ready to believe that just yet, but for the first time since arriving, the apartment didn't feel completely empty.

•••

A few days had passed since they settled into the apartment.
Not many, but enough for a few boxes to be unpacked and certain routines to start forming.

That morning, Shane was in the small kitchen making breakfast while Galina chatted endlessly from the table.

"I’m going to show him my new room," she said excitedly. "And the toy Mateo gave me, and I’m going to tell him about the cat in the building courtyard—Daddy will definitely want to see it."

Shane was spreading butter on a piece of toast, listening to her with a blend of tenderness and a tight ache in his chest.

Ilya was coming over today. After several days of text messages, calls Shane hadn't answered, and a few failed attempts at reaching out, they had finally agreed that Ilya would

pick Galina up to spend the afternoon together—and she was thrilled.

Shane, on the other hand, had been tense since the moment he woke up.

"What time is he coming?" she asked again.

"In a little bit," Shane replied.

Galina climbed down from her chair and started running through the living room, looking for her backpack.

"Can I bring my drawings?" she asked.

"Yes, of course."

"And my toy?"

"That too."

The little girl's excitement filled the apartment. To her, everything was simple: she was going to see her dad, tell him things, play.

Shane watched her as he carefully packed her backpack—packing a sweater, a water bottle, a few small toys.

Inside, however, he was trying to prepare himself to see Ilya again.

When the doorbell finally rang, Galina practically jumped.

"It’s Daddy!"

She ran toward the door before Shane could even react.
Shane walked more slowly behind her and opened it.

Ilya was on the other side, and there was something different in his face—maybe weariness, maybe the strain of not having seen them for days. His eyes shifted straight to Galina.

"Hey, princess."

Galina threw herself into his arms.

"Daddy!" she said with pure joy. "I have so many things to tell you!"

Ilya lifted her into his arms as if the gesture were automatic.

"I figured."

But then he looked at Shane, and the air between them shifted.
A brief, uncomfortable silence fell.
Ilya set Galina back on the ground.

"Can we talk for a second?" he said.

Shane hesitated… but nodded.

"Gali, go get your backpack."

"Okay!" she answered and ran off to her room.

Once they were alone near the doorway, Ilya took a step closer, his voice dropping low.

"I missed you."

Shane felt the weight of those words hit harder than he cared to admit.
Ilya was staring at him with an intensity Shane knew all too well.

"Please," he said. "Give me a kiss."

The plea was gentle, almost desperate.
Shane felt a knot in his chest. For a split second, he really wanted to—wanted to step closer, lean against him, forget everything… but he took a small step back.

"No," he said softly.

Ilya dropped his gaze for a moment, as if the answer hurt more than he anticipated.
Shane studied him for a few seconds before asking directly:

"Are you high today?"

The question cut sharply between them.
Ilya looked up right away.

"No."

Shane didn't break eye contact.

"I’m asking you seriously, because if you’re high, you’re not taking Galina."

Silence hung over them for a few seconds.
Ilya shook his head.

"I’m not."

Shane observed him carefully—reading his eyes, his posture, the tone of his voice.

He had spent so much time watching him in different states that he could recognize it almost instantly.
Finally, he nodded.

"Alright."

Just then, Galina came running back holding her backpack.

"Ready!"

Ilya managed a faint smile.

"Shall we go?"

"Yes! Is Viktor there?"

"Yeah, in the car."

"And Sergei? Because I need to tell him I loved his present for my b—"

"Galina," Shane cut in, making both Ilya and the girl look at him. "Viktor, Sergei, and all the men at the house work for Daddy. They aren't your friends."

"Yes they are," Ilya said.

Shane had to bite his tongue to keep from reminding him that his employees were nothing more than thugs and hired killers, and that the thought of Galina considering those people her friends repulsed him.

Galina, however, took Ilya's hand enthusiastically, turning back to look at Shane right before stepping out.

"I'll tell you everything later!"

Shane forced a small smile.

"Have fun."

The door closed, and the silence returned to the apartment, heavier than before.

Shane stood frozen in the same spot for a few seconds, staring at the door as if he could still see them on the other side.

Then he walked slowly into the bathroom. He had been feeling something strange in his body for days now—an odd fatigue, mild morning dizziness, and a suspicion he had been avoiding confronting.

He rested his hands on the edge of the sink and looked in the mirror; his reflection looked drained.

He opened the drawer where he had left a small pharmacy bag and pulled out the test.

The moment felt surreal, almost automatic, as if he were carrying it out on autopilot.

Minutes later, he was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, the test resting on the sink counter, waiting.

The apartment was deathly quiet.
Shane stared at the floor, his heart beating far too hard for such a peaceful place.

Finally, he looked up, saw the result, and the breath caught in his throat.

He was pregnant for the second time in his life—and for the first time with Ilya Rozanov, the man he loved and had just left.

For a few seconds, he didn't move.
Then he brought a hand to his mouth, completely in shock.

"No…" he barely whispered.

The bathroom remained just as silent, but his life had just changed all over again.

# Chapter 19

The living room in Ilya’s house was grand and elegant, with floor-to-ceiling windows and dark leather furniture that usually conveyed a serious, almost intimidating presence. But this afternoon, the atmosphere was completely different.

In the middle of the living room, facing the television, stood three people in a line: two of them were Viktor and Sergei, and the third was Galina.

The theme song of a children's cartoon echoed from the screen while Galina watched the two men with her arms crossed, judging them with a seriousness that was almost absurd for her age.

Viktor and Sergei were huge—two Russians accustomed to work that involved weapons, threats, and violent situations that would make most people tremble. Yet right now, they were trying to follow a ridiculously complex dance routine from a kid's show... and they were doing a remarkably bad job.

"No, no, no," Galina said with a frustrated gesture. "Again!"

Viktor glanced at Sergei, looking utterly resigned.

"We’ve done this three times already," he muttered in Russian.

"Four," Sergei corrected under his breath.

From one of the armchairs, Ilya was watching the scene with a glass in his hand. He had a tight smile that he was trying—and failing—to hide.

"Listen to the boss," he said calmly, resting an arm on the back of the armchair.

Galina pointed at the screen.

"First the jump, then the spin, and then you go like this," she explained, moving her arms with energy. "Just like in the cartoon!"

Viktor tried to copy the movement, resulting in an awkward, exaggerated gesture that made Galina frown instantly.

"No!"

Sergei, a man capable of disarming someone in under ten seconds, was concentrating fiercely, trying to remember which arm he was supposed to move first.

"This one or this one?" he asked Viktor in Russian.

Galina let out a dramatic sigh.

"You're not paying attention!"

Ilya brought the glass to his lips to muffle a laugh.

"Focus," he said, trying to sound serious. "This is important."

Viktor gave him a side-eye.

"This isn't work," he muttered.

"It is now, if my girl says so," Ilya replied with total ease.

The music restarted. Galina stepped in front of them like a dance instructor completely dedicated to her craft.

"Ready," she declared. "Start now."

She jumped, spun, and moved her arms with precision. Viktor and Sergei followed her... more or less. Within ten seconds, disaster struck again.

Viktor jumped early, Sergei fell behind, and the final spin ended up looking more like a failed military maneuver than a children's dance routine. Galina stared at them in utter disbelief.

"Not like that!"

The two men froze, both breathing a little heavily.

"It's hard," Sergei offered in defense.

"It’s not hard!" Galina protested. "It’s easy!"

Ilya stopped trying to hide his amusement altogether.

"Maybe they need more practice," he chimed in.

Galina walked in small circles in front of them, visibly frustrated.

"If you don't get it right, we can't do the finale."

Viktor raised his hands as if negotiating a high-stakes crisis.

"We are doing our best."

Galina glared at him, and then, with absolute gravity, she raised a finger the way she had seen her father do so many times before.

"Do it right, or tonight you sleep with the fishes."

The silence that followed was brief... but heavily dramatic.

Sergei looked at Viktor, Viktor looked at Ilya, and Ilya froze completely for a second before bursting into an uncontrollable laugh. He leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Did I actually say that once?" he asked, though he clearly already knew the answer.

Galina nodded with absolute conviction. "Yes."

Viktor muttered something in Russian that sounded suspiciously like a complaint. Ilya ran a hand over his face, trying to compose himself.

"Well..." he said finally, "maybe you shouldn't repeat everything you hear Daddy say."

He tried to sound stern, but there was a unmistakable trace of pride in his eyes. Galina didn't look remorseful in the slightest.

"Then do it right," she insisted.

Sergei sighed. "Again."

The music kicked off once more. This time, Viktor and Sergei genuinely tried. With a level of concentration usually reserved for far more dangerous tasks, they began copying Galina's movements as precisely as they could.

From the sofa, Ilya watched them. Though he tried to keep his composure, he was thoroughly entertained on the inside... and, in a way he would never admit out loud, immensely proud of his daughter.

•••

Night fell peacefully over Ilya's house after a day filled with noise, children's music, and laughter.

Galina was completely exhausted. After dinner, she could barely keep her eyes open as Ilya carried her up to her room. He laid her down gently on the bed.

"Did you have fun?" he asked softly.

Galina nodded, half-asleep.

"Viktor almost learned it," she murmured.

Ilya let out a quiet chuckle. "Yeah... almost."

He tucked her in, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Are you staying with me tomorrow too?" she asked, her eyes fluttering shut.

Ilya hesitated for a fraction of a second. "We'll see," he answered gently.

Galina didn't respond; within seconds, her breathing grew slow and deep. Ilya stayed seated on the edge of the bed for a long time, watching her. There was something about this moment that hurt more than he expected, perhaps because he knew that even though she was here tonight, nothing was truly fixed.

Finally, he stood up quietly and left the room in silence.

The house was still. He walked down the hallway with slow steps. He had been holding himself together all day—for hours, his entire focus had been on Galina, playing with her, making her laugh, trying to act... normal. But now, the urge was rushing back.

He walked into his office and shut the door behind him. He stood still in front of the desk for a few seconds, knowing exactly what was inside, knowing exactly why he had come in here.

He placed both hands on the surface of the desk and lowered his head.

"No..." he whispered to himself.

For several seconds he did nothing, just breathing, trying to convince himself that he could walk away, that he could step back into the hallway, go upstairs, and go to bed.

He thought of Shane. He thought of what Shane had told him. He thought of that look of disappointment he had seen so many times over the last few years. And then he thought of Galina, fast asleep in the bedroom upstairs. His daughter—the reason he was trying to stop.

He rubbed his face tiredly. "I have to stop this," he said under his breath.

But his body was tense, and the anxiety was already there, mounting fast.

Finally, he opened the drawer. He stared at what was inside with a flicker of self-disgust. The doubt crept back, stronger this time. For a moment, he genuinely considered shutting it, but the craving was too intense; the addiction pulled with a force he knew all too well.

With slow, almost mechanical movements, he began setting up the line on the desk. As he did, something deep inside him felt utterly exhausted by his own weakness.

"You're an idiot," he muttered.

He stared at the line for one last second, as if there were still time to regret it, but in the end, he leaned down and snorted it.

When he finished, he leaned hard against the edge of the desk, breathing heavily with his jaw clenched tight. The hit came quickly, as it always did, bringing with it that awful, familiar mix of relief and crushing guilt.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

"You're a piece of shit," he whispered to the empty room.

There was no one there to disagree with him.

•••

Dawn arrived without much sleep.

As the sky barely began to lighten, Ilya was already dressed and leaving the house in silence. Galina was still asleep.

The car moved through nearly deserted streets until it pulled up to the cemetery. It was early, and the grounds were peaceful, wrapped in that distinct silence unique to graveyards at dawn. The air was crisp, and the sky was a pale gray.

Ilya walked between the headstones with slow steps until he stopped in front of one in particular: the grave of Galina, the woman who had been more of a mother to him than anyone else.

He stared at it for a few seconds before sitting down on the small bench facing the stone. He rested his elbows on his knees and let out a slow breath. For a while, he said nothing.

Then he spoke, his voice low. "I brought her home yesterday. Shane let me see her... you would’ve liked her."

He looked at the inscription carved into the stone as if expecting an answer.

"She's bossy," he added with a faint smile. "Just like you."

The quiet around him was absolute. Ilya lowered his gaze to the ground.

"I need to stop... because I'm going to lose them."

He fell silent for a few seconds, thinking about Shane, about everything that had happened, about how close it all was to shattering forever.

"But I don't know how anymore."

The words sounded more tired than he cared to admit. He leaned back against the bench and looked up at the gray sky.

"I wish you were here," he said softly.

His expression softened slightly. Then, imitating the voice of the woman he had loved years ago, he quoted her with a quiet smile that held equal parts nostalgia and pain:

"I'm not afraid of you, Ilya."

Ilya bowed his head again, staring at the grave in silence. For the first time in a very long time, he had no answers left for himself.

•••

Late afternoon was setting in when the car rolled out through the gates of Ilya's estate.

The sky was taking on a warm golden hue just before twilight. Inside the vehicle, everything seemed calm, at least on the surface.

Galina was sitting in the back seat, her backpack beside her, swinging her legs non-stop as she chattered away. She had spent an entire day with her father and still had a endless list of things to share.

"And then Viktor almost fell when we did the spin!" she said enthusiastically. "But then he did better. Sergei is still bad at it, though."

Up front, Viktor—who was driving—allowed a barely visible smile to touch his lips as he watched the road. He didn't say anything, but he was listening.

Ilya was sitting in the back next to his daughter, an arm resting on the back of the seat, watching her talk. His expression was gentle, almost serene, but inside, he was anything but. Right before leaving the house, he had gone back into his office and taken another line.

The memory was still fresh in his mind when he suddenly felt something warm and wet trickle down from his nose. He knitted his brows slightly and instinctively reached up with his fingers. When he looked at his hand, he saw dark red staining the handkerchief he had quickly pulled from his pocket.

He tried to wipe it away quietly, tilting his head slightly forward, but Galina caught it instantly.

"Daddy..."

Ilya looked up at her. "Yeah?"

The little girl's face had gone serious, lined with worry. "You're bleeding."

Ilya tried to brush it off, dabbing at his nose again. "It's nothing, sweetheart."

"Does it hurt?"

"No, Gali."

Galina kept staring at him intently; she was remarkably observant whenever she was worried about something.

"I'll tell Daddy Shane. He'll fix you up."

The phrase came out naturally, almost like a fundamental rule in her head: if something went wrong, you tell both your daddies.

Ilya felt an uncomfortable weight settle in his chest. He leaned closer to her and lowered his voice. "You don't need to tell him."

Galina frowned right away. "But you're bleeding..."

"It'll pass," he said gently. "It happens sometimes."

The little girl hesitated for a few seconds. "Are you sure?"

Ilya nodded. "Positive."

Galina studied him for a moment longer before letting out a soft sigh. "Okay..."

She didn't sound entirely convinced.

In the front seat, Viktor had been watching the whole interaction through the rearview mirror. He remained silent, but his eyes lingered on Ilya's face a fraction of a second longer than usual. Ilya caught the look, and something inside him twisted—not because of the blood, not because of the drugs, but because of what he had just done. He was asking his daughter to keep a secret, to lie.

He turned his gaze toward the window, pressing the handkerchief firmly to his nose, filled with a sudden surge of self-loathing.

The rest of the drive passed in silence.

When they arrived at Shane's apartment building, Galina practically burst out of the car. She had been waiting for this moment all day. Shane was already standing on the sidewalk.

"Daddy!" she shouted, running straight into his arms.

Shane picked her up immediately. "Hey, sweetheart."

Galina started talking at full speed, recounting her day—the dance, Viktor, the house—all blurred together in one continuous story. Ilya stayed near the car for a few moments, watching them from a distance.

After a moment, Shane glanced up and met his eyes. Neither said a word, but the silence between them was thick with unsaid things.

Ilya gave a subtle nod. Shane returned it. Then Shane and Galina headed into the building, and Ilya stepped back into the car.

"Home," he said simply.

The car pulled away, and the silence inside felt heavier now. They drove past several blocks until something outside the window caught Ilya's eye.

A sign on a modest, unassuming building read clearly:

Addiction Recovery Center

Ilya stared at the sign as the car passed the entrance.

"Stop," he said.

Viktor pulled over immediately, parking right in front of the doors.

Ilya stared at the building without moving. His hands rested on his knees, his eyes fixed on the entrance. He looked as though he were gathering something from deep within himself. Several seconds ticked by, perhaps more than a minute, but he didn't make a move to get out.

"Drive."

The car didn't budge. Ilya frowned.

"Drive, Viktor."

Viktor remained still. Ilya leaned forward slightly, his tone turning dangerous. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Drive the car before I tear your eyes out and feed them to you."

Normally, a threat like that would have ended the matter instantly. Viktor never questioned Ilya's orders—never. But this time, he didn't start the engine. Instead, he met Ilya's gaze in the mirror and said something in Russian that even he hadn't anticipated saying:

"I'm not afraid of you, Ilya."

The silence that followed was absolute.

For a long, agonizing second, the air inside the car felt frozen solid. Viktor was the first to realize what he had just blurted out, and his face instantly drained of color.

"I..." he stammered, "I'm sorry, boss. I'm sorry, I don't know why I said that."

His voice grew panicked. "I didn't mean it like that, I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me."

But Ilya wasn't listening to him anymore. Those words had struck him straight in the chest—he had heard them that very morning at the cemetery, spoken in her voice: Galina, his old nanny, the memory of that stern tone he felt himself forgetting a little more each day.

“I’m not afraid of you, Ilya.”

For a moment, a strange chill ran down his spine, as if something from the past had breached the present in a way he couldn't explain. He looked back at the building outside the window. Slowly, he opened the car door.

"Stay here," he said.

And he stepped out.

•••

The main room of the support center was plain, almost too simple for someone like Ilya.

The walls were painted a slightly faded white, a coffee urn sat on a side table, and a circle of folding chairs occupied the center of the floor. There were no hierarchies here; no one was above anyone else.

Ilya took an empty chair, sitting up straight with his legs slightly apart and his arms resting on his thighs. His posture remained formidable, almost intimidating even in a place like this. He glanced around calmly, assessing every person in the room as if he were in a meeting in his own world, and his first thought was that he didn't belong here.

There was a young man who couldn't stop fidgeting his leg. An older woman with deep dark circles under her eyes held a plastic cup with both hands. A guy in his twenties stared at the floor as if he were too ashamed to lift his head.

Ilya observed them one by one as they began to talk. This isn't for me, he thought. I'm not like these people.

A man with a calm voice—the facilitator—started the meeting by thanking everyone for coming. He spoke slowly, with a serenity that stood in stark contrast to the constant tension Ilya carried within himself.

A few people shared first. One man mentioned he had been clean for only a few days and felt anxious all the time; a woman spoke about how she had shattered her family's trust. The stories came out awkwardly, punctuated by long pauses and raw nervousness.

Ilya listened, but inside his head, quick judgments formed. Idiots, he thought. They can't even keep a grip on their own lives.

He leaned back slightly in his chair, lacing his fingers together, waiting for the meeting to end. Then the facilitator turned toward him.

"We have a new face today. If you'd like to introduce yourself, you're welcome to."

A few people turned their heads slightly toward Ilya—not with aggressive curiosity, but with quiet attention.

Ilya held their gazes effortlessly; he was used to people looking at him. But this was different. There was no fear in their eyes, and that threw him off slightly. He leaned forward slowly and spoke.

"I'm Ilya, and..."

Before he could continue, the entire group spoke up at once, almost like a ritual:

"Hi, Ilya."

Ilya blinked once, caught off guard by the synchronized greeting. He wasn't used to that kind of response.

"Yeah... hi," he said, clearing his throat before continuing. He ran his tongue along the inside of his cheek, figuring out how to phrase it without sounding pathetic. "I'm here because...

maybe I have a problem," he finally said. "And I already have enough problems without having to deal with this shit... plus, I'm losing my family, and I don't want that."

When he finished, no one interrupted or offered unsolicited commentary. There was only a quiet, respectful silence, as if what he had said was enough.

The facilitator nodded. "Thank you for sharing."

Ilya gave a small nod and leaned back into his chair again. Inside, he still felt uncomfortable, like he had just voiced something he was never supposed to say out loud.

The meeting went on as people continued to speak one by one—stories of relapses, lies, and desperate attempts to start over. As he listened, Ilya noticed something strange: at first, their stories had seemed pathetic to him, but slowly, he began to recognize a pattern. They were all talking about the exact same thing, just in different ways.

Losing control.

Lying to the people they loved.

Pushing away everyone who mattered.

And even though Ilya still believed his life was incomparable to theirs, something deep down felt uncomfortably familiar.

After a while, the facilitator explained the group's program.

"For those who are new, we work through a twelve-step process," he said calmly. "It's not something that happens overnight; everyone goes at their own pace."

Ilya raised his eyes slightly, listening with a degree of skepticism.

"The first step is admitting that we have a problem," the facilitator continued. "Accepting that we can't handle it on our own."

Ilya let out a faint, quiet chuckle—it wasn't entirely mocking, but rather incredulous. Admitting a problem seemed like the easiest part in the world to him; the hard part was everything else.

The facilitator kept talking. "Further down the road, there's another crucial step: making a list of all the people we've harmed... and attempting to make amends to them wherever possible."

That made Ilya smirk—a brief, dark smile.

He cast his eyes to the floor as he absorbed the phrase. If he had to make a list like that, it would be endless, and certainly not filled with the kind of harm these people were describing.

Naturally, he didn't say a word about his real life or the world he came from. To them, he was just another man struggling with addiction.

The meeting wrapped up with a few final comments. People slowly stood up, some chatting with one another, others leaving in silence.

Ilya remained seated for a few extra seconds. He wasn't entirely sure what he was feeling—ridiculous, yes, but also... strange, as if something had shifted slightly inside his head.

The facilitator walked over to him, keeping a respectful distance.

"The first meeting usually feels a bit strange," he said.

Ilya looked up at him. "Yeah."

The man gave a calm smile. "How are you feeling?"

Ilya pondered the answer for a moment before speaking. "Like an idiot."

The facilitator let out a sympathetic laugh. "That's pretty common."

Ilya placed his hands on his knees and looked around at the circle of chairs again. The place still felt alien to him, but perhaps not quite as much as when he had walked in.

The facilitator spoke again. "If you decide to come back, we meet every week."

Ilya paused for a few seconds before standing up slowly. "Maybe I will."

And in his world, where he almost never admitted weakness to anyone, that sentence carried far more weight than it let on.

•••

Night had long settled in by the time Ilya returned to his office.

The house was quiet—almost too quiet. The only sound was the faint hum of the heating system and the occasional gust of wind brushing against the windows.

The office was lit by a single desk lamp. Its yellow glow left the rest of the room wrapped in soft shadows.

Ilya was sitting in his leather chair, leaning back with one elbow propped on the armrest. Between his fingers, he held a small transparent baggie—the last one.

He rolled it slowly between his thumb and index finger, watching the white powder slide back and forth inside the plastic.

His body wanted it desperately; he could feel it in his clenched jaw, the faint itch in his nose, the knot of anxiety tightening in his chest. His mind was already conjuring the familiar rush: the sharp hit, the artificial clarity, the sudden surge of energy that always followed.

He swallowed hard. "Fuck..." he whispered to himself.

He set it down on the desk for a second, but almost immediately picked it back up. He couldn't take his eyes off it.

Minutes ticked by like this, in total silence, the craving intensifying with every second.

Finally, he grabbed his phone. He hesitated for a second before dialing, but he pressed call anyway.

It rang several times before someone picked up on the other end.

"Hello?"

Shane's voice was low, sounding a bit tired. Ilya leaned his head back against the chair.

"I'm at... well, one of those meetings."

There was a short silence on the other end of the line. Then Shane spoke, his tone instantly sharpening. "Are you calling to tell me you're playing poker?"

Ilya closed his eyes for a moment and let out a quiet breath through his nose. "No..." Another pause. "Not that kind of meeting."

It took Shane a moment to process. "Then what are you talking about?"

Ilya looked at the baggie sitting on the desk again. "A meeting... for addicts."

A much longer silence followed on the line this time. When Shane spoke again, his voice had completely shifted.

"Oh..."

Ilya registered the change in his tone. "Yeah."

Shane exhaled slowly. "Good. I'm glad."

He didn't sound overjoyed or entirely convinced; he sounded... cautious.

"I went today," Ilya continued. "Sat there with a bunch of people listing off their miseries."

Shane didn't say anything, but he was listening intently. Ilya spun the baggie between his fingers once more.

"The guy running it explained something... a twelve-step program."

"Yeah," Shane said softly.

"One of those steps..." Ilya paused briefly, "...is apologizing to the people you've hurt."

Silence settled over the line again, but this time it felt different—heavier, more charged. Ilya dragged a hand down his face. He wasn't used to this.

"So..." he murmured, "I guess I have to start somewhere."

Shane didn't answer right away, so Ilya spoke up before he could.

"I'm sorry."

The word hung suspended between them. It wasn't a word Ilya used often. In fact, he almost never did.

"For lying to you," he continued. "For all this time... for not stopping when I should have."

On the other end, Shane closed his eyes for a moment. "Ilya..."

"I'm not saying it's fixed," Ilya added quickly. "Or that it's going to be easy, but..." He looked at the baggie one last time. "I'm trying not to ruin everything."

Shane took a deep breath. "Okay," he said finally. "Thank you for telling me."

A few more seconds of silence passed, calmer this time.

"I should get some sleep," Shane said softly. "Galina's already asleep."

"Yeah," Ilya replied.

"We'll talk tomorrow."

"Yeah."

The call ended. Ilya set the phone down on the desk, and the office fell back into complete stillness.

His eyes landed on the small baggie once more. He picked it up between his fingers and raised it to the light.

He still wanted it immensely. For a long, motionless moment, he just sat there.

Then he stood up and walked toward the office's adjoining bathroom with slow, heavy steps. He flipped on the harsh white overhead light, walked up to the toilet, and held the baggie over the bowl.

His hand trembled slightly. He could keep it. He could save it for another time. He could tell himself that next time would be the real last time.

He squeezed his eyes shut for a second, and then he let go. The baggie dropped into the water with a soft splash.

Ilya pressed the flush lever. The water swirled, dragging the plastic and the white powder down until they vanished completely.

He stood staring into the bowl for a few seconds longer, his breathing slow and steady.

•••

On the other side of the city, in his apartment, Shane stood in the doorway of Galina's bedroom.

The dim glow of a nightlight bathed the room in a warm tone. Galina was fast asleep, hugging her pillow tightly with her hair scattered messily across her face. Shane stepped in quietly so as not to wake her, leaning over to pull up a blanket that had slipped off. Then he backed out of the room and shut the door softly.

In the quiet of the apartment, Shane placed a hand over his abdomen.

It wasn't showing yet, but he knew it was there. He slid his hand gently across his stomach, almost timidly.

"Hey there," he whispered softly.

A faint smile touched his lips, though it carried a trace of nervous uncertainty.

"I hope your father isn't lying to me."

He stayed like that for a long moment, his hand resting on his belly, listening to the silence of the night and thinking about the call he had just received.

# Chapter 20

The morning was quiet in Shane's house.

Sunlight poured through the kitchen windows and fell across the table, illuminating the coffee cups that had already grown a bit cold. Outside, in the garden, the voices of the kids playing could be heard.

Galina was running through the grass with Mateo, who was trying to catch her with a ball in his hand. Sometimes they shouted something through laughter, sometimes they argued over rules only they understood—it was that kind of cheerful noise that made the house feel alive.

Inside, however, the atmosphere was very different.

Shane was leaning over the kitchen sink, gripping the edge with both hands while his body shook from another dry heave. His hair fell slightly over his face, and he breathed in short gasps, trying to recover.

It had started with a mild dizziness a few minutes ago, followed by the first bout of vomiting that now seemed endless.

Hayden was right behind him, one hand resting on his back, supporting him with care yet firmness. Ever since they had become friends, Hayden had learned to notice when Shane tried to pretend he was fine, and that morning was one of those moments.

"Easy," he said in a low voice. "Breathe... slowly."

Shane tried to, but another heave doubled him over the sink again.

When he finally calmed down a bit, he rested his forehead against his arm and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

"God..." he murmured, his voice tired.

Hayden picked up a glass of water and brought it closer.

"Take some."

Shane took barely a sip and then set the glass down on the counter.

"This is worse than yesterday," he said, his voice still weak.

Hayden leaned against the counter, watching him with a certain concern.

"Well... that usually happens," he replied. "The body is adjusting."

Shane let out a small, tired laugh.

"Yeah... adjusting."

He ran a hand over his face, still somewhat pale.

For a moment they remained silent, listening to the distant laughter of Galina and Mateo outside from the kitchen.

Hayden glanced out the window for a second, making sure the kids were okay, and then looked back at Shane.

"When are you planning to tell Ilya?"

The question hung in the air.

Shane didn't answer right away. He straightened up slowly, leaning against the counter, and looked out toward the garden as well, as if he needed a moment before speaking.

"I don't know," he finally said.

Hayden frowned slightly.

"Doesn't he suspect?"

Shane shook his head.

"No."

Hayden observed him in silence for a few seconds, trying to understand what was going on in his head.

"Shane..."

"He's in rehab," Shane interrupted gently. "He just started." He crossed his arms, though the gesture seemed more like a way to protect himself than anything else. "And I don't think something like this is good right now."

Hayden looked at him intently.

"Something like this?"

Shane placed a hand over his abdomen almost unconsciously, as if the gesture were already natural.

"A baby isn't exactly... light news."

Hayden let out a soft sigh.

"No, of course not."

Outside, Galina shouted something neither of them quite understood, and Mateo responded with a laugh.

Shane looked toward the glass door leading to the garden, making sure everything was fine, and then spoke again.

"Ilya's just trying not to destroy himself," he said. "He's going to those meetings, he's trying to quit cocaine... I don't know if burdening him with this right now is the right thing to do."

Hayden rested his forearms on the counter, leaning in a little toward him.

"And you?"

Shane looked at him, confused.

"What?"

"You're going through something big, too," Hayden said calmly. "Very big."

Shane looked away for a second.

"I'm fine."

Hayden let out a small, humorless laugh.

"You didn't look very fine two minutes ago while throwing up half your breakfast."

Shane laughed slightly again, but this time it was more tired.

"That's part of the package."

"I don't just mean that," Hayden said.

The silence that followed was heavier.

Hayden spoke in a more serious tone now.

"You're taking care of Galina, you're taking care of the house, you're taking care of Ilya from afar while he tries to recover, and now you're also..." he discreetly looked at Shane's abdomen "...going through this."

Shane didn't say anything.

