

nettles

drkr2pnt0



a HEATED RIVALRY fan work

NETTLES



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DRKR2PNT0

nettles by drkr2pnt0

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The years shall run like rabbits, for in my arms I hold the Flower of the Ages, and the first love of the world. But all the clocks in the city began to whirr and chime:

'O let not Time deceive you, you cannot conquer Time. (...) In headaches and in worry, vaguely life leaks away, and Time will have his fancy, to-morrow or to-day.

W.H. Auden, *As I Walked Out One Evening*

As for me, I go on. Alone, now.

Clarice Lispector, "Obsession", *The Complete Stories*

Foli, are you still here? I am unsure how to survive without you.

(I am unsure how to be me without you.)

Outer Wilds

How people go on, and how people don't.

Ada Limón, *Accident Report in the Tall, Tall Weeds*

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Part One:

Ilya

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Chapter One

GREATNESS IS MADE of beginnings, Grigori Rozanov had once told him.

It wasn't said kindly, or to encourage. It was delivered like how most things were in that house: as a statement of fact, as instruction, as something that didn't need to be comfortable to be true. Voice flat and declarative, like it was law rather than thought. His father believed in beginnings like other men believed in God—as something rigid, hierarchical, already written. You began correctly, or you failed early, and everything that followed was merely consequence.

Ilya learned young how to stand still under that gaze. Grigori Rozanov was a man made of restraint, a statesman's spine, a voice that never rose because—well, it never needed to. Affection was never much of a priority for him, it seemed, and praise was rarer still. Most of the time, it came in the form of him *not* disapproving of something Ilya'd done, for once—and even that was rare enough that it just felt accidental. Mostly though, love meant expectation: *be more, be better, be worthy*.

And still, Ilya'd loved him. That was the cruelty of it, really—he'd loved his father with desperate devotion, wanting to be seen, to matter, to one day be pointed at and claimed. *This is my son*, the

father in his dreams would say as he beamed at him, warm hand on Ilya's shoulder. It was always the same fantasy, ultimately—wanting to make his father proud had consumed his entire childhood, while other boys had just wanted toys or games. For that version of his father—proud, warm, beaming—Ilya would've shaped himself into anything. So pride became his native language, achievement his first dialect. Russia itself started to blur with his father's approval—homeland, legacy and expectation all collapsing into the same heavy weight he carried in his chest.

Greatness is made of beginnings. The phrase stayed with him, lodged somewhere deep, and Ilya carried it with him longer than he carried anything else. Carried it through cold Moscow winters that bit at his skin and taught him endurance by force. Through teenage years spent measuring himself against impossible standards and larger-than-life silhouettes. Through the gradual unraveling of his mother's psyche. Through her suicide, which felt like a fault line that split the house open and was never spoken of again, sealed off behind locked doors like everything else in that home. Carried it through hockey—the ice, the discipline, the clarity of effort becoming result. Through the rise that was supposed to explain everything. Through becoming great, unmistakably great, the greatest hockey player of his generation, second only to a player even greater. Through his father's disappearance into dementia, the cruel inversion of roles, the man who'd once been indestructible now reduced to fragments, to repeating his words, to forgetting the very greatness

he'd once demanded. Carried it through Shane Hollander, who arrived both too late and too early, all at once.

Greatness is made of beginnings. Decades later, and the words still made him vaguely sick, still hit him wrong, still felt like they were twisting his insides around, because—what happens when the beginnings never end? When they stretch and stretch, shapeless and unresolved, until it all starts to feel like he's stalling instead of actually starting? When stillness becomes habit, and habit becomes waiting, and waiting becomes something that looks a lot like paralysis if he stares at it too long?

You look so sad, Ilyusha, his mother's voice echoes in his head. *So sad. Like me.*

Had she really said it? Or had he just imagined it? Made the memory up somewhere along the way, sometime while his own sadness was festering, polluting, following him like a storm shadowing over a country, influencing everything, determining what could grow, what could survive? Ilya doesn't know. He just knows that years were passing, and his limbs were growing, and, hell, *he* was growing—child into boy into man, dream into ambition into greatness, obscurity into reputation into spectacle—until one day he suddenly realized that something inside him had somehow reversed. That while his body had kept moving forward, some part had contracted instead, folded back in on itself, become smaller, more cautious, more afraid. Until,

without ceremony, the boy who'd grown into man had gone from man back to boy.

