

Remembering You

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77247666) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77247666>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	F/M , M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Kip Grady & Scott Hunter , Hayden Pike/Jackie Pike , David Hollander/Yuna Hollander
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Yuna Hollander , David Hollander , Hayden Pike , Jackie Pike , Scott Hunter , Kip Grady , Hayden Pike's Children
Additional Tags:	Original Character(s) , Hockey , Hockey Injuries , Amnesia
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-07 Words: 11,048 Chapters: 1/1

Remembering You

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Summary

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, star players and fiancés of the Ottawa Centaurs, have shared both love and triumph on and off the ice, including two Stanley Cup victories. But when a devastating hit leaves Shane with partial amnesia, he forgets only Ilya—the man he once loved and imagined a future with.

The world knows them as Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander—superstars, champions, captains. Ottawa's golden boys. Two men who changed the shape of a franchise and, without ever meaning to, shifted the culture of the league simply by loving each other openly.

They play on the Ottawa Centaurs, share a line, share a home, share a future. Their engagement had broken the internet for a solid forty-eight hours—rings flashing during warmups, a quiet kiss caught by a long lens, Shane's hand resting so naturally at Ilya's back it felt like it had always belonged there.

There are haters. There always are. But they are drowned out by the roar of fans who chant their names together, by teammates who treat their relationship as the most normal thing in the world, by families who sit side by side in the stands wearing matching jerseys.

Together, they have won two Stanley Cups.

Together, they have bled for this sport.

And together, they understand the risk.

Hockey is fast. Hockey is violent. Hockey does not care who you love.

They've always known that.

Ilya learned it first in April of 2014.

Back then, Shane was playing against Boston. A hard hit—late, ugly, the kind that makes the arena go silent before anyone even realizes why. Shane went down wrong, helmet snapping back, body going slack as he hit the ice.

Ilya had been on the bench.

He remembers standing up too fast. The way his vision tunneled. The way his heart stopped beating—not metaphorically, not poetically, but truly, painfully still—as Shane didn't move.

He remembers gripping the boards so hard his knuckles went white. Remembered screaming Shane's name without realizing he was doing it. Remembered the medical staff swarming, remembered the stretcher, remembered not breathing again until he saw Shane's chest rise in the tunnel.

After that, every hit carried a ghost.

Every time Shane stayed down a second too long, Ilya felt 2014 claw its way up his spine.

They talked about it, quietly, late at night. About the risks. About concussions and broken bones and the way the game takes pieces of you and never gives them back.

They promised each other honesty.

They promised each other presence.

They promised that no matter what—no matter the cameras, the league, the rules—they would choose each other first.

That promise is tested again in 2017.

It happens fast.

Too fast.

The puck is dumped deep, Shane chasing hard, skates digging in. There's a collision near the boards—shoulder to shoulder, brutal but clean—and then something goes wrong. Shane's edge catches. His head snaps back.

He goes down.

And this time... he doesn't move.

The arena goes deathly quiet in that way every hockey fan recognizes instantly. No cheering. No booing. Just the sharp scrape of skates slowing, players looking around, realizing something is wrong.

Ilya sees it from center ice.

Sees Shane's body twisted unnaturally.
Sees his stick slip from his fingers.
Sees the stillness.

The past slams into him like a freight train.

But this time—

This time Ilya doesn't freeze.

He doesn't stay back.

He doesn't wait for officials.

He doesn't care about protocol or penalties or the watching eyes of thousands of fans and millions more at home.

His fiancé is unmoving.

Ilya drops his gloves and sprints.

"ILYA—!" someone shouts, maybe a ref, maybe a teammate. He doesn't hear it.

He drops to his knees beside Shane, hands shaking as he cups his helmeted face. "Shane. Shane—hey, love, look at me. Please. Please."

His voice cracks on the last word.

Medical staff are already moving in, but they hesitate for just a fraction of a second when they see the way Ilya is holding him—like if he lets go, Shane might disappear entirely.

Ilya presses his forehead to Shane's helmet, breathing for both of them. "You promised me," he whispers, raw and broken. "You promised you wouldn't scare me like this again."

The cameras are everywhere.

Ilya does not care.

If the world is going to watch, then they are going to watch him love Shane without apology. Watch him cry openly. Watch him tremble as he keeps one hand wrapped tight around Shane's wrist, counting seconds, begging for a pulse he can feel.

Finally—mercifully—there's movement.

A twitch.

A breath.

A faint groan.

Ilya sobs, sound ripping out of him before he can stop it. "That's it. That's it. I'm here. I've got you."

The medics gently pull him back as they stabilize Shane, but Ilya doesn't go far. He kneels there, chest heaving, eyes never leaving Shane's face as he's lifted onto the stretcher.

As Shane is wheeled off the ice, Ilya follows—penalty be damned, rules forgotten—until the tunnel swallows them both.

Because hockey is dangerous.

Because the ice does not care.

Because love does not make you immune.

But it makes you brave.

And in that moment, Ilya Rozanov isn't a champion or a captain or a public figure.

He is just a man in love, walking beside the stretcher of the person who holds his entire heart, proving to the world once again that some things matter more than the game.

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The hospital is too quiet.

Ilya hates that most of all.

Machines hum softly around Shane's bed, steady and indifferent, like they don't understand how close everything came to breaking apart. Shane lies still beneath white sheets, one arm immobilized, collarbone braced, ribs tightly wrapped. A faint bruise is already blooming at his temple, dark against pale skin.

Ilya sits in the chair pulled close to the bed, his forehead resting against the mattress, fingers wrapped tightly around Shane's hand. He hasn't moved much since they brought Shane in. Hasn't slept. Hasn't stopped counting each rise and fall of Shane's chest like it's the only thing keeping the world spinning.

He whispers sometimes.

Small things. Familiar things. Stories from practice. Complaints about refs. Reminders. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. You're safe.

The door opens softly.

Ilya looks up immediately, heart jumping into his throat—until he sees them.

Yuna and David Hollander.

Shane's parents move quickly but quietly, the way people do when they're afraid of disturbing something fragile. Yuna's eyes are red, her coat still clutched in her hands like she forgot to take it off. David's jaw is tight, his arm firm around his wife's shoulders, steady even as his own eyes shine.

Ilya stands without thinking.

Yuna doesn't hesitate. She crosses the room in two strides and pulls him into her arms, holding him the way only a mother can—protective, grounding, fierce.

"Oh, my baby," she whispers, rocking him slightly. "Ilya... talk to me. What did the doctors say?"

Ilya exhales shakily against her shoulder. For just a moment, he lets himself be held.

"It was a bad hit," he manages, voice rough. He pulls back just enough to look at her, eyes glassy. "His collarbone is broken. A couple ribs too. They—" His throat tightens. He swallows hard. "They've stabilized everything."

David steps closer now, resting a hand on Ilya's back. "And his head?"

That's where it breaks.

Ilya's grip tightens on Yuna's sleeve as he nods. "They said... there's swelling. They're worried about possible brain damage." His voice cracks despite his best effort. "His brain activity shows signs of amnesia."

The word feels too big for the room.

"They won't know for sure," Ilya rushes on, choking back a sob, "not until he wakes up. They said it could be temporary. It could—" He can't finish the sentence.

Yuna pulls him back in instantly, cradling his head against her shoulder. "Hey. Hey. That's enough," she murmurs, stroking his hair. "You don't carry all of that alone."

David nods, eyes fixed on Shane, voice low but steady. “You did everything right, son.”