"The thing is," Hayden continued gently, "you take care of everyone... but who takes care of you?"

The question caught him off guard.

Shane placed his hands on the counter and lowered his gaze, thinking.

He didn't have an immediate answer; the silence filled with the distant sound of the ball hitting the grass outside.

After a moment, Shane spoke in a low voice.

"I suppose... I'm just used to it."

Hayden watched him closely.

"That doesn't mean it's right."

Shane raised his gaze to him, and for a second his expression showed something more vulnerable than he usually allowed.

"I don't know how to do this any other way."

Hayden didn't answer immediately; he just stepped a little closer and gave him a soft pat on the back.

"Well... then let's start with something simple," he said. "Today, at least, you're not doing it alone."

Shane looked at him, a little surprised by how directly he said it.

Hayden smiled faintly.

"I'm here."

Shane took a deep breath and nodded slowly.

At that moment, Galina came running toward the kitchen door, with Mateo right behind her.

"Daddy!" she shouted from outside. "Mateo cheated!"

Shane and Hayden looked at each other for a second and almost at the same time smiled a little.

The meeting room no longer felt as foreign to Ilya as the first time he had walked in.

The chairs were still arranged in a circle, the coffee thermos was still on the side table, and that same faint smell of wood and warm coffee filled the atmosphere.

He sat as he always did, big, taking up space, but his posture wasn't quite as rigid. Sometimes he rested his elbows on his knees, sometimes he listened with his head tilted, and every now and then, he even nodded when someone spoke.

The meeting was underway, and a woman was speaking at that moment. She was around fifty, with dark hair tied back simply and a tired but firm voice—it was Ana.

Ilya had noticed her since the first meetings. She didn't talk much, but when she did, no one interrupted her.

"This week was hard," she was saying. "I didn't relapse, but... I came very close."

The coordinator nodded calmly.

"Do you want to share what happened?"

Ana sighed softly before replying.

"Sometimes I feel like my house isn't a safe place," she said.

The phrase made Ilya barely lift his gaze.

Ana continued.

"And when you're in a place where you feel like that... it's easy to want to escape."

No one asked anything else at that moment; in this group, things were often said without needing to explain everything.

Ilya watched her in silence. As the weeks passed, he had started talking more, too. At first with few words, then a bit more. He didn't share who he really was or where he came from, but he did talk about cocaine, the loss of control, the feeling of losing what mattered most to him.

That afternoon, when his turn came, he spoke with a naturalness that months ago would have been impossible.

"This week was... weird," he said, running a hand through the back of his neck. "I didn't use."

Some people nodded.

"But I wanted to," he continued. "Several times."

The coordinator looked at him attentively.

"What did you do when you felt that?"

Ilya thought for a second before answering.

"I stayed still," he said. "And I waited for it to pass."

There was a small smile of approval on some faces.

"Sometimes it's as simple as that," the coordinator said.

Ilya shrugged slightly.

"It didn't feel simple."

The meeting continued with others sharing. When it ended, some stayed to chat for a bit before leaving.

Ilya was about to head out when Ana approached him.

"Are you going straight home?" she asked.

Ilya looked at her.

"Not yet."

Ana motioned with her head toward the street.

"There's a cafe around the corner, sometimes I go there after the meetings."

Ilya hesitated for a second, but finally nodded.

"All right."

They walked together down the sidewalk in silence for a few minutes. The night was cool and the street quiet.

The cafe was small, with warm lighting and a few occupied tables. They sat near the window. A waiter brought them two coffees without them having to say much else.

Ana wrapped her hands around the cup, as if she needed the warmth.

"Thanks for coming," she said after a moment.

Ilya shrugged a little.

"I didn't have anything better to do."

Ana smiled faintly, as if she understood that this was his way of saying he did want to be there.

For a few minutes they talked about simple things: the meeting, the people in the group, small everyday things.

Until Ana fell silent all of a sudden.

Ilya noticed.

"What's wrong?"

She took a few seconds to answer.

"What I said in the meeting... about my house."

Ilya looked at her attentively.

Ana lowered her gaze to her cup.

"My husband," she said finally. "When he drinks... he gets violent."

The phrase hung in the air between the two of them.

Ilya didn't change his expression, but something in his gaze grew darker.

Ana kept talking, perhaps because he didn't interrupt her.

"It wasn't always like that," she said. "Or maybe it was and I just didn't want to see it." She shrugged sadly. "Sometimes I think if I had just done things better..."

Ilya spoke for the first time since she started.

"It's not your fault."

Ana looked at him, a bit surprised by the firmness with which he said it.

"It's complicated," she replied. "Couple life is always complicated."

Ilya didn't argue, but he didn't look convinced either.

"Did he hit you?" he asked directly.

Ana hesitated for a moment and then barely nodded.

"Yes."

Ilya didn't say anything else; he just took a sip of coffee, but in his head, something was already at work.

They talked for a bit longer about other things before parting ways outside the cafe.

"See you at the next meeting," Ana said.

"Yeah," Ilya replied.

She walked away down the sidewalk, losing herself among the streetlights.

Ilya stood still for a few seconds longer.

Then he pulled out his phone.

"Sergei."

On the other end, they answered almost immediately.

"Yes, boss."

Ilya walked toward his car as he spoke.

"I need you to look into someone."

"Good."

"A man, the husband of a woman who comes to my meetings, her name is Ana."

There was a short silence while Sergei took a mental note.

"What do you need to know?"

"Everything," Ilya replied calmly. "Name, job, where he lives, what he does."

Sergei didn't ask why; he never did.

"Understood."

Ilya opened the car door.

"And if it turns out he's the kind of person I think he is..." He paused briefly. "I want you to give him a... little scare."

On the other end, a small, amused exhale was heard.

"What kind of scare?"

Ilya rested an arm on the roof of the car and looked out at the street in silence for a few seconds.

"Nothing permanent," he finally said. "Just so he understands that someone is watching him, and that Ana isn't alone."

Sergei replied in his usual, calm tone.

"Done."

Ilya hung up.

He stared at the phone screen for a moment before putting it in his pocket.

In the group, they were teaching him to take responsibility for his actions, but there were things that, in his world, were resolved another way.

The night in the apartment was quiet.

A light rain had started falling a while ago, and the soft sound against the windows filled the silence of the house.

Shane had left a dim light on in the living room, and from the kitchen still came the faint scent of a soup he had made earlier.

When Ilya knocked on the doorbell, Galina was the first to run to the door.

"Daddy Ilya!" she shouted even before Shane could open it.

The door swung open and Galina practically launched herself at him. Ilya caught her easily in the air, lifting her and spinning her around a bit while she laughed.

"Hello, little storm," he said with a smile he rarely showed anywhere else.

"You came!" she said, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Of course I came."

Shane watched them from the doorway with a soft expression. For weeks now, Ilya had been coming to see her like this—in bits, with care, as if he were rebuilding something step by step.

They spent a while playing in the living room. Galina insisted that Ilya sit on the floor with her to build a huge tower out of blocks. Ilya, who could intimidate anyone in any other situation, was completely focused on trying not to knock the structure down.

"No, no, that goes there," Galina corrected him with absolute authority.

"Yeah?" he replied, feigning doubt. "I thought I was the expert."

"No," she said very seriously. "I'm the expert."

Shane watched them from the couch, holding a mug of tea between his hands, and couldn't help smiling a little.

Later, when Galina's energy began to fade, Shane took her to brush her teeth, but it was Ilya who ended up sitting on the bed with her to tell an improvised story.

"And so the dragon decided that instead of fighting..." Ilya said, his voice softer than usual "...he was going to sleep."

"That's boring," Galina protested, half asleep.

"The dragon was tired."

"Well..." she murmured, settling against the pillow. "But tomorrow he fights."

"Tomorrow he fights."

Little by little, Galina fell asleep.

Ilya sat still for a few seconds longer beside the bed, watching her breathe peacefully.

Then he stood up slowly and walked out of the room, closing the door carefully.

In the living room, Shane was tidying some things up on the table.

"She fell asleep," Ilya said.

"Yeah, she looked tired."

There was a comfortable little silence between them, something that wasn't always easy to achieve.

Ilya leaned against the back of a chair, watching him.

"I missed her."

Shane nodded.

"She missed you, too, a lot."

They talked for a bit about Galina: school, something she had drawn that week, an absurd fight she'd had with Mateo over a toy.

Then the conversation naturally shifted.

"How are the meetings going?" Shane asked.

Ilya ran a hand through his hair, as if pondering the answer.

"Good."

Then he added, with something that looked like contained pride:

"Three weeks clean already."

Shane looked up immediately; there was something warm in his expression.

"I'm proud of you," he said sincerely. "That makes me very happy."

For a second, Ilya looked a bit uncomfortable with the praise; he wasn't used to receiving that kind of approval.

"Yeah..." he murmured. "Well."

He hesitated for a moment, as if debating whether to say what came next, then took a small step closer to Shane.

"The withdrawal is killing me."

Shane looked at him calmly.

"I know, it's hard."

Ilya let out a small, dry laugh.

"No, not just from the cocaine."

Shane already knew where the conversation was heading.

"I'm in withdrawal from a lot of things," Ilya continued, lowering his voice a little.

Shane raised a hand softly.

"Ilya..."

It was a way to stop him before he went on, but Ilya didn't back down; on the contrary, he stepped a bit closer. His gaze held something insistent, tired, and vulnerable all at once.

"I miss you like an idiot," he said.

Shane lowered his gaze for a second before answering.

"Me too."

The silence that followed was full of things neither of them said.

"Come back home," Ilya murmured.

Shane shook his head softly.

"Not yet."

Ilya frowned slightly.

"Why not?"

"Because I need to know you're taking this seriously," Shane replied quietly. "That it's not just a matter of a few weeks and then we're right back to the same thing."

Ilya took another step, now much closer.

"I am."

"Ilya..."

"I am," he repeated, with more intensity, running a hand over his face, clearly nervous. "I'm going to those meetings, I'm clean, I'm trying to fix everything... what else do you want me to do?"

Shane looked at him with a mix of affection and firmness.

"Keep it up."

Ilya watched him for a long moment and then spoke in a lower voice.

"At least let me kiss you."

Shane hesitated.

"Ilya..."

"Please," he said, almost desperately. "Just that."

He stood there, looking at him as if he truly needed that small gesture.

Shane took a deep breath, said nothing for a few seconds, and finally yielded a little.

"All right... but just for a second."

Ilya waited no longer; he leaned in and kissed him with a restrained urgency, like someone who had been waiting far too long.

It wasn't an aggressive kiss, but it was charged with everything he had accumulated over those weeks: the distance, the fear, the need.

Shane responded to the kiss, though more softly, and for a few seconds, the rest of the world seemed to disappear.

Until a small voice broke the moment.

"Are you back together?"

The two of them separated immediately.

Galina was standing in the hallway, hair messy, eyes wide open.

"You're back together!" she said, now smiling with excitement.

She ran toward them.

"I knew it! I knew you were going to get back together!"

Shane crouched down a bit in front of her, trying to speak calmly.

"Gali, sweetie..."

But the little girl's expression began to change when she saw that neither of them was saying what she expected.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Shane spoke carefully.

"We love each other, yes, but we're not going back to the big house just yet."

The reaction was immediate; the enthusiasm vanished, replaced by anger.

"No!" she said. "I don't want to!"

Shane tried to explain.

"We're fixing some things first."

But Galina was already furious.

"No! It's unfair!"

And before they could stop her, she ran off toward her room.

Ilya and Shane looked at each other briefly.

"I'm going to..." Shane started to say.

But it wasn't necessary; Galina came back to the living room a few minutes later with a little backpack slung over her shoulder.

"I'm going with Daddy Ilya."

Ilya blinked, surprised.

"Uh..."

The little girl stood firmly in front of him.

"I'm leaving now."

Ilya crouched down a bit to get to her eye level, his voice softer than usual.

"Gali..."

She looked at him with eyes full of anger.

"I want to go with you."

Ilya took a deep breath before answering.

"Listen to me for a second."

Galina crossed her arms.

"No."

"Yes," he said with patience. "You have to listen."

The little girl didn't say anything, but she didn't move.

Ilya continued.

"I... haven't been behaving so well lately."

Galina frowned.

"Why?"

Ilya searched for words she could understand.

"Because I did some things that weren't right, and now I'm trying to fix them."

Galina looked at him in silence.

"When I manage to do that," he continued, "you and Daddy Shane will come back home with me."

The little girl clutched her backpack tighter.

"When?"

Ilya hesitated for a moment.

"Soon... if I keep doing things right."

Galina lowered her gaze a bit, still upset, but no longer quite as sure of her escape plan.

Ilya extended a hand and gently tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear.

"But now you have to stay here, with Daddy Shane."

The silence in the living room grew soft again, filled with emotions that were still trying to settle, as confusing as they had been these past weeks.

Ilya's house was quiet when he returned; now it felt too big, too empty.

He closed the door behind him and for a moment stood still in the entryway, the sensation still clinging to his skin: the kiss, the closeness, Shane's scent.

He ran a hand over his face, exhaling slowly.

Then his phone rang. He looked at the screen and saw it was Shane calling, so he answered almost immediately.

"Yeah?"

On the other end, Shane's voice was low, soft, as if he didn't want to break the silence of the night.

"I just wanted to say... thank you."

Ilya frowned slightly, walking toward the living room.

"What for?"

"For how you handled Gali," Shane replied. "And for everything... you're doing."

Ilya stood still; he wasn't used to being recognized like that.

"I didn't do anything," he murmured.

"Yes, you did," Shane insisted. "And... I noticed it, I notice everything, and I'm happy and proud of you."

There was a short silence.

Ilya sat on the couch, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"I miss you too," Shane said in an even lower voice.

Ilya closed his eyes for a second.

"Me more."

The breathing on the other end sounded a little sharper.

"Today..." Shane started, hesitating slightly "...it was nice."

Ilya rested his head against the back of the couch.

"Yeah, I needed to kiss you."

The memory of the kiss rushed back.

"That shouldn't have happened," Shane added, though his tone didn't sound convinced.

Ilya let out a small, dry laugh.

"But it did..."

"I miss you," Ilya said again, this time lower.

On the other end, Shane took a second to reply.

"Me too."

Ilya ran his tongue over his lips, restless.

"You have no idea how much."

Shane's breathing changed slightly, turning slower.

"Yes, I do..."

Ilya pressed his fingers against the armrest.

"No, you don't," he murmured. "You have no idea what it was like having you so close today and not being able to..."

He fell silent, but he didn't need to finish the sentence.

Shane didn't speak right away either, but when he did, his voice was softer, more intimate.

"Ilya..."

"Yeah?"

"Don't hang up."

"I'm not going to hang up."

"I want to touch you so bad right now."

Shane closed his eyes; he could feel his body heating up so much it was funny to think he got like that just from hearing his voice.

"I miss you touching me."

Ilya parted his lips and brought his hand down to his crotch, feeling himself harden.

"Am I going to be able to fuck you again someday?"

Shane smiled and bit his lip.

"If you keep behaving yourself, you're going to be able to do whatever you want to me."

"Everything I want?"

Shane laughed, aroused.

"What would all that be?"

"You know everything I like to do to you."

Shane sighed and closed his eyes, remembering, indeed, how passionate Ilya could be, how intense he was in bed.

"Are you hard right now?"

Ilya unzipped his pants and took hold of his throbbing erection. He stroked it slowly with his free hand.

"I'm so hard I could break something with this."

On the other end came a nervous little giggle.

"You usually break me with that dick."

"If you were here right now I'd fuck you so hard..."

"Hard?"

"Hard, the way you like it."

"You like fucking me, don't you? Do you like it when I spread my legs and let you have your fun?"

"Shane..."

"Are you going to touch yourself for me?"

"I'm doing it," Ilya said, moving his hand faster and faster.

"Imagine you have me right there, in our bed, opening my legs just for you..."

"Just for me..."

"Yeah," Shane said, settling into his seat. "My body is made for yours..."

"Shit..."

"Keep behaving yourself and I promise you're going to do whatever you want to me soon."

Ilya closed his eyes and came onto his hand. He felt a little embarrassed at how fast he came, but truly, these had been difficult days for him in that regard.

Both of them were breathing slower now, calmer.

"This doesn't help the abstinence much," Ilya murmured with a tired half-smile, feeling his semen on his fingers.

Shane smiled on the other end, even though he couldn't see him.

"Worse would be feeling nothing."

Ilya let his head drop back against the rest and stared at the ceiling.

"I feel nothing with anyone else."

The silence that followed was soft.

"I know," Shane replied.

They spent a few seconds more.

"Go to sleep," Shane finally said. "Tomorrow you have to keep doing things right."

Ilya closed his eyes.

"Yeah."

"Good night."

"Good night, love."

The call disconnected, and for the first time in a long time, the silence of the house didn't feel so empty.

The morning was clear and fresh when Ilya stepped out of the car in front of Shane's building the next day.

He was carrying a small, neatly closed bag in his hand; inside was a gift for Galina, something he had chosen himself with a dedication he rarely put into that sort of thing.

Viktor remained in the driver's seat, attentive, as always.

"I won't be long," Ilya said before closing the door.

He entered the building unannounced and climbed the stairs with a firm step. He hadn't given a heads-up that he was coming; part of him wanted to surprise Galina, to see her face when she opened the door, and another part—harder to admit even to himself—simply needed to see them.

When he reached the apartment hallway, he stopped.

The door was ajar, and voices could be heard from inside.

Ilya stood still in silence. He recognized Shane's voice immediately, and also his laugh—it was a different laugh from the one he was used to hearing, lighter, more relaxed.

Ilya stepped closer just enough to look inside without being seen.

Shane was in the kitchen, leaning against the counter with a mug in his hand. His hair was slightly messy and his posture relaxed.

In front of him stood a man Ilya didn't know.

"I swear Mateo did the exact same thing yesterday," the man was saying, laughing. "He got so mad he went to his room for ten minutes."

Shane let out an open laugh.

"Gali is the same, such a drama queen."

"But they get along," the other replied. "That's what matters."

Shane nodded, still smiling.

"Yeah... luckily."

Ilya didn't move; he observed every gesture, every look, every small detail.

The man said something else in a low voice, leaning in a little toward Shane. Shane did the same to listen better, and for a second, their shoulders almost brushed.

It was a minimal gesture, but enough. Ilya's jaw immediately tightened, and his fingers closed harder around the bag he was carrying.

He didn't need to hear anymore. He backed away in silence, walking away from the door with controlled steps, though inside everything had turned rigid.

When he stepped out of the building, the cold air hit his face, but it did nothing to calm him.

Viktor glanced up briefly when he saw him approach.

Ilya opened the car door and slid into the back seat with a dry movement.

"Drive."

The engine started, and the car began to move forward.

For a few seconds, no one spoke.

Ilya stared out the window, but he wasn't looking at the street; the scene kept replaying in his head, over and over: Shane's laughter, the closeness with that man, the comfort between the two of them.

"Viktor," he suddenly said.

"Yes, boss."

Ilya didn't take his eyes off the glass.

"There's a guy up there, with my family."

Viktor asked no unnecessary questions.

"Description?"

Ilya exhaled slowly, tense.

"Tall, quiet, the face of someone who thinks he's a little too comfortable with my man."

Viktor nodded slightly.

"Understood."

Ilya turned his head just enough to catch his reflection in the window.

"I want you to follow him."

Viktor hesitated for an instant, but didn't question the order.

"Yes, boss."

"Closely," Ilya added. "I want to know who he is, what he does, who he hangs out with... everything."

His tone left no room for argument.

"Understood."

After a few seconds, Ilya spoke again, his voice lower, colder.

"Let's make it clear that the only one who gets to feel comfortable with my man is me."

Viktor nodded in silence, watching him through the rearview mirror, but Ilya was no longer looking at anything. He was only seeing, over and over again, Shane laughing with someone who wasn't him.

# Chapter 21

Hayden’s morning started as almost every other had for some time now: with tiny footsteps running through the apartment and a child’s voice demanding attention early on. Mateo appeared in the kitchen holding a sheet of paper, waving it with excitement.

"Look, Dad!"

Hayden, still holding his coffee, leaned down just enough to look at the drawing. He narrowed his eyes, exaggerating his concentration.

"Let's see… this is clearly a masterpiece."

Mateo smiled, proud.

"It's a dragon."

"Ah, that makes sense," Hayden replied. "I can tell it's dangerous."

The boy laughed and ran off again, leaving the paper on the table. The apartment had that gentle messiness of living with a kid: toys in a corner, an open backpack, half-folded clothes over a chair—nothing serious, but full of a warm, happy life.

After breakfast, they went down to the building's courtyard.
Mateo was playing with a ball, running back and forth, while Hayden watched him from a bench, relaxed but attentive.

It was a simple, predictable, uneventful routine... and, without his knowledge, watched.

From a parked car half a block away, Viktor observed patiently.
He didn't draw attention to himself or stand out; he just watched, recorded, and memorized.

He repeated this surveillance for days: he watched him take Mateo to school, return with grocery bags, run into Shane, and spend time with the kids in the courtyard or in the apartment.
Nothing out of place, nothing suspicious, nothing that justified the tension he had seen in Ilya.

When he finally gathered everything, he returned to the house and went straight to the office.

Ilya was sitting behind the desk under dim lighting, an untouched glass sitting in front of him.

"Well?" he asked without preamble.

Viktor approached and set an envelope on the desk.

"His name is Hayden. He lives in the apartment next to Shane's and has a son, Mateo, who is around Galina's age."

Ilya opened the envelope and began reading carefully, turning the pages with sharp movements.

"Stable job," Viktor continued. "Normal routine, no record, no problematic connections."

The silence grew heavy, and Ilya slowly looked up.

"That's it?"

"That's all."

Ilya dropped the papers onto the desk with a abrupt gesture. His fingers tapped the wood once, twice, as if needing to release something.

"And Shane?"

"They see each other often," Viktor answered calmly. "Because of the kids. They spend time together in the courtyard, sometimes in the apartment."

Ilya clenched his jaw.

"Anything else?"

Viktor hesitated for a brief second before shaking his head.

"No."

The silence that followed was not peaceful; it was thick, loaded with something that couldn't find an outlet.
Ilya leaned back in his chair, running a hand over his face.

There was nothing concrete, and yet, he couldn't get the image of Shane laughing with that guy out of his head—so close, so comfortable.

"You can go," he said finally.

"Yes, boss."

When the door closed, Ilya was left alone. He looked at the report again: name, routine, son —everything in order, everything clean. And yet, something inside him continued to burn.

On the other hand, Shane was starting to soften.
Weeks had passed and Ilya had kept his end of the bargain: he was staying clean, going to his meetings, holding himself together. Little by little, that had begun to shift something in Shane. He wasn't avoiding him as much anymore; he was seeking him out again, even if cautiously.

That night, after hesitating for several minutes, he picked up his phone and typed:

*"Do you want to come over for dinner with us tomorrow?"*

He stared at the screen with a mix of hope and nerves that felt good to experience—it tasted like a fresh start.

However, the reply came moments later:

*"I'm busy."*

Shane frowned. It wasn't the first time over the last few days.

He wrote back:

*"We can make it early, Gali will be happy."*

A few minutes passed before another answer arrived:

*"I can't promise anything."*

Shane put the phone on the table and sighed. He didn't understand. Ilya was doing everything right, but at the same time, he seemed more distant, colder, harder to reach.

The next day, he tried again:

*"Gali was asking about you all morning."*

The reply was immediate:

*"Tell her I'm working."*

Shane rested his forehead against the palm of his hand.

"I don't understand..." he whispered.

Meanwhile, in his office, Ilya held his phone without replying further. He stared at the conversation as if trying to find something hidden between the lines.

The invitation, Shane's gentle insistence—and in his mind, the same scene replayed over and over: Shane laughing with another man.

He squeezed the phone tightly. He could have gone, he wanted to go, but something inside held him back—something he wouldn't say out loud: the jealousy he was feeling.

He set the phone down with a sharp gesture, as if he could turn off what he was feeling that way. But it didn't work, because no matter how much the report said there was nothing... he had already seen enough not to be able to ignore it.

•••

Jealousy didn't take long to rot his temper.

At first, it was an internal annoyance, something that tightened inside him without showing too much. But as the days went by, that discomfort began to seep into everything he did, and

when it finally came out, it went badly.

At the warehouse, standing in front of one of his debtors, his patience lasted less than ever. The man was on his knees, sweating, trying to explain why he hadn't been able to pay on time. The words rushed out of him, thick with fear.

"I swear to you, next week..."

The strike cut him off before he could finish. Ilya grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and yanked him up, pulling him close to his face with contained violence.

"How many times have I heard that?" he asked in a low, dangerous voice. "How many?"

The man didn't answer; he couldn't.
Ilya let go of him only to shove him hard against the table.
The impact echoed through the warehouse—dry, brutal.

He paced around him like a restless animal, running a hand through his hair in frustration.

"I'm losing my patience," he continued. "And when I lose my patience, people usually end up bad."

The debtor tried to say something else, but Ilya was no longer listening. He hit him again, with a harshness that was completely out of proportion to the offense.

Sergei and Viktor exchanged a brief look from the side. No words were necessary; both of them knew this wasn't just about money. Ilya was venting something else.

That same afternoon, another man paid the consequences of that same state of mind.
An unnecessarily violent punishment, executed with a coldness that made it clear something was very wrong.

Hours later, when Ilya arrived at Shane's apartment to see Galina, he was still carrying that tension in his body, though he tried to hide it.
Galina ran to hug him as soon as she saw him.

"Daddy Ilya!"

He picked her up effortlessly, kissing her head with a gentleness that stood in stark contrast to what he had done hours earlier.

"Hey, princess."

For a moment, everything seemed normal.
Until Shane came out of the kitchen.

"Ilya," he said with a smile, "come here, I want to introduce you to someone."

Ilya turned his head and saw him.
Hayden was standing there, leaning against the counter in a relaxed posture. When Ilya

looked at him, Hayden offered a polite smile.

"Hi, I'm Hayden."

Ilya looked him up and down, making no effort to hide it.

"Not interested," he replied, cold.

Silence fell immediately—uncomfortable, heavy—and Shane tensed up.

"What is wrong with you?" Shane muttered, taken aback.

Hayden raised his hands slightly, keeping his cool.

"It's all good," he said. "I'll take off."

"You don't have to," Shane tried to intervene.

"Seriously," Hayden replied, already backing away. "See you later."

He left the apartment without making any more noise. The door closed behind him, leaving the air thick with tension.
Galina tugged on Ilya's shirt, oblivious to it all.

"Are we going to play?"

"Later," he answered, without taking his eyes off Shane.

Later, while Galina was in her room setting everything up to play, Shane couldn't hold his silence any longer. He crossed his arms and stared at him.

"Can I know what the hell is wrong with you?"

Ilya let out a short, humorless laugh.

"With me?"

"Yes, with you," Shane snapped back. "What was that?"

Ilya looked straight at him.

"Who is that guy?"

"I told you," Shane replied. "He's a friend."

"I don't believe you."

The answer was immediate and harsh. Shane scowled.

"Excuse me?"

Ilya took a step toward him.

"Why the hell is that guy attached to your hip?"

"He's not attached to my hip," Shane answered, trying to stay calm. "He's my neighbor. Our kids play together."

"I saw you," Ilya spat out. "I saw how you were laughing together, how you were right there..."

Shane looked at him, suddenly realizing.

"Have you been spying on me?"

Ilya didn't answer; he didn't need to.

"You're sick," Shane whispered.

That was enough to break everything.

"Don't take me for a fool!" Ilya yelled. "I know how guys look at someone when they want something."

"He doesn't want anything!" Shane shouted back, raising his voice too. "He's a friend I made!"

"Right," Ilya said sarcastically. "A friend."

Shane clenched his teeth.

"Yes, a friend."

Ilya stepped closer, invading his space.

"And why is he always with you?"

"Because he helps me!" Shane replied, his patience completely gone.

Ilya let out a bitter laugh.

"Helps you with what?"

Shane glared at him with anger.

"With living through all this shit with some company, Ilya!"

But he wouldn't stop.

"Are you fucking him?"

The silence that followed was brutal.
Shane looked at him as if he couldn't believe what he had just heard. Disappointment, rage, and pain washed over his face—and then he exploded.

"I'm pregnant, Ilya!"

Ilya froze completely. Shane was breathing heavily, his eyes glistening.

"And Hayden is the only one helping me," Shane continued. "The only one who's there when I feel sick, when I throw up, when I can't handle it all."

"I wanted to tell you at the dinner I made for us," Shane added, his voice breaking slightly. "And you would know if you weren't so jealous and sick."

Ilya remained completely still.
The word kept echoing in his head, as if it refused to make sense.

*Pregnant.*

He blinked once, slowly, as if needing to rearrange what he had just heard. His expression, which just seconds ago was fueled by anger, drained completely.

"What...?" he whispered, barely audible.

Shane stood before him, breathing heavily, eyes moist, jaw set. He was still angry, hurt, exhausted.

"I'm pregnant," he repeated, firmer this time. "We're having a baby."

The silence turned strange, heavy, but no longer because of the fight.
Ilya looked at him, and for the first time in a long while, he appeared completely disarmed.

"I..." he started, but couldn't finish the sentence.

He lowered his gaze for a second, trying to process everything. Then he looked up again, and something had shifted.

The harshness had disappeared. In its place was shock, and then... something else.

"For real?" he asked, his voice completely stripped of aggression.

Shane didn't answer right away. He just stared at him, still hurt.
Ilya took a step toward him, slower this time, as if approaching something fragile.

"Shane..."

He ran a hand through his hair, nervous in a way that was uncharacteristic of him.

"Is it mine?"

The question came out almost clumsy, and Shane looked at him in disbelief.

"Who else's would it be? Are you an idiot?"

That was enough. Something inside Ilya clicked into place, and his reaction was instant: a smile escaped him—completely out of place for the moment, but impossible to contain.
He brought a hand to his mouth, as if not knowing quite what to do with what he was feeling.

"Damn..." he muttered, almost laughing. "Damn, Shane..."

His eyes shone in a way rarely seen in him.

"I'm having another child..."

The joy spilled out of him unfiltered—raw and unexpected.
But Shane didn't smile. He didn't move. He remained standing in the exact same spot, arms tense at his sides.

"Don't be like that," Ilya said, taking another step, still caught up in the emotion. "It's... it's a good thing."

Shane stared right at him.

"A good thing?" he repeated in disbelief.

Ilya's smile faded a bit.

"Yes..."

"After everything you just said?" Shane interrupted him. "After treating me like I was a...?"