There wasn't one moment he could point to and say, *look, here, it started here*. Just the realization that he'd lost range, lost reach, lost the ability to imagine himself beyond what he already was. But, well—then again, naming it would change nothing. Self-pity would solve nothing, he knew. His father had seen to that. This was just another thing for him to carry, wasn't it? So Ilya learned how to live around it, how to step without feeling the arrows buried in him, buried so deep he wouldn't remember they were there in the first place. Russia's Achilles, wearing himself out, year by year, adjusting his steps so he wouldn't press too hard against his wounds. Learning to map the pain, memorizing where he'd buried it.

A crisis of purpose? Existential numbness? A dread that followed him like a shadow? It didn't matter much what it was. All he knew was that it *felt* like he was chasing an enemy that didn't exist—or rather, one that only existed inside him—and the harder he ran, the faster it seemed to move, the older he grew, the less he recognized himself, and somewhere along the way, dissociation had become less the cause and more the effect.

Well—he was who he was. No point lingering on it.

There were too many things already crystallized inside him by the time he came of age—old fear, old voices—and removing them felt worse than just leaving them where they were, stacked

neatly and not bothering him too much. Sure, the fear, the voices, the panic—they all made his chest tighten and his breathing suddenly pick up and his throat close down, but they also gave him direction, helped keep him on his toes, left him hyper-conscious of what he stood to lose if he let himself settle, let himself get too comfortable. *This is what's waiting for you if you get distracted. This is what's waiting if you stop to rest.* Fear kept him vigilant, kept him disciplined, made sure he kept his eye on the ball and never looked away for even a second. It was the same reason why he'd rejected the idea of speaking to a therapist for most of his life, really, much as it was frowned upon back home—therapy would force him to accept himself as he was, his circumstances as they were, resign himself to his current state, and that was the one thing he refused to do. He'd rather anxious but awake than settled but dormant. So he relented—Ilya would adapt and build a life around what little he could bear, one that never asked too much of him and demanded as little of his heart as possible. He'd function. He'd excel. He'd become very, *very* good at not making things worse. And that'd be that.

Time passed that way. A year, then another, then enough that counting them as years started to feel a bit arbitrary, so he turned to counting hockey seasons instead, as a reminder of what truly demanded his focus. He forced the world to rearrange itself around him, bent it to his will—but through it all, he couldn't help but stay suspended in that in-between, refusing to be small or ordinary or to let *this* be all there was, and yet being unable to move towards anything else. Thrashing while immobile,

screaming while stuck in place. Resistance becoming paralysis, rebellion hollowing itself out.

Greatness, he'd remember, when doubt surfaced. *Think of hockey. Think of legacy. Think of Moscow. Think of making it all worth something.* But it just passed through him anyway, and even started to feel small against the loneliness that'd settled in his bones. He could be completely surrounded—in locker rooms loud with laughter, or dinners crowded with familiar faces, or next to dozens of bodies that were close enough to touch—and still feel sealed off, wrapped in bubble wrap, locked behind whatever invisible, unyielding wall he'd raised up that day. And, well, sure, he could talk to someone about it, theoretically—Svetlana would hear him out, maybe Marleau, too—but vulnerability just felt self-indulgent, and his throat would immediately tighten, his jaw would lock, his eyes would slide away, the words would turn to sand right as he tried to reach for them. It all felt too humiliating, too shameful, too embarrassing, made him feel so *small*. *A failure of discipline*, his father would probably call it.

Ilya would pause to look at it sometimes, to question just when had his whole identity turned into this, just when had meaning and purpose thinned out, when exactly had everything started to feel like sand passing through calloused fingers. But—well—it was all he knew by this point, really. All that restraint had become reflex, or instinct, and Ilya had learned all too well how to swallow everything bitter, had mastered smiling in the right places, laughing without believing it, nodding convincingly enough, burying the fatigue so he'd never find it again. He could

participate in conversations and make it look like he was actively present, could keep his worst thoughts folded and compressed into something that never spilled. But every day still felt directionless, like he was moving just for the sake of moving, aimless.