The word son hits Ilya hard.

“I should’ve—” Ilya starts, then stops, shaking his head. “I keep thinking if I’d been closer, if I’d seen it sooner—”

David gently squeezes his shoulder. “No. You stayed with him. That’s what matters.”

Yuna pulls back just enough to cup Ilya’s face, forcing him to look at her. “Mamas here now,” she says softly. “Were all here. And we’ll all be here when he wakes up. Together.”

Ilya nods, tears slipping free despite himself. “Mama,” he whispers, voice barely there.

David clears his throat and moves to the other side of the bed, carefully taking Shane’s uninjured hand. “We’ll wait,” he confirms. “All of us.”

Yuna guides Ilya back into the chair beside Shane, settling next to him and lacing her fingers with his free hand. “He’ll know you,” she says with quiet certainty. “Whether it takes minutes or days—he will know you.”

Ilya leans forward again, pressing his lips gently to Shane’s knuckles.

And this time, he doesn’t feel alone.

Shane wakes slowly.

Not all at once—never like in the movies—but in fragments. Sound comes first: the rhythmic beep of a monitor, the soft murmur of voices, the faint rustle of fabric. Then pain. Deep, aching, everywhere. His chest feels tight, his shoulder screams when he tries to move, and his head—his head feels like it’s been split open and stitched back together wrong.

“Shane?”

His eyelids flutter.

“Shane, sweetheart, can you hear me?”

That voice cuts through the fog.

“Mom,” he rasps, eyes cracking open.

Yuna is instantly at his side, hands trembling as she cups his face. “I’m here. I’m here.”

David’s voice follows, steadier but thick. “Hey, champ.”

Shane exhales shakily. “Dad.”

Relief crashes through the room like a wave.

A doctor steps closer, light pen already in hand. “Hi, Shane. I’m Dr. Meyers. You took a pretty serious hit out there. I’m going to ask you a few questions, okay?”

Shane nods faintly, wincing as the movement sends pain spiking behind his eyes.

“Do you know where you are?”

“Hospital,” Shane answers. “Ottawa General.”

“Good. Do you know what year it is?”

“2017.”

“And your full name?”

“Shane Hollander.”

The doctor nods, pleased. “Can you tell me who they are?” He gestures to Yuna and David.

“My parents,” Shane says immediately. “Yuna and David.”

Yuna presses a hand to her mouth, tears spilling freely now. David squeezes Shane’s hand hard, pride and relief warring in his eyes.

The doctor continues. “Do you remember what you do for a living?”

Shane lets out a breath that’s half a laugh, half a wince. “I play hockey. Ottawa Centaurs. Left defense. Captain.”

Another nod. “Good. Teammates? Friends?”

Names come easily. Too easily. Faces slot into place in his mind like they never left—locker room laughter, road trips, Cups lifted overhead.

The doctor glances down at his chart, then casually asks, “Do you recognize the man sitting beside you?”

Shane’s gaze shifts.

He really looks—at the man in the chair pulled too close to the bed, dark curls disheveled, eyes red-rimmed and shining with something raw and desperate. The man hasn’t blinked since Shane woke up. One of his hands is wrapped loosely around Shane’s, like it belongs there.

Shane’s stomach twists.

“No,” he says slowly.

The room stills.

“I—no,” Shane repeats, frowning. “I don’t know him.”

The silence that follows is unbearable.

Ilya feels it like a physical blow.

The doctor doesn't react immediately, only nods once and makes a small note. "Okay. That's alright, Shane. That can happen with head trauma. We'll talk more in a bit." He steps back, murmuring reassurances to Yuna and David before quietly leaving the room.

Shane's eyes flick back to the stranger.

"Who are you?" he asks, voice wary now.

Ilya swallows.

"I'm—" His voice breaks on the first attempt. He clears his throat, forces himself to breathe. "My name is Ilya Rozanov."

Nothing. No flicker of recognition.

"I'm your fiancé," Ilya continues softly. "We—we play together. We're getting married."

Shane's expression hardens instantly.

"No," he snaps. The word sends a sharp jolt of pain through his skull, and he winces, clutching at the sheets. "No, that's not funny."

"I'm not joking," Ilya says quickly, leaning forward despite himself. "Shane, please, I can show you—photos, videos, rings—"

"Stop," Shane barks.

The sound echoes too loudly in his own head. Pain detonates behind his eyes, white-hot. He groans, pressing a hand to his temple.

"Shane," Yuna says urgently, "lower your voice, sweetheart."

But Shane's eyes are locked on Ilya now, fear and anger tangling together. "Why is he lying to me?"

"I'm not lying," Ilya insists, tears spilling freely now. "I love you. I've loved you for years."

"Get away from me!" Shane yells.

Instant regret.

The pain slams into him again, vicious and blinding. He cries out, body tensing, monitors spiking as nurses rush in from the hallway.

"Shane, stop, please—" Yuna pleads.

Ilya backs up immediately, horror written across his face. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—I’ll stay back.”

But even from a distance, Shane’s breathing is ragged, his head pounding, confusion turning quickly into panic. “I don’t know him,” he keeps repeating, like if he says it enough times it’ll make sense. “I don’t know him. Why won’t he leave?”

Ilya stands frozen at the foot of the bed, hands clenched so tight his nails bite into his palms.

The man he loves is right there.

Alive.

Breathing.

Looking at him like he’s a stranger.

Ilya leaves.

He says it out loud so Shane can hear it, so Shane can understand.
“I’ll go,” he whispers, voice breaking. “Just so you can calm down.”

Shane doesn’t respond—he’s breathing too hard, eyes squeezed shut, hands pressed to his head like he’s trying to keep himself together.

So Ilya does the hardest thing he’s ever done.

He walks out.

The hallway swallows him whole.

An hour later, after doctors have adjusted Shane’s medication and Yuna insists—gently but firmly—that Ilya belongs here too, he comes back.

He opens the door quietly.

The moment Shane sees him, it’s like a switch flips.

“No—NO!” Shane shouts, panic detonating instantly. “Get him out! Why is he here?!”

His voice rises, sharp and frantic, and immediately his face twists in pain. He grabs his head, groaning, body tensing as monitors spike again.

Nurses rush in. Yuna soothes. David speaks low and calm. Medication follows.

Ilya doesn’t move closer.

He just stands there, rooted, taking every word like a punch because at least Shane is awake. At least he’s alive enough to be angry.

After that, Ilya stays away.

For a day.

It nearly kills him.

The next afternoon, Shane is calmer—sedated enough to take the edge off the pain, lucid enough to answer questions without shouting. The room is quiet when Ilya steps in, cautious now, like he's approaching something wild and wounded.

Shane looks at him, wary but not panicked.

Ilya swallows. "Do you... know who I am?"

Shane studies him for a long moment, then shakes his head. "No."

The word still hurts—but it doesn't shatter him this time.

"Can I explain?" Ilya asks softly.

A pause.

"...Fine," Shane says. "Just—don't lie."

Ilya nods. He keeps his distance. Keeps his voice steady even though his hands are shaking.

"My name is Ilya Rozanov," he begins. "I'm the captain of the Ottawa Centaurs. You played with me. We won two Stanley Cups together."

Shane's brow furrows, like pieces are shifting but not fitting.

"And," Ilya continues, voice barely holding, "I'm your fiancé."

The reaction is instant.

Explosive.

"That's bullshit!" Shane yells, fury flashing across his face. "You're still lying!"