His voice cut off, but he didn't need to finish. Ilya frowned, confusion beginning to mix with guilt.

"I didn't know," he said. "If I had known..."

"But you didn't know because you didn't let me tell you," Shane answered, growing more hurt by the second. "Because you were too busy accusing me of things."

Ilya fell silent. The joy was still there, pounding hard in his chest, but now it collided with something far heavier.

"Shane..." he tried, lowering his voice.

"No," Shane cut him off. "Don't touch me."

Ilya stopped; that boundary was crystal clear.

"I'm tired," Shane continued, running a hand over his face. "Tired of you treating me like this, of you not trusting me, of having to explain myself all the time."

Ilya listened without interrupting, his breathing slowing down.

"And on top of that..." Shane instinctively rested a hand over his abdomen, "I'm going through this alone."

The sentence hung in the air, striking harder than any scream.

Ilya lowered his eyes toward that hand, and for the first time since he walked through the door, he said nothing. Not because he had nothing to say, but because he realized anything he said now... came too late.

So he stayed quiet for a few more seconds, processing everything that had just happened.
The joy was still pulsing strong inside him, but now it was mixed with guilt, with the weight of everything he had said just minutes before.

He took a deep breath and looked up at Shane, who was still standing there, tense, arms rigid.

"Shane..." he said softly, carefully. "Let's talk."

Shane didn't answer right away. He ran a hand over his face, exhausted, trying to dial back the intensity of his emotions. His shoulders rose and fell with his breathing.

"I don't want to fight anymore," Ilya added, taking a tiny step closer. "Please."

The silence stretched for a few seconds until finally, Shane gave a slight nod.

"Fine."

They sat on the couch, leaving a little space between them.
The distance wasn't just physical, but at least they weren't shouting anymore.
Ilya rested his forearms on his knees, lacing his fingers together as if he needed something to hold onto.

"How long have you known?" he asked, his voice more controlled.

Shane looked down for a moment before answering.

"A few days."

Ilya turned his head slightly toward him.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Shane exhaled slowly.

"Because you're in rehab," he said. "You just started getting stable, holding yourself together... and I didn't know if this would be too much."

Ilya watched him in silence.

"I didn't want to burden you with something like this when you were already fighting so much," Shane added, more gently.

That explanation didn't make him angry. On the contrary, it hurt, because it meant Shane had to gauge him, test him... as if he couldn't trust that he would measure up. And deep down, he knew why.

Ilya looked down for a second, nodding faintly.

"I understand."

After a few moments, Ilya spoke again.

"Do you want to keep it?"

The question was direct, but not harsh. Shane raised his eyes to meet his; he didn't hesitate.

"Yes."

The answer was firm and clear.
Ilya held his gaze for a few seconds longer, as if needing to confirm there was no doubt there—and there wasn't.

Then, something in his expression softened completely.
He moved closer and, carefully, wrapped his arms around him. It wasn't a rough or dominant gesture; it was restrained, almost hesitant at first, as if he didn't know if Shane would accept it. But Shane didn't pull away; instead, after a second, he relaxed slightly against him.

Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's shoulder.

"What are we going to do?" he whispered.

Shane took a deep breath before answering.

"I'll move back home..." he began.

Ilya tensed slightly, expectant.

"...but only if you commit to sticking with your treatment."

The condition was set clear and simple. Ilya didn't hesitate—he pulled back just enough to look him in the eyes.

"I will."

Shane held his gaze in silence, evaluating him.

"I mean it," Ilya added. "Not just for you... for me too, and for them."

His eyes drifted down for a second, almost instinctively, toward Shane's abdomen.
The gesture was subtle, but meaningful, and Shane noticed.

"I don't want to lose you guys again," Ilya continued, his voice dropping lower. "Not again."

Shane nodded slowly.

"Then prove it."

Ilya leaned in close again, resting his forehead against Shane's.

"I will."

And for the first time in a long while, the promise didn't sound empty.

•••

The months passed with a different kind of calm than the one they had known before.
The house filled with life again, but it wasn't the same as before; there was something more careful in everything, more conscious, as if every step were measured so as not to break what had cost so much to rebuild.

Shane was six months pregnant.
His belly was already impossible to hide—round, firm, clearly marking the presence of the baby.
Unlike Galina's pregnancy, this time his body didn't seem to be at war with itself; there was nausea, yes, fatigue as well, but nothing that left him completely exhausted or broken. He could move with more freedom, even enjoy a few moments.

That afternoon he was in the living room, settled on the couch with a light blanket over his legs.

He had one hand resting on his belly, stroking it absentmindedly while reading something that couldn't quite hold his focus.
Ilya was sitting nearby, on a chair, watching him—not in a covert way, he never did that.
There was something about him that hadn't changed: that intense way of observing, of paying attention to every gesture, every movement.

—He's moving —Shane whispered suddenly, without looking up from the book.

Ilya leaned forward slightly.

—Yeah?

Shane nodded and looked up.

—A lot.

Ilya stood up without saying a word and walked over. He knelt in front of him, resting a large, warm hand on his belly.
He waited, and when he felt the movement, his eyes opened slightly, surprised, as if he still couldn't quite get used to it.

—Fuck… —he muttered, almost under his breath.

Shane smiled faintly, looking at him.

—He's calmer than Gali —he said—. But he still has his moments.

Ilya didn't answer right away. He kept his hand resting there, feeling.
Then he raised his gaze to Shane.

—He's okay.

It wasn't just a statement; it was relief.
Shane noticed.

—He's okay —he repeated, softer.

Ilya nodded, but there was still something more in his expression. The exhaustion from difficult nights, from the moments when withdrawal hit him hard. He kept going to the meetings, kept holding on, but it wasn't easy, and even so, he hadn't relapsed a single time.

—Did you have a meeting today? —Shane asked.

Ilya sat beside him this time.

—Yeah.

—And?

Ilya shrugged slightly.

—I spoke.

Shane raised an eyebrow slightly.

—That's a lot for you.

Ilya let out a small smile.

—Yeah, I guess.

The silence that followed was comfortable until a door slamming interrupted everything.
Galina appeared in the living room, her brow furrowed and arms crossed.

—I don't want that baby.

Shane looked up, surprised.

—Ilya…

But Ilya was already standing up.
He approached his daughter calmly, crouching down in front of her to get at eye level.

—What's wrong?

Galina looked at him with contained anger.

—I don't want him —she repeated—. He's going to come and take everything away from me.

Ilya shook his head gently.

—No, that's not going to happen.

—Yes, it is —she insisted—. You and Daddy Shane only talk about that.

Ilya observed her in silence for a few seconds before answering.

—Listen to me —he said, his voice firm yet gentle—. That baby isn't coming to take anything away from you.

Galina pressed her lips together.

—Liar.

Ilya let out a soft sigh and placed a hand on her shoulder.

—You are my daughter —he said—. That doesn't change.

The little girl looked at him, hesitating.

—It's never going to change.

—What if you love him more? —she asked, her voice much quieter now.

The question pierced him; Ilya shook his head immediately.

—No.

—But he's tiny… —she insisted—. Babies are cuter.

Ilya couldn't help a small smile.

—You were tiny once, too.

—But not anymore —she replied, almost offended.

Ilya leaned in a bit closer to her.

—Then I'm lucky —he said—. Because now you're big and I can talk to you like this.

Galina looked at him, still hesitant.
Ilya rested his forehead against hers.

—And because you are *you* —he added in a quiet voice.

The girl stayed still.

—The baby is going to be your brother —he continued—. Not your replacement.

Galina looked down.

—What if I don't love him?

Ilya didn't rush her.

—You don't have to love him right now.

She looked up, surprised.

—I don't?

—No —Ilya repeated—. But when he gets here… you'll meet him and then we'll see how you feel.

Galina hesitated.

—And will you still love me just the same?

Ilya hugged her then, tightly, without hesitation.

—Not the same —he said—. More. I'll always love you a little more than yesterday.

The little girl stayed still for a few seconds before wrapping her arms around him, too.
From the couch, Shane watched the scene in silence, with one hand resting over his belly, and smiled. He loved his family.

•••

A few months later, the day arrived in the middle of a quiet dawn.
Shane woke up with a familiar, deep sensation that pulled him suddenly out of sleep.
It took him a few seconds to understand it, to process the low, rhythmic pain that came and went.
He stayed still, breathing, and then another contraction hit.

He turned his head slightly and looked at Ilya, who was sleeping beside him face down, his arm extended toward where Shane had been.

—…Ilya —he whispered, touching his shoulder.

He didn't react at first.

—Il…

The next contraction was stronger, and the sound that escaped Shane woke him instantly.
Ilya opened his eyes and sat up in a split second.

—What's wrong?

Shane looked at him, with a mixture of nerves and something resembling calm.

—I think he's coming.

The shift in Ilya's expression was immediate. All drowsiness vanished.

—Now?

Shane nodded, taking a deep breath.

—Now.

The trip to the hospital was fast, tense, full of silence and controlled breathing. Ilya didn't let go of Shane for a single moment; his grip was steady, constant, as if that contact were the only thing keeping him grounded.

During labor, Ilya was right there the entire time. He didn't move from his side, didn't leave, didn't step away even when things became intense, when the pain caused Shane to break down at times, squeezing his hand tightly.

—I'm right here —he repeated over and over, close to his ear, just as he had during Gali's birth—. I'm right here.

When the baby's cry finally filled the room, everything seemed to stop for a second.

A strong, clear, vibrant cry.

Ilya froze completely, watching.
The doctor lifted the baby just before wrapping him up, and that was enough—he was… unmistakable: the light hair, the shape of his face, even in that small, wrinkled state… there was something completely his. The baby was a miniature replica of Ilya.

—It's a boy —a nurse said.

But Ilya barely heard her.
Shane, exhausted, turned his head slightly.

—Is he okay? —he asked, his voice weak.

Only then did Ilya react.

—Yeah —he answered quickly—. He's fine.

When they brought him closer to Shane, he looked at him with a tenderness that needed no words. His hand, still trembling, touched the tiny cheek.

—Hi, sweetheart —he whispered.

Ilya watched from the side in silence, something in his chest heavy and complex, something he wasn't quite sure how to handle.

Hours later, calmer now in the hospital room, the atmosphere was completely different.
Shane was lying back, tired but serene, with the baby sleeping against his chest.

Ilya stood beside the bed, looking at them without moving, without speaking—just watching, until a knock came at the door.

Galina came in holding Viktor's hand, her eyes wide, curious, expectant.

—Is he born already? —she asked right away.

Shane smiled faintly.

—Yeah, come meet him.

Galina approached slowly, as if the mood forced her to lower her volume.
Ilya crouched down beside her.

—Gentle —he whispered—. He's tiny.

Galina climbed onto the bed carefully, settling close to Shane. She looked at the baby with a mix of curiosity and distrust.

—He's… really small —she said.

Shane chuckled softly.

—Yeah, but he's going to grow really fast, you'll see.

The little girl hesitated for a moment, but then reached out and barely touched him with the tip of her fingers, as if he were fragile.
The baby made a tiny movement, and Galina's eyes widened.

—He moved.

—Of course —Ilya said—. He's alive.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

—I know that.

Then she returned her attention to the baby.
She observed him in silence for a few more seconds, with complete focus.

—What's his name?

Shane raised his eyes toward Ilya, and Ilya looked back at him; then, almost at the same time, they both looked back at Galina.

—We don't know yet —Shane said.

The little girl frowned.

—What do you mean you don't?

Ilya placed a hand on her back.

—We were thinking… that you could choose.

Galina blinked.

—Me?

—Yeah —Shane answered, a soft smile on his face—. If you want to.

The girl looked back at the baby.
She studied him with a seriousness surprising for her age.
A long few seconds passed.

—His name is going to be Luka —she finally said.

Shane raised his eyebrows, surprised.

—Luka?

Galina nodded decisively.

—Like the one from *Guardians of the Forest*. He's brave and he fights monsters.

Ilya let out a low chuckle.

—Good reasoning.

Shane looked at the baby, then at Galina.

—Luka… —he repeated softly.

The name settled in the air, natural, as if it had always belonged to him.
Galina petted the baby's tiny hand again, this time with more confidence.

—Hi, Luka —she whispered.

And this time, she didn't sound annoyed; she sounded… a little proud to have become a big sister.

•••

The days with Luka settled in with a gentleness that surprised everyone.

The baby was quiet, possessing an almost strange calmness for someone so small. He slept for long hours, woke up without fuss, and when he did, all he wanted was to nurse.

Shane spent most of the day with him on his chest, nestled on the couch in the living room or in bed, with a light blanket over their legs and soft sunlight streaming through the windows.

That afternoon, the air was warm, and the house held that steady hum of a lived-in home.

Shane was lying on his side on the couch with Luka latched onto his chest, one hand supporting him carefully while the other stroked his back in slow, repetitive motions.

—This guy only wants to eat —he muttered softly, more to himself than anyone else.

Luka made a tiny, satisfied sound and kept nursing.

From the floor, Galina barely raised her head with a critical expression.

—He's boring.

Mateo, sitting across from her with colored blocks, looked at her confused.

—He's a baby.

—I know —she replied, rolling her eyes—, but he could do something else.

Even so, every few minutes she looked at him. She couldn't help it; she would stand up, walk over to the couch, stand there watching him in silence as if studying him, and then head back to her makeshift blanket-and-pillow fort.

—When he grows up he's going to be strong —she explained to Mateo with utmost seriousness—. Stronger than anyone.

—Stronger than your dad? —the little boy asked.

Galina hesitated for a second.

—No, nobody is stronger than my dad Ilya.

Mateo nodded, convinced.

—And is he gonna fight?

—Yeah —she answered—. Like Luka from *Guardians of the Forest*, but this Luka is better because he's my brother.

Shane listened to them from the couch, a subtle smile on his face, without interrupting.
When Luka finished eating, Shane gently adjusted him against his shoulder, supporting his small head while giving him light pats on the back.

The baby let out a quiet burp and went completely limp and relaxed again, as if the world were a perfectly safe place.

At that moment, the front door opened.
The sound made Shane look up.
Ilya walked in, removing his coat with a tired movement, but as soon as he crossed the threshold, he froze at the scene.

The messy living room with toys scattered around, blankets forming a fort on the floor, Galina talking non-stop, Shane on the couch with Luka asleep against his chest, and to the side... Hayden.

Leaning near the kitchen counter with a mug in his hand, quietly taking in the scene.
Ilya's chest tightened slightly—that automatic reflex was still there—but he said nothing.

Hayden looked up and met his gaze.

—Hey.

There was a second of silence.
Ilya held his gaze, measuring, containing something he already knew all too well.

—Hey —he finally replied.

His tone was dry, but not sharp. Over the past few months, he had been forced to accept that Shane now had a friend who also happened to be the father of Galina's best friend.

Shane noticed immediately.

—You're home early —he said, shifting Luka gently without waking him.

—Yeah —Ilya answered, setting his keys on the table.

Galina ran out of the fort.

—Daddy!

He crouched down and lifted her into his arms effortlessly, kissing the top of her head.

—What were you up to?

—Playing with Mateo —she answered—. And I told him about Luka.

Ilya looked toward the couch, where the baby was still asleep.

—Oh, yeah?

—Yeah —she insisted—. He's gonna be super strong.

Ilya offered a faint smile.

—For sure. Just like you.

Mateo shuffled a bit closer, shyly staying by Galina's side.
Ilya looked at him for a second, assessing him.

—Hi.

—Hi —the boy answered.

The exchange was brief, but enough to keep the tension from building.
Shane watched everything closely, noticing every small effort Ilya was making to stay calm.

A little while later, Hayden placed his mug on the counter.

—We're heading out —he said—. Mateo needs to eat dinner.

—Bye —Shane replied with a smile.

—See you —Galina added, climbing back into the fort.

Ilya gave a brief nod.

When the door closed, Ilya walked over to the couch and looked down at Luka.

—Sleeping again?

—He ate —Shane answered—. Now he goes into statue mode.

Ilya let out a low, soft laugh and reached out to adjust his blanket with almost automatic care.

Night fell slowly.
They ate a simple dinner, with Galina talking endlessly between bites, making up stories about Luka as if he were already a superhero.

Then came the usual routine: bath, pajamas, mild protests, and finally bed.

Shane sat next to Galina, tucking her hair behind her ear.

—Are we playing with Luka tomorrow? —she asked, half-asleep.

—When he's bigger —he replied.

—Okay… —she whispered—. Tell him I'll teach him.

—I'll tell him.

Ilya watched from the doorway, leaning against the frame in silence.

When Shane came out, they met in the hallway. They looked at each other for a moment without speaking.

—She's doing better —Ilya said, referring to Galina.

—Yeah —Shane answered.

They went into their bedroom.
Luka was sleeping in his crib, completely peaceful, wrapped in a calm that seemed contagious.

Shane sat on the bed, exhausted, resting a hand over his now-empty belly, still adjusting to the absence.

Ilya came over and sat beside him.
For a moment, neither of them spoke.
The silence was soft, comfortable.

—I didn't say anything to him today —Ilya said finally, his voice low.

Shane looked at him.

—I noticed.

Ilya lowered his eyes.

—It was hard for me.

Shane rested his hand over Ilya's.

—I know.

Ilya took a deep breath and looked toward the crib.

—But he's there because he helps you.

Shane nodded slowly.

—Yeah.

Ilya held his gaze for a few more seconds, processing it, accepting it.

Then he looked back at Luka.

—And we're right here.

Shane followed his gaze.
The baby was sleeping.
Galina was, too.
The house was quiet, but it wasn't an empty silence—it was a full one.

Shane leaned over slowly and rested his head on Ilya's shoulder.
Ilya wrapped an arm around him, pulling him close without a word, and they stayed like that, still, breathing together, watching their son sleep.

•••

Time passed faster than Shane would have liked.
Suddenly, Galina wasn't that little girl running around the house with toys in her hands anymore.

Now she was standing in front of the mirror in her school uniform, her hair neatly tied back, with a brand-new backpack leaning against the wall.

She stared at herself in silence, without a smile.

—Do you like it? —Shane asked from the doorway, leaning against the frame while holding Luka in his arms.

Galina didn't answer right away. She looked down, adjusting one of her sleeves.

—I don't know…

Shane took a few steps closer.

—It's your first day —he said gently—. It's normal to feel like this.

Galina looked up, her brow slightly furrowed.

—I'm scared.

The word came out quietly, honest.
Shane felt the weight of it and opened his mouth to reply, but someone beat him to it.

—That's okay.

Ilya was standing behind him, leaning against the wall, watching her.

Galina looked at him.

—Is it okay to be scared?

Ilya nodded and approached slowly. He crouched down in front of her to meet her eye level, with that firm, steady calm he reserved only for her.

—It means it's important.

Galina looked at him in silence, processing.

—What if they don't like me?

Ilya shook his head.

—That doesn't depend on you.

—Then what does it depend on?

—It depends on them —he answered—. You just have to be yourself.

Galina hesitated.

—What if they don't want to be my friends?

Ilya rested a hand on her knee.

—Then they aren't friends worth having.

The silence that followed was short, but long enough.
Galina took a deep breath, as if trying to settle all of that inside herself.

—Mateo won't be there… —she whispered then, her voice cracking slightly.

Shane looked down for a second.

—I know.

—He's going to a different school —she added, as if she needed to say it out loud to make it real.

—Yes —Shane replied gently—. But that doesn't change what you two have.

Galina looked at him.

—Are you sure?

Shane nodded.

—People don't stop being friends just because they don't see each other every day.

Galina frowned slightly, uncertain.

—But… what if he forgets about me? What if he makes another friend at his school?

Shane walked over to her and crouched down on her other side, holding Luka, who was already reaching out trying to grab his sister's hair.

—He won't forget —he said—. And even if you don't see each other every day, you can still play, visit each other, talk.

Galina looked at Luka as he tugged at a strand of her hair.

—Hey —she muttered, gently moving his hand away.

Luka giggled, as if it were all a game.
Ilya watched the scene with a slight smile.

—Besides —Shane added—, you can make new friends.

Galina made a face.

—I don't want new ones.

Ilya let out a soft laugh.

—You don't have to replace anyone.

She looked at him.

—So?

—You can have more than one —he answered—. There's no limit.

Galina looked down, thoughtful.

—Still… —she whispered—. I hope Mateo stays my best friend forever.

The phrase, which had just left the mouth of a six-year-old girl on the verge of starting school, hung lingering in the air, anchoring itself to her heart with profound intensity.

# Chapter 22

~A few years later~

Time didn't just pass: it slipped away.

The house changed without anyone fully noticing.

The toys disappeared from the living room, the walls no longer had drawings taped to them, and the silence shifted from afternoon naps to closed doors.

Galina no longer ran through the hallways; now she traversed them with headphones on, long glances, and short answers.

She was fourteen years old, and it was impossible not to see it.

She had inherited the intensity of Ilya's eyes and the softness of Shane's gestures, but everything was laced with a restless, electric rebellion that always pushed her a little beyond the limits.

She was beautiful in a way that was starting to draw attention, and far from making things easier, that only complicated them.

That afternoon she was sitting in the park, legs crossed on the bench, phone in hand, with an absolute concentration that had nothing to do with studying.

Her fingers moved quickly across the screen, and every so often, a faint smile curved her lips despite herself.

Mateo was beside her. They had been friends for ten years and had become inseparable.

He was leaning against the backrest, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye every few seconds.

"Again?" he finally asked, unable to stay quiet any longer.

Galina didn't look up.

"Again what?"

Mateo tilted his head toward the phone.

"That. Is it that guy?"

Galina let out a small, automatic smile.

"Yeah, Mateo."

Mateo clenched his jaw, uncomfortable.

"Gali…"

"What?" she responded, finally looking up.

"This isn't cool."

Galina rolled her eyes and went back to her screen.

"Here you go again."

"Because it's true," Mateo insisted, turning slightly toward her. "He's twenty years old."

"So?" Galina replied, shrugging. "It's not that big a deal."

Mateo sat up straight, now facing her completely.

"You're fourteen."

"I know how old I am," she said, annoyed, locking eyes with him.

"Then understand that this isn't normal."

Galina locked her phone abruptly and glared at him, irritated.

"It's not your problem, Mateo. Drop it."

The sentence fell flat and cold.

Mateo looked down for a second, swallowing hard before speaking again.

"I'm worried," he said, lower this time.

Galina held his gaze in silence for a few seconds.

"You're always worried about everything. You're so suffocating."

"Because someone has to be."

"You're not my dad," she shot back, harsher now.

The silence that followed was uncomfortable.

Mateo gave a faint nod.

"I know, Gali."

Galina sighed and unlocked her phone again.

"Besides, Ted is nice."

Mateo made a face, incredulous.

"Right."

"Seriously," she insisted. "He listens to me, we talk about everything…"

"Yeah, I bet," Mateo interrupted her. "A twenty-year-old guy talking 'about everything' with a fourteen-year-old girl sounds real healthy."

Galina frowned.

"You're exaggerating."

Mateo looked at her intently.

"Do your parents know?"

She immediately shook her head.

"No way in hell."

"Then there's a reason for that..."

Galina pressed her lips together.

"Because they wouldn't understand."

Mateo let out a short, humorless laugh.

"No, Gali, they wouldn't understand because it's wrong."

"It's not wrong," she countered. "You don't know him."

Mateo looked at her, exhausted.

"I don't need to know him."

Silence settled between them once more.

Galina went back to texting on her phone, typing faster, as if needing to escape from the moment.

Mateo watched her in silence, taking in every detail: the way she smiled, how she isolated herself from the world when she was like this, how she wasn't really there with him anymore even though she was right beside him.

It hurt him, more than he wanted to admit. He wasn't just worried about his friend; it also hurt because years ago he had developed feelings that he knew very well were not returned by her.

"He's going to hurt you," he said suddenly.

Galina paused for a second.

"No."

"Yes, Gali."

"You don't know him."

"I don't have to," he insisted. "He's older, Gali. He plays in a different league."

She looked at him, annoyed.

"I'm not a little kid."

Mateo held her gaze.

"To him, you are..."

The phrase hung heavy in the air. Galina looked down for a moment, but quickly hardened her expression again.

"I don't care."

Mateo closed his eyes for a second, frustrated.

"I care..." he whispered.

She didn't answer and went back to typing as if she hadn't heard him.

Mateo shifted his gaze forward, gripping the bench tightly with his hands. He had known her forever; they had grown up together, shared everything, and now he felt her farther away than ever.

"I won't tell anyone," he added after a while, his voice lower. "But I don't like it."

Galina didn't look up.

"I know."

The sun was starting to set, casting a warm hue over everything.

She smiled at her phone again, and seeing her like that, Mateo felt something painful in his chest.

•••

The house was peaceful that afternoon.

Sunlight streamed through the kitchen window, illuminating the table where Luka sat with an open notebook, a pencil in hand, and an expression of utter concentration… though he clearly wasn't making much progress.

Shane was beside him, leaning slightly toward him, resting an elbow on the table as he watched him with patience.

"Let's see…" he said softly. "Read the prompt again."

Luka looked down at the notebook, his lips moving silently as he read. His voice came out quiet, barely a whisper.

"'Write… three… sentences… with… words… from… the box…'"

He fell silent after that, staring at the page as if waiting for the words to write themselves.

Shane smiled faintly.

"And which words did you choose?"

Luka pointed with his pencil, without lifting his hand much.

"'House'… 'tree'… and… 'dog'."

"Perfect," Shane replied. "Do you want to come up with one together?"

Luka nodded slowly, without looking at him.

He was a quiet boy, very different from what anyone would have expected seeing Ilya.

He had the same face, the same light eyes, the same wavy brown hair falling over his forehead… but everything about him was soft—his gestures, his voice, the way he occupied little space, as if always trying not to be in the way.

Shane knew him well enough not to rush him.

"You can start with 'My house…'" he suggested.

Luka rested the tip of the pencil against the paper, hesitating.

"My house…" he repeated quietly.

"What is your house like?" Shane asked, leaning in a bit closer to him.

Luka thought for a few seconds.

"Big."

"Alright," Shane said. "Then you can write: 'My house is big.'"

Luka looked at him for a second, as if seeking approval, and then began to write slowly, taking care with every letter.

Shane watched him in silence, without rushing him.

When he finished, he lifted the notebook slightly, showing it to him.

"Like this?"

Shane smiled.

"Just like that. It's perfect."

Luka looked back down, but this time there was a hint of pride in his expression.

"Now another one," Shane said.

The boy looked at the words again.

"'Tree'…"

"Do you like trees?" Shane asked.

Luka nodded.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Luka hesitated, rolling the pencil between his fingers.

"Because…" he started, "…they are peaceful."

Shane looked at him, melted.

"Just like you."

Luka didn't reply, but a faint smile appeared on his face before he looked down again.

"Then you can write that," Shane continued. "'Trees are peaceful.'"

Luka wrote it down, more confident this time.

The silence between them was comfortable.

After a moment, Luka set the pencil down and, without saying a word, moved a little closer to Shane, resting his arm against Shane's.

It was a small gesture, but a constant one.

Shane noticed it and, as always, responded without making a show of it. He simply turned his body slightly toward him, giving him the space Luka seemed to need.

"Tired?" he asked softly.

Luka shook his head.

"No."

But he didn't move away.

Shane rested a hand on his back, stroking it gently.

"You have one sentence left."

Luka let out a quiet sigh.

"'Dog'…"

"Well," Shane said. "What do you like about dogs?"

Luka thought a bit longer this time.

"That… they're always there."

Shane felt something in his chest.

"Yeah," he murmured. "That's what they do."

Luka wrote the last sentence carefully.

When he was done, he put the pencil down and stared at the notebook for a few seconds, as if checking if it was right.

"Done?"

Shane looked at him.

"Done."

Luka looked up and, this time, smiled a bit more.

Then he closed the notebook and, without saying anything, leaned all the way in, resting his head against Shane's arm.

It was a familiar gesture, a haven.

Shane wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him close without holding him too tightly.

However, Shane and Luka's quiet afternoon was suddenly shattered by the sound of the front door opening and voices rising in the hallway.

"I told you not to speak to me like that!" Galina's voice arrived first, dripping with anger.

"And I told you not to talk back to me like that," Ilya responded firmly, using that tone that allowed no argument… though with her, clearly, it was never enough.

Shane glanced up from the table. Luka did as well, tensing slightly without a word.

A second later, both of them appeared in the kitchen.

Galina threw her backpack onto a chair with a sharp movement.

"You're unbearable."

"And you're being impossible," Ilya countered, crossing his arms. "You can't just do whatever you feel like all the time."

"I didn't do anything!"

"Nothing?" Ilya raised his eyebrows. "Arriving late, talking back to your teachers, skipping class… that's nothing?"

Galina scoffed.

"You exaggerate everything."

"I'm not exaggerating," he replied. "I'm tired of repeating the same thing."

"Well, then don't repeat it," she said, defiant.

The tension in the air mounted.

Shane watched silently, not stepping in yet. Luka, on the other hand, lowered his gaze back to his notebook, though he was no longer writing.

"Don't speak to me like that, Galina," Ilya said, his voice lower, but harder.

Galina took a step back, her eyes shining with anger.

"And how do you want me to speak to you?"

"With respect."

She let out a dry laugh.

"Respect? You start yelling first."

Ilya clenched his jaw.

"Because you don't listen."

"Because you don't let me talk."

"Because when you talk, it's to challenge me."

"Because you want to control everything!"

The silence that followed was heavy, loaded with everything neither of them was fully saying out loud.

Galina held his gaze for another second, breathing heavily.

"You're just like everyone else," she muttered before turning around.

"Galina…" Ilya started.

But it was already too late; she slammed out of the room, and a few seconds later, the loud bang of her bedroom door echoed through the whole house.

The silence left behind was different than before—denser.

Ilya stood still for a few seconds, looking toward the hallway as if he wanted to follow her… but he didn't.

He exhaled deeply, running a hand over his face.

"Unbearable brat," he muttered, though without real conviction.

Then he turned and walked over to the kitchen.

Shane looked at him calmly, without reproach.

Luka, meanwhile, was already packing up his things with quick, neat movements, as if wanting to disappear before anything else happened.

"Are you finished?" Shane asked softly.

Luka nodded without looking up.

"Yes."

He closed the notebook, tucked away his pencil, and stood up with everything in his arms.

Ilya looked at him.

"Hey…" he said, trying to soften his tone. "What were you two up to?"

Luka hesitated briefly, but didn't look at him directly.

"Homework."

"And?" Ilya pressed, trying to step closer. "How did it go?"