His mind drifted, like it often did, towards the stories he'd loved as a boy. Some days, he couldn't help thinking of Odysseus. It was a melodramatic comparison, he knew, but he couldn't shake it—Odysseus without Ithaca, wandering without direction, shipwrecked across the Aegean, rising and falling according to winds he could never command. Drifting north, south, east, west, everywhere but where he intended. It felt like Ilya, too, was rowing blind towards an abstract of home, one that only receded the closer he thought he was to reaching it.

Well, anything to avoid the weight of his father's gaze, he supposed—stern and critical and never fully gone, not even when it eventually became Ilya's own gaze, turned inwards.

At night, when everything fell away, his mind would refuse to rest. Sleep came and went unpredictably, and Ilya would lie awake some nights, thinking of all the different versions of himself he might've been had things tilted even just slightly differently. The boy, the athlete, the son, the lover, the man, the person. They all hovered right in front of him, real enough that he couldn't grieve them, technically, but each one somehow less than what they

might've been, or should've been. Like he could've been better at every single one of them.

So what else could he do, but dream? And, oh, did Ilya dream. He dreamed of intensity, of finally letting go, of living life on his own terms and feeling a joy that didn't come with any warning labels. Dreamed of the Floating Gardens of Babylon, of building a home in them, of miracles, old and new, miracles so wondrous they made a mockery of his father's entire theology of restraint. Of meaning, purpose, settledness—*greatness*, finally—real and tangible and malleable and his and right there, oh, right there in his hands.

He dreamed of being remade, stripped down to the true core of what he was, or could be. Dreamed of overnight transformation, arriving from somewhere outside himself—a biblical moment, or a mythological force, or a giant's hand reaching down somehow to set him free from all this mediocrity that he'd become. Divine intervention, some otherworldly catastrophe—Jesus, anything would do when it was five in the morning and his imagination was set loose. Anything powerful enough to overcome this inertia he couldn't seem to escape. Gods with outstretched hands, ready to tear him apart and build him anew.

He dreamed, too, of simpler things. More than anything, really. Though he didn't know what it said about him that the ordinary felt less attainable than the extraordinary—mostly it just made him sad when he woke up. Two pairs of feet propped up

on a sofa. A favorite film half-watched. Some dog barking in the background—but the pleasant odd bark, not the annoying incessant one. His head resting against someone else's, or someone else's head against his—just the weight of it. Sentences that were left unfinished, because whoever was there in his dreams already knew how they ended, somehow, and it made him feel fucking giddy. Notes spread through their home, missing signatures, because, well, those went without saying, and some of them were grocery lists, taped to the fridge, and others were just little reminders, maybe lost under the cabinets. Ilya dreamed of smiling—of looking up at the face of the person he loved most and his lips twitching of their own accord, big and wide. Of smiling so instinctively his cheeks would ache and his heart would burst.

For a long time, he went about his days mistaking closeness for intimacy, mistaking being wanted for being known—though never wanting for knowing, funnily enough. Bodies were easy, frankly, and they didn't ask much of him beyond just being present and performing. There was a relief to that, how basic and predictable it all was, how raw physicality could drown out thought, even if just for a few moments. Touch without any tenderness, sex reduced to the simple mechanics of belts unbuckling, mouths touching, words being spoken out of habit rather than this otherworldly, transformative desire.

He let it happen because, well, why wouldn't he? It proved, even if just for a second, that he still existed, still occupied space,

still had a body—and he was damn good at using it, thank you very much. Women laughed at his jokes, men looked twice, strangers remembered his name even when they forgot their own. If nothing else, he knew how to make someone want him. There was always another smile to return, another drink to buy, another bedroom waiting somewhere at the end of the night. It had a rhythm to it, a beginning, a middle, an end. You flirted, you laughed, you touched, you kissed, you left before morning. Catch their eye, say the right thing, lean in at the right moment, whisper at the right second, call the cab, mess up the sheets, straighten your clothes. Clean, predictable, fun, *easy*—infinitely easier than letting someone know him—but it also left him emptier every time.

The euphoria would always fade quickly, replaced by that old, familiar emptiness, the sense that he'd missed something essential, that he'd once again tried to reclaim something he didn't know he'd lost. Some strange hollowness. Ilya would walk away carrying the exact same ache he'd arrived with, all the more convinced of the contradiction at the root of him. Wood made of cotton, maybe—hard at a distance, but gentle to the touch, that split under the faintest pressure and turned itself into seas, then searched for harbors made of wreckage and grey skies beneath which to anchor.