Pain slams into him immediately, but he barrels through it, words spilling out sharp and ugly and cruel.

"I'm not gay!" he shouts. "I'm not—" his voice cracks, rage and fear tangling, "—not some fag!"

Yuna gasps. "Shane!"

Shane doesn't stop.

"I'd never love someone like you," he spits, pointing at Ilya. "Some cocky, rude bastard who thinks he can just—just show up and claim me!"

The room goes dead silent.

Ilya doesn't flinch.

He just... breaks.

Not loudly. Not dramatically. His face goes slack, like all the strength drains out of him at once. Tears spill, but he doesn't wipe them away. He doesn't defend himself. He doesn't argue.

Because he knows.

This isn't Shane.

This is fear. Pain. A brain scrambling to protect itself by rejecting the one thing that feels too big, too intimate, too dangerous to accept.

"I'm sorry," Ilya whispers. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Shane groans as the pain finally overtakes him, clutching his head, anger collapsing into agony. Nurses move in again, voices firm, calm, practiced.

Yuna turns on her son, tears streaming. "That is enough," she says, fierce and shaking. "That man loves you. Whether you remember it or not."

Ilya backs toward the door.

"I'll give you space," he says quietly. "I won't push. I promise."

The room is quiet again.

Too quiet.

Ilya stands a few feet from the bed, hands trembling at his sides, eyes red and glassy but steady. He looks at Shane—not angry now, not afraid—just closed off, defensive, exhausted.

"Do you want to get to know me?" Ilya asks softly.

The question is fragile. Honest. Offered without pressure.

Shane doesn't hesitate.

"No," he says, disgust curling his lip. "Why would I?"

Something in Ilya's chest finally gives.

He nods slowly, a sad, understanding smile breaking through even as tears spill freely down his face. He doesn't argue. Doesn't plead. Doesn't remind Shane of promises, or rings, or years.

"Okay," he whispers.

He takes a breath, then asks one last thing. "Can I... can I have a hug?"

Shane opens his mouth to refuse.

Before the word can leave him, Yuna lifts her hand, eyes shining with tears, and gently gestures. Please.

Shane exhales sharply, irritated—but tired. So tired.

“...Fine,” he mutters.

Ilya steps forward carefully, like he’s afraid Shane might vanish if he moves too fast. He wraps his arms around Shane, holding him with aching tenderness—careful of injuries, careful of pain, careful of everything.

Shane stays stiff.

He doesn’t hug back.

Ilya closes his eyes anyway, breathing Shane in like it might be the last time—which it is. He presses a gentle kiss to the top of Shane’s head, reverent and soft.

“Goodbye, Shane,” he whispers.

He steps back.

Then he turns to David and Yuna.

With shaking fingers, Ilya slides the ring from his hand—the ring Shane had given him. A heavy band of history. Love. Family. A Hollander heirloom meant to stay.

He places it gently into David’s palm.

“Goodbye,” he says, voice breaking completely now.

David’s hands curl around the ring like it’s burning him. Tears stream freely down his face. Yuna sobs openly, pressing her hand to her mouth.

“You don’t have to do this,” Yuna cries, stepping toward him. “You’re our son. You’re—”

Ilya shakes his head, tears falling harder now. “Mama... it’s only hurting both of us.” His voice cracks. “It’s for the best.”

He pulls David into a tight hug, clinging for just a second longer than necessary—like he’s memorizing the feel of him. Then he kisses Yuna’s cheek, lingering, gentle.

“I love you,” he whispers.

And then, with one last look at Shane—who stares back, unmoved, unaware of what has just been lost—Ilya turns and walks out.

The door clicks shut behind him.

And for the first time since the accident, the room feels truly empty.

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Shane stays in the hospital two more days.

Two quiet, carefully monitored days where the doctors are satisfied with his progress and deeply concerned about what he's lost. Two days where Yuna and David sit with him, love him, protect him—and never once say Ilya's name again.

He never returns to the ice as a player.

The decision is made quickly, quietly, and without argument. The doctors made that decision for him. Too many injuries. Too much risk. His body can't take another hit, and his brain absolutely cannot. The announcement is brief, respectful, final.

Forced retirement.

By the time he's home, Ilya is already gone.

Transferred. Traded quietly and efficiently to a team far enough away that their paths will never “accidentally” cross. His number disappears from Shane's phone. His contact vanishes. No calls. No messages. No goodbyes left hanging.

It's like he was erased.

And everyone agrees—silently—that this is for the best.

* Three Years Later *

Shane Hollander is still hockey royalty—just no longer on the ice. Assists teams. Offers strategy. Mentors younger players. He's good at it—brilliant, even—but something is missing, something he can never quite name.

He doesn't talk to the press.

Doesn't give interviews.

Doesn't Google himself.

And never—never—asks about who he used to be.

His family and friends know better than to bring it up. Hayden. Jackie. Scott. Kip. His parents protect him fiercely, even when it hurts them to do so.

And Shane himself never wonders why there's a quiet ache in his chest when he sees championship highlights.

Ilya, on the other hand, never never stops watching.

From a distance.

He doesn't reach out. Doesn't cross lines. But Shane is impossible to miss—popular, well-loved, photographed constantly, highlighted in articles, trending on social media, photographed at charity events and galas.

And always—

Always with a woman on his arm.

A different one every time.

Ilya tells himself it shouldn't hurt.

It does anyway.

Because Ilya knows that smile.

He knows how practiced it is.

And he knows exactly who taught Shane how to fake being okay.

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The tournament is supposed to be a break.

A vacation.

A flight out. A hotel with too-soft beds. Arena lights instead of obligations. Shane tells himself—like he always does—that this trip is just about hockey, just about relaxing with his parents and friends.

No expectations. Just enjoyment. Nothing more.

They don't check rosters closely.

They don't see it coming.

Until the opposing team skates onto the ice.

The arena is already buzzing when they take their seats. Jerseys everywhere. Music thumping through the speakers. The smell of popcorn and cold air and sharpened steel.

“God, I miss this,” Scott says, leaning back with a grin.

Shane nods absently, eyes scanning the ice as players begin to gather near the tunnel.

The lights dim.

The announcer's voice booms through the arena. “Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome—your starting lineups.”

One by one, players skate out, names echoing, applause rising and falling in waves. Shane listens without really listening, clapping when others do, smiling when he's supposed to.

Then the announcer's tone shifts.

"And now... the captain."

The crowd surges before the name is even spoken.

"Number—"

The roar is deafening.

"—thirteen—"

"—ILYA ROZANOV."

Shane's chest tightens.

The building erupts.

Chants start instantly—IL-YA! IL-YA! IL-YA!—so loud the sound vibrates through Shane's bones.

Ilya skates out alone.

No hesitation. No flourish. Just pure confidence carved into muscle and motion. He glides across the ice like he owns it, head high, shoulders squared, the captain's "C" stitched proudly over his heart.

He lifts a hand to the crowd, stick tapping the ice once in acknowledgment, then takes a full lap—fast, powerful, controlled. The fans scream his name louder with every stride.

Shane can't look away.

He doesn't know why.

Something about the way Ilya moves—like the ice bends for him, like every edge is instinctive—pulls at something deep in Shane's chest. His pulse stutters, a strange hollow ache forming beneath his ribs.

The game starts, and it's immediately clear why the arena worships him.

Ilya is everywhere.

On the forecheck. Backchecking like a demon. Threading passes through impossible lanes. He reads the ice half a second ahead of everyone else, anticipates plays before they exist.