Luka gave a slight shrug.

"Fine."

There was a small, awkward silence.

"We can look at it later," Ilya offered, taking another step forward.

But Luka shook his head, clutching his things tightly against his chest.

"I'm already done."

And without adding anything else, he headed off toward his room.

The sound of his retreating footsteps was soft, but clear.

Ilya was left standing in the middle of the kitchen, staring at the spot where his son had vanished.

Then he turned to Shane.

His brow was slightly furrowed, exhaustion etched onto his face.

"Why does neither of them like me?"

The question came out half-serious, half-joking, but with something very real underneath it.

Shane didn't answer right away. He stood up slowly from his chair and walked over to him.

He looked at him for a second and then smiled.

"Don't be dramatic."

Ilya made a face.

"It's not drama," he muttered. "It's a fact."

Shane let out a quiet laugh and, without saying another word, cupped Ilya's face with his hand and kissed him.

It was a soft, brief kiss, but enough to ease some of his tension.

Ilya closed his eyes for just a second, letting out a breath.

"Galina competes with you," Shane said afterward, still standing close. "All the time, trying to see who wins."

Ilya grunted under his breath.

"Yeah, I noticed."

Shane smiled faintly.

"And Luka… well," Shane continued.

Ilya looked at him.

"What?"

Shane tilted his head, amused.

"He's very different from you."

Ilya frowned.

"And?"

Shane looked him straight in the eye.

"I think you scare him."

The silence lasted half a second.

Then Ilya sighed, letting his shoulders drop.

"Great."

Shane couldn't help but laugh.

He leaned in closer and kissed him again, this time with more ease.

"It's not a bad kind of fear," he clarified. "It's… respect, a little distance… and the fact that you're pretty intense."

Ilya looked at him, resigned.

"I'm his father."

"Yes," Shane replied. "And he admires you."

Ilya held his gaze silently.

"He just needs time," Shane added, resting his forehead against Ilya's.

Ilya exhaled slowly.

"I'm tired."

"I know."

Shane gave him another gentle kiss.

"Come here."

And this time, Ilya didn't argue.

•••

The next day, the house was in that fragile state of balance that had become habitual.

Everything seemed fine from the outside.

Shane had gone out with Hayden to take care of some errands, Luka was at school, and Ilya had left early for work.

The silence in the house was rare, unusual, and Galina saw it more as an opportunity than an absence.

She was in her room, sitting on her bed, staring intently at her phone until the screen lit up with a message.

Mateo: Done, your dad is with mine.

Galina smiled immediately.

Her fingers moved fast.

Galina: Thanks, bestieee

The "sent" confirmation appeared almost instantly, but Mateo's reply wasn't far behind.

Mateo: I'm not okay with this, Gali.

Her smile faded slightly. She read it, but didn't reply.

She set the phone down on the edge of the bed and sat still for a few seconds, as if needing to convince herself of something.

Then she got up, walked over to the mirror, and looked at herself.

She fixed her hair, undoing the hair tie to let it fall over her shoulders. She tried out a smile, practicing a different expression—more relaxed, more confident.

Her heart was beating a bit faster. It wasn't fear, exactly, but rather nerves.

She picked up her phone again and opened the chat.

Galina: Come over now.

The answer came back quickly.

Ted: On my way.

Galina put down the phone and began moving around her room with pent-up energy. She tidied up the bed a bit, adjusted her pillow, and checked to make sure the door was closed.

A few seconds later, she walked down the stairs in silence, peeking into the empty living room before heading back up.

The sound of the doorbell made her freeze for a moment. She took a deep breath and went downstairs.

She opened the door just a crack, looking outside first. Ted was standing there—taller, bigger, with that calm confidence she found so attractive. He smiled when he saw her.

"Hey, girl."

Galina felt butterflies in her stomach.

"Hey," she replied softly.

She glanced quickly down both ends of the hallway, as if making sure no one was watching.

"Come in."

Ted walked in without rushing and calmly closed the door behind him.

For a second, they just stood there looking at each other in silence. The gap between them was obvious, but Galina didn't see it as a problem.

She moved in first—a decisive, almost impulsive motion.

Ted lowered his head slightly and kissed her.

Galina responded right away, stepping closer, pressing her hands against his chest as if needing to anchor herself there. He held her by the waist with a firm grip, pulling her even closer.

The kiss became deeper, heavier, more urgent.

"Upstairs," she whispered, pulling back just enough to speak.

Ted nodded.

They went upstairs without a word, taking quick but quiet steps, as if the secret itself was propelling them forward.

When they entered her room, Galina locked the door behind them. The click of the lock was distinct, final.

Ted looked at her for another second. She didn't hesitate—she approached him again and kissed him once more, harder this time, without pausing.

•••

Galina closed her eyes the moment she felt Ted's hand slip under her shirt.

They had ended up on the bed without realizing it while kissing.

She wasn't stupid—she knew why they were there, and she had been sure she wanted it. But now, in her bed, regret set in. She didn't feel ready for this.

Yet she knew Ted was older, that he was used to being with girls, and that if she stopped him, he would probably break up with her. So she held her breath as the guy's hands moved up to her breasts and squeezed them lightly.

Ted, on the other hand, was thrilled.

He was kissing Galina's neck, having managed to push up her bra, squeezing her breasts as her legs framed his body.

"You have no idea how long I've waited for this," he told her, dragging his lips down to her collarbone.

She tried to smile, but she was stiff, nervous. Her mind was screaming at her to stop, that doing this was too much, that if she crossed this line there would be no turning back.

Mainly out of fear, she said nothing and let him slide his pants down, take her hand, and lead it down there.

"Touch it," he told her. "Look what you did to me."

She felt the heat of his skin against her fingers and bit her lip tightly. She didn't want to, she wasn't ready, but she couldn't back out now, she couldn't...

Suddenly, Galina's thoughts were completely cut short when the sheet covering them both was yanked to the floor.

Gali opened her eyes only to see a massive, heavy hand clamp down on Ted's hair and drag him off the bed.

"Dad!" she screamed in embarrassment, covering her chest with a pillow. "Leave him alone!"

But Ilya wasn't looking at her. He was busy hauling Ted up and slamming him against the wall, towering over him.

"Who the fuck are you and what the shit were you doing with my daughter?"

"Sir... I..."

The guy was trapped between the wall and this giant, furious Russian whose hand was still twisted in his hair.

He began to tremble, and it only got worse when Ilya's eyes dropped and he saw the erection—the erection the guy had from being in bed with his daughter—and fury exploded inside him.

Ilya threw a heavy punch straight into his nose, then dragged him out of the room.

He hauled him down the stairs and, upon reaching the front door, shoved him outside.

He gave Sergei a sharp order to drag him out to the street while Ted tried to stem the blood from his nose and pull up his pants all at the same time.

When the house was silent once more, Ilya went into his office.

His knuckles were raw and red, and a vein throbbed violently in his neck. Many times in his life he had imagined a situation like this with Galina, and every scenario was bad, but none was like this. It was obvious the guy was older—he looked twenty or more.

Ilya closed his eyes, resting his elbows on the desk, when the office door burst open.

"Why did you do that?!" screamed Galina, already dressed, crying from sheer rage.

"You are fourteen years old," Ilya said without opening his eyes.

"So what?!"

"How could you bring a guy into your bed and let him touch you like that? What the hell is wrong with your head?" he shouted, opening his eyes and locking his gaze with hers.

"I have the right to live my sexual life however I want!"

"When you're an adult and living on your own, you can do whatever you want! But as long as I'm around..."

"I hate you! You ruined my life! Now he's never going to want to see me again!" she screamed back, tears still streaming down her face.

Ilya scoffed, raising an eyebrow in disbelief.

"And that's a bad thing? A guy not talking to you anymore because he didn't get to sleep with you is a bad thing? I can't believe how oblivious you are. That piece of shit is twenty or older! He's taking advantage of you!"

"He's only six years older than me!"

"You are a minor!"

At that moment, Shane—who had just arrived home—rushed into the room to intervene.

"What's going on? I can hear the screaming from outside."

"This guy," Galina yelled, red with rage, "thinks he can control my whole life!"

"Don't speak like that, Galina," Shane warned.

"He's... a caveman!"

"I am your father," Ilya replied.

"No, you're not!"

Ilya and Shane froze completely at that phrase—a phrase that, in a painful way, carried truth.

"Galina..." Shane whispered.

"He's not. He's nothing to me," she continued.

"I'm just the caveman who pays for your school, your clothes, your nights out... basically your wallet," Ilya said calmly, looking right at her.

"And what else could you possibly be?" she asked, glaring at him.

"Enough, Galina," Shane interjected, visibly shaken.

"That's all you are," she said to Ilya, staring into his eyes and ignoring Shane. "A big, fat wallet that isn't even filled by honest work, because your job... 'Dad,'" she sneered, making air quotes, "'is killing people, like the disgusting mobster you are.'"

Another heavy, haunting silence fell over the room.

Ilya, however, maintained eye contact, completely serene.

"Yeah. That's true."

"Ilya..."

"But this disgusting mobster," Ilya continued, "no matter what you say, is not going to let an adult take advantage of you. So go ahead and scream with all your might in your room if you want to, but that guy is never coming near you again."

"I hate you."

"A lot of people hate me. Welcome to the club."

Galina took a deep breath and stormed off to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Shane looked at Ilya and let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"What happened? Why is she like this?"

Ilya leaned back in his seat and stared at the ceiling.

"Because she's more like me than we thought."

Shane didn't answer, and neither of them truly realized just how much like him she really was—because while they remained in the office, Galina, upstairs in her room, was already hatching a new plan.

# Chapter 23

The house had felt different since the fight; there were no screams or slamming doors now, but the silence left behind was heavier, as if everything was being held back by force.

Shane was in the living room, sitting on the sofa with his body leaned forward and his hands clasped together, staring without really seeing.
He couldn't get the scene out of his head: Galina's words, the way everything had broken in a matter of seconds.

He heard footsteps in the hallway and looked up. Ilya appeared in different clothes, as if changing could bring order to something inside, but it wasn't working—he remained just as tense, with tight shoulders and a set jaw.

"How are you doing?" Shane asked, carefully.

Ilya didn't answer right away. He went to the kitchen, opened the fridge without really looking, and closed it again. Then he leaned against the counter, with his back to him.

"Fine," he said at last.

Shane sighed and got up slowly. He walked over to him without crowding his space, but without staying far either.

"You're not fine, love."

Ilya didn't move; he exhaled through his nose, short and contained.

"I'm fine, really."

Shane shook his head softly, stepping a little closer.

"You don't have to do that with me."

The silence stretched for a few seconds, heavy. Finally, Ilya looked up. There was something dimmed in his eyes, something he didn't usually show.

"She told me I'm not her father," he said, as if he still hadn't finished processing it.

Shane felt a knot in his chest.

"You know that's not true."

Ilya made a small grimace, barely lowering his gaze.

"Either way... she knows I'm not her father, she didn't lie about that."

The way he said it didn't hold anger. It held resignation.
Shane took another step closer, enough to stand right in front of him.

"No," he answered firmly. "That's not true."

Ilya looked up, not entirely understanding.

"You've been with her since she was in my womb," Shane continued, his voice filled with emotion. "You were there for her birth, through every year of her life, at every important moment. You gave her your last name, Ilya, you raised her, you cared for her, you love her."

Ilya looked at him in silence.

"I don't understand what we're doing wrong for her to be like this," Shane added, lower now, frustrated. "I don't understand at what point it got out of hand."

The silence that followed was long.
Ilya glanced away toward the hallway, as if expecting her to walk out at any moment, but she didn't.

"She's a teenager," he said finally, his voice lower. "And she's just like me."

Shane let out a brief, humorless laugh.

"That's what worries me."

Ilya didn't smile; he stayed still for a few more seconds, and then pushed off the counter.

"I'm going to talk to her."

Shane hesitated for a moment.

"I don't know if it's a good time..."

But Ilya was already walking toward the hallway.
He stopped in front of Galina's door. He stared at it for a few seconds, as if measuring something he didn't know how to approach. Then he raised his hand and knocked twice.

"Gali."

Silence.

"Gali, open up."

Nothing.
Ilya rested his hand on the doorknob, but didn't try to open it.

"We need to talk, sweetheart."

From the other side, her voice was finally heard.

"No."

Ilya pressed his lips together.

"It's not going to disappear just because you ignore it."

"Neither are you," she answered from inside. "And I don't talk to you either."

The blow landed direct.
Ilya closed his eyes for a second, taking a deep breath.

"Don't speak to me like that."

"Don't tell me what to do."

Silence settled once again between both sides of the door.

"Gali..." he tried, lowering his tone a bit. "About yesterday..."

"I don't want to talk to you," she cut him off.

The statement was definitive.
Ilya stood still for a few seconds longer, staring at the closed door.

Then he lowered his hand; he didn't press further.
When he returned to the living room, Shane was looking at him—there was no need to ask.
Ilya gave a slight shake of his head.

"She doesn't want to talk to me."

Shane sighed, weary, leaning his back against the sofa.

"She'll give in eventually."

Ilya didn't answer. He stood there for a few seconds, as if not quite knowing what to do with his body, with his head, with everything.
Then he sat down next to Shane, running a hand over his face.

"I don't know how to talk to her," he admitted in a low voice.

Shane turned his head toward him.

"You don't need to win this time."

Ilya looked at him, confused.

"It's not a fight," Shane added. "She's your daughter."

The silence was gentle this time.
Ilya rested his elbows on his knees, staring straight ahead.

"She won't listen anyway."

Shane placed a hand over his.

"Someday she will."

Ilya didn't reply, but he didn't pull his hand away. He didn't seem angry—just... tired.

•••

Lunch went by in an uncomfortable silence that neither seemed to know how to break entirely.
Shane had prepared something simple, more out of routine than hunger.

Luka was eating slowly, focused on his plate, while Galina barely touched her food, pushing her fork around listlessly, her gaze lost on the table.
Shane observed both of them, feeling the weight of what had been left hanging since yesterday. He knew he couldn't let it pass any longer.

"Gali," he said finally, in a soft tone, trying not to be intrusive. "Can we talk for a second?"

Galina didn't look up.

"I'm eating."

"It's important."

She sighed, resting her fork against the plate with a small clink.

"What?"

Shane adjusted himself in his chair, trying to remain calm.

"About yesterday..." he started. "You went too far."

Galina looked up, immediately on the defensive.

"So did he."

"I'm not saying Ilya did everything right," Shane replied. "But you hurt him."

Galina let out a dry, humorless laugh.

"Really? You're worried about him?"

Shane frowned slightly.

"I'm worried about both of you."

"Well, I'm not," she retorted. "He started it."

Shane took a deep breath, holding back his frustration.

"Gali, Ilya doesn't want to control you out of a whim—he's trying to protect you."

"I don't need him to protect me," she said immediately. "I'm not a little girl."

"You're a minor," Shane answered firmly. "And what you did... wasn't right."

Galina glared at him harshly.

"I didn't do anything."

Shane held her gaze.

"You were seeing a twenty-year-old guy."

The silence grew tense.

"You don't know anything about Ted," she muttered.

"I know enough," Shane replied. "And so does he."

Galina looked away, pressing her lips together.

"You always defend him."

"I'm not defending him," Shane said, lower. "I'm trying to get you to understand that what you did has consequences."

"Right," she replied. "Because everything is my fault. He does... his things, and nobody says anything to him."

Shane shook his head, exhausted.

"It's not about blame, it's about understanding..."

At that moment, Luka stood up from the table, carefully picking up his plate.

"I'm going to get my backpack," he said quietly, looking at neither of them.

Shane nodded.

"Go ahead."

The sound of his footsteps walking away was soft, and when he disappeared down the hallway, silence settled between them once more.
Galina rested her elbows on the table, staring straight at him.

"Who is he?"

Shane frowned, not understanding.

"Who?"

"My father."

The question caught him off guard.

"What?"

"I want to know who he is," she insisted, without breaking eye contact. "Ilya isn't my father."

The tone shifted something inside him.

"Galina..."

"No," she interrupted. "You're my dad, he's Luka's father, but I have another one."

Shane stared at her, and this time anger began to surface.

"Your parents are Ilya and me."

"No," she repeated. "I want to know who he is."

The silence grew sharper.
Shane rested his hands on the table, leaning slightly forward.

"There's a very good reason why I never told you about the guy who got me pregnant," he said, more serious now. "And I know you're not an idiot—you understand that."

Galina held his gaze.

"I have the right to know."

Shane clenched his jaw.

"He was a bad person, Galina."

She didn't hesitate.

"He can't be worse than Ilya."

The sentence landed like a punch, and Shane froze, staring at her, because he knew—he knew how much Ilya loved her, he knew everything Ilya had done for her, and hearing that, just like that, so cold... it hurt him in a way he hadn't expected.

He opened his mouth to reply, with something harsher ready to come out.
But at that moment Luka returned, backpack slung over his shoulder and notebook in hand.

"Ready?" he asked, looking at Shane.

The moment shattered.
Shane slowly closed his mouth, swallowing what he was about to say.

"Yeah," he answered, not entirely taking his eyes off Galina.

She was no longer looking at him; she had gotten up from the table, grabbing her backpack as if nothing had happened, as if she hadn't left everything trembling in her wake.

•••

The noise of the port was constant: cranes moving, containers clanking against metal, distant voices blending with the wind.
Ilya stood in front of a line of containers, talking to another man while Viktor and Sergei remained a few steps back, alert to everything.

"So we agree then," the Italian was saying, with a tight smile. "You take care of transport, and I handle distribution."

Ilya gave a slight nod, expression solemn, measuring every word.

"If something falls through, it falls through for both of us."

The other man opened his mouth to reply, but at that moment Ilya's phone vibrated in his pocket once, twice, three times.
He ignored it at first, annoyed by the interruption, but the phone kept ringing, insistent, cutting through the rhythm of the conversation.
He frowned and finally pulled it out.
When he saw the name on the screen, something in his expression changed—it was Shane.

He answered right away, turning around and taking a few steps back.

"What's wrong?"

On the other end, there was no immediate answer. Just ragged, panicked breathing.

"Shane?"

"Galina isn't here," his voice came out broken, out of control. "Love... she's not here."

Ilya went completely still.

"What do you mean she's not there?"

"I took her to school," Shane continued, speaking fast, frantic. "Both of them, they walked in together, like always, but now I came to pick them up and they tell me Galina never went in... Ilya, she never entered."

The world around Ilya seemed to go silent.

"What?"

"She's not here," Shane repeated, lower now. "She's not at school, she's nowhere, and her phone is turned off... I don't know what to do."

Ilya closed his eyes for a second, clenching his jaw.

"Luka?"

"He's with me," Shane answered right away. "He did go in, he didn't see anything... he says they parted ways at the entrance."

Ilya ran a hand over his face, trying to bring order to the chaos.

"How long ago?"

"Half an hour... forty minutes... I don't know," Shane's voice was shaking. "I thought she was in class, but no... she's not."

Ilya took a deep breath, though air didn't seem like enough.

"Listen to me," he said, shifting his tone, making it firm. "Calm down."

"I can't," Shane answered immediately. "Ilya, I can't..."

"Yes you can," he cut in. "I need you to stay clear-headed."

On the other end, there was a brief silence, filled with hitched breathing.

"I am..." Shane tried. "I'm with Luka."

"Stay there," Ilya ordered. "Don't move."

"What if...?" Shane started.

"Don't move," he repeated, firmer. "I'll handle it."

The silence was short.

"Ilya..." Shane's voice dropped, heavy with fear. "What if something happened to her?"

Ilya pressed the phone tightly against his ear.

"Nothing happened to her, and I'm going to find her."

On the other end, Shane didn't reply, but his breathing hitched completely.

"I'm heading over," Ilya added. "And I will find her."

He hung up and stood still for just a second, phone still in hand.

Then he turned around.
His face was no longer the same.
The other man looked at him, confused.

"Is something wrong?"

Ilya put his phone away without answering right away.

"The deal is off."

"What?" The man frowned. "What are you talking about?"

But Ilya was no longer looking at him.

"Another day."

He turned on his heel and walked straight toward Viktor and Sergei.

"The girl is missing," he said, without beating around the bush. "Activate everyone."

Both men tensed instantly.

"How long ago?" Viktor asked.

"Less than an hour."

That made it urgent—much more urgent.

"Cameras, contacts, streets, everything," Ilya ordered. "I want to know where she is now."

Sergei nodded, pulling out his phone.
Viktor looked at him for a second longer.

"Do you think...?"

Ilya cut him off with a look.

"Don't think anything. Find my daughter."

The air grew heavy, because they all understood what it meant.
Ilya stood still for just another second, then walked toward the car.

# Chapter 24

The afternoon became endless; the hours passed, but nothing changed. The phones didn't stop ringing, messages went back and forth, cars entered and left, and men moved throughout the city following leads that led nowhere.

Ilya's contacts had been activated, the cameras checked, the usual spots reviewed over and over again, and still, Galina didn't appear—there wasn't a single sign, not a trace.

Back at the house, the air felt heavy, hard to breathe. Shane couldn't stay still; he paced back and forth across the living room, grabbing his cell phone, putting it down, picking it up again, as if a message that would fix everything might pop up at any second.

"And?" he asked again, turning toward Ilya. "Anything?"

Ilya sat leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees, holding his phone. His posture was rigid, contained, as if his whole body were making an effort not to break.

"No," he answered dryly.

Shane ran a hand over his face, completely overwhelmed.

"It can't be... it can't be..."

"We're going to find her," Ilya said without raising his voice.

Shane looked at him with desperation.

"How do you know? How can you be so calm?"

Ilya looked up. He wasn't calm, but he couldn't afford not to be.

"Because I'm going to find her," he replied firmly.

Shane shook his head, resuming his restless pacing.

"She left, Ilya... she left... after yesterday... after everything she said..."

"I'm going to bring her back."

Shane stopped and stared right at him.

"And what if she doesn't want to come back?"

Ilya didn't answer, not because he didn't have an answer, but because there wasn't one he could say out loud.

Daylight slowly faded until the house was plunged into an uncomfortable gloom, lit only by a few lamps.
No one was hungry, no one was sleepy; there was only the waiting and the anguish.

After a moment, Shane stopped.

"Luka?" he called out, looking toward the hallway.

There was no answer.
He frowned and walked toward the bedrooms. The door to Galina's room was ajar, and he pushed it open slowly. That was when he saw him: Luka was sitting on his sister's bed, legs folded, clutching one of her pillows against his chest. His face was buried in the fabric, but the sound said it all—he was crying.

Shane felt something inside him break a little more.
He entered in silence and closed the door behind him. He walked over slowly, without rushing him.

"Luka..." he called softly.

The boy barely lifted his head. His eyes were red, his cheeks damp.

"She's not here..." he said, as if just realizing it. "My sister isn't here, daddy."

Shane sat down next to him without saying a word.

"I know."

Luka pressed the pillow tighter against his chest.

"What if she doesn't come back?"

The question was small, fragile.
Shane felt a lump in his throat, but he placed a hand on the boy's back and began to stroke it gently.

"She'll come back."

Luka shook his head, crying silently.

"She was so angry..."

"Yes," Shane murmured. "But that doesn't change anything."

Luka looked up, distressed.

"I didn't say anything to her... I didn't do anything."

Shane turned toward him slightly, looking at him softly.

"This isn't your fault, son."

Luka lowered his gaze again.

"Is she alone?"

Shane hesitated for barely a second.

"No," he replied. "She's not alone."

He didn't know if it was true, but Luka needed to hear it.

"Are they going to find her?"

Shane nodded.

"Yes."
Luka clung tighter to the pillow.

"I miss her..."

Shane wrapped an arm around him and pulled him close, letting him cry without hurrying him.

"Me too," he murmured.

They stayed that way for a few minutes, in silence, surrounded by Galina's things, by her presence in every corner of that empty room.

•••

Shortly after, Ilya was in the living room, standing with his phone in hand, giving orders in a low, sharp voice. Every so often he walked a few paces, stopped, and called again.
Everything about him was control, but underneath, something vibrated tense and dangerous.

Luka appeared from the hallway. He had wiped his face, but his eyes were still swollen. He walked slowly, as if hesitating to approach, but still moved until he stood right in front of Ilya.
Ilya saw him and stood still.

"Daddy," he said in a voice that was small but firm.

Ilya barely frowned, not out of anger, but because of the way he had addressed him.

"What's wrong?"

Luka looked at him without lowering his gaze—that alone was different.

"Find her," he said directly. "Please."

Ilya held his gaze, and for the first time, Luka didn't shrink back, didn't look away, didn't hide; he just stood there, waiting.
Ilya took a step toward him.

"I'm going to find her," he said firmly.

Luka pressed his lips together.

"Promise me."

The word hung between the two of them.
Ilya didn't hesitate.

"I promise you I'm bringing your sister home."

Luka gave a slight nod. He didn't smile, but something in his posture loosened a bit, as if he needed to hear precisely that.

At that moment, the front door opened.
Shane raised his head from the sofa where he sat, completely exhausted, with trembling hands resting on his legs.

"Who is it?" he asked without getting up.

"It's me," Hayden replied, entering with Mateo right behind him.

Hayden walked straight toward Shane without hesitating. He crouched down in front of him, resting a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Relax," he said quietly. "We're going to find her."

Shane shook his head, his eyes full of anguish.

"I don't know where she is... I don't know who she's with..."

"We'll find out," Hayden insisted. "You're not alone."

Shane closed his eyes for a second, leaning slightly into that contact, as if he needed to hold onto something.

Meanwhile, Mateo had stayed a few steps back.
He watched the scene in silence and then looked at Ilya. He hesitated; he had always been afraid of him—of the way he looked, the way he spoke, everything he represented. But this time he took a step forward until he was standing in front of him.

Ilya looked at him, waiting.
Mateo swallowed hard.

"I know where Ted lives."

The silence was immediate.
Ilya stood completely still.

"What?"

Mateo held his gaze, even though it was difficult.

"I know where Gali is."

Ilya took another step closer.

"Tell me."

Mateo hesitated for a second, glancing sideways at Shane as if seeking permission. But Shane was too broken to react.
He looked back at Ilya.

"It's on..." he began, giving the address with precision, though his voice shook slightly.

Ilya didn't interrupt him; he didn't even blink.
When Mateo finished, the silence grew heavy.

"Are you sure?" Ilya asked.

Mateo nodded.

Ilya held him in his gaze for one more second and then did something Mateo didn't expect.

"Thanks... Viktor," he said, grabbing his phone. "I have an address."

•••

The house wasn't what Galina had imagined.
When she left school and got into the car with Ted, it had all felt like an adventure, freedom, something forbidden that made her feel grown-up and independent.
Turning off her phone, disappearing, answering no one... at the time, it had seemed like a powerful decision. But that was yesterday. Now, sitting on an old, sagging sofa, with the constant noise of a video game console in the background and the heavy smell of smoke clinging to her clothes and hair, everything felt different—smaller, dirtier, more uncomfortable.

Ted was sprawled on another sofa with a joystick in his hand, laughing with two guys who had barely introduced themselves.
One had a beer, the other leaned against the wall, and neither made the slightest effort to hide that they were looking at her.

Galina shifted in her seat, crossing her arms, trying to make herself smaller.

"Come on, pass it," one of them said, nudging Ted with his foot.

Ted laughed and handed him the joint without even looking at her. The smoke grew thicker in the room.
Galina shifted her gaze toward the window. It was closed—everything was closed.

She felt a knot in her stomach.

"Want some?" Ted asked suddenly, holding out the joint to her.

She shook her head immediately.

"No."

Ted shrugged, as if he didn't care, and went back to the game.
One of the guys looked at her openly.

"How old are you?"

The question made her tense up, put her on alert.

"Fourteen," she replied dryly.

The guy raised his eyebrows, looked at Ted, and then looked back at her with a smile she didn't like.

"Oh..."

Ted didn't say anything or even react; he just kept playing.
Galina felt the heat rush to her face and stood up abruptly.

"I'm going to the bathroom."

No one stopped her.
She walked quickly down the hall until she found it. She closed the door, placed her hands on the sink, and looked at her reflection in the mirror. She didn't look like herself; her hair was messy, her eyes tired, her skin paler.

"What did you do?" she whispered faintly.

The silence of the bathroom was the only thing that gave her a little air. She pressed a hand to her chest, taking a deep breath, trying to calm down.
She didn't want to be there; she didn't want to be with Ted; she didn't want them looking at her like that.

From the living room, the laughter, the noise of the game, and the background music kept filtering through—and far from reassuring her, it made her feel more alone.
She thought of her home.
Of Shane.
Of Luka.
And then, inevitably, of Ilya.
The knot in her chest tightened.

"He hates me..." she whispered, pressing her forehead against the mirror.

The image from the previous day hit her all at once: Ilya's face, the fury, the strike, her own words.

*"You're not my father."*
She squeezed her eyes shut.

"I'm such an idiot..."

She quickly wiped away her tears, as if someone might see her, and left the bathroom.
When she returned to the living room, nothing had changed. Ted was still playing, laughing, completely oblivious.

"Everything okay?" he asked without looking at her.

Galina hesitated for a second.

"Yeah."

She stood there, not knowing where to position herself.

"Hey, come here," one of the friends told her, patting the sofa beside him. "Don't just stand there."

There was something in his tone that made her uncomfortable.

"I'm good here," she replied.

The guy made a face.

"Whatever you say, pretty."

Galina sat down again, but this time closer to the door. Closer to an exit.
She took out her phone, which was turned off; she knew why she had turned it off, and now she didn't know how to undo it.

"Ted..." she said after a while, in a low voice.

"What?" he replied, eyes still on the screen.

"I want to leave."

Ted let out a short laugh.

"Now?"

"Yes."

"Hold on, Gali," he said. "We're good here."

She shook her head.

"No... I'm not."

Ted set the joystick down on the table and looked at her seriously for the first time.

"What's your problem now?"

Galina hesitated for a second.

"I don't like this."

Ted looked around, as if he didn't understand.

"Like what?"

"This," she replied, gesturing to the room. "This isn't what you said."

Ted rolled his eyes.

"Well, it is what it is."

The phrase rubbed her the wrong way.

"I want to leave," she repeated.

Ted sighed, already annoyed.

"I'll take you later, kid, stop bugging."

"No," she said more firmly. "Now."

One of the friends laughed quietly.

"The little girl is intense."

Galina felt embarrassment wash over her entire body.
Ted rubbed a hand over his face.

"Don't start, Gali."

She stared straight at him, and in that moment, something shifted.
For the first time since she had arrived, she stopped seeing him as someone who understood her or cared for her, and began to see him for what he really was: someone who wasn't going to help her.

•••

While everything remained the same in that house, an SUV slammed to a halt half a block away.
The engine kept running, vibrating under the silent night.
From the outside, everything looked normal: a yellowish light spilling through the window, low music, muffled laughter—just any ordinary scene.

But it wasn't.

Ilya got out first, without waiting for anyone, with a sharp movement. Viktor and Sergei followed immediately, and behind them the rest of the men fanned out quickly, surrounding the house like a closing shadow.

"Nobody leaves," Ilya ordered in a low voice.

Sergei moved toward the door and pushed it open effortlessly. The crash against the wall was sharp and violent, enough to instantly cut off the music and laughter. The silence that followed was immediate, charged with confusion.

One of the guys jumped to his feet; another dropped his joystick. The smoke hung heavy and foul in the air.
"What the fuck...?" one started, but didn't finish the sentence.

Viktor grabbed him by the shirt and shoved him against the wall with a violence that knocked the wind out of him.

"Sit down," he growled.

Another tried to run for the hall, but one of Ilya's men blocked his path with a push that sent him stumbling back. The chaos was immediate, but brief. Fear did the rest.
Ted sat frozen, pale, his eyes wide.

"What... what is this?" he stammered.

He didn't have time to react.
Sergei grabbed his arm tightly, spinning him around and throwing him roughly to the floor.

Viktor crouched beside him, holding him down as Ted tried to wriggle away, desperate.

"Hey, stop! Stop!" he yelled.

It did no good.

"So you like little girls," Viktor said with a calm that was more threatening than any shout.

Ted opened his mouth.

"No, no, I didn't..."

The first punch cut off his sentence—heavy and direct.

"We," Sergei continued, positioning himself over him, "like educating little boys."

The second blow was harder.
Ted screamed, trying to cover his face, but he had no way to defend himself. Every attempt was useless; their hands were faster, heavier, more determined.

The friends didn't stick around.
One ran out the moment he found an opening. Another followed without looking back. No

one tried to help him; no one wanted to stay.

The blows kept coming, one after another, with a brutal rhythm, as if each one carried a clear message.

Meanwhile, Ilya didn't stop in the living room.

He walked straight down the hall, looking at no one, paying no attention to what was happening behind him, as if everything else didn't exist.

He pushed open the bedroom door and saw her.

Galina was standing in the middle of the room, completely still, as if she had been waiting for that moment since she heard the door open.

Their eyes met, and everything stopped.
There were no shouts, no questions, no reproaches—just that dense silence between the two of them.

She didn't move at first.
Neither did Ilya.
They stared at each other for a long time, with everything that had happened hanging heavy in the air, impossible to ignore.

Galina was the first to move, walking until she stood right in front of him.

Ilya didn't step back, nor did he speak. She didn't either.

When she was close, she lowered her gaze for a brief second... and then raised it again.

Ilya turned his body slightly, leaving the path clear. Galina understood, walked past him in silence, and he followed.

They left the room.
The sound of the blows still echoed from the living room, muffled now like a distant hum, but neither looked back.

They crossed the house without saying a word and went outside.

The night air hit them suddenly—cold and clean.

The SUV was still waiting. Ilya opened the back door, and Galina climbed in without hesitation.

Ilya closed the door, walked around the vehicle, and got in on the other side.

"Drive," he ordered.

The engine roared, and they drove away in complete silence.

•••

The house was quiet when Ilya knocked on the door.
He didn't knock hard—just two dry, restrained taps, as if even in that he was measuring how much he was intruding.

On the other side, Galina sat on her bed with her legs crossed and a lost expression. She had returned home hours ago, but she hadn't quite managed to calm down; everything was still too recent, too heavy.

The sound made her look up, and she hesitated for an instant before answering.

"Come in."

The door opened slowly. Ilya entered without hurrying and closed it behind him.
He stood in place for a second, watching her as if he needed to sort out what he was going to say before stepping closer.

Then he walked over to the bed and sat down beside her, leaving a small space between them.

Ilya slipped a hand into his pants pocket and pulled out something small. He held it between his fingers for a moment before holding his hand out to her.

"Here."

Galina frowned slightly, confused, and carefully took the object. It was a heavy men's ring with an engraving she didn't recognize.

"What is this?" she asked, looking at it.

Ilya rested his forearms on his legs and stared straight ahead before answering.

"It's Min-Jae's ring."

The name sounded foreign to her.

"Who is that?"

Ilya turned his head and looked at her.

"That was your father."

The ring suddenly seemed to weigh much more in her hand.

"What...?" she managed to murmur, leaving the question unfinished.

Ilya didn't look away.

"And I killed him."

The air in the room grew thick. Galina snapped her head up and looked straight into his eyes, completely frozen. She said nothing; she couldn't.
Ilya held her gaze, not dodging what he was saying.

"He wasn't a good person," he continued firmly. "And neither am I. A lot of people would say I'm not."

He paused briefly before going on.

"But that guy wasn't good to your father," he added, referring to Shane. "And I avenged him. I don't regret it."

Silence settled between them again, heavy, loaded with all that truth implied.
Ilya dropped his gaze for barely a second, as if ordering what came next, and then continued.

"Still, there is something he did right." He pointed to the ring in her hand. "And that's you."

Galina felt something inside her crack. She looked at the ring as if seeing it in a new light, and then raised her eyes to him again.
Ilya took a deep breath.

"I don't regret killing him," he repeated, lower. "Someday, maybe, you'll understand everything." He took a second. "But I don't regret loving you either."

The phrase hung suspended between them.

"You're my daughter," he added, looking at her. "No matter what you do, and no matter what you say."

Galina looked down at her hands. Then, almost without realizing it, she looked at Ilya's hands, his rings, the way he held everything with that steady assurance he always had. She looked back up into his eyes.
Tears began to fall without her being able to stop them—no sound, no sobs, just that silent crying that squeezed her chest.

Ilya didn't move; he didn't try to interrupt her. He just watched her.

"I didn't do anything... with Ted," she finally said, her voice small and broken.

Ilya nodded once.

"Good."

Silence settled back between them, but it wasn't the same anymore.
Galina swallowed hard.

"I almost never understand you..."

Ilya let out a soft exhale.

"You understand me very well."

He looked right at her as he said it—not as a reprimand, but as something inevitable, because deep down, they were more alike than either of them wanted to admit, and they knew each other like no one else did.

Galina looked down for a second and then looked back up.

"You're my dad," she said, her voice cracking slightly. "And I'm sorry I said you weren't."

Ilya didn't answer right away. He kept looking at her, absorbing every word.
Then he raised a hand and, with a gentleness that wasn't usual for him, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

He didn't say anything, but he stayed right there with her, like always.

# Chapter 25

The room was almost dark and, for the first time in days, at ease.

Shane was lying on the bed, his body half-turned toward Ilya, who had moved close enough to invade his space without asking permission.
There was something playful in the atmosphere, a different kind of tension—lighter, more intimate after everything they had been through.

"Are you going to pay attention to me now?" Ilya murmured close to his ear, with a half-smile.

Shane let out a low laugh, giving his chest a light push.

"You always want attention," he replied. "You're worse than a kid."

"Don't complain," Ilya retorted, leaning a bit closer. "I've been working more than usual, I'm tense, and I need... help."

Shane glanced at him sideways with an expression that mixed weariness and affection.

"You only need help when it suits you."

Ilya pressed his forehead against Shane's for a second, unhurried, enjoying that simple contact. His hands moved slowly, without urgency, as if the only important thing was staying right there in that moment.

"I just want my man's attention, am I asking too much?" he said in a low voice.

Shane shook his head slightly, but didn't pull away.

"Shut up."

Ilya let out a soft laugh and leaned in again, brushing against him intentionally, more to provoke him than to actually force anything.

"You're softer," he murmured. "You used to fight more."

"I'm tired," Shane replied, though his hand stayed rested on Ilya's arm, holding him close.

"Doesn't look like it."

The atmosphere grew a bit heavier—not abruptly, but slowly, naturally, like something that had been growing without either of them fully noticing.
Ilya kissed his neck, leaving kisses along his throat while his hands slipped under his clothes, brushing against his warm skin.

Their semi-hardened erections bumped against each other as their tongues sought one another in a dirty, wet kiss.

Ilya grabbed his jaw and bit him lightly near the collarbone, making Shane sigh with pleasure.

"I could make you another baby tonight," Ilya whispered, sliding down toward his chest.

His tongue reached Shane's left nipple and bit it gently.

"The factory is completely closed, so you better..."

He couldn't finish the sentence; a knock at the door stopped them cold.

Both froze instantly and looked at each other. Then another knock was heard.

"Dad?" Galina's voice came from the other side.

The moment changed completely.
Ilya pulled away immediately, sitting up and running a hand through his hair to pull himself together. Shane adjusted the sheet, propping himself up a bit.

"Yeah, come in," he answered.

The door opened slowly.
Galina walked in wearing her pajamas, her hair loose and somewhat messy. She had that mix between a teenager and a little kid that hadn't quite worn off yet.

She looked at both of them for a second, as if assessing the mood, and then walked straight to the bed without hesitation.

"Can I stay?" she asked, already climbing up.

Shane smiled immediately.

"Sweetheart, you're big now and..."

But Galina settled right in the middle, sliding under the covers naturally, as if that spot had always belonged to her.
She cuddled up against Shane first, resting her head on his shoulder, and then reached out a hand to grab Ilya's shirt.

Ilya looked at her in silence for a second before relaxing his posture. He raised his hand and carefully tucked her hair behind her ear in a gentle gesture.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

Galina barely shook her head.

"No..." she murmured. "I wanted to be with you guys."

Shane hugged her a bit tighter, pressing his cheek against her head.

"It's fine."

Ilya lay down on the other side, leaving the three of them lined up with Galina in the middle.
She closed her eyes, holding onto both of them as if she needed to make sure they were there.

"Don't move," she said in a low voice. "I want to sleep like this."

Shane smiled faintly.

"Bossy."

Galina didn't answer; she was already more relaxed.
Ilya let out a soft exhale, resting his hand on top of her head, keeping her close without squeezing.

"Alright," he said finally.

Shane looked at Ilya with a mischievous smile on his lips and mouthed, *tomorrow*.
But Shane didn't know that for Ilya, for the first time in his life, the interruption didn't matter.
They could have sex another day, every day; having Galina in the middle of them like when she was little, on the other hand, wasn't a common occurrence, so he decided to enjoy it.

•••

The morning started quietly, with soft light pouring through the dining room windows and the sound of silverware clinking against plates.

Shane went back and forth between the kitchen and the table, finishing serving breakfast while Ilya was already seated, holding his coffee and watching the kids.

Galina was eating with more energy than usual, talking nonstop about anything and everything, as if she needed to fill all the silences from the previous days.
Luka, on the other hand, was different.
His back was slightly hunched, his gaze lowered, and he barely touched his food.

Ilya watched him for a while without saying a word.
Then he set his mug down on the table.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked directly.

Luka barely looked up, surprised.

"Nothing."

Ilya frowned slightly.

"It's not nothing."

"It is nothing," Luka insisted quickly, dropping his gaze back down. "I'm fine."

Shane watched the scene from the kitchen out of the corner of his eye, noticing the tension.

"Luka..." he started softly.

"I'm fine," he repeated, a bit more firmly, as if wanting to close the subject.

Ilya didn't press, but he didn't believe him either. He leaned back slightly in his chair, crossing his arms, watching him for a few more seconds before shifting his attention.

Breakfast went on, but the mood wasn't the same.

A while later, when Luka went to his room to grab his backpack, Galina got up from the table and walked quickly over to Ilya, leaning in close so the others wouldn't hear.

"He's not okay," she murmured.

Ilya turned his head toward her.

"I know."

Galina shook her head.

"No, you don't know."

Ilya looked at her steadily.

"Then tell me."

She hesitated briefly, glancing toward the hallway to make sure Luka wasn't nearby.

"Some kids are bullying him," she said in a low voice. "At school."

Ilya's expression changed.

"Who?"

Galina shrugged.

"I'm not entirely sure... but they bother him, say things to him, push him... and he doesn't say anything."

That was enough.
Ilya placed his hands flat on the table and stayed silent for a few seconds, processing it.
Then he stood up.

"Finish eating," he told Galina calmly.

She looked at him with a small, knowing smile. Part of feeling bad for what she had said about his work when she was angry came precisely from that—it was a lie that she didn't like

it; she actually adored how dangerous her dad seemed to be, she admired that.

"You're not going to kill them, right?"

Ilya glanced at her sideways.

"No..." He paused. "Just a little scare."

Galina let out a half-laugh.

"Good."

Ilya walked over to the living room and took out his phone. He dialed without hesitation.

"Viktor," he said when someone answered. His voice was low, but carried that tone that left no room for doubt. "I need you to look into something."

"Go ahead."

"There are some kids at Luka's school giving him a hard time. Find them and then... give them a scare."

"How hard?" Viktor asked.

Ilya thought for a second.

"Hard enough that they never look at him again, but don't hurt them—they're Luka's age."

The silence on the other end was almost imperceptible.

"Got it."

Ilya hung up.
He stood still for a moment with the phone in his hand, taking a deep breath.

When he returned to the dining room, Luka was already back at the table, finishing his breakfast in silence.
Ilya walked up and placed a hand firmly yet calmly on his shoulder.

"I'll take you today," he said.

Luka looked up, surprised.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Luka gave a slight nod.

"Okay..."

Ilya watched him a second longer. He didn't say anything, but this time, Luka didn't lower his gaze quite as fast.

•••

The afternoon fell softly over the house, and the atmosphere felt different from the night before—lighter, more breathable. As if something had settled into place, even if no one said it out loud.

The front door swung open and Luka walked in first, his backpack slung over one shoulder and a huge smile on his face.

"Dad!" he called, letting his backpack drop onto the sofa. "Nobody bothered me today."

Shane, who was in the kitchen, popped his head out with an immediate smile.

"Really?"

"Yeah," Luka replied enthusiastically, walking toward him. "Nobody, not a single one."

Ilya, who was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, watched him in silence. His expression didn't change much, but his eyes softened just a bit.

"See?" Shane said, ruffling his hair. "Sometimes things change."

Luka nodded energetically.

"Yeah... it was weird though," he admitted. "It was like... they wouldn't even look at me."

Ilya looked away for a second, hiding a faint shadow of satisfaction.

"Better," he said simply.

Luka didn't suspect a thing; there was no reason he should.
He let himself fall onto the sofa, still happy, and began sharing details of his day—simple things, unimportant anecdotes he still needed to tell.

At the other end of the living room, Galina was sitting with her phone in hand, completely absorbed.
Her fingers moved fast across the screen, over and over, and every now and then a smile slipped out that she tried to hide.

"Who are you texting so much?" Shane asked from the kitchen.

"Mateo," she replied without looking up.

"Again?" Luka chimed in playfully. "They're a couple, Galina and Mateo are a couple," he sang out cheerfully.

"Of course not," Galina and Ilya said at the exact same time.

Shane looked at Ilya, annoyed.

"Don't start..."

"Not with that... boy."

"There's nothing going on with Mateo," Galina said. Yet her phone vibrated again, and she smiled, biting her lip slightly as she read.

Ilya glanced at her sideways.
It didn't take a genius to notice the obvious—the way Mateo pursued her, the way she responded without realizing it. But he didn't say anything; he preferred not to think about it right now, and if possible, never think about it at all.

He pushed off the wall and walked into the kitchen, where Shane was finishing up some things. He leaned against the doorframe, watching him for a few seconds before speaking.

"They're in their own world," he murmured.

Shane smiled without turning around.

"Yeah... thankfully."

Ilya tilted his head slightly.

"Then let's go out."

Shane turned around, surprised.

"Now?"

"Yeah."

Shane looked at him for a second, evaluating.

"Where to?"

Ilya shrugged.

"To eat, somewhere."

There was something simple about the proposal, but also something more. A clear intention to steal a moment for themselves.
Shane leaned his hip against the counter, crossing his arms.

"And them?"

Ilya tilted his head toward the living room. Luka was still talking away, now building something with his hands, while Galina hadn't even lifted her eyes from her phone.

"They'll be fine."

Shane looked at them too, hesitating slightly.

"I don't know..."

Ilya stepped a bit closer, closing the distance between them.

"How long has it been since we went out alone?"

It wasn't a question; it was a reminder.
Shane sighed, but a small smile appeared anyway.

"You're pushy, Russian."

"You know I am."

Shane shook his head, but he was already giving in.

– "Alright... but nothing too long."

Ilya nodded.

"Perfect."

They walked out to the living room. Shane grabbed his jacket as he spoke.

"We're going out for a bit," he announced. "You guys stay out of trouble, okay?"

Luka looked up right away.

"Yeah."

Galina raised a hand without looking, responding on autopilot.

"Yeah, yeah."

Ilya watched her for another second, seeing how she kept smiling at her phone, completely lost in her conversation, and felt a vein in his neck pulse harder.

Then he looked at Luka.

"Watch the house, you're the man of the house tonight."

Luka nodded solemnly.

"Obviously."

"I don't need any man to watch me," Galina piped up.

Ilya held her gaze for a second, then gave a slight nod.

They walked out and the door clicked shut behind them.

The night greeted them with fresh, calm air.
The city was still alive, but far from the heaviest noise, in a more intimate, more reserved neighborhood.
The car pulled up in front of an elegant restaurant with warm lights and wide windows that offered a glimpse of a meticulously cared-for, almost pristine interior.
Shane looked at the place the moment he stepped out.

"Isn't this a bit much?" he asked, half-jokingly.

Ilya closed the car door and walked around to his side.

"No."

Shane looked at him with a half-smile.

"Obviously not."

They went in together. As soon as they crossed the threshold, the atmosphere felt different—there were no crowds, just a couple of waiters, quiet and attentive, as if they already knew that night wasn't going to be ordinary.
Shane stopped.

"Ilya...?"

He didn't answer right away; he simply placed a hand on Shane's back and guided him toward a table near the window.

"I wanted some quiet, so I booked it for us," he finally said.

Shane looked at him for a moment longer, but didn't press; he sat down.
The table was carefully set: lit candles, shining glasses, a calm wrapping around everything.

At first, they spoke very little—not because they had nothing to say, but because the silence between them was no longer awkward after fifteen years of loving each other. It was a full, shared silence.

Every now and then, Shane smiled at something minor, and Ilya looked at him as if he needed to memorize every single gesture.

The food came and went at a leisurely pace. Ilya made sure everything was perfect without making it obvious, without breaking that sense of intimacy.

"You're acting weird," Shane remarked at one point, setting his fork down.

Ilya raised a single eyebrow.

"Weird how?"

"I don't know..." Shane looked at him closer. "Quiet, overly proper."

Ilya let out a slight smile.

"Does it bother you?"

"It worries me," Shane answered sincerely.

Ilya lowered his gaze for a second, as if organizing something inside himself. Then he looked back up.

"It's nothing bad."

Shane stayed quiet, watching him, waiting.
Ilya rested his hands on the table, interlocking his fingers, and took a deep breath before speaking.

"You know I'm not good at this," he began. "With talking... with saying things."

Shane didn't interrupt.

"I've done a lot of things wrong," Ilya continued, his voice low but steady. "A lot, and for a long time I thought that was all I was."

He paused.

"But then you showed up."

Shane lowered his gaze slightly, listening.

"And you changed everything," Ilya went on. "Even when I resisted, even when I ruined things, even when..." He shook his head. "You always came back. You always stayed."

The silence grew denser, but not uncomfortable.

"You gave me a family," he added. "You gave me Galina... Luka... and something I didn't know I could have."

Shane looked at him again.

"It wasn't just me..."

"No," Ilya cut him off. "But you were the first."

This time, Shane said nothing.
Ilya stayed silent for another second, and then did something entirely unlike him.

He stood up.
Shane frowned slightly, surprised, following him with his eyes.
Ilya walked around the table and stopped right in front of him.

For a heartbeat, he just looked at him—and then he knelt down.

Shane's eyes widened in complete bewilderment.

"Ilya... what are you doing?"

But Ilya was already pulling a small box from his pocket. He opened it, revealing a ring inside—extremely ostentatious, massive, heavy, and solid... just like him.

"I don't know how to say this any other way," he said, looking straight into his eyes. "Or how to do it better."

Shane froze completely.

"But I know I want to do it."

He took a deep breath.

"You're the father of my children, but you're not my husband yet... I want you to be."

The silence was absolute.

"I want to wake up with you every day, fight with you, fix things with you... and keep building this life we have."

His voice wasn't shaking, but there was something in his eyes that was.

"I'm not easy," he added. "And I never will be."

A brief pause.

"But I love you, and I want to do this right," Ilya finished. "With you."

Time seemed to stop.

"Will you marry me?"

Shane stared at him, unable to speak at first. His eyes were shining, his breathing a bit fast, as if everything had hit him all at once.
He shook his head barely, with an uncontrollable smile breaking through.

"You're an idiot..." he murmured, choked with emotion.

Ilya didn't move; he stayed right there, waiting.

Shane brought a hand to his face, wiping away a tear he hadn't noticed falling.

"Yes," he finally said. "Yes, I will."

The smile that appeared on Ilya's face was minimal, but completely real.

He stood up immediately, took Shane's hand, and carefully slipped the ring onto his finger.

Then he pulled him close and kissed him without rushing, as if that moment belonged entirely to them—because it did, that moment belonged completely to the two of them.

# Chapter 26

The following days turned into a kind of whirlwind revolving around a single thing: the wedding.

Shane was completely absorbed.
From the moment he woke up until he went to sleep, everything was about lists, decisions, ideas, changes, doubts, new lists. The dining table had stopped being a place to eat and was now covered in papers, magazines, fabric swatches, notes, and a phone constantly vibrating with supplier messages.

“No, white isn't... white isn't the same as ivory,” he was saying, pacing back and forth with his phone in hand. “Yes, I know they look similar, but they aren't... no, I need to see it... tomorrow, yes, tomorrow.”

He hung up and set the phone on the table, sighing, but immediately picked up another piece of paper.
Ilya, leaning against the wall, had been watching him in silence for several minutes.

“How long have you been at this?” he finally asked.

Shane didn't even look up.

“I don't know.”

“Since you opened your eyes.”

“Probably,” he replied, distracted, as he jotted something down.

Ilya ran a hand over his face, exhaling through his nose.

“It's a wedding, Shane.”

Shane snapped his head up, offended.

“It's *our* wedding.”

The emphasis was enough.
Ilya raised his hands in surrender.

“Fine.”

But he didn't move; he stayed there watching him for a while longer, seeing him lose himself in his papers again, completely immersed in that world.

In the living room, Galina was sprawled on the couch with her phone, watching the scene with an exhausted expression.

“How long has he been like this?” she whispered.

Luka, sitting on the floor with some blocks, looked up.

“Since forever.”

Galina let out a short laugh.

“No, worse.”

Shane suddenly appeared in the living room holding a notebook.

“Gali, I need your opinion.”

Galina dropped her head back.

“No...”

“It's quick.”

“No.”

Shane walked over anyway, ignoring her refusal.

“Bridesmaid dress,” he said, flipping through pages. “This one or this one?”

Galina barely glanced, unenthusiastically.

“They're the same.”

“They aren't the same,” Shane shot back immediately. “This one drapes more softly, and this one is more structured.”

Galina stared at him for a few seconds.

“I don't care.”

“Well, but you're going to wear it.”

“Then you choose,” she replied, returning to her phone.

Shane made a face, frustrated.

“Nobody helps me.”

From the floor, Luka raised his hand.

“I can help.”

Shane immediately looked at him with a smile.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Luka answered, stepping closer. “What do I have to do?”

Galina looked at him with pity.

“You don't know what you're getting yourself into.”

Ilya let out a low laugh from the wall.
Shane, on the other hand, crouched down in front of Luka with all the seriousness in the world.

“I need you to help me pick flowers.”

Luka opened his eyes, interested.

“Flowers?”

“Yes.”

Shane began showing him pictures, explaining every option with a dedication that made everything seem important.
Ilya watched the scene in silence.
After a few seconds, he walked over.

“And me?” he asked.

Shane looked up.

“You...” he looked him up and down. “You have to pick a suit.”

Ilya grimaced.

“A black one.”

“No,” Shane replied instantly.

“It's a suit.”

“It's not 'a suit,' it's *the* suit.”

Ilya sighed.

“It's going to be black.”

Shane shook his head, already writing something down.

“We'll see.”

Galina let out a laugh from the couch.

“You don't stand a chance.”

Ilya glanced at her sideways.

“Shut up.”

But he didn't sound annoyed.
Shane went back to his world, talking, writing, organizing, without pausing for a single second. Every detail seemed crucial, every decision final.

“I want it to be perfect,” he whispered at one point, more to himself than to the rest.

Ilya heard him and didn't say anything this time; he just watched him a bit longer because, even if no one else could quite tolerate it... he understood perfectly why Shane needed this.

•••

The door to Galina's room was ajar, and low laughter, hushed conversations, and the constant sound of a phone playing something spilled into the hallway.

The late afternoon was setting in slowly, and the house had that quiet atmosphere that had become more frequent in recent days.

Inside the room, Galina was lying face down on the bed, her feet swinging endlessly in the air, while Mateo was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall with his back slightly hunched and his phone in hand.

“No, I swear, no,” she said, laughing. “After that, I never spoke to him again.”

Mateo smiled faintly, looking at her.

“Good.”

“Yeah, obviously,” Galina replied, turning her head to look at him. “He was a disaster.”

Mateo looked down at his phone, nodding.

“I know.”

There was a short, comfortable silence. The kind that doesn't feel awkward when there is familiarity.
Just then, the door opened a bit wider, and Ilya appeared in the frame.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed.

Galina looked up instantly.

“Nothing.”

“Uh-huh.”

Ilya looked at Mateo for a second. Mateo straightened up slightly, unintentionally tense.

“Hi,” he said, somewhat uncomfortably.

“Hi,” Ilya replied, without taking his eyes off him.

The silence lasted a second longer than necessary.
Then, Ilya spoke.

“Leave the door open.”

Galina frowned.

“The door *is* open...”

Ilya looked at the door, which was indeed open, though not completely.

“More open.”

Galina sighed, lifting herself slightly to push it open a bit further with her foot.

“There.”

Ilya nodded once, satisfied.
*“Good... keep it that way,”* he thought, without saying it out loud.
He stayed for one more second, taking in the scene: his daughter on the bed, Mateo on the floor, the closeness, the comfort between them.

Then he straightened up.

“Carry on,” he said, as if he didn't care.

And he left.
The silence lasted barely a second after he disappeared down the hallway.
Galina dropped back onto the bed and let out a laugh.

“He's crazy.”

Mateo looked up.

“Why?”

“Didn't you see how he was looking at us?” she said, amused. “He thinks we like each other or something.”

Mateo felt something tighten in his chest.
He lowered his gaze almost immediately, returning to his phone as if it had suddenly become crucial.

“Yeah...” he whispered. “Crazy.”

Galina kept laughing, oblivious.

“Totally. I mean... it's you.”

Mateo forced a small smile that she didn't even see.

“Right.”

Silence settled in again, but it was no longer the same.
Galina went back to her phone, sending a voice note, laughing to herself about something else.
Mateo stayed still, staring at the screen without really seeing it, because to him, there was nothing crazy about it.

•••

The house was silent when night fully fell. The kids were already in their rooms, everything was calm, and for the first time all day, there were no lists, no decisions, no voices crossing paths.

Shane closed the bedroom door slowly and leaned against it for a few seconds, letting out a long sigh, as if only then could he let everything go.

Ilya was watching him from the bed.
There was something in the way he looked at him—quieter, more intense—that made Shane look up.

“What?” he asked with a tired half-smile.

Ilya didn't answer right away. He simply extended a hand toward him, a simple but clear gesture.
Shane hesitated for barely a second before walking toward the bed.

He sat down first, sideways, looking at him. The silence between them wasn't uncomfortable, but it was loaded with something else, something that had been building up for days.

“You didn't stop today,” Ilya murmured, drawing a little closer.

“I need it to turn out well,” Shane replied, though his voice lacked the firmness it had before.

Ilya looked at him for another second.

“It's already fine.”

Shane lowered his gaze, as if that phrase released something inside him, and in that small moment of stillness, Ilya took his chance.
He moved closer, enough for their knees to brush against each other.

“Come here,” he said softly.

It wasn't a command; it was something gentler.
Shane looked up again, and this time he didn't hesitate. He leaned slightly toward him, closing the remaining distance.

The first contact was slow.
As if both needed to remember each other.
Ilya's hands rested on his waist, firm but unhurried, while Shane rested a hand on his shoulder, anchoring himself there.

“I miss you when you're like this... far away,” Ilya murmured against his mouth.

Shane let out a soft exhale.

“I'm here.”

“Now you are. You're right where I want you.”

The touch returned, a bit more confident. There was no rush, no desperation, but a calmer, deeper need.

Shane gradually relaxed against him, letting Ilya pull him closer, adjusting him as if he knew exactly where he fit.

“You're clingy,” he whispered, though he didn't pull away.

Ilya let out a low laugh.

Shane smiled faintly against his skin, closing his eyes for a second.

Hands began to move with more confidence, tracing each other without haste, finding those familiar gestures that always brought them back together, despite everything.

Shane rested his forehead against Ilya's, breathing close, staying there for a moment.

“Just for a little while,” he whispered, though his tone didn't sound very convincing.

Ilya looked at him.

“Whatever you want.”

•••

Shane had his eyes closed, focused solely on feeling everything.
He could feel Ilya's body over his; his large hand wearing the gold ring pressing his head into the pillows while he fucked him hard, deep, hitting the sweet spot over and over, wringing moans of pleasure from him that choked in the sheets.

Ilya felt sweat dripping down his back and chest.
The rhythmic movement made the cross hanging from his neck sway back and forth as his hand kept holding Shane's head down and his other hand held his body firm, gripping his hip.

Shane didn't know how long they had been at it; he had lost track, and frankly, he didn't care. His mind had drifted away long ago; he didn't care about the preparations anymore, he didn't care about anything. He had even stopped thinking about the sounds: the moans, the gasps, the sound of the bed hitting the wall. Nothing mattered more in that moment than feeling Ilya inside him.

Ilya let his weight fall on top of him and kissed the nape of his neck.
Shane parted his legs wider, and the movement allowed Ilya to slide even deeper, ripping an even more intense groan from him.

Ilya chuckled softly and kissed him again.