Shane leans forward without realizing it.

"That man's unreal," Jackie murmurs.

Hayden squints, elbows on his knees. “Damn,” he says quietly. “He’s better than I remember.”

Shane turns to look at him.

For the first time, Hayden doesn’t see anger in Shane’s eyes. Or rejection. Or discomfort.

He sees confusion.

Wonder.

Shane shakes his head slowly, eyes snapping back to the ice. “I don’t remember him,” he admits, almost to himself. “But... it feels like I should.”

Ilya strips the puck clean from an opposing forward, pivots sharply, and accelerates. His skates bite into the ice, spray flying as he bursts past one defender, then another. The crowd is on its feet.

Shane’s heart starts to race.

He follows Ilya the entire shift—every cut, every check, every calculated risk. When Ilya scores, a blistering shot off the post and in, Shane’s breath catches painfully in his throat.

The game only gets faster from there.

The hits come harder. The checks drive deeper into the boards. The energy in the arena sharpens, electric and volatile, the kind of tension that promises something ugly before the night is over.

Ilya thrives in it.

Midway through the second period, an opposing forward takes a run at one of Ilya’s younger linemates—late and high. The crowd erupts in angry noise, boos raining down as the player skates away smirking.

Shane feels it before he understands it.

The way Ilya’s posture changes.

He goes still. Dangerous.

The puck drops again, and Ilya doesn’t take his eyes off the man who made the hit.

Two strides.

One shove.

Then gloves hit the ice.

The arena explodes.

“Oh—oh shit,” Kip breathes.

Ilya doesn't wait for the other player to square up.

He lunges forward, fists already flying, each punch brutal and precise. There's no showmanship. No grin. No chirping. Just pure, contained violence unleashed in a heartbeat.

The other player stumbles back, shocked, barely landing a hit before Ilya drives him into the ice with terrifying force.

The referees rush in, struggling to separate them.

Blood streaks from a split brow—not Ilya's.

“Jesus Christ,” Jackie whispers.

Scott's jaw drops. “That's... that's not how he used to fight.”

Shane can't breathe.

His hands shake in his lap as he watches Ilya stand there, chest heaving, eyes cold and empty as the refs finally pull him away. There's no satisfaction on his face. No adrenaline-fueled smile.

Just nothing.

The crowd chants his name again, thunderous and approving.

IL-YA! IL-YA! IL-YA!

Yuna presses a hand to her mouth. “He looks... hardened.”

Shane nods slowly, unable to look away as Ilya skates to the penalty box, blood on his knuckles, jaw clenched tight. Something twists painfully in Shane's chest.

This isn't just skill.

This is grief given muscle and motion.

When Ilya returns to the ice later, the game bends around him again. He dominates every shift, plays like he has something to prove—or something to punish.

Later, a whistle blows. Players drift toward the bench, and Ilya reaches up, unbuckling his helmet.

He pulls it off.

Time slows.

Dark hair damp with sweat. Sharp jaw. A thin cut on his lip from earlier in the game, still red. His face is flushed from exertion, eyes burning with focus and something deeper—something

harder.

The air leaves him in a violent rush, like he's been punched square in the chest. His vision blurs, heart slamming against his ribs as he stares at Ilya's face—sweat-soaked hair, cut lip, eyes blazing with something he knows but cannot name.

Shane's hand flies to the armrest, gripping hard as a wave of vertigo crashes over him.

There it is.

That feeling.

The missing piece snapping into place without explanation.

His vision blurs—not with pain, but with something far more dangerous.

Recognition without memory.

Connection without understanding.

Yuna turns sharply. “Shane?”

He swallows, eyes locked on Ilya as he skates back into position, helmet still off, captain, king, stranger.

“I—” Shane breathes, voice shaking. “Mom... I think I know him.”

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The game ends, the arena slowly transitions into something softer—warm lights, music playing low, laughter echoing across the ice. The announcer's voice calls it Family Night, inviting players' loved ones, children, and friends to come onto the ice. It's meant to be casual. Friendly. Joyful.

Shane and his family drift forward, watching from the stands at first, cautious. The ice is dotted with skates, little ones waddling in oversized helmets, parents laughing and holding hands, everyone blending together in a chaotic kind of happiness.

Ilya is there, too. But he is alone.

Shane's chest tightens at the sight. He can see it—clearly—how isolated Ilya looks. The team's wives, partners, and kids cluster around others, chatting, hugging, skating hand in hand. Ilya doesn't have that. He doesn't have someone calling his name, a hand waiting for his, a warm shoulder.

Shane swallows, jaw tight.

Then something small happens.

A few of the younger players' children break away from their parents and toddle toward Ilya, laughing and holding little sticks, clearly excited.

Shane watches as Ilya crouches, smiling softly, letting them climb on his legs, showing them how to pass the puck gently, how to hold their skates steady. His face is calm, focused, patient. Shane can't look away.

He murmurs quietly, more to himself than anyone else:
"He's always been good with kids..."

No one responds. They just watch him. They've learned to stay quiet, to let Shane process on his own. They know the truth—intuitively. They know why Shane is staring so hard. They know who Ilya was. They know who he still is to Shane.

Shane's lips curve into a soft smile as he watches Ilya, and then, almost without realizing it, he starts speaking. Not about the present, not about the game, but about the past.

"One time," Shane begins, voice low, reflective, "Ilya and I were babysitting Hayden's twins. Hayden and Jackie had to go to some charity dinner, and we promised we'd make it easy for them..."

He pauses, smiling faintly, watching Ilya gesture patiently to the children, hands guiding tiny sticks. "I thought it'd be a disaster. I mean, I'm terrible with kids. But Ilya—he just... he had this way of making them feel safe. Like everything was normal. I was reading Goodnight Moon upside down on the couch to one of the twins, and Ilya had built a whole obstacle course with pillows and chairs. They were screaming, laughing, throwing toys everywhere, and by the time Hayden and Jackie got home, all of them were napping in a heap on the floor. And Ilya... he just smiled. Calm. Happy. Like he hadn't just survived chaos, like he enjoyed it."

Shane's voice softens, his eyes fixed on Ilya across the ice. "He's... he's always been like that. Patient. Kind. Even when everything else falls apart."

He pauses again, looking down at his hands, and something clicks. A sharp, undeniable memory bursts through—bright, clear, devastatingly intimate.

His chest tightens. His heart skips. He swallows hard, and when he looks up, he catches his mother's gaze.

Yuna's hand is pressed over her mouth, tears streaking down her cheeks. Her eyes are wide, frozen in shock. David stands beside her, pale, jaw tight, silently clutching the ring he gave Ilya all those years ago. Their friends—Hayden, Jackie, Scott, Kip—freeze in mid-step, all silently aware. They don't say a word, but they know. They all know.

Because Shane had just remembered something. Something about Ilya.

And what makes it even more poignant—what leaves everyone in stunned silence—is that Shane doesn't say it like he's confessing, doesn't cry or beg or demand anything. He's just telling a story. A memory. Like it's a story from years ago, nothing more.

But they all see it.

The tenderness. The longing. The recognition.

Shane stays frozen, eyes still locked on Ilya as he crouches with the kids, laughing softly, guiding them. The memory—the story he just told—lingers in his mind like a spark catching dry kindling.

His chest tightens. His hands tremble. He swallows hard, trying to steady himself, but the memories—the fragments of touch, laughter, arguments, long nights, the feel of Ilya next to him—flood his mind in shards, incomplete, desperate for context.

He looks up at his mother. Her face is wet with tears, eyes wide, mouth pressed into a thin line of shock and awe. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't need to.

"Mom," Shane whispers, voice breaking, trembling. "I... I need to know more. I have... pieces... small pieces, but I don't... I don't know the full story. I need... I need to know everything."

Yuna swallows, blinking back tears, placing a hand gently over his. She doesn't hesitate. She nods, fierce and soft at the same time. "Okay, Shane," she says quietly. "We'll do it. We'll go through everything."

Shane's head drops into his hands. "I can't... I can't stand not knowing. I have to remember. I have to know him—all of him—the way he was. The way we were. The way we should've been."

Yuna kneels beside him on the stands, taking his hands in hers, holding him steady. "Then we'll go slowly," she whispers. "I'll show you everything. All the pictures, all the letters, the tabloids, the videos... everything we've saved. And we'll tell the story, Shane. All of it. Piece by piece."

He swallows hard, tears slipping down his face, eyes still fixed on Ilya across the ice, distant and unaware. "I need to know... Mama. I have to know."

Yuna nods again, her own tears falling freely. "Then we'll start, Shane. You'll remember. I promise you, you'll remember everything."

For the first time in years, Shane feels the faintest glimmer of hope, even as his heart aches with the weight of what he's lost. The fragments of memory aren't enough. But now, for the first time, he has a path to the truth—and to Ilya.

-

The tournament ends, and Shane, Yuna, David, and the rest of their friends fly back home. The city passes beneath them in patchwork lights, a quiet reminder of the life they're returning to.

At home, Shane settles into a routine he never expected. Most days are spent with his mother, sitting side by side at the living room table or sprawled across the couch, laptops open, photo

albums stacked beside them.

Private pictures Shane had never seen before. Videos of them laughing in the locker room. Footage from practices where they goofed off, late-night recordings of shared jokes. Even some old tabloids chronicling their story—the rise of the team, their growing closeness, and finally, their engagement.

“How did I... forget this?” he whispers one afternoon, voice cracking. “I remember fragments... the way he laughed, the way he’d always nudge me when I was being stubborn... but the whole story?”

Yuna doesn’t answer with words. She just squeezes his hand gently, encouraging him silently. Shane flips through more pictures, pauses at one of the engagement: Shane down on one knee, ring shining under the sunlight, Ilya frozen in disbelief, laughing, crying, shaking, finally nodding yes.

He swallows hard, eyes brimming. “I...I remember... I remember us, Mama...”

Even as he relives the past, he keeps tabs on the present. News articles. Sports reports. Social media. Always Ilya. Always watching from afar. And nothing surprises him: no new partners. No big social announcements. No attempts to move on publicly.

Across the country, in a city far from Ottawa, Ilya scrolls through the same networks, checking Shane’s updates as he always has.

He notices something unusual. Shane isn’t posting with new partners. He isn’t trying to fill the void with attention or romance. He’s quiet. He’s keeping to himself.

Confusion coils tight in Ilya’s chest. Why?

And then he sees it: a subtle update from Shane’s doctor. Carefully worded, minimal, almost clinical. “Shane Hollander is showing continued cognitive improvements following his head trauma. He is beginning to reconnect with past memories.”

Ilya’s hands tighten around his phone. He reads it again.

The post says nothing of specifics. Nothing about who Shane is remembering. But Ilya knows.

He knows exactly who this is for.

For the first time in years, Ilya allows himself a small, unguarded exhale. His heart aches and leaps all at once. Shane is remembering.

The only thing Shane had truly forgotten... was him.

And now... slowly, deliberately, the pieces are coming back.

Ilya doesn’t reach out. He doesn’t call or text. He doesn’t risk breaking the fragile progress Shane is making. He only watches, quietly, a shadow of vigilance and hope, waiting for the

moment Shane fully remembers, fully sees him, fully feels again.

Because once Shane does... nothing will ever be the same.

-

A couple of days pass.

Not quietly.

The news hits Shane in the middle of the morning—an email from the team, routine and logistical, outlining the upcoming schedule. He scans it once, distracted.

Then he sees the opponent.

Ilya's team.

Coming to Ottawa.

Playing against the team Shane assists—his old team, the ice he knows like muscle memory.

The room starts to spin.

Shane's breath goes shallow, hands trembling as he grips the edge of the table. His heart pounds so hard it feels like it's trying to escape his chest.

"No—no, no," he mutters, panic flooding in. "I'm not ready. I can't—"

Yuna is there instantly, crossing the room, steady hands on his shoulders. "Hey. Hey. Breathe."

He drags in a shaky breath, eyes wild. "Mama, I can't be there. I can't see him and not—" His voice breaks. "Not reach for him." "What if he hates me!?" Shane yells in a panic.

Yuna swallows hard.

Yuna swallows hard, her own eyes shining. She hesitates, choosing her words with care.

"He loves you," she says softly. "He would never do anything to hurt you—never willingly. He has changed, yes... but you must always know this."

She lifts his face gently so he has to look at her.

"No matter how cold he seems now, his love for you was real. And love like that doesn't disappear."

Shane nods miserably, tears spilling over anyway. "I know. I saw it. At the tournament." His voice cracks. "He was colder. Harder." A sob rips out of him, raw and broken.

"That's my fault," he chokes. "I did that to him. I took everything soft out of him and left him with nothing but armor."

Yuna pulls him into her arms, holding him tightly as his shoulders shake.

“You were sick,” she says firmly, even as her voice trembles. “You were hurt. None of that was you.”

But Shane can’t hear it. Not really.

“My Ilya,” he cries, voice breaking apart. “My solnyshko—oh God—Mama, what did I do? What have I done?”

Yuna holds him tight, rocking him gently as he shatters. She doesn’t rush him. Doesn’t interrupt.

“I said those things,” he sobs. “I looked at him like he was nothing. Like he was a stranger—worse than a stranger.” His breath stutters.

“Mama, he begged me—begged me—to let him explain who he was, who we were. And I screamed at him. I gave him no choice. I made him leave... and he did.”

His voice breaks completely. “He left because I was hurting.”

Yuna closes her eyes, remembering that day too clearly.

“He loved you enough to walk away,” she whispers.

“That’s what makes it worse,” Shane cries. “He protected me even when I was destroying him.”

He pulls back again, wiping angrily at his tears, something sharp and desperate settling into his expression.

“And now he’s different. Colder. Ruthless. Everyone sees it. They call him strong, unbreakable.” Shane laughs bitterly. “That’s not who he was with me. He was warm. He was patient. He was—” His voice breaks completely. “He was home.”

The room falls quiet.

Then Shane straightens, chest rising with a shaky but determined breath.

Shane pulls back just enough to look at her, eyes red, jaw trembling—but something else is there now. Resolve.

“I have to face him,” he says. “Not because I deserve forgiveness. Not because I expect anything from him.” His hands clench into fists. “But because he deserves to know that I remember. That I know who he is. That I know who we were.”

Yuna studies her son for a long moment, seeing the fear, the regret—and the love that never truly left.

Finally, she nods.

“Then we’ll take it one day at a time,” she says softly. “And whatever happens... you won’t face it alone.”

Outside, the city carries on as if nothing monumental has shifted.

But for Shane Hollander, the countdown has begun.

Because in just a few days, Ilya Rozanov will step back onto Ottawa ice—

And this time, Shane will remember everything.