“You like it that much, huh?”

“I love it, Ilya.”

Ilya pulled back just enough to turn him over and lay on top of him, face to face.

He penetrated him again while Shane clung to his back, arching slightly as Ilya started thrusting into him again with force.

“Do you like how I fuck you?” he asked near his ear. “Do you like having daddy's dick inside you?”

Shane scratched his back and arched his spine slightly, feeling the intensity of the thrusts.

“I love it, my love, I love it... break me completely.”

Ilya moved even more intensely, but he knew he was close. He thrust a few more times and then pulled out.

He sat up, leaning on the edge of the bed, wrapping his hand around his shaft.
Shane needed no explanation; he crawled across the sheets to position himself right beneath him, ready to receive his future husband's load straight to his face.

Ilya's semen landed on his nose, cheeks, and parts of his lips, which quickly vanished as Shane licked it off without delay.

Exhausted, a short while later, both put on clothes and fell asleep together. The next day would be just as intense as the one before.

•••

Exactly two weeks later, the house was completely transformed.
Warm lights hung in the garden, flowers were arranged with almost obsessive precision, tables were set, and chairs were perfectly aligned.

Everything was in its place, just as Shane had imagined for weeks—too perfect, and that didn't calm him down; it made him worse.

He paced back and forth across the living room with his phone in hand, reviewing the same list for the fifth time. His fingers trembled slightly, and every so often he stopped to look around, as if searching for something out of place.

“The flowers are fine... the table... the music...” he muttered to himself, running through it. “The suit... the rings...”

He ran a hand through his hair, exhaling sharply.

“Everything is fine,” he told himself, though he didn't sound convinced.

On the couch, Galina watched him in silence, her legs crossed and an expression that didn't match the excitement of the moment.

“Everything is *not* fine,” she finally said.

Shane stopped dead in his tracks.

“What?”

Galina looked at him, dead serious.

“I don't know... but something feels off.”

Shane frowned, irritated.

“Gali...”

“Seriously,” she insisted. “I have a bad feeling.”

Heavy silence fell.
Shane closed his eyes for a second, taking a deep breath, trying to hold himself together.

“Don't make me more nervous than I already am,” he answered, his voice tighter than he intended.

Galina didn't move.

“It's not to make you nervous, it's just that...” she hesitated. “Something is wrong.”

Shane looked at her, fixing his gaze more firmly this time.

“What thing?”

She shook her head.

“I don't know.”

That was worse.
Shane dropped his phone onto the table with a dull thud.

“Then don't say anything,” he snapped. “Not today.”

Galina pressed her lips together but didn't respond; she lowered her eyes, crossing her arms.

The silence that followed was awkward and heavy.
From the kitchen, Luka poked his head out, sensing the tension.

“Is everything okay?” he asked cautiously.

“Yes,” Shane answered quickly, way too quickly. “Everything is perfect.”

But it wasn't, because something didn't add up.
Shane checked his watch again, and then again. Ilya should have been there long ago; he had said he would be back early, that he wanted to see him before the wedding, that he wasn't going to leave him alone tonight—the night before one of the most important days of their lives.

Shane grabbed his phone again and looked at the screen.
Nothing. No new messages, no calls.

He dialed. The ring tone sounded once, twice, three times, but Ilya didn't pick up.
Shane hung up, gripping the phone tightly.

“He's probably busy,” he muttered, more to reassure himself than anything else.

Galina looked at him again.

“See?”

Shane looked up abruptly.

“Don't start.”

“I'm not starting anything,” she replied, but her voice was low, insecure. “I'm just saying that...”

She went quiet.
Shane held her gaze for a few seconds, then looked away, unable to handle the fear that was beginning to grow inside him as well.

He looked back at his phone, but there was nothing.

The silence of the house, which before had felt peaceful, now felt different—too big, too empty.

Shane paced a few steps further, not knowing what to do with the anxiety tightening in his chest.

“He's going to come,” he finally said.

But this time he didn't sound sure, and on the couch, Galina pulled her arms tighter around herself, gripped by that feeling that wouldn't go away—because even if she couldn't explain it, she knew something wasn't right.

•••

The port was almost empty at that hour.
Tall floodlights illuminated the shipping containers stacked like silent giants, forming corridors of long shadows and blind spots where the darkness felt denser.
The air carried that metallic, salty smell that was always present in places like that—heavy, almost sticky.

Ilya walked slowly, hands in the pockets of his coat, eyes fixed straight ahead.

Viktor and Sergei followed a few paces behind, alert, as always. Behind them, the rest of his men spread out naturally, taking up positions without needing instructions.

“After this, I'm shutting everything down,” Ilya said without turning around. “I want everything clean.”

Viktor nodded.

“It's almost ready.”

Ilya made a slight grimace.

“'Almost' doesn't cut it.”

His voice was low, but enough.
The group waiting for them was a few meters ahead. The man at the front took a step forward, adjusting his jacket, with a smile that looked far too rehearsed.

“Rozanov,” he greeted, extending a hand.

Ilya didn't even look at it.

“Speak.”

The other man's smile flickered slightly, but didn't disappear.

“Everything is as we agreed: the routes, the movements... nobody interferes, nobody asks questions.”

Ilya observed him in silence for a few seconds. It wasn't what he was saying; it was *how* he was saying it. There was something subtle, almost imperceptible, but it didn't fit.

“And the people?” he asked.

“Controlled.”

“All of them?”

The man hesitated for barely a second, but it was enough. Ilya saw it; Viktor did too.
The air shifted and grew heavier.

“Yes,” the other finally replied.

Ilya didn't break eye contact. The feeling that something was wrong was no longer an intuition: it was a certainty.

Before he could say a word, the first gunshot cut through the air.
The sound echoed off the containers, and in an instant, everything erupted.

“GET DOWN!” Sergei shouted, shoving one of the men.

The shadows filled with movement. Gunfire erupted from the sides, from above, from places they shouldn't have been. It was a perfect ambush.

Ilya reacted instantly. He ducked to the side while drawing his weapon, firing without hesitation. One of the attackers fell before he could finish aiming.

“FALL BACK!” he ordered.

Viktor was already covering him, returning fire with brutal precision. Sergei launched himself against a container, using it for cover while returning fire aimed from the right.
The noise was deafening. Metal struck by bullets, shouting, running footsteps, barked orders.
The man in the suit was no longer smiling. He had retreated, trying to vanish into the chaos.
Ilya spotted him.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered.

He took a step forward and fired.
The guy fell backward, collapsing onto the ground, but Ilya didn't get a chance to confirm anything. A movement to his right caught his attention—too close. He turned, but it was too late; the gunshot went off almost pressed against his body.

The impact was blunt and brutal.
Ilya stood completely still for a second, as if his body couldn't quite comprehend what had just happened.

Then he gasped for air. He lowered his gaze slightly and saw the dark stain expanding across his shirt, right on his chest.

The pain arrived second—intense, deep.

“ILYA!” Viktor's voice pierced through the chaos.

Ilya tried to breathe, but every attempt hurt more than the last. Still, he didn't fall. He kept himself upright, tensing his body, clenching his jaw.

He raised his gun again.

“FINISH THIS!” he ordered, his voice raw but firm.

He fired; one more fell.
The shootout began to die down slowly. The attackers were retreating, the few remaining trying to flee between the containers. Ilya's men didn't let them.

In a matter of seconds, the chaos turned into silence—a heavy, dense silence.
Only distant echoes of gunshots and heavy breathing remained.

Ilya lowered his weapon slowly just as his legs gave out.
Viktor reached him in time to catch him before he hit the ground.

“Don't pass out,” he said firmly, though his voice trembled. “Don't you dare pass out, dammit.”

Ilya tried to focus his eyes, but everything was beginning to blur.

“Tomorrow...” he barely managed to whisper.

Viktor shook his head, holding him tighter.

“You're going to make it. Tomorrow you're getting married.”

Ilya closed his eyes for a second.
Shane's image appeared in his mind with painful clarity. The house, the lights, everything ready, waiting for him.

“Don't tell him...” he tried to say.

But his voice broke; his body stopped responding.
He went limp in Viktor's arms, and this time, he couldn't hold on any longer. The world went dark.

# Chapter 27

The drive to the hospital felt endless.

Shane was in the front passenger seat, holding his phone tightly in his hand with ragged breath, as if he were on the verge of breaking down at any moment.

In the back, Galina and Luka sat in silence, far too still for who they were. Nobody asked anything; nobody dared to.

Viktor's call kept repeating in his mind: "He's hurt."

Nothing else—no details, no explanations.

"He's going to be okay," Shane whispered, more to convince himself than anything else.

Galina looked at him from the back, her eyes wide with fear.

"Did he get shot?" she asked in a low voice.

Shane swallowed hard.

"I don't know, sweetheart."

But he did know, and that was killing him.

When the car pulled up to the hospital, Shane got out before it even came to a complete stop. He walked quickly, almost running, with the kids following closely behind him.

"Where is he?" he asked the moment he walked in, his voice strained.

Viktor appeared from down the hallway.

"Over here."

Shane didn't wait a second longer. He walked straight up to him.

"How is he?"

Viktor hesitated for just a moment.

"He's fine."

Shane froze.

"What?"

"The bullet didn't hit his chest," he explained. "It went through his shoulder. If it had been a little lower…"

He didn’t finish the sentence; he didn’t need to.

Shane closed his eyes for a second, letting out a sharp breath, as if he could only now finally breathe again.

“Can I see him?”

Viktor nodded.

“Yeah.”

Shane moved forward without waiting, pushing open the room’s door.

Ilya was in the bed, his torso bandaged, his arm immobilized, and his skin still pale—but he was conscious. He barely raised his eyes when he saw him enter, and something in his expression shifted.

“Shane…”

He didn’t get to say anything else. Shane crossed the room in two steps and stopped right in front of the bed. He stared at him, as if needing to prove to himself that he was truly okay, and then completely broke down.

“You’re an idiot…” he said, his voice cracking as tears began to fall uncontrollably. “You’re such an idiot.”

Ilya tried to sit up a bit.

“I’m okay…”

“I don’t care!” Shane interrupted him, crying. “I don’t care about anything, I just wanted you to be okay.”

The silence that followed was heavy, but different.

Ilya looked at him, taking in every word.

Galina and Luka appeared at the door at that moment. They stood still, watching the scene, not knowing whether to step inside or not.

Galina was the first to move. She walked slowly up to the bed.

“Are you okay?” she asked, her voice much smaller than usual.

Ilya looked at her and nodded.

“Yes, my love.”

Luka walked over too, staying a bit further back, but without looking away.

“I told you I was going to be here,” Ilya whispered, looking at him.

Luka nodded, swallowing hard.

Shane wiped his tears with the back of his hand, trying to pull himself together, though he couldn't stop staring at him.

"You almost died," he said, softer this time.

Ilya held his gaze.

"No."

"Don't say that," Shane replied immediately. "Don't say that."

Ilya lowered his gaze for a second, as if accepting it.

Then he raised his eyes again.

"Then let's do it now."

Shane frowned.

"What?"

Ilya looked at him intently.

"Let's get married."

The silence was total.

Galina's eyes widened in surprise. Luka looked at Shane, confused.

"Are you crazy?" Shane asked, his voice still trembling.

Ilya shook his head slightly.

"No, we have to get married today."

"We have everything ready… the house, the party, everything," Shane insisted. "And you want to… what? Get married here?"

Ilya didn't hesitate.

"Yes."

Shane looked at him as if he didn't recognize him.

"Why?"

Ilya took a deep, labored breath.

“Because I don’t care about the party,” he said. “I don’t care about any of that.” He paused. “I want to marry you.” His eyes didn't stray from Shane’s. “If I had died this time…” he started, and Shane’s body tensed. “If one day I die…”

“No,” Shane tried to stop him.

But Ilya kept going.

“I want you and the kids to be safe.”

Silence fell once more.

“I want you to be my husband,” he added. “Really, it’s all that matters to me.”

Shane looked at him, completely still.

Tears welled up in his eyes once more.

“You’re out of your mind…” he whispered, shaking his head slightly, unable to stop a smile from breaking through his tears.

Ilya didn’t answer; he just looked at him, waiting.

Shane took a deep, trembling breath.

Then he took a step closer.

“Yes,” he finally said. “Yes, I’ll marry you, right now, whenever you want.”

Galina let out a nervous little laugh.

“Are you seriously going to do this here?”

Luka smiled, his eyes still bright with tears.

Ilya closed his eyes for a second, relieved.

And when he opened them again, there was no doubt left in his gaze: this time, he wasn't going to wait any longer.

•••

The hospital room changed its mood in a matter of minutes.

What was once a cold, white, silent space began to feel different. The lights remained the same, the monitors kept beep-tracking a steady rhythm, but something in the air had transformed. It was no longer just a recovery room; it was the place where something important was about to happen.

Shane stood beside the bed, his eyes still damp, but much calmer. Galina couldn’t stay still: she paced from one side to the other, tidying things that were already tidy, looking at

everyone with a mix of excitement and anxiety. Luka, on the other hand, stayed closer to the bed, watching in silence with a timid smile he couldn't quite hide.

“I can’t believe this is happening here,” Galina whispered, looking around at everything.

“It’s perfect,” Shane replied without hesitation, and this time he truly meant it.

Ilya was sitting up in bed, his arm immobilized and his body still sore, but his gaze was steady and calm. There were no doubts in him.

The officiant arrived shortly after, accompanied by a nurse who didn’t hide his curiosity. Viktor and Sergei were already inside the room, occupying a corner with their imposing presence, though at that moment they seemed almost out of character—attentive, silent.

“Well,” said the officiant, arranging some papers. “It’s not the most conventional setting, but we can proceed.”

Galina let out a short, nervous laugh.

“Definitely not conventional.”

Shane stepped closer to the bed and took Ilya’s hand. Ilya held it firmly, intertwining their fingers as if he needed that contact to anchor himself.

“Ready?” Shane asked in a low voice.

Ilya looked him straight in the eyes.

“Always.”

The officiant began with the formal words, but no one in that room seemed to be paying attention to every exact phrase. What mattered wasn’t the protocol, but what they were saying to each other with their eyes, in the way they held on to one another.

“Do you take…?” the officiant started.

“I do,” Ilya answered without waiting for him to finish.

Galina couldn’t help but laugh.

“He didn’t even let him finish.”

The officiant smiled faintly and nodded, continuing.

“And do you?”

Shane looked at Ilya for a moment longer. His eyes filled up again, but this time it wasn’t from anguish.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I do.”

The silence that followed was brief, but full.

The officiant continued with the rest of the ceremony, maintaining his formal tone, but even he seemed to notice that he was witnessing something special.

When it came time for the rings, Shane pulled his out with slightly trembling hands. Ilya did the same with more difficulty, moving carefully due to the pain, but without taking his eyes off him.

They put the rings on slowly, with a carefulness that made the simple gesture feel massive.

“I now pronounce you married,” the officiant finally said.

Galina was the first to react, clapping enthusiastically.

“Yes!”

Luka joined in, his smile widening.

Shane let out a breathless laugh, still emotional.

Ilya pulled him close as best as he could and kissed him.

When they pulled apart, Shane rested his forehead against Ilya's and closed his eyes for a moment.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Ilya held his gaze.

“I love you more than you could ever imagine.”

The joy that filled the room was different from any big celebration; it was more intimate, more honest. There was no music, no guests, none of what Shane had planned for weeks—and yet, nothing was missing.

As the minutes passed, everything began to settle down.

The officiant left, and so did the nurse. Shane and the kids stayed close to Ilya, settling into this new space they now shared.

Viktor walked out into the hallway in silence, loosening the collar of his shirt slightly as he walked toward the elevator.

When the doors opened, he stepped inside without looking back.

The doors were about to close when a hand stopped them.

It was Sergei, who stepped in beside him without saying a word, and the elevator finally began its descent.

For a few seconds, neither spoke; only the faint humming of the mechanism moving could be heard.

Sergei turned his head and looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

“When is it our turn?”

The question hung in the air, without drama, but with a weight that couldn’t be ignored.

Viktor turned slowly toward him, his brow furrowing slightly.

“Babe, don’t start.”

The tone was automatic, almost a defense mechanism.

But Sergei didn’t smile; he wasn’t saying it as a joke. His gaze was firm, serious, different. After more than twenty years of keeping their relationship hidden, and after what had happened with the boss, marrying the love of his life seemed like the natural thing to do. But he knew what the answer would be, so he said nothing more.

Viktor noticed, and the silence shifted, growing thicker.

Sergei lowered his eyes for a second, as if doubting whether he had said too much, but he didn’t take it back.

Viktor let out a long sigh, and then, without saying another word, he reached out and took his hand.

The gesture was simple, but firm.

“Someday,” he whispered.

Sergei looked up again. He didn’t smile, but he didn’t let go of his hand either, and the elevator continued going down in silence.

•••

The house was far too quiet.

Without Shane and Ilya, the place felt bigger, emptier.

Galina moved through the space with a sense of responsibility that wasn’t entirely natural to her, but she embraced it nonetheless.

Luka was in the living room, sprawled on the floor with toys scattered around, completely focused on building something only he understood.

“Don’t forget to eat dinner later,” Galina told him from the kitchen, leaning out.

“Okay,” he replied without looking up.

Galina went back to what she was doing, absently checking her phone. Every now and then she checked the time. Shane wasn't coming back tonight, just like the past few days, as he was staying at the hospital to care for Ilya. Even though she tried not to dwell on it too much, his absence was felt.

The doorbell rang.

Galina walked to the door and opened it without asking who it was.

"Hey," Mateo said, standing there with his hands in his pockets and his usual slightly slouched posture.

"Hey," she replied, smiling faintly. "Come in."

Mateo entered carefully, waving a hand at Luka in greeting.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Galina replied. "Come on, let's go to the living room."

They sat together on the couch. Galina turned on the TV and put on whatever was on, more to fill the silence than out of any actual interest in watching.

Luka was still on the floor a few feet away, playing quietly, though every so often he'd glance up.

At first, they talked about simple things: school, some teacher, something that had happened that day. Mateo responded, but he was acting strange—quieter than usual, more tense.

Galina noticed.

"What's up with you?" she asked, looking at him sideways.

Mateo shook his head quickly.

"Nothing."

"Come on," she pressed. "I know you."

Mateo bit his lip, staring at the screen for a second as if searching for courage in something that wasn't there.

"Gali…" he started, but went quiet.

She looked at him closer now, more attentive.

"What? Tell me."

Mateo swallowed hard, his hands clenching into fists.

"I…" He took a deep breath. "I have to tell you something."

Galina frowned slightly, confused.

“Okay…”

Mateo wasn’t looking at her; his eyes were fixed on his own hands.

“I like you,” he blurted out, almost rushing the words. “I have for a long time.”

Time seemed to freeze.

The TV was still on, Luka was still playing, but everything faded into the background.

Galina froze completely; she didn’t say anything.

Mateo raised his eyes slowly, meeting her silence.

“I’m sorry,” he added quickly. “I know that… that you don’t… but I needed to say it.”

Galina looked down.

She stayed silent for a few more seconds, processing.

“Mateo…” she began softly.

He shook his head immediately.

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“Yes, I do,” she answered, raising her eyes. “Because I don’t want you thinking the wrong thing.”

Mateo looked at her with a mix of fear and a hope he couldn’t quite maintain.

Galina let out a small sigh.

“I care about you a lot,” she said genuinely. “Really.”

Mateo nodded, as if he already knew what was coming.

“But not like that.”

The silence fell heavy.

“I don’t want a relationship,” she added, lowering her voice. “Not with you.”

Mateo swallowed hard.

“It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay—that much was obvious.

Galina looked at him, hurt, feeling guilty.

“It’s not because there’s anything wrong with you,” she clarified. “It’s… me…”

Mateo let out a small, humorless laugh.

“They always say that.”

“I mean it,” she insisted. “I’m not good at this. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Mateo lowered his gaze again.

“It’s fine,” he whispered. “No big deal.”

He stood up from the couch with somewhat awkward movements.

“I better go.”

“Mateo…” Galina said, sitting up.

“No, seriously,” he stopped her, not looking at her. “Everything’s fine.”

It wasn’t, but he didn’t want to stick around to show it.

He walked toward the door in a hurry, as if staying one second longer was too much to bear.

“See you, Gali. Sorry,” he said before stepping out.

And then he was gone.

The door closed softly, leaving behind an uncomfortable, long silence.

Galina remained standing in the middle of the living room, staring at nothing.

“Why did you do that?” Luka asked from the floor.

She turned her head toward him.

“Do what?”

“Tell him no.”

Galina sighed and sat back down, slower this time.

“Because I don’t feel the same way.”

Luka looked at her, confused.

“But you like spending time with him.”

“I do,” she answered. “I care about him a lot.”

“So…”

Galina shook her head.

“It’s not the same thing.”

Luka frowned.

“I don’t understand.”

Galina rested her elbows on her knees, staring at the floor.

“I’m… not good for him,” she whispered. “I don’t want to hurt him.”

Luka watched her in silence, trying to grasp something that was still beyond his age.

“Hurt him how?”

Galina didn’t answer right away, because even she didn’t fully know how to explain it. She just knew that something inside her didn’t fit with what Mateo felt, and that staying… would only be worse.

Silence settled back over the house, but this time, it wasn’t just because of Shane and Ilya’s absence—it was because of something that had just broken.

•••

The discharge papers came a few days later, when the doctors finally decided Ilya could continue his recovery at home.

Shane didn’t leave his side for a single second throughout the entire process, attentive to every instruction, every detail, as if letting his guard down would cause everything to collapse again.

When they crossed the threshold of the house, Ilya stopped for a brief moment. He looked around the place in silence, as if seeing it differently. Maybe it was because he had come too close to losing it; maybe it was because he now valued it in a new way.

“What are you standing there for?” Shane asked, turning to look at him. “Come on.”

Ilya moved forward without answering. He took only a few steps before Galina appeared from the living room, approaching quickly.

“Finally!” she said, stopping in front of him and looking him up and down. “You still look like a mess, though.”

Ilya let out a faint smile.

“I missed you too, doll.”

Luka appeared behind her, calmer, watching him carefully.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

“A little,” Ilya answered. “But I’m okay.”

Shane didn’t give him time to say anything else. He gently guided him straight to the bedroom, settling him in with almost obsessive precision.

“Sit down,” he ordered.

Ilya obeyed without arguing. He watched him pace back and forth arranging pillows, checking the bandages, making sure everything was in place.

“I’m not an invalid,” Ilya whispered.

Shane looked at him, out of patience.

“You almost died, Ilya.”

Ilya didn’t answer; there was no point.

The next few days repeated themselves with that same dynamic. Shane watched over him constantly: tracking his medication, helping him move, monitoring every gesture.

Ilya let him, watching him closely, because in each of those small acts of care there was something that completely undid him inside, making him love Shane even more.

One night, while Shane was carefully changing his bandage, Ilya spoke up.

“I want us to go away.”

Shane looked up.

“Where?”

“On a trip.”

Shane studied him for a few seconds.

“Right now?”

“When I’m better,” Ilya clarified. “But not alone.”

Shane frowned.

“What do you mean?”

Ilya rested his head against the headboard.

“I want the four of us to be together. We’ve been through a lot… Galina’s stuff, mine… Luka’s…”

Shane froze.

“What about Luka?”

The silence was tiny, but long enough. Ilya looked away, but it was too late.

“What did you do?” Shane asked, crossing his arms.

Ilya sighed.

“Nothing serious…”

“What did you do, Ilya?”

He met his eyes.

“I took care of a problem. It’s what I do.”

Shane held his gaze.

“My God…” he whispered. “Did you send someone?”

Ilya didn’t answer.

Shane ran a hand over his face, in complete disbelief.

“Are you completely insane?”

Ilya tensed slightly.

“Nobody messes with my kids.”

His tone was firm, unwavering.

“They’re kids!” Shane insisted. “Kids!”

“And my son is one of them,” Ilya replied. “And no one touches him.”

The silence turned tense.

Shane walked a few steps away, trying to process what he was feeling.

“You can’t solve everything like this.”

“Yes, I can,” Ilya countered without raising his voice. “And I did.”

Shane stopped and looked at him. He was angry, yes, but there was also something else—something akin to tenderness.

“Don’t do that again,” he finally said.

Ilya didn’t promise anything, but he lowered his eyes, and coming from him, that already said enough.

The tension eased. Shane stepped closer again and finished fixing his bandage gently.

“You’re still a crazy bastard,” he whispered.

Ilya smiled faintly.

“I know.”

Shane shook his head, but a faint smile escaped him anyway.

“About the trip…” he added later. “We can do it.”

Ilya looked up.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Shane answered. “The four of us. It sounds nice.”

Ilya nodded slowly, and something in his expression relaxed.

That night, exhaustion took over; he fell into a deep sleep for the first time in days.

But a soft sound woke him.

He opened his eyes slowly. The room was dimly lit, but not empty—Luka was standing there, right in front of the bed.

Ilya frowned, still half-asleep.

“What are you doing up?”

Luka was looking at him with a seriousness uncommon for him.

“I want you to teach me how to shoot.”

Ilya blinked.

“What for?”

Luka didn’t hesitate.

“To protect Dad, Galina… and you when you get old.”

The silence turned soft.

Ilya looked at him for a few seconds, and something in his expression changed completely.

“Come here,” he whispered.

Luka stepped closer. Ilya lifted his good arm and wrapped it gently around him, pulling him close. Luka let himself be held, resting his head against Ilya's chest.

“Listen to me,” Ilya said in a low voice. “That’s not for right now.”

Luka didn’t answer, but he stayed still.

“When you’re older…” Ilya continued. “If you want to be part of the family…” he said, referring to the mafia crew he led, “…I’ll teach you everything.”

Luka raised his head slightly.

“Really?”

“Really,” Ilya answered. He paused briefly. “But right now, I want you to study.”

Luka frowned.

“Just that?”

Ilya smiled.

“That’s already plenty. It’s more than I ever did.”

Luka thought about it for a second and then nodded.

“Okay.”

He settled back against him.

Ilya closed his eyes slowly, holding him tight. In that moment, despite everything they were and everything they had been through, he felt that for the first time in a long while, he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

# Chapter 28: Extra

The warehouse was silent, but it wasn't a peaceful silence—it was a heavy silence, thick with fear.

The man was on his knees in the center, hands tied behind his back, his breathing ragged.
His face was swollen, a trickle of blood running down the corner of his lip, his eyes glued to the floor, as if looking around would be far worse.

In front of him stood Sergei: motionless, towering.
His boots barely echoed against the concrete as he took a step forward. He wore a dark shirt rolled up at the sleeves, revealing toned arms covered in tattoos and scars.

His thick, dark beard only emphasized the harsh expression on his face.
He slowly crouched down in front of the man.

The guy raised his eyes for barely a second... and broke.

"Please..." he whispered, his voice trembling. "Please... the debt is too much... I can't pay it all at once..."

Sergei watched him in silence, without urgency or any visible emotion.

"I have a family," the man continued, desperate. "Kids... I swear I'll pay, but I need time..."

Sergei tilted his head slightly, as if sizing him up, and then smiled.

"Fine," he said, with a calmness that chilled the blood. "You can pay half in a week... and the rest in installments."

The man blinked, unable to process it.
Then, all at once, hope lit up his face.

"Really?" he asked, almost breathless. "Really?"

"Yes, of course. My boss is a very noble man."

The guy started nodding rapidly, almost crying with relief.

"Yes, yes, thank you... thank you, I swear I'll deliver, I won't fail Mr. Rozanov..."

Sergei looked at him for one more second and then added:

"But I'm taking a finger as compensation."

The silence became absolute.
It took the man a moment to process it.

“What...?” he whispered.

Sergei didn’t repeat himself—he didn’t need to—and the terror rushed right back.

“No, no...” the guy started, shaking his head frantically. “No, please, not that... I’ll pay you, I swear, there’s no need...”

“There is a need,” Sergei interrupted him, with that same unnerving calm.

The man began to weep.

“Please... please...”

Sergei didn’t answer. He stood up slowly, as if none of this affected him in the slightest, and extended his hand without looking.
One of the men off to the side handed him what he needed.
The glint of metal was brief.
The man tried to scramble backward, but he had nowhere to go.

“No, no, no...” he repeated, completely broken.

Sergei crouched back down in front of him. He grabbed his hand firmly, without unnecessary brutality, but leaving no room to move.

“Easy,” he whispered. “It’ll be fast.”

The man screamed before it even happened.
The sound sliced through the warehouse air, followed by a heavy, suffocating silence.

Sergei let go of the hand. The pinky finger remained on the concrete floor—small, almost insignificant compared to everything else.
The man was crying, trembling, utterly destroyed.

“One week,” Sergei said, standing up. “Don’t be late.”

He turned around without looking back.
He walked out of the warehouse as if it were nothing.
Outside, the cold air hit his face. He stood still for a second, breathing it in; it had been another exhausting day.

•••

The apartment was small, almost austere. Pale walls, sparse furniture, everything in order. Nothing unnecessary, nothing extra. It was a place to crash rather than a home, yet it still had something... of its own.

When Sergei unlocked the door, exhaustion weighed heavy on his entire body. He shut it behind him quietly and stood still for a few seconds, leaning his forehead against the wood, taking a deep breath.

It had been a long day—far too long.

He pulled off his gloves with slow movements and walked further inside, slightly rolling his shoulders to loosen up, and then he saw him.

Viktor was sitting on the couch, as if he had been there all along.
Legs spread, elbows resting on them, hands laced together, just as massive as Sergei himself—blonde, with a thick beard that gave him an even more intimidating air.
He looked up the moment Sergei stepped in.

“I didn't know you were sleeping here tonight,” Sergei said in a low voice, still heavy with fatigue.

Viktor shrugged.

“I'll leave if you want.”

Sergei looked at him for another second.

“We’d live together if it were up to me, you know that, Vik,” he finally answered.

Viktor didn’t reply with words. He stood up slowly and walked toward him.

When he was close enough, he raised his hands and, without any hurry, began taking off Sergei's overcoat.
He did it carefully, as if unclasping something fragile, even though he knew full well that Sergei was anything but.

The coat dropped to the side.
Viktor rested his hands on Sergei's shoulders for a moment, evaluating him.

“You’re stressed.”

Sergei let out a short exhale.

“It was a hard day.”

They looked at each other, and as always, Sergei found himself trapped in those blue eyes. There was something in them that undid him in a way nothing else could—something that never changed, no matter how many years passed.