The days turn into a countdown.

For Shane, every morning feels heavier than the last. He marks time without meaning to—three days, then two, then one—each number tightening the knot in his chest. He goes through his routines on autopilot, assists during practice, stands behind the bench, gives feedback when asked. No one pushes him. No one mentions why his hands shake or why his eyes keep drifting to the rink doors as if expecting someone to walk through them at any second.

At night, he barely sleeps.

When he does, it’s Ilya—always Ilya. Sometimes smiling, sometimes turning away. Sometimes saying nothing at all, which somehow hurts more.

Across the country, Ilya is counting too.

He’d thought about opting out the moment the schedule was finalized. The idea lodged in his chest like a splinter. Ottawa. That ice. Those colors. That bench. It was one thing to skate against old rivals, against teams filled with bad blood and brutal memories.

This was different.

This was home.

This was the team where he and Shane had built something legendary. Two captains. Two Stanley Cups. A love story the world never stopped talking about.

And now Shane stood behind that bench. Assisting. Coaching. Living in the place Ilya had lost everything.

Ilya stands alone in the teams locker room after practice one night, helmet resting in his hands, knuckles white around the rim. He considers it again—how easy it would be to claim an injury, to ask for rest, to let someone else wear the C just this once.

But he doesn’t.

He can’t.

A captain doesn’t run. A captain doesn’t abandon his team because of ghosts.

Still, fear coils in his chest.

What if he sees Shane?

What if Shane looks at him the way he did three years ago—eyes sharp with disgust, voice full of words that cut deeper than any hit on the ice? What if that hatred is still there, preserved like a scar that never healed?

Ilya exhales slowly, forcing his shoulders to square.

He tells himself it doesn't matter.

He tells himself Shane made his choice.

But the truth sits heavy and undeniable—

This isn't just another game.

For both of them, it feels like standing on the edge of something they survived once... and might not survive again.

-

The flight to Ottawa is quiet.

Not because the team is subdued—there's the usual card games, headphones, low laughter—but because no one pushes Ilya. They all know the public version of the story. The headlines, the interviews that never quite said anything at all.

Engaged.

Injured.

Gone.

What the internet knows is simple: Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander are no longer together.

When they land, Ottawa greets them with cold air and familiar streets that feel like a punch to the chest. Ilya keeps his head down through the terminal, cap pulled low, earbuds in. Still, he feels it—the weight of memory pressing in from every direction.

The arena is worse.

The moment he steps inside, it's like his body remembers before his mind can stop it. The smell of ice. The echo of skates. The banners hanging from the rafters—their banners. The ones he and Shane raised together.

He doesn't look up.

He doesn't need to.

Shane's team is in their locker room, stretching, lacing skates, reviewing plays. He can feel the day pressing down on him, the seconds ticking closer to their inevitable encounter.

And then it happens.

A hallway. Narrow. Sterile, fluorescent-lit. A brief moment between locker rooms, just wide enough for one person to pass another.

Shane rounds the corner at the same time as Ilya.

Time stops.

Ilya stiffens instantly, every muscle taut, like a drawn bowstring. His eyes flicker, scanning Shane, but he doesn't step closer. He cowers slightly, almost instinctively, like Shane could strike or shout or reject him again.

"Hollander," Ilya says, voice low, cautious. Not his name, not *moya lyubov'*, not the nickname that used to curl warmth into his chest every time he heard it. Just plain, clipped, wary.

Ilya starts to step past, attempting to put space between them, trying to act professional, trying to protect himself.

But Shane doesn't move. His chest heaving, hands clenching into fists. Something inside him snaps.

"I remember!" Shane yells, voice raw and shaking.

Ilya freezes mid-step. He glances back, eyebrows raised, eyes wide.

Shane takes a tentative step forward. "I... I remember," he begins softly, voice breaking with the weight of years lost. "I remember it all—the kisses, the hugs, me proposing, our movie nights..." His voice falters, a tear sliding down his cheek. "I remember it all."

Ilya doesn't move. His arms hang at his sides, tense, unsure, the world narrowing to Shane's voice.

"And I am so sorry," Shane continues, tears streaking his face now. "For how I treated you. How I forgot you. You are the most important person in my life—a man I imagined spending the rest of my life with. I don't know how I forgot you!" Shane screams out in frustration, not pointed at Ilya but himself.

A faint, bitter laugh escapes Shane. "You know... I used to dream of our wedding. How it would go, who would attend, the arguments over food and drinks. How you'd order me ginger ale because you knew I couldn't drink soda with dinner. I dreamed of it all... and now..." He swallows, voice catching, "I dream of it too. The same dream from four years ago."

Ilya stands frozen, mouth slightly open, unable to speak. His heart hammers against his ribs as if it wants to escape.

Shane takes a small step closer, shaking, still crying softly. “I am so sorry it took me so long to remember. I don’t expect you to forgive me... or even want me.”

Ilya doesn’t move. He just stares, frozen, caught between disbelief and cautious hope. Shane’s chest heaves, tears still streaking his cheeks, voice soft now but trembling: “I needed you to know.”

For a long moment, neither speaks. Shane’s chest rises and falls, heart hammering like it’s trying to escape his ribcage. He takes a deep breath, trying to steady himself. Ilya stands frozen, eyes wide, jaw tight, silent, unsure.

Shane slowly lifts a hand, shaking slightly. His palm is open, tentative, fingers quivering. “I... can I—” he starts, voice barely above a whisper. “Can I touch you?”

Ilya blinks. His lips part, then close again. He doesn’t step back. Not yet. But something inside him shifts. The wall he built over the past three years begin to crumble.

Slowly, almost painfully, Ilya nods.

Shane inches forward. Slowly. Reverently. He raises his hand and places it gently on Ilya’s cheek.

Ilya doesn’t pull away. Instead, instinctively, he leans into the touch, closing his eyes for a heartbeat.

Shane’s lips twitch into a soft, tender smile. “I needed to tell you,” he murmurs. “I needed you to know... I never stopped loving you. Deep down... even when I didn’t know it myself. My mind may have forgotten, but my heart... it always knew. It always knew you were mine.”

Ilya swallows, a tear escaping down his cheek. A broken sob breaks through him, barely audible, and yet it shakes the air around them. Somehow, despite the grief, despite the distance, he smiles through it, tentative but real.

Shane sees it. Feels it. And without waiting for anything more, without asking permission, he leans forward.

Their lips meet.

Soft at first. Hesitant. Timid. Then firmer, more certain, as the years of longing, of lost time, of heartbreak and memory, pour into that kiss.

Ilya’s hands rise slowly, resting on Shane’s shoulders, holding on as if afraid to let go. Shane cups Ilya’s face, pressing closer, breathing in the scent he never truly forgot.

The world around them falls away—the arena, the other players, the noise, the lights. Nothing exists except them, the space they’ve carved out, and the reunion they didn’t know either of them could survive

Shane pulls back just slightly, resting his forehead against Ilya's, voice trembling but soft. "I'm here. I'm here now. And I'm not going anywhere."

Ilya swallows, nods against him, a mix of relief, longing, and something unspoken settling between them.

For the first time in years, the distance, the fear, the heartbreak—all of it—feels like it can finally begin to mend.

-

Shane and Ilya separate in the hallway, each swallowed by their own racing thoughts. Shane's voice trembles as he murmurs, barely audible:

"I'll find you after the game. I promise."