Viktor noticed, offered a faint smile, and leaned in to kiss him.
It wasn’t a rough kiss, but it wasn’t soft either. It was firm, direct, like everything between them—a contact that needed no introduction, that already knew exactly where it belonged.

“I just wanted to see you,” Viktor whispered against his mouth, resting his forehead against his.

Sergei closed his eyes for a second. The weight of the day was still there, but it became much easier to carry.

He wrapped an arm around Viktor's waist, pulling him closer.

“Stay,” he murmured.

Viktor kissed him again, this time with more hunger, deeper. Sergei responded in kind, holding him tight against himself, as if he needed to feel his presence completely.

There was strength in the gesture, but there was also sweetness—there always was.

After a moment, they parted just enough to breathe. Viktor rested a hand on Sergei's chest, feeling his heart still racing.

“Did you eat anything?” he asked.

Sergei shook his head.
Viktor huffed, turning around.

“Sit down.”

Sergei obeyed without arguing. He sank into a chair while Viktor headed to the kitchen. It didn’t take long: something simple, quick, just enough.

They ate in silence, but it wasn’t an empty silence. It was comfortable, the kind that only exists when there is no need to fill the room with words.
Every so often they met each other’s eyes, and that was plenty.

When they finished, Viktor gathered the few things they had used and set them aside. Sergei had already leaned back a bit, eyes closed.

“Come on,” Viktor murmured.

Sergei opened his eyes and looked at him; no further words were needed.
He stood up, and together they walked toward the bedroom.

•••

In the bedroom, the light was dim. The silence was charged with something different now—denser, more intimate.

The moment they lay down, the space between them vanished.
Sergei was the first to reach for him, cupping Viktor's face with a large, rough hand, kissing him with that signature intensity they always shared.
It wasn’t delicate, it wasn’t slow, but it wasn’t mindlessly rough either—it was... them: direct, essential.

Viktor responded the same way, clinging to his neck, pulling him closer, as though no amount of closeness could ever be enough.

Their breathing mingled quickly, bodies coming together with a naturalness born of years together.

Hands began to move without thinking, exploring, peeling away layers.

Sergei pulled off Viktor's shirt, exposing marked skin, tattoos, and scars he knew by heart. Viktor did the same to him, tracing his fingers along Sergei's back as if needing to confirm he was really there.

The kiss grew deeper, more urgent.
Sergei worked his way down, intending to strip away the rest of their clothes, but when his hands reached Viktor's pants, Viktor stopped him.

“Wait,” he whispered, pulling back just a fraction. “I want to show you something.”

Sergei hummed, a half-smile tugging at his lips.

“I already know what you have to show me,” he said, his voice deep and suggestive. “And it’s exactly what I’m looking for.”

Viktor shook his head, the trace of a smile appearing.

“It’s not that.”

He sat up slightly and, keeping his eyes locked on Sergei, pulled down his pants just enough.

Sergei looked down and froze.
Right below the waistband of his boxers, fresh ink sat against the skin.

“Sergei.”

The silence turned heavy, but not uncomfortable.

“Baby...” Sergei whispered, his tone entirely different—lower, more vulnerable than usual.

Viktor leaned back in, resting his forehead against Sergei's.

“I never...” he started, hesitating for a split second. “I never thought I could fall in love with anyone.”

Sergei didn’t break eye contact.

“Least of all with a guy,” Viktor continued, with a faint, humorless chuckle.

“But you did,” Sergei answered softly.

Viktor gave a slight nod.

“But I did.”

He paused, holding him with clear, completely genuine eyes.

“And I want you with me forever.”

Sergei stared at him for another second, as if soaking in every single word. Then he grabbed him by the waist and pulled him in effortlessly, flushing Viktor's body against his own.

Nothing more needed to be said.
The kiss returned—deeper, heavy with everything they didn't need to put into words.

They made love for the rest of the night, just two tough, hardened men who saw and did unthinkable things day in and day out, now finding each other in bed, loving each other the way they had for so many years.

•••

The morning light crept slowly through the window, filtering through the curtains and settling over the messy bed.

Sergei was the first to wake, though he didn't move right away. He had Viktor pressed against his body, breathing peacefully, his head resting on Sergei's chest.
He stayed like that for a few moments, staring at the ceiling, savoring that rare moment of calm that never seemed to last long enough.

He lowered his gaze and watched him.

Viktor opened his eyes shortly after, as if sensing the gaze on him. He blinked a couple of times, shifting slightly against Sergei.

“Good morning, Russian,” he muttered, his voice still deep from sleep.

Sergei didn't answer; he simply leaned down and kissed him.

The kiss was slow, unhurried, completely different from the night before. Softer, sweeter... more everyday.

Viktor smiled faintly against his mouth.

“You have morning breath,” Sergei murmured, pulling back a fraction.

Viktor let out a low laugh.

“So do you.”

“Yeah, but I hide it better.”

Viktor shook his head in amusement and kissed him right back anyway, not caring in the least.

Sergei returned the kiss, holding him steady with a firm hand on the back of his neck.
They stayed like that a bit longer until Sergei pulled away slightly.

“Show me,” he said.

Viktor looked at him, knowing exactly what he meant.

“Again?”

“Again.”

Viktor let out a soft sigh with a faint smile and pulled down his boxers just enough to reveal the tattoo.
Sergei observed it in silence, expression serious.

“If any other son of a bitch gets close to this part of you...” he said, running his fingers near the ink, “...he’s going to see my name.”

Viktor chuckled.

“This part of me has a name... literally.”

Sergei glanced at him sideways, unable to stop a slight smirk from tugging at the corner of his mouth.

He sat up, sliding out of bed with calm movements. Viktor followed him with his eyes for a few seconds.

Then he got up too.
When they stood face to face, Sergei took him by the waist and pulled him close, kissing him once more—brief and firm.

Viktor placed a hand over Sergei's and brought it to his own chest, placing it right over his heart.

“And this part too. In here, it says Sergei all over it,” he said, looking him straight in the eyes.

Sergei held his gaze for a second, stern as always, but something in his eyes softened. He gave a single, firm nod and kissed him again.

Minutes later, they were dressed. Black. Long overcoats. Everything back in place.

The image returned to what it always was: two tough, impenetrable men, with no visible trace of what went on behind closed doors.

They walked out of the apartment together, greeted by the crisp morning air.

“Ready?” Viktor asked.

Sergei lightly adjusted the collar of his coat.

“Always.”

They walked side by side in silence.
Once again, they were who they had always been.

Ilya's bodyguards.
The ones no one wanted to cross paths with.
Yet between them, the love that bound them remained unbreakable.

# Chapter 29

The house was huge, white, and bright, with gigantic windows that let in the ocean light as if it were part of the interior.

Outside, the constant sound of the waves crashing against the shore set a peaceful, almost hypnotic rhythm. Everything was designed to relax, to slow down, but not everyone was managing to do so.

“Can you put the phone down for five minutes?” Shane said, leaning against the counter, looking at Galina.

She was sprawled on one of the couches, legs crossed, her attention completely absorbed by the screen.

“Yeah,” she replied without looking up.

She didn't put it down.
Shane sighed, crossing his arms.

“Gali.”

“What?” she answered, this time with a bit of annoyance, though still not looking at him.

“We're on a trip.”

“I know.”

“Then live the trip a little.”

Galina rolled her eyes, finally looking up.

“I am living,” she said, showing him the phone screen. “I'm talking to Mateo.”

Shane frowned slightly.

“You can talk to Mateo when we get back.”

“No,” she replied firmly. “Because he's available now.”

Shane looked at her for a few seconds, trying not to lose his patience.

“The ocean is available now too,” he pointed outside. “So is your family.”

Galina dropped her head back, exaggerating.

“Oh, please...”

“It's not an 'oh, please,'” Shane insisted. “We came all the way here to be together, not for you to be glued to a screen.”

“I'm not on it all the time,” she defended herself.

Shane raised an eyebrow.
Galina hesitated slightly.

“Well... almost all the time,” she admitted, shrugging.

“Galina...”

“What do you want me to do?” she asked, sitting up. “Sit and stare at the ocean like a retired old lady?”

Shane looked at her, somewhere between indignant and surprised.

“You could, I don't know... talk to us, go outside, take a walk, do something other than that.”

Galina lowered her eyes for a second, uncomfortable.

“I'm talking to Mateo...”

“And that's fine,” Shane said, softening his tone a bit. “But you can't disappear completely.”

The silence grew slightly tense.
Galina didn't answer right away. She looked at her phone, hesitated... and finally set it aside with a sigh.

“Fine,” she muttered. “Done.”

Shane watched her, noting the gesture.

“Thank you.”

“Just don't nag me anymore,” she added.

Shane couldn't help but smile slightly.

“I'll try.”

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, the atmosphere was completely different.
Ilya was standing at the counter with a cutting board and a knife in hand. Luka was next to him, standing on a stool to reach better, focused on his task.

“Like this,” Ilya said, cutting slowly. “Look.”

Luka watched him with absolute attention, as if every movement was crucial.

“Can I try?” he asked.

Ilya hesitated for just a moment, looking at him.

“Be careful.”

He handed him the knife, guiding his hand from above.

“Slowly.”

Luka pressed his lips together, completely focused. The cut turned out crooked, but functional.

“Good,” Ilya said.

Luka smiled proudly.

“Am I good?”

“You manage,” Ilya replied with a faint smile.

Luka looked at him, half offended, half amused.

“I *am* good!”

Ilya set the knife aside and ruffled his hair.

“Yeah, you're good.”

Luka returned to his task, calmer now.
The silence they shared wasn't awkward; it was the kind that filled itself with small gestures and shared glances.

“Do you like it here?” Ilya asked after a while.

Luka nodded.

“Yeah.”

“More than home?”

Luka hesitated.

“It's different.”

Ilya glanced at him out of the corner of his eye.

“Better or worse?”

Luka thought for a second.

“I like it when we're all together.”

Ilya didn't answer right away; he just nodded.

Then he picked up a tomato and placed it in front of him.

“Try this one.”

Luka focused again, sticking his tongue out slightly, the way he did whenever he was concentrating hard.

Ilya watched him in silence. There was something priceless about that moment—no violence, no business, none of the things that filled his life outside. Just this with his son, learning how to slice a tomato, so simple and wonderful all at once.

“When we go back,” Luka said suddenly, “are we gonna keep cooking?”

Ilya looked at him.

“If you want to.”

Luka nodded decisively.

“I want to.”

Ilya rested a hand on his head for a second.

“Then yes.”

From the living room, Galina's voice merged with Shane's, less tense now, lighter. The sound of the ocean remained in the background, constant.

•••

Lunch started well... and didn't last long that way.

The table was set in front of the large windows, with the ocean in the background and bright sunlight pouring in, illuminating everything.
Luka was proud of the food, pointing out everything he had helped make, while Ilya listened to him with a faint smile.

“I cut that,” Luka said, pointing at the salad.

“It shows,” Galina replied without looking up from her phone.

Ilya stared at her.

“Was that a compliment or a critique?”

“A comment,” she answered, typing endlessly.

Shane rested his elbows on the table, watching her with rapidly thinning patience.

“Galina.”

“What?” she answered, still not looking at him.

“Put the phone away.”

“I'm eating.”

“It's not just about eating,” Shane said. “It's about being with your family.”

Galina huffed, uncomfortable, but didn't put the phone down.
Ilya chimed in then, his voice low but firm.

“You're not present here.”

That made Galina look up.

“Oh God, you guys are so annoying.”

“Put it away,” Shane insisted.

There was a moment of tension where it seemed like she wouldn't do it. But finally, she set the phone on the table with an annoyed gesture.

“Fine.”

Silence settled again... until Luka spoke up.

“Mateo said something the other day.”

Galina snapped her head around.

“Luka, shut up.”

But he was already looking at the others.

“What did he say?” Shane asked.

“Nothing,” she tried to cut him off.

“That he likes Galina,” Luka blurted out completely naturally.

The mood shifted immediately.
Ilya set his utensils down slowly.

“What do you mean he likes you?”

Galina closed her eyes for a second, resigned.

“Yeah, he likes me. That's it.”

“And?” Ilya pressed.

“And nothing,” she answered. “Because I told him no.”

“Then why the fuck is he confessing to you?”

“Because I'm his friend!” she snapped. “I didn't do anything!”

Shane intervened quickly before things could escalate further.

“It's normal, Ilya. They're kids.”

“I don't like it,” he muttered, dead serious.

“You don't have to like it,” Shane replied. “It's part of growing up.”

Galina picked up her phone again, this time without asking for permission.

“Whatever, it's over,” she said. “Nothing happened.”

But Ilya didn't look convinced.

Later, the house buzzed with activity as they got ready to head to the beach.

Shane was organizing everything, and Luka followed behind, helping however he could, excited.

Galina was the last to appear, and the second Ilya saw her, he froze.

The bikini was simple, black, completely normal—but to him, it wasn't.

“No,” he said.

Galina frowned.

“What?”

“You're not going out like that.”

“What do you mean?”

Ilya pointed at her.

“Put a T-shirt on.”

Galina looked at him like she couldn't believe it.

“I'm going to the beach...”

“Exactly,” he replied. “I don't want any bastard staring at you.”

“What?!” she exploded.

Shane turned around upon hearing her tone.

“What's going on?”

“Your husband lost his mind,” Galina said.

“Ilya...” Shane started.

“No,” he insisted. “Not like that. People will stare at her.”

“It's a bikini,” Shane said calmly. “She looks fine.”

“It's not fine. Everything is showing.”

“It *is* fine,” he repeated. “It's the beach, and nothing inappropriate is showing.”

Galina crossed her arms.

“I'm not putting anything on.”

Tension filled the room.

“Ilya,” Shane said, firmer now. “It's just a bikini.”

Ilya clenched his jaw, visibly uncomfortable. He looked at Galina, then at Shane.
Finally, he sighed.

“Do whatever you want.”

Galina didn't say a word, but her expression said everything.

•••

At the beach, the sun beat down strongly, and the sea was calm. Shane and Luka set up near the shoreline and began building a sandcastle with total concentration.

“It needs a wall,” Luka explained. “Otherwise, it falls.”

“Perfect,” Shane replied. “We trust the engineer.”

Ilya stood a few yards behind them, watching.
He wasn't looking at the ocean or the people.
Every time someone looked at Galina, he noticed; his posture would tense slightly, his expression hardening.

A guy walked by slower than usual and glanced at her.
Ilya took a step forward. The guy kept walking, but he didn't look back again.
Shane saw it out of the corner of his eye and shook his head.

“Ilya,” he called out.

No answer.

“Honey...”

Ilya finally walked over, though clearly restless.

“Sit down,” Shane said.

“I'm fine standing.”

“Sit down.”

Ilya obeyed reluctantly, and Luka handed him some sand.

“Help, Daddy.”

Ilya looked at the castle.

“That's not going to hold up.”

“Yes, it is!” Luka replied, offended.

Shane smiled.

“Trust us.”

Ilya huffed, but took the sand anyway. Meanwhile, he kept glancing around out of the corner of his eye, ever vigilant, keeping a close watch on Galina as she sunbathed nearby.

Shane watched him for a moment and let out a faint smile. He was impossible, but... he was also just being himself, and Shane loved him for it.

•••

The house was quiet at night.
The sound of the ocean drifted softly through the open windows, filling the space with a constant murmur that seemed to soothe everything.
The kids were already asleep—Galina in her room, and Luka exhausted after a full day in the sun.

Shane was on the bedroom balcony, leaning against the railing, looking out into the darkness of the ocean.
The breeze stirred his hair slightly, and for the first time in days, he seemed truly still, lost in thought.

The door behind him opened quietly.
Ilya stepped in without making a sound and shut it gently behind him.

He didn't say anything; he just walked over to the armchair in the corner of the room and sank into it with a low sigh, stretching out his body, which was still stiff and sore.

He sat there, watching him.
Shane didn't turn around immediately, but he knew he was there.
After a few seconds, he spoke without looking back.

“Are they asleep?”

“Yeah,” Ilya answered. “Luka was out in two minutes.”

Shane smiled faintly.

“He was worn out.”

Silence settled again, but this time it wasn't tense.
Shane finally turned around. He looked at him sprawling in the chair, carrying that signature mix of fatigue and commanding presence he always had, and walked over to him without a word.

When he reached him, Ilya raised his head slightly, following him with his eyes. Shane leaned down and kissed him—a soft, slow kiss at first, as if testing the moment.

Ilya responded immediately, resting a hand on his waist to pull him closer.

The kiss deepened gradually, gaining intensity without losing the calm that came from everything they had been through together.

Shane adjusted his position, sitting down beside him and resting a hand on his shoulder to steady himself as he kissed him. Ilya pulled him closer, firm, as if needing to feel him completely against his body.

They separated just enough to breathe, but didn't pull away entirely.

“I missed you all day,” Ilya murmured in a low voice.

Shane rested his forehead against his.

“I missed you too.”

Ilya kissed him again, this time with more hunger, more insistent, and Shane matched his energy, letting himself go.

Then Ilya wrapped an arm behind his neck and deepened the kiss.
Shane met him with equal fervor, their tongues tangling again and again as the atmosphere slowly turned up the heat between them.

Shane slid a hand down his chest, moving slowly until stopping at the zipper of his pants.
Ilya let out a heavy breath as he felt his husband undo the zipper and slip his fingers around his erect shaft, stroking him gently up and down.

“Fuck...” Ilya whispered against his lips, tightening his hand slightly on the back of Shane's neck.

Shane smiled and opened his eyes.

“You've been behaving so well lately. I want to make you feel good.”

Ilya started to answer, but Shane didn't give him the chance. He leaned down and moved between his legs.
Without stopping the rhythm of his hand, he brought his mouth down, wrapping his lips around the tip.

His tongue stroked slowly down the length, sucking and kissing as he continued to stroke him unhurriedly.

Ilya adjusted his position and pushed his pants down further. Sensing the movement, Shane cupped his testicles, taking them into his mouth as well.

Within minutes, Shane was a mess.
His face was flushed, his lips swollen, and a mixture of his own saliva and Ilya's pre-cum coated his chin down to his jawline. Yet he didn't pull away; he kept sucking with complete focus, entirely dedicated to giving him all the pleasure he knew he could provide.

Ilya's entire body was rigid, his breathing ragged as he tried to keep his quiet gasps under control, aware that the kids were sleeping nearby. But he couldn't help himself—with Shane wrapped around him, feeling the heat and wetness of his tongue everywhere, the hand resting on Shane's head guided his rhythm, and the wet sounds were driving him out of his mind. Before he could finish, Ilya stopped him; he needed this night to last.

He pulled Shane back, kicked off his pants and boxers, and stood up, lifting a breathless Shane by the waist as he did.

They made it to the bed, and Ilya didn't wait a second. He laid him down and stripped off the rest of his clothes quickly before flipping him over, pressing his chest flat against the mattress.

Then he positioned himself between Shane's spread legs and delivered a firm slap to his buttocks.

“Ass up,” he commanded, using that authoritative tone that always sent a surge of heat right through Shane.

Shane spread his legs wider and arched his hips high, pressing his chest deep into the mattress.
Ilya leaned over him, slid his arms behind his thighs, and buried his face into Shane's rear, licking his entrance eagerly.
He dragged his tongue over his rim before working it inside.
As he ate him out, he slicked him with saliva, opening him up little by little.
Shane relaxed into the touch, feeling nothing but his husband devouring him, his tongue

penetrating deeper and deeper, working in and out while slick threads of saliva dripped onto the sheets.

When Ilya finally pulled back, he looked down and smiled proudly, his throbbing erection pressing against the mattress.

“You're so wide open...”

Shane, lost in pure pleasure, pushed his hips back slightly, seeking him out.

“So desperate?”

“Fuck me... don't make me wait any longer.”

Ilya smirked and leaned over him.
He gripped the back of Shane's neck with one hand while using the other to align his dick with his dilated hole, but he held back from pushing in just yet.

“Ask for it.”

“Ilya...”

“Ask for it. Come on, little slut.”

Shane huffed. He could feel the head pressing against his rim without going in, and the sheer frustration drove him crazy.

“Give it to me... give me all of it!”

Ilya didn't keep him waiting any longer.
He slid his length in slowly, driving deep before beginning to move.

The thrusts started slow, but quickly picked up intensity.

Ilya took a firm grip on both sides of his waist to drive into him harder, while Shane dug his fingers into the sheets and bit down on the pillow to muffle his screams.

They came together—Ilya right over his back, right on time, and Shane collapsed into the sheets, his legs trembling uncontrollably as if they had a mind of their own.

Shortly after, they drifted off to sleep together. Shane had wanted to change the messy sheets, but sheer exhaustion wouldn't allow it. It had been an intense day, and the night had been so much more.

# Chapter 30

Two years had passed, and the house felt different in little ways.

Luka wasn't so little anymore, and Galina... Galina was no longer a child. For her, that night held a special kind of magic: she was going out dancing for the very first time.

Her bedroom was absolute chaos—clothes scattered everywhere, the closet doors thrown open, shoes tossed on the floor. Galina stood in front of the mirror, trying on outfit after outfit with a mixture of excitement and frustration.

"I have nothing to wear," she complained, eyeing her reflection.

Shane, sitting on the edge of the bed, watched her with a suppressed smile.

"Your entire closet is full, you have another one downstairs, and you have the card your dad gave you in case you want anything else. Galina, for god's sake."

"Nothing that works," she insisted.

She turned toward him wearing a tight top and a very short skirt—almost too short.

"What about this?"

Shane looked at her closely.

"It looks good on you."

Galina checked her reflection again, adjusting the fabric over her hips. For a second, she liked it... but then her face fell.

"Dad is going to kill me."

Shane let out a low laugh.

"Yeah... that's also true."

Galina dropped into her chair with an exaggerated sigh.

"I can't believe I'm sixteen and I still can't dress how I want."

"You can dress how you want," Shane replied calmly. "The problem is your father."

"Exactly," she said, throwing her hands up. "He's so dramatic."

Shane stood up and walked over to the closet, beginning to search through it with much more patience than she had.

"It has to be something you like... that won't give him a heart attack."

"Impossible," Galina muttered.

After a few seconds, Shane pulled out a black skirt—a little bit longer—and handed it to her.

"Try this one."

Galina looked at it suspiciously.

"It's so long. I'm going to look like a nun."

"Try it anyway. I want to check something."

Huffing, she changed quickly. When she looked back in the mirror, it wasn't bad... but it wasn't quite what she wanted either.

Shane stepped up behind her, observing her in silence.

Then, without saying a word, he hitched the skirt up a little higher on her waist, shortening it with a simple adjustment.

Galina met his eyes in the reflection.

"Oh..."

Shane smiled.

"See?"

She turned around, inspecting herself from every angle.

"You're a genius."

Positioned like that, the skirt remained "decent"... but it had a completely different vibe.

"When you leave the house, it stays like this," Shane clarified casually. "When you get there..."

Galina smiled, sharing the secret.

"I pull it up."

"Exactly. If Ilya ever finds out I taught you that, he'll stop talking to me, so it's our secret."

They locked eyes for a moment, both breaking into soft giggles.

"We're terrible," she whispered.

"We're smart," Shane corrected.

Galina returned to the mirror, fixing her hair with much more ease now.

"Thanks, Dad."

Shane leaned against the wall, watching her. He still remembered the moment he found out he was pregnant with her; he remembered the fear, and how deeply attached he had been to her before even meeting her. Galina had saved his life without a doubt.

"Are you nervous?"

She hesitated for a split second.

"A little."

"That's normal."

Galina lowered her gaze, fidgeting with the hem of her skirt.

"What if something happens?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know... creepy people, guys... things."

Shane stepped closer and gently held her face so she would look at him.

"You know how to take care of yourself. If something doesn't feel right, you leave. If someone makes you uncomfortable, you put a stop to it. And if you need anything, you call us."

Galina nodded.

"And Dad?"

Shane offered a faint smile.

"We can handle your father."

She let out a laugh.

"Poor guy..."

"No, not 'poor guy,'" Shane answered. "He's unbearable."

Just then, footsteps echoed down the hallway, and both froze.

Galina looked at Shane.

"Is he coming?"

"Probably."

In a matter of seconds, Galina smoothed her skirt down into a far more "decent" version. Shane crossed his arms, looking solemn as if nothing had happened.

The door swung open, and Ilya appeared.

He looked at Shane first, then at Galina.

A brief silence settled over the room as he evaluated everything.

"Is that how you're going out?" he asked.

Galina gave a small shrug.

"Yeah."

Ilya studied her for a few seconds more—the skirt, the top, the entire outfit.

Finally, he nodded.

"Fine... come on, I'll drive you."

Shane hid a smile. Galina did too.

Ilya lingered for another second, still clearly suspicious, but he didn't say anything else. He turned around and walked out.

The door closed.

The silence lasted barely an instant before Galina and Shane looked at each other... and burst out laughing.

"I can't believe that worked," she whispered.

"Told you," Shane replied. "Your dad is easy to handle."

Galina turned back to the mirror, lightly adjusting her clothes.

"As soon as I get inside..."

"You pull it up... but not too much, either."

"Obviously not."

They exchanged another knowing look.

And this time, behind Galina's smile was something more than just mischief—there was excitement. Because she wasn't a little girl anymore, and tonight... was the start of something new.

•••

The car was parked outside the club, heavy bass notes vibrating through the doors from inside.

Colorful lights flashed through the entrance every time someone stepped in or out, and a group of teenagers were laughing on the sidewalk.

Galina stared out the window, trying to hide a mixture of anxiety and excitement.

Ilya, on the other hand, wasn't hiding a thing.

"I don't like it," he said, staring at the entrance with a deep frown.

Galina sighed, already exhausted.

"You've said that ten times already."

"And I'm going to say it an eleventh."

She turned her head to look at him.

"It's a club, Dad, not a cave."

"To me, it's the same thing."

"It's not."

Ilya rested a tight hand on the steering wheel.

"I'm going in with you."

Galina stared at him as if he had just said something completely insane.

"No..."

"Yes, Galina."

"No," she repeated, firmer this time. "I'm not letting you do that in a million years."

"I want to see the place."

"You're not going to see anything. You're going to ruin my life."

Ilya huffed.

"Dramatic."

"Dramatic?!" she snapped. "Can you imagine walking in with me? Everyone looking at you? Nobody would ever talk to me again!"

Ilya looked at her, completely serious.

"I don't give a fuck what they think."

"Well, I do," Galina answered. "It's my first time going out. Don't do this to me."

A short, tense silence fell between them.

Ilya watched her, sizing her up. There was something in her expression... it wasn't just defiance. It was nerves, anticipation, eagerness... growth. And he didn't like it one bit.

"I don't like it," he repeated, his voice lower.

Galina softened her tone just a fraction.

"I know." They locked eyes for a second. "But I need you to trust me," she added.

Ilya didn't answer right away. He clenched his jaw, visibly uncomfortable.

"I'm staying right here," he finally said.

"You don't have to."

"I do. I'm staying here."

Galina rolled her eyes, but she didn't argue further. She knew that was the absolute most he was going to yield.

•••

Galina got out of the car and shut the door.

She walked toward the entrance without looking back, blending into the crowd with that slightly rehearsed confidence that people put on for their first time out.

When she reached the doors, she hesitated for barely a second... and stepped inside.

Ilya stayed put, watching the doors close behind her.

The muffled thud of the club's music faded back into the background, and the silence inside the car grew heavy.

A few seconds passed, maybe a minute.

Ilya rested his head against the headrest, closing his eyes for a moment.

Then he pulled out his phone, dialed a number, and waited.

"Yeah?" a voice answered on the other end.

"Sergei," Ilya said, his voice low and firm. "She just went inside."

He paused briefly.

"Keep a close eye on her."

There were no questions from the other end.

"Yes, boss."

Ilya hung up, set the phone on the passenger seat, and stared back at the club entrance, expression stern.

He wasn't going inside, but he wasn't going to stop protecting her either.

•••

Inside, the club was a world of its own.

Intense, flashing lights cut through the dark, the bass hit hard against your chest, and people moved continuously—packed together, laughing, shouting to be heard over the music.

The air was hot and thick, and everything felt like it was moving too fast.

Galina met up with her friends, trying to act cool, though her heart was pounding in her chest.

The second she passed through the entrance, with an automatic gesture, she hitched her skirt up a little higher.

"Now we're talking," one of her friends laughed.

Galina smiled.

They moved onto the dance floor—a bit awkward at first, then letting go.

The music gradually swallowed them up, and slowly, Galina stopped overthinking. She started laughing for real, moving without inhibition, feeling like a real part of everything she had waited so long for.

For a little while, she forgot about everything—until she saw him.

Mateo was standing on the other side, leaning against a wall with a few other guys.

Taller, broader, different... yet still the same.

When their eyes met, he smiled.

Galina froze for half a second.

Mateo gave a subtle nod, silently asking if he could come over.

She didn't hesitate and walked straight toward him.

They met in the middle of the music, the crowd, the noise... but in that single moment, everything else faded into the background.

"Hey," Mateo said, a smile mixing nerves and pure happiness.

"Hey," she answered.

They looked at each other for a second, and without hesitation, without extra words, they kissed.

It was a direct kiss, filled with built-up desire, carrying the gentle urgency of something that had been growing between them for a long time. It wasn't awkward or hesitant; it was confident, natural. The truth was, they had been officially together for a couple of months.

When they pulled back, both smiled, and almost without realizing it, their fingers intertwined.

A few meters away, in a darker corner, two figures watched.

Sergei was leaning against a pillar, arms crossed, completely motionless. Viktor stood beside him, scanning the venue, taking everything in.

Both had seen the exact same thing.

"We should tell Ilya about this," Sergei said without breaking his gaze.

Viktor didn't budge.

"No."

Sergei turned his head slightly toward him.

"He'll kill us if we don't."

Viktor exhaled slowly.

"He'll kill us anyway. I wish you'd stop being so in love with Ilya."

Sergei laughed.

"Are you jealous now?"

Viktor clicked his tongue.

"I'm not in love with him, nor do I admire him. I just want to do my job."

Sergei looked back toward the dance floor, where Galina and Mateo were talking and laughing, completely oblivious to the world around them.

"I don't like it," he muttered.

"Don't like what?" Viktor asked.

"This."

Viktor tilted his head slightly.

"She's sixteen years old, Sergei. So is he. I don't see what's wrong with this. It's not our problem."

"We get paid to make it our problem," Sergei replied.

Viktor glanced at him sideways.

"We get paid to keep her safe." He paused briefly. "Not to decide who she kisses."

Sergei didn't answer right away. He kept his eyes on the scene: Galina laughing, Mateo looking at her as if nobody else existed in the room.