Ilya nods, chest tight, eyes flickering with a mix of relief and apprehension, before stepping toward his locker room. They don't speak again, but the weight of what's been said hangs in the air, fragile and electric.

The visitors' tunnel hums with energy as the players line up. When Ilya steps onto the ice for warmups, the reaction is immediate. A ripple through the crowd. Cheers louder than expected. Some boos, yes—but drowned out by applause.

Respect.

Always respect.

When the announcer's voice booms through the arena during introductions, Ilya stands at the gate, helmet tucked under his arm.

"And now—captain of the visiting team—"

The crowd roars before his name is even finished.

"ILYA RO-ZA-NOV!"

He skates out, smooth and controlled, taking a full lap around the ice. The chant rises—Ilya! Ilya!—echoing off the boards.

The game begins.

Both teams are fierce, every pass and check charged with unspoken emotion. Shane watches from the sidelines, giving feedback, assisting where needed, but every glance toward the ice is drawn to Ilya. He's faster, sharper, more ruthless than ever—yet there are flashes of the man Shane remembers beneath the ice-cold exterior.

The final buzzer sounds. Ilya's team wins. The cheers from the stands are deafening, but for Shane, the noise fades into a heartbeat of anticipation.

Later, both teams retreat to their locker rooms. Sweat, exhaustion, and adrenaline mix in the air.

The locker room buzzes with post-game chaos—players laughing, clapping each other on the back, towels flung across benches, the smell of sweat and ice lingering thickly in the air. Ilya moves automatically, peeling off his jersey, muscles tight and exhausted, and steps into the shower. Hot water hisses and splashes, steam curling around him. He tilts his head back, letting the water pound against his shoulders, trying to wash off the adrenaline, the tension, the lingering chaos of the game.

When he finally steps out, towel around his waist, the cool air of the locker room hitting damp skin, he makes his way to his locker, moving carefully but efficiently. He sits briefly to pull on his pants, adjusts his belt, fixes the fit with the practiced precision of years.

Shane steps inside quietly, almost unnoticed at first. He doesn't rush. He doesn't make a sound. He leans lightly against a wall, heart hammering in his chest, and watches.

Ilya doesn't notice him at first. He pulls his shirt over his head, hair damp and sticking slightly to his forehead. Every small motion—the tilt of his head, the slight flex of his shoulders—triggers memories Shane didn't realize were still there, memories buried deep, resurfacing now with every second.

The years apart, the anger, the fear, the heartbreak—all of it compressed into this single moment.

Shane's chest tightens. He doesn't move closer. He doesn't want to risk startling him. He just watches, each breath careful, measured. He sees the curve of Ilya's shoulders, the rise and fall of his chest, the sharp line of his jaw.

Some of the players glance up. A few freeze mid-laugh, noticing Shane standing there. Murmurs ripple quietly through the room—curiosity, surprise, recognition—but no one interrupts. They all know the tension, all sense the fragile gravity of this reunion. A couple of Shane's former rivals exchange glances, subtly stepping back to give the space its due. Even Ilya's teammates hesitate, sensing the unspoken weight between the two men.

Ilya senses it long before he feels it. A weight behind him, the warmth of someone close enough that it presses softly against his back. A careful, familiar pressure. He freezes, muscles taut, heartbeat quickening.

Then he feels it: arms wrap gently around him from behind. Protective. Familiar. And the heat, the presence, is unmistakable.

Ilya stiffens for a moment, uncertainty written across his face—but slowly, hesitantly, he turns.

Shane is there. Close. Smiling softly, vulnerability shining in his eyes, the warmth in his gaze unspoken but undeniable.

“Ready?” Shane asks, voice soft, careful, full of hope and trepidation.

Ilya swallows, chest rising and falling quickly, emotions choking off his words. He doesn’t need to ask where they’re going or what will happen next. The answer is simple.

“Ready,” he whispers, voice steady now.

A few teammates notice, glancing at Shane’s reassuring hand brushing gently down Ilya’s arm. Some exchange quiet smiles, understanding the moment without needing words. Others glance away, giving the two the space they clearly need, the locker room quieting slightly in reverence to what’s happening.

Shane smiles wider, fingers lingering just a moment longer on Ilya’s arm before they step toward the locker room exit together. Quiet intimacy threads between them, hearts syncing in rhythm, a suspended moment in time where everything else—the past, the games, the chaos—fades away.

For the first time in years, it doesn’t matter what the world expects. As long as they’re together... it’s enough.

Shane and Ilya step out of the arena, the cool evening air brushing against their faces. The city hums around them—cars, distant voices, lights—but it feels muted, like they’re in their own bubble.

Shane leads the way to his car. Ilya follows almost automatically, hands loosely at his sides, eyes tracing Shane’s every movement. He doesn’t question, doesn’t speak. He just... goes.

Once inside, Shane starts the car, the engine low and steady beneath them. They drive in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the rhythmic passing of streetlights filling the space.

Then Shane reaches over, slowly, deliberately, and takes Ilya’s hand in his. Fingers intertwining. The touch is gentle, warm, grounding. Ilya doesn’t pull away. He doesn’t even speak. He just lets himself be held.

Shane smiles softly, glancing at him. “Do you remember when we ran off to the cottage for two weeks?” he asks, voice teasing but tender.

Ilya blinks, caught off guard by the casual tone. He nods slowly, a small smile tugging at his lips.

Shane laughs, shaking his head. “God, we were idiots. Two weeks. No phones, no schedules, no one knowing where we were. Nothing. Just us. You insisted on cooking every night, and I somehow ended up chopping firewood and tripping over every log.” Shane laughs, shaking his head. “You laughed at me every time. I think you secretly enjoyed it.”

Ilya lets out a quiet laugh, trying to shake the lump of emotion in his throat. Shane’s smile softens as he glances at him again, and then he notices the tear slipping down Ilya’s cheek.

“You really do remember,” Ilya murmurs, voice small.

Shane swallows and, without a word, pulls off to the side of the road. He turns the car off, clicks his seatbelt free, and carefully climbs over the center console, settling into Ilya’s lap.

Ilya freezes for a heartbeat, shocked, but the tension in his chest softens almost instantly. His hands come up instinctively, sliding around Shane’s waist, holding him close.

“I remember everything,” Shane murmurs, pressing his forehead lightly against Ilya’s. “Every little thing. Every laugh, every kiss, every dumb argument...” He chuckles softly, warmth in his eyes unwavering. “It’s all still there.”

He tightens his arms just slightly. “And I plan to make more.”

Something in Ilya breaks. He leans forward, lips capturing Shane’s in a desperate, needy kiss, urgency and longing spilling into every movement. Shane responds instantly, arms wrapping around Ilya’s neck, holding him close, grounding himself in the warmth and familiarity of the man he’s never truly stopped loving.

“I missed you,” Ilya chokes out between kisses, voice raw. “I missed you so much!”

He buries his face in Shane’s neck, clutching him tightly, as if holding on could make up for all the lost years, all the distance, all the pain. Shane rocks slightly, holding him, letting the tears fall freely for both of them, letting their hearts speak what words could never fully capture.

For the first time in years, they’re not afraid. Not of the past. Not of the world. Not of each other.

They just exist—two halves finally, painfully, undeniably together again.

Eventually, Shane settles back into the driver’s seat, buckling himself in. Ilya shifts beside him, still warm and curled in the seat, his fingers playing with Shane’s hand in quiet, lazy amusement. Shane glances down every few minutes, catching the small movements of Ilya’s fingers, and smiles softly.

The drive continues in gentle silence, the hum of the tires on the road the only sound between them. Ilya leans his head lightly against the seat, eyes closing, finally letting himself drift into sleep. Shane glances at him, heart swelling, then keeps his eyes on the road.

When Ilya wakes, sunlight spills through the trees, the scent of pine and lake air filling the car. He blinks, disoriented... and then freezes.

They’re back.

The cottage. Just like before.

Shane glances over, nervously smiling. “What do you say we make new memories? Starting now... at the cottage. Two weeks. Just like last time.”

Ilya's jaw drops slightly. His eyes widen, disbelief and delight mixing into a laugh that's half shock, half joy.

Shane chuckles nervously, a blush creeping over his cheeks. "I hope I'm not overstepping, but... I already talked with your coach. The season's over, and I asked if you could stay behind. Would you like to?"

Ilya's grin spreads across his face, unstoppable, wide and genuine. "Sounds perfect," he breathes.

He takes a breath, then adds softly, "I'm actually retiring... hockey's definitely taken a toll on me. I've already talked with my coach. This was my last season. They'll announce my retirement next month."

Shane squeezes his hand gently, eyes glimmering. "Then it's just us. Two weeks, no distractions, no schedules, no games. Just... us."

Ilya leans in, brushing his forehead against Shane's shoulder. "I think I like the sound of that," he murmurs, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

Shane had already planned ahead. Before leaving, he quietly spoke to his friends and family, asking for their privacy and understanding. "We just need these two weeks," he said softly. "No interruptions. Just us." Everyone—Yuna, David, Hayden, Jackie, even Shane's teammates—had been more than happy to respect that. Excitement and warmth colored their well-wishes, and Shane and Ilya were left with the space they needed.

The first night in the cottage was... a little awkward. Every corner, every chair, every little detail was steeped in memory. The kitchen table where they'd argued over breakfast, the couch where they'd spent lazy mornings, the deck where they'd watched sunsets. Shane felt the tension more acutely; Ilya's laughter sounded tentative, unsure. They both knew it—but neither spoke. Instead, they made tea, settled near the fireplace, and let the quiet stretch comfortably around them.

By the next morning something had shifted.

The awkwardness melted away in the soft light of dawn and the gentle sounds of the lake. The air smelled of pine and water, the sun glinting off the cabin windows. They were calmer, more open. Smiles came easier. Laughter flowed naturally. They just... went with it, letting the flow of time and each other guide them.

The days passed in a rhythm of simple joys:

Cooking together, sometimes playfully arguing over measurements, sometimes laughing when things went completely wrong.

Sitting on the porch with mugs of coffee, telling stories and teasing one another.

Swimming in the lake, racing, splashing, floating side by side in silence, watching the sunlight flicker across the water.

Board games that inevitably ended with mock arguments and lots of laughter.

Quiet evenings by the fire, wrapped in blankets, reading, talking, or just watching the stars appear.

Each day chipped away at the walls they had built over years of separation and fear.

Then, on the fifth night, the shift became physical.

Shane had gone to bed early, curling under the covers, exhausted but content. The moonlight filtered through the windows, painting the room in silver tones. A soft knock—or rather, the lack of a knock—signaled something different.

Ilya appeared in the doorway of Shane's bedroom. He didn't speak. He didn't move forward immediately. He just stood there, towel over his shoulder, hair damp, eyes flicking briefly to Shane and then back to the floor.

Shane didn't say a word. He just lifted the covers, patting the space beside him. A simple gesture, quiet but heavy with invitation.

Ilya hesitated a heartbeat longer, then walked over, sliding beneath the covers. He curled close, instinctively molding himself to Shane's side. Shane's arm came around him, holding him tight, resting his hand lightly against Ilya's back.

No words were needed. None were spoken. The past, the hurt, the distance—all dissolved in the gentle rhythm of breathing, the warmth of bodies pressed together.

That night, they curled together, limbs tangling naturally, hearts syncing, breathing slow and steady. Shane's arm draped securely over Ilya's shoulder, Ilya's head resting against Shane's chest. The world outside ceased to exist.

They fell asleep like that, in each other's arms, the quiet comfort of finally being together outweighing everything else.

It wasn't rushed. It wasn't frantic. It was gentle, deliberate, and deeply familiar—a reclamation of intimacy, of closeness, of love that had never truly been lost.

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The two weeks at the cottage flew by, a perfect mix of laughter, teasing, quiet moments, and rediscovered intimacy. Every meal, every swim, every board game, every shared sunset reminded them that the time apart had never erased what they had.

When the last morning at the cottage arrived, Shane turned the car toward his parents' house, glancing at Ilya with a small, teasing smile.

"Ready to surprise my parents?" Shane asked.

Ilya's lips curved into a smile, nodding. "I've been ready since the moment we left the cottage," he said softly, reaching over to squeeze Shane's hand.

Shane chuckled. “Good. I just hope they’re as excited as we are.”

The car hummed along the road, quiet except for the occasional soft conversation between them. Ilya felt a thrill of anticipation—he had seen Yuna and David before, of course, but seeing their faces light up with surprise and joy? That would be... special.

When they pulled into the driveway, Shane got out first, then turned to Ilya. “Ready?”

Ilya nodded, heart hammering with excitement and nerves.

Shane knocked, and moments later the door swung open. Yuna and David stood there, still in casual morning clothes, looking sleepy... and then their eyes landed on Ilya.

Their faces transformed instantly.

“Ilya?!” Yuna gasped, tears welling as she stepped forward, enveloping him in a tight hug. “Oh my God, it’s so good to see you again!”

David’s grin spread wide, and he clapped Ilya on the shoulder. “Welcome back, son! You have no idea how happy we are to see you!”

Ilya’s chest tightened with emotion. He hugged them both, letting himself feel the warmth and love he had missed so much. Shane, standing slightly behind him, watched quietly, heart full, a small smile tugging at his lips.

The visit was brief but full of quiet happiness, laughter over small stories Shane shared, teasing from Yuna, and proud, supportive smiles from David. When it was time to leave, Shane slid his arm around Ilya’s waist, and they headed back to Shane’s house, the car filled with soft conversation and comfortable silence.

Back at the house, Ilya paused in the doorway, taking it all in. Three years had passed, but nothing had changed. The photos of them together still lined the walls; the little mementos of their life were exactly where they had left them. It was as if the house had been waiting, frozen in time, for them to come back.

Ilya didn’t question it. He didn’t need to. A smile broke across his face, soft and warm. He set his bag down, let himself breathe in the familiarity, and allowed himself to feel at home again.

A week later, Ilya’s retirement regiment was officially published. Fans flooded social media with support, congratulating him on his decision, celebrating the end of his career, and wishing him well for this new chapter of life. The noise of the public world existed, but inside the walls of Shane’s house, none of it mattered.

Ilya moved into the house with Shane, slipping back into a rhythm that was both old and new. They cooked together, laughed together, and in the quiet moments—sitting on the porch, sharing morning coffee, or tangled in bed—they simply existed as they had meant to for years.

Shane's house, untouched and waiting, was now their home again. Ilya marveled at the little details—the photos, the carefully preserved memories—and didn't question them. He simply smiled, heart full, knowing he was exactly where he belonged.

For Shane and Ilya, the past had been painful, the present full of rediscovery, and the future... well, the future was theirs to build together.

And finally, after all the heartbreak, the fear, the years lost, and the memories reclaimed, they were whole again.

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