"How long are we going to do this?" Viktor asked after a moment. "Stalking her?"

Sergei frowned.

"It's work."

"It's not normal."

"Nothing we do is normal."

That drew a faint smirk from Viktor.

"Good point."

Silence fell between them again—heavy, but calm.

"Still..." Sergei murmured. "If Ilya finds out..."

"He won't find out," Viktor cut in.

Sergei looked at him, and Viktor held his gaze, steady.

"Not tonight. That girl needs to live a little."

A beat of hesitation passed.

Then Sergei gave a slight nod, refocusing on Galina without stepping in, but without letting his guard down for a single second.

•••

The night was turning out perfect.

Galina was laughing with Mateo, dancing close to him, leaning in to whisper in his ear so he could hear her over the music.

Everything felt light, effortless.

He looked at her with a mix of affection and admiration that made her feel good, and every now and then, their hands drifted together naturally, as if that was how it had always been.

For a while, the world was reduced to just that—until she saw them.

First came an uncomfortable feeling, as if eyes were glued to her back.

She turned her head casually... and there he was. Viktor, standing tall and solemn, carrying that unmissable presence.

Beside him stood Sergei, just as motionless, just as obvious to anyone who knew them.

Her heart hit a sudden drop.

"What's wrong?" Mateo asked, noticing the shift.

But Galina was already somewhere else.

Fury surged through her all at once—hot, immediate.

She pulled her hand from his without an explanation and marched straight toward them, cutting through the crowd without looking at anyone, planting herself right in front of Viktor with eyes burning with rage.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, making no effort to hide her anger.

Viktor looked down at her with that unshakeable calm he always possessed.

"Miss Galina..."

"Don't call me that," she cut him off, tense. "What are you doing here?"

Sergei spoke up then, his tone neutral.

"He's just worried."

Galina let out a short, humorless laugh.

"Worried? Sending you two is being 'worried'?"

Neither answered. They didn't need to.

She clenched her jaw, feeling outrage burn in her chest.

"You're sick," she whispered.

Without waiting for a response, she spun around and walked out of the club.

She shoved the door open hard, and the crisp night air hit her face, but it wasn't enough to cool her down.

She knew exactly where he was.

She walked quickly to the car and yanked the door open with force.

She climbed in without looking at Ilya.

He turned his head toward her, surprised.

"What happened?"

Galina looked at him, incredulous.

"What happened? You're seriously asking me that?"

Ilya frowned.

"Galina..."

"Did you send Viktor and Sergei?" she interrupted.

The silence was answer enough.

"It's not normal for you to do this," she said, her voice dripping with rage.

Ilya gripped the steering wheel tighter.

"I just want to protect you."

"Protect me from what?" she snapped, raising her voice. "From dancing? From hanging out with people my age? From living?!"

"You don't know the kind of people in there," he said firmly.

"And you don't know what it's like to be me!" Galina shot back. "Let me be a normal teenager!"

Tension stretched thick between them. Ilya was breathing heavily, clearly torn between what he felt and what he was trying to control.

"I can't stop protecting you," he finally whispered.

Galina looked at him. The anger was still there, but it was no longer the only thing she felt.

She shifted closer and, in an unexpected gesture, took his face gently between her hands.

Ilya froze, surprised, forced to hold her gaze.

"Listen to me," she said, softer now. "I know I didn't handle things right in the past."

Ilya didn't look away.

"But I learned," she continued. "I'm not doing anything wrong, I don't trust people easily, I know how to defend myself... because you taught me."

Her voice dropped a notch lower.

"I just need a little room to breathe."

Ilya searched her eyes, processing every single word.

"You're my baby girl..." he murmured.

Galina smiled faintly, with warmth.

"Yes, I am." She paused briefly, without letting go of his face. "But I'm also an independent human being, and I need to grow up, Dad."

Ilya closed his eyes for a second, as if it pained him to accept it. When he opened them, something in his expression had softened. The tension was still there, but so was understanding.

He gave a slow nod.

"Alright."

Galina watched him, seeking confirmation.

"Really?"

Ilya exhaled.

"Really."

She gently released his face, visibly relieved.

The silence inside the car lingered, but the weight of it had changed.

The tension had drained away, replaced by something deeper, harder to name. Ilya was still looking at her, as if trying to digest everything he had just heard—everything involved in loosening his grip.

Then he looked past her and spotted him.

Mateo was standing near the club doors, still, looking toward the car.

He wasn't stepping closer or making any intrusive gestures, but he was there, waiting.

His posture said it all: he didn't want to interrupt, but he wasn't going to leave without knowing if she was okay.

Ilya looked back at Galina.

"He..." he started, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Galina followed his gaze and let out a quiet sigh. She didn't look surprised—more like she was resigned to the fact that this moment was inevitable.

"We're... testing the waters," she said carefully.

Ilya gave a faint frown.

"Testing the waters?"

Galina adjusted herself in her seat, searching for the right words.

"Yeah. It's not like... super official yet, but... we care about each other."

The words hung in the air between them.

Ilya felt a tightness in his chest. It wasn't just jealousy or anger; it was something more complex, quieter. He knew Mateo, had watched him grow up alongside his daughter, knew what kind of person he was. Deep down—very deep down—he knew he wasn't a bad kid. But that didn't make accepting it any easier.

He sat in silence for a few seconds, staring at the steering wheel, taking a deep breath. It was as if he were fighting a battle with a part of himself that wanted to react, forbid it, control it.

When he looked back at her, his expression had shifted slightly. He wasn't happy, but he wasn't angry either—just... tired of fighting against the inevitable.

He gave a small, subtle nod, but that was enough.

Galina looked at him in surprise, as though she hadn't expected such a restrained reaction.

"Thank you," she whispered softly.

She leaned in and kissed his cheek affectionately.

"I love you."

Ilya placed a hand on her arm for a brief moment.

"I love you too."

Galina smiled, at peace now, and opened the door. Before stepping out, she instinctively adjusted her skirt and got out of the car.

Ilya stayed inside.

Watching.

Mateo saw her approaching, and his expression transformed instantly into pure relief.

Galina reached him and, without hesitating, kissed him.

They talked for a second, laughed, and then walked back into the club together.

Ilya didn't look away for even a second.

He sat there, hands gripping the wheel, feeling a strange emptiness—not entirely sadness, but not something easy to accept either. Because his little girl wasn't a little girl anymore, and even if it hurt in a place he couldn't quite explain, he knew this was exactly how it had to be.

•••

The house was quiet when Ilya returned.

The car engine shut off, and for a moment, he remained seated without moving, hands still resting on the wheel.

The image of Galina walking away, laughing with Mateo, stepping back into the club... kept running through his mind.

He let out a slow exhale and got out.

He walked inside quietly, as if trying not to disturb the calm inside.

He shut the door carefully and moved down the hallway, slipping off his jacket along the way.

His first stop was automatic: Luka's room.

He pushed the door open just enough to peek inside. The dim night light illuminated the quiet, orderly room.

Luka wasn't that small anymore—his longer frame in the bed made that clear—but there was still something about the way he slept that remained entirely childlike.

Ilya stepped inside quietly, walked over to the bed, and stood watching him for a few moments. Luka was sound asleep, hugging his pillow, breathing steadily.

Ilya leaned down slightly and ran a hand through his hair with a gentleness reserved for no other moment in his life.

"Sleep well," he barely whispered.

He lingered a second longer... then stepped back out, closing the door with care.

The hallway returned to silence, and Ilya walked toward his master bedroom.

He opened the door slowly, making no sound. The lights were off, but the faint glow from outside was enough to see by. Shane was in bed, lying on his side, wrapped in the sheets.

Ilya watched him from the doorway.

For a moment, everything else felt miles away.

He allowed himself that quiet sanctuary, that simple picture: his home, his partner, his children... everything in its place.

He pushed the door open a little further to step in, and then he caught a tiny whimper.

He hesitated for a fraction of a second... and instead of moving forward, he took a step back.

He pulled the door shut with the exact same care he had used to open it, returning to the quiet hallway.

He walked down the hall once more, reaching the very last room, and gently opened the door.

The scene greeted him instantly.

Nadezhda was standing in her crib, clutching the wooden bars with her tiny hands, shifting restlessly.

Her soft, curly blonde hair tumbled messily around her face, and her bright blue eyes shone in the dark.

When she spotted him, she made a quiet little sound.

Ilya closed the door behind him and walked over to her without rushing.

He reached down and lifted her carefully into his arms.

The baby immediately settled against his shoulder, fitting against him as though it were her natural place.

Her tiny hands gripped the fabric of his shirt, and her restless breathing began to steady.

Ilya held her securely, yet gently, swaying back and forth slightly.

"You're never going to leave Daddy, right?" he whispered softly.

Nadezhda didn't understand the words, but she understood the tone. She snuggled deeper against him, resting her cheek against his neck.

Ilya closed his eyes for a moment, resting his face against her head.

The movement of his body slowed to a steady, rhythmic sway, rocking her with a patience that seemed bottomless. Bit by bit, the little girl's tension melted away. Her fingers loosened their grip on his shirt, and her breathing grew deep and even as she drifted off to sleep.

Ilya looked down, lowering his head slightly to get a better look at her—that small, peaceful face, completely untouched by the world outside.

Nadezhda had arrived nine months ago. She had been completely unexpected, but deeply loved by her parents and older siblings.

"Don't grow up so fast... please," he whispered.

But even as he said it, he knew he couldn't stop it—no one could. Still, he held her a little longer, as if that simple gesture could, if only for a second, make time stand still.

# Chapter 31

~a few years later~

The study was in dim light, barely illuminated by the glow entering through the enormous window that opened to the garden.

Outside, everything was in motion: hanging lights turning on one by one, decorated tables, people walking back and forth finalizing details.
The music was still soft, barely a background hum, but the atmosphere of celebration was already building, taking shape.

The party was ready, the long-awaited wedding.

Ilya stood motionless in front of the glass, wearing an impeccable suit that tailored his frame.

He held a cigarette between his fingers, smoking slowly, letting the smoke dissolve into the air.

His eyes weren't truly on the party; they were far away.
He let out a faint sigh and rested a hand on the window frame. There was something heavy in his chest, a mixture of pride and sorrow that he couldn't quite untangle.
He was resigned, but also... it hurt.

A soft knock at the door pulled him from his thoughts.
He didn't answer right away, but the knock repeated, a bit firmer.

"Come in," he finally said, without turning around.

The door opened.
Ilya stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray and only then turned around.

Upon seeing her, he froze.
Galina stood on the threshold in a wedding dress.

The dress fell perfectly over her body—elegant, delicate, with details that caught the light in a soft glow.
Her makeup was subtle, highlighting just enough.
Her hair, carefully styled, fell in neat waves... except for that tiny streak dyed blue that broke the perfection in a way that was so distinctly hers.

Ilya looked at her, and for a second, he didn't see the woman. He saw the little girl—the one who ran through the house, the one who hid behind him, the one who followed him everywhere with those exact same eyes.

He swallowed hard and forced himself to focus, to see her for what she was now: a woman, his daughter.

Galina watched him in silence, with a soft smile loaded with deep emotion. She walked toward him slowly, as if afraid to break the moment.

"Are you coming down?" she asked, with a voice that was no longer a child's, but would always sound familiar to him. "I need you, okay?"

Ilya followed her with his eyes as she approached.
He didn't answer right away; his eyes took in every detail: the dress, her hands, the makeup... her hair... that blue streak.

Her blue streak.

"I'm coming down," he finally said, his voice lower than usual.

Galina stopped in front of him, close enough to feel his presence.
She locked eyes with him, smiled a bit wider, and rested a hand on his chest, right where his heart was beating fast.

"I'm happy, you know?"

Ilya looked at her, and something in his expression softened.
He gave a slow nod.

"Mateo is a good man," she added.

Ilya let out a tiny, barely visible smile.

"He better be."

Galina let out a soft laugh, but didn't break eye contact.

"I want you to be happy for me."

Ilya held her gaze for several seconds. It wasn't easy; there was too much inside him: fear, pride, love, loss... all tangled together.

But there was clarity, too.
He took a deep breath, and when he spoke, his voice was firm and sincere.

"Your siblings' happiness... and yours... will always be mine."

Galina looked at him as if she needed to hear those exact words.
Her eyes glistened faintly, and without saying anything else, she wrapped her arms around him.

Ilya responded immediately, pulling her close, holding her with a contained strength, as if trying to hold onto a piece of that moment.

He rested his face against her head and closed his eyes—because there, in that embrace, was everything.

The thing.
The little girl.
The woman.
And everything in between.

Galina didn't pull away immediately as the hug began to loosen. In fact, she held him for another second, clinging to him as if she were still that little girl from before. When she finally stepped back, she shook her head softly.

"Actually, Dad... I came to ask you for something."

Ilya frowned, bewildered.

"Galina, I paid for absolutely everything. As soon as I walk you down the aisle, it's Mateo's turn to..."

She let out a soft laugh and shook her head again, cutting him off.

"It's not that."

She looked at him with a mix of nerves and excitement, lowering her gaze toward her own dress.

"I have... something new," she said, carefully touching the fabric. "Something old..." She raised a hand and showed small earrings. "These were mine when I was little."

Ilya recognized them immediately; he had seen them on those tiny ears so many years ago that it felt like another lifetime.
Galina smiled faintly, almost shyly.

"Something blue..." she added, running her fingers over the dyed streak falling through her perfectly styled hair.

She paused briefly before continuing.

"And I'm missing something borrowed. I thought maybe... I don't know, a ring or..."

Ilya automatically looked down at his hands. The rings he wore were not something he wanted to lend her—not out of selfishness, but because none of them held that kind of meaning.
He gave a slow shake of his head.

"No."

Galina nodded, as if understanding, without pressing further.
But then he did something that caught her by surprise.

He reached up to his neck.
The gold cross he always wore glinted faintly as he took it between his fingers.

For a second he stayed like that, holding it, as if lost in thought.
Then he unclasped it.

"I don't know if this fits the rule," he said, looking at her. "Because actually... I want you to have it."

Galina frowned immediately, surprised.

"No... it's yours..."

Ilya shook his head gently, stepping closer.

"I told you once that it would be yours someday." His eyes softened just a fraction. "This is the moment."

Galina looked at him in silence, processing what that meant. It wasn't just an object. It was a piece of him—something that had always been there.
Something important, and now... he was giving it to her.

A smile slowly spread across her face, heavy with emotion.

She didn't say no a second time; she just stood still.

Ilya moved behind her with a gentleness that contrasted with everything he was, placing the chain around her neck. His fingers brushed against her skin as he fastened it.

Galina closed her eyes for a second.
When he finished, she brought her hand to the cross, touching it carefully, as if needing to make sure it was really there.

Ilya looked at her, and in that simple gesture... there was something definitive, as if, in some way, he were letting her go while still standing beside her.

Galina turned back to face him, the smile still there, softer now.

•••

The party was at its liveliest point.

The garden of the house had been completely transformed, illuminated by garlands of warm lights hanging between the trees, casting soft reflections onto the elegant tables.
The music echoed ambiently—not too loud, just enough to set the rhythm for a night that seemed to refuse to end.

People were laughing, toasting, moving through intersecting conversations. There were flowers everywhere, crystal glasses, and that constant hum of celebration that made everything feel lighter.

At the center of it all were them.
Galina and Mateo, now married.

She was still in her pristine dress, though her hair was slightly looser, more natural, as if the night had gently undone the formality.

Mateo was beside her, jacket unbuttoned, tie loosened, looking at her as if he still couldn't entirely believe it.
They were laughing continuously between themselves, as though the world around them were merely a backdrop.

"I can't believe all of this is already over," Mateo said, gripping her hand tightly.

Galina looked at him with a wide, genuine smile.

"It's not over," she replied. "It's just beginning."

He looked at her as if those words had shifted something inside him, and without thinking too much, pulled her a little closer.

Galina didn't resist; she let herself be drawn in, resting a hand on his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his breathing.

"You're incredible," Mateo whispered.

"You're the one who went through with all of this," she answered, amused.

They both laughed softly, as if sharing a secret.

A few meters away, people continued to celebrate, but they were in a world of their own.

Every so often, someone would congratulate them, hug them, or take photos, and they would respond with wide, tired, and happy smiles all at once.

Galina looked around for a second, as if searching for something in the crowd.
She didn't say it out loud, but she knew exactly where Ilya was. When she spotted him not far from the dance floor, watching her in silence, her expression softened even further.

Mateo followed her gaze.

"Is he okay?" he asked softly.

Galina nodded.

"Yeah." She moved a little closer to him and rested her head on his shoulder, at peace. "He's acting strange, but... he's fine... Not like yours."

Both looked over at Hayden, who was completely broken down in tears.

They shared a little laugh and stayed like that—together, as if no one else existed, because on that night, that was truly how it felt.

•••

The party raged on, filled with laughter, music, and constant movement under the warm lights of the garden.
Amid the adults chatting and toasting, there was also a chaotic energy from the kids that gave everything a livelier, more playful feel.

Nadezhda, barely six years old, was running barefoot across the grass as if the entire world belonged to her.
Her light dress fluttered with every step, and her curly blonde hair—just like when she was a baby—bounced as she dodged the other children playing with her.
She laughed loudly, shamelessly, completely free, as if the night had no limits.

"Faster!" she yelled, leading an impromptu race amid laughter and shouts.

She stopped for just a second to catch her breath, looked around with bright eyes, and darted off again, weaving between the legs of adults and decorated tables.

Not far away, Luka observed the scene, leaning against one of the garden pillars.
He was eighteen now, and it was impossible not to notice him.
Not just because of his height or commanding presence, but because of something deeper: the way he looked at things, his posture, even the quiet way he moved.
He was practically a younger version of Ilya—same serious expression, same restrained air, as if carrying the weight of the world without needing to say a word.

Ilya, watching him from afar, lingered his gaze a second longer than usual. There was something surreal about that image: seeing his son so grown, so much like him, so far from the boy who used to sleep in his arms.

Luka caught his eye and walked over.

"Everything's fine," he said simply, as if reading his father's mind.

Ilya gave a faint nod.

"You look too much like me," he murmured, almost unintentionally.

Luka looked at him for a second—serious, but completely comfortable.

"So they say."

There was no complaint in his voice, nor exaggerated pride—just a calm acceptance of the inevitable.

A few meters away, Nadezhda ran past again, laughing heartily, chasing another child who pursued her with equal energy. She paused just long enough to turn and glance over at them. When she saw Luka, she raised her hand enthusiastically.

"Luka! Come on!"

He didn't move immediately, but his expression softened just a bit. After a beat, he began walking toward her.

Ilya kept his eyes on them.

Luka joined the group of children effortlessly, and within seconds he was fully in the game, crouching down to match their height, participating without losing his signature calm demeanor.

Nadezhda took him by the hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world and kept running.

Ilya watched the scene in silence.
The little girl laughing endlessly.
The son who was his reflection.
The house filled with life all around them.

Shane stepped up beside him at that moment, noticing his gaze.

"You look very serious," he whispered.

Ilya didn't take his eyes off the garden.

"I'm just watching them," he replied.

Shane followed his gaze as well and smiled softly.

"They're okay."

Ilya nodded slowly.

"Yeah."

And for the first time all night, he didn't say anything else; he just stood there, watching his family run, laugh, and continue to grow under the party lights.

•••

In another area of the party, amid the crowd, Sergei leaned against one of the tables in his usual rigid posture, watching the general commotion as if he were still on duty.

Beside him, Viktor remained just as calm and quiet, hands in his pockets, eyes fixed on the garden.

Despite standing together, there was something unsaid between them.
Sergei glanced out of the corner of his eye toward the makeshift dance floor where a few couples were slow dancing.
He wanted to say something, but held back.
He looked back at Viktor, then looked away, as if inwardly chiding himself for even entertaining the thought.

Viktor noticed, as he always did.

"You're restless," he said, without looking directly at him.

Sergei let out a faint huff.

"I'm fine."

But he wasn't entirely fine.
Viktor turned his head toward him, observing him with that characteristic composure. He didn't push or ask further; he just looked at him as if reading him like a book.

"Let's go," Viktor finally said.

Sergei frowned.

"Where?"

Viktor didn't answer with words; he simply extended his hand.

Sergei stayed still for a second, as if he couldn't quite believe it. His eyes lowered to that hand, and for a moment his harsh expression broke just enough to reveal something vulnerable.

"You don't have to," Sergei murmured.

"Yes, I do," Viktor replied simply.

The silence between them stretched for one more second.
Then, Sergei released a quiet breath and took his hand.

Viktor led him toward the center of the garden naturally, unhurriedly, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.
The music enveloped them softly, and when they reached an open space beneath the lights, Viktor turned slightly and pulled him a little closer.

Sergei remained stiff at first, not quite sure what to do with his body in that setting. But Viktor, without saying a word, rested a hand on his shoulder and guided him gently.

And then he began to move.
Slowly.
Simply.
Without spectacle.

Sergei followed his lead, awkward at first, unaccustomed to that kind of public closeness. But Viktor didn't let go for a moment, holding him with the same steadfast security he brought to everything else.

Bit by bit, the tension in Sergei began to thaw.
His shoulders relaxed, his eyes stopped scanning the surroundings as if on guard, and settled right there—with him.

Viktor looked at him a second longer than usual.

"This is nice," he whispered.

Sergei didn't answer right away.
Then, in a voice lower than usual—almost embarrassed, but entirely sincere—he said:

"I didn't think you'd do this."

Viktor looked at him softly.

"You were dying to."

Sergei let out a brief, almost imperceptible laugh.

"Not my style."

"I know."

They continued to dance, closer now, at peace.
And for the first time all night, Sergei stopped looking around and just looked at him.

•••

In an area not far away, Ilya and Shane were moving at a different pace.

Not at the center of the noise, but slightly tucked away near one of the garden tables where the lights hung lower and the music sounded softer.

From there, you could see everything: people making toasts, Galina laughing with Mateo, and the house fully illuminated as if it were celebrating too.

Shane held a glass in his hand, though he wasn't drinking much. He was more focused on watching Ilya, who for once didn't look tense or vigilant, but... present, relaxed in a way that was rare for him.

"You're not hovering over anyone," Shane remarked with a smile.

Ilya looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

"I am supervising," he responded, serious.

Shane laughed quietly.

"Doesn't look like it."

Ilya exhaled through his nose, accepting the banter without putting up a fight this time. Instead of arguing, he moved a little closer, resting a hand on the back of Shane's chair, leaning in slightly.

"I don't want to ruin anything today," he said, lower.

Shane looked at him more intently.

"You're not going to ruin anything."

Ilya held his gaze a second longer than usual. There was something in his eyes that wasn't customary for him: a stillness mixed with something vulnerable, almost tender.

"You look good," he murmured.

Shane smiled.

"You too."

Ilya lowered his gaze for an instant, as if receiving compliments took some getting used to.
Then, without another word, he took his hand.
Shane immediately intertwined their fingers.

"Everything is okay," Shane said softly. "Look."

Ilya followed his gaze.
Galina was dancing with Mateo, laughing. Luka was sitting nearby, eating something in total tranquility. The house glowed behind them as if every piece were right where it belonged.
Ilya took a deep breath.

"I never thought that this..." he started.

He didn't finish the sentence, but Shane understood all the same.

"Neither did I," Shane answered simply.

Ilya turned his head back toward him. This time there was no harshness, no tension, no constant barrier of control. Just exhaustion... and love.
Shane touched his cheek gently.

"You did well," he said.

Ilya closed his eyes for a second, as if those words weighed more than he let on.
When he opened them, he looked straight at him.

"I didn't do it alone."

Shane's smile softened.

"No."

They stayed like that for a moment in silence, hands clasped together.

Ilya leaned in just a bit more and rested his forehead against Shane's.
Shane closed his eyes too, leaning into the moment.

The music played on, the party continued, but right there, between the two of them, everything was peaceful.

Ilya gave his hand a gentle squeeze, almost as a silent thank you—and Shane, without saying another word, squeezed back just the same.

# Chapter 32: Extra: Luka Rozanov (The end)

~And a few more years later~

The study had returned to what it had always been: dark, silent, with that heavy weight in the air that never truly dissipated.
The garden lights were gone, the music as well; only the closed, dark night remained, with the city stretching out beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Ilya was sitting behind the desk, his jacket open and his tie loosely unbuttoned.
He was not an old man—not even close—but the exhaustion showed in his shoulders, in the way he rested his back against the chair, in that slower gesture as he lit a cigarette.

Standing across from him was twenty-two-year-old Luka.

Tall, firm, carrying the exact same presence Ilya once possessed at his age... yet different: more contained, colder.
His eyes were light-colored, but revealed very little.

They observed, calculated, recorded.

He didn't speak unnecessarily; he didn't need to.

"The Poles are moving where they shouldn't," Ilya said, slowly exhaling smoke. "It's not a mistake."

Luka didn't answer right away. He listened.

"They're testing boundaries," Ilya continued. "First it was one shipment, then another. Now they're putting men on our turf."

He paused, resting the cigarette in the ashtray.

"This isn't something you talk out. You cut it off at the root."

Silence held for a second.

Luka gave a subtle nod.

"I understand."

Ilya looked at him. There was no hesitation in that response, nor was there any emotion.

"What do you propose?" he asked.

Luka tilted his head slightly, as if organizing his thoughts without rush.

"First, I identify who's in charge," he said, his voice low and confident. "Not everyone—just the decision-maker."

Ilya didn't interrupt.

"Then I sever the chain," Luka continued. "Logistics, contacts, routes. If they can't move, they don't exist."

He paused for a beat.

"And I make the message clear."

Ilya observed him attentively.

"How?"

Luka looked him straight in the eyes.

"Fast."

Ilya gave a slow nod. Given the choice, he would have preferred Luka to study, to stay away from his footsteps. But even though he and Shane had refused, there was no negotiating with Luka; he had it in his blood.

"Good."

Luka didn't react; he simply received the approval as part of the job.

"I'll handle it," he added.

He turned slightly, as if ready to leave, but Ilya spoke again.

"Luka."

He stopped and turned his head just enough to look at him.
Ilya lowered his gaze for a second to Luka's hand, looking at his ring.

Thick, dark, heavy.

It wasn't decorative. It was a mark, a decision made, a sign of belonging.
Luka noticed the look, but he didn't hide his hand; he left it right there, visible.
Ilya met his eyes once more.

There was a longer silence this time, different.

"Are you sure?" he asked, lower.

It wasn't about the plan. It was about everything.

Luka didn't hesitate.

"Yes, Father."

The answer was firm, without a crack.

Ilya held his gaze for a few seconds longer, then nodded.

"Then do it."

Luka gave a slight tilt of his head as a minimal gesture of respect, and left.

•••

The church was wrapped in a solemn silence.

Light filtered through the stained-glass windows, spilling soft hues over the marble, over the pews occupied by family and acquaintances, and over the small altar where everything was set for the ceremony.
Galina held her son with an almost instinctive delicacy; Ilya Junior was sleeping peacefully, oblivious to it all, wrapped in an immaculate white blanket.
Mateo stood beside her, his hand firm on her back, walking through every second with her.

Further back, Shane observed in silence, a contained emotion in his gaze.
In front of the baptismal font stood Luka.
Dressed in solid black, faultless, standing tall with a steady posture and a fixed gaze.

His presence was solid, unwavering, as if nothing could pierce him.

Yet, there was something deeper in his eyes—something left unsaid, but unmistakably there.

The priest began to speak in a measured voice, guiding the ritual with the precision of an ancient tradition repeated thousands of times.

"Who presents this child for baptism?"

Mateo answered without stuttering.

"We do."

The priest nodded, continuing with the ceremony, and then turned his gaze toward Luka.

"And who will be his godfather?"

All eyes fell upon him. Luka didn't move immediately. He held the priest's gaze calmly, as if measuring every second.

"I will," he finally answered, his voice low and firm.

Meanwhile, in another part of the city, silence did not exist.

Several vehicles pulled up simultaneously on different streets.

The doors burst open, and armed men stepped out without a word, moving with exact coordination.
There was no doubt or hesitation in them—only execution.

In a warehouse, the door gave way with a heavy thud, and the first gunshot cut through the air.

Then came many more—a barrage that filled the space with noise, chaos, and screams cut short.

The men inside barely had time to react before dropping to the floor.

In the church, the priest's voice continued, unperturbed.

"Do you renounce Satan?"

Luka didn't break eye contact.

"I renounce him."

In an apartment, another group burst in with the same violence. The wood of the door splintered open, and gunfire erupted instantly.

One man fell onto a table, dragging glasses and bottles down with him, while another tried in vain to reach for a weapon.

"And all his works?" the priest continued.

"I renounce them," Luka answered with the same firmness.

In a sleeker office, the man who seemed to be in charge raised his hands, attempting to speak, negotiate, buy time.
He didn't get the chance. The shot was direct, clean, and his body fell backward along with the chair.

"And all his empty promises?"

"I renounce them."

In every location, the pattern repeated itself. Luka Rozanov's men advanced, fired, secured the space—leaving no margin for error, leaving no witnesses.

The ceremony carried on as if none of that existed.

The priest picked up the holy water and looked at Luka.

"Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?"

"I do," he answered without hesitation.

In the warehouse, one of the last remaining men tried to crawl toward an exit, leaving a dark trail on the floor before one of Luka's men stepped forward and finished the job without saying a word.

"Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord?"

"I do."

The gunfire began to cease at every location. The bodies lay where they had fallen, and silence slowly returned—heavy, definitive.

"Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?"

"I do."

The priest carefully took the baby. Ilya Junior shifted slightly, restless, but he didn't cry. The water poured softly over his head.

"I baptize you in the name of the Father..."

Across the city, the men Luka had dispatched began to withdraw. They climbed back into their vehicles and vanished with the exact same precision with which they had arrived, leaving nothing unresolved.

"...and of the Son..."

Another drop of water trickled down the baby's forehead.

"...and of the Holy Spirit."

The little one made a faint sound and settled back peacefully in his mother's arms.

"Amen," the priest concluded.

A soft murmur filled the church—smiles, hugs, relief.
Galina kissed her son's head, and Mateo wrapped an arm around her, proud.
Luka took a step back; he didn't smile.

From his place, Ilya observed him in silence. His eyes took in his son's figure with an understanding that required no words.
When Luka looked up, their eyes met, and for a moment, that was enough.
There was no celebration in that look—only certainty.

Afterward, Luka lowered his eyes to his godson, his expression softening just a fraction, almost imperceptibly.

But what had happened was already done.

And there was no undoing it.

The End.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!