Or maybe there wasn't a metaphor for it at all. Maybe he was just lost.

For years, he refused to look directly at it, to ask who he was or what he'd become. *Clean lines are boring*, he told himself often. *This is depth. This is complexity. This is interesting. Better this than ordinary. Better this than forgettable. Better this than mediocre.* He'd always preferred extremes, after all—peaks and valleys, the storm *after* the calm.

What was there to say, really? He searched endlessly for the single explanation that would unlock everything, spent whole nights staring at the ceiling convinced the next thought might finally be the right one. He dissected, catalogued, deconstructed, broke things apart and rearranged them, yet never moved past the thinking.

All those lives he hadn't lived. All that love he hadn't allowed himself. All the chosen families he might've found if he'd lingered here or hurried there. Other paths. Other homes. Other versions of himself. *Somewhere else*, he'd think. *Somewhere else, someone else.* Somewhere else, someone else was getting it right. Somewhere else, someone else's life was unfolding exactly as this one hadn't. Somewhere else, another Ilya had made a single different choice, and everything after it had followed.

Days repeated themselves dully, like waves against ice, each morning bringing the same hope of rebirth and the same disappointment when everything would remain the same. He'd dream of change, wake up, and immediately know better.

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Greatness, he'd force himself to keep remembering, as a mantra. *Hockey. Legacy. Moscow. Pride.*

Sometimes he wondered if this was simply all he was built for. If he was just configured differently for the type of life other people seemed to fall into without much effort. *Some flowers aren't made to bloom*, he'd tell himself, and find some comfort in how fatalistic it was. *Some flowers are made to wilt, and to wither, and to someday die.*

Time continued its work. He grew older in ways that surprised him, laugh lines appearing without memory of laughter, milestones passing without much ceremony, watching his friends settle into lives that seemed to seamlessly click into place somehow. Relationships smoothing into routines, futures taking on shape and direction. He felt like an observer to his own life—present, but unanchored, participating, but never really arrived. Still, something in him refused to go quiet, and Ilya continued to chase intensity like how others sought stability, finding meaning and direction in what other people called extreme.

Well—anything would do, he supposed. Anything that would break the numbness open, even if just for a second. Anything that would put an end to all this waiting.

And then, somewhere along the way, Shane Hollander appeared.



HE DIDN'T REALLY understand what was happening, at first.

Shane was just there, in the periphery of his life, in those early unremarkable days of hockey. Not really someone Ilya had noticed—the KHL was an entire world apart, after all—but he somewhat knew the name, the face, just vague enough to be in the corner of his mind, like a whisper he couldn't quite catch. But the league had them marked, tied together in some unspoken script, and so they were going to keep crossing paths, circling each other like planets being pulled by the same gravity. It felt inevitable, like a current that was dragging them closer to each other whether they wanted it or not.

But then Shane showed up that first day in Saskatchewan and came up to him, so awkward and earnest and polite—and so very Canadian—and introduced himself, and, fuck, who knew that's how it'd all start? In a voice Ilya would come to expect, one that wouldn't demand anything from him. In someone, well, quite boring, frankly, and who'd ask him equally boring questions, but who'd actually wait for him to answer every time instead of filling in the silence for him, and seemed genuinely interested in whatever Ilya had to say. In a boy meeting another boy, in unexpected pleasantries and polite remarks, in *Ilya Rozanov? Shane Hollander, I wanted to introduce myself and you're an awesome player to watch and good luck in the tournament tomorrow.*

So simply, so casually, like the fabric of their lives wasn't forever changing right that very second. There wasn't any thunder, any ceremony, any divine hand reaching down, any fire splitting open the sky—or if there was, it sure as shit didn't happen in fucking Regina, Saskatchewan. Just Shane, as ordinary as any guy Ilya'd met before, stepping into his orbit and refusing to ever leave it again.

So what the hell was he supposed to do but give in to it? He had no choice. No fucking choice but to surrender to the pull of him—Shane Hollander, eventual Prince of Hockey, fated rival if the MLH had any say in it, all awkward edges and stammering pauses, polite to a fault, freckles across his face like something incidental, unremarkable, impossible to look away from.

Attraction followed. Of course attraction followed—how could it *not*? Immediate, volatile, less a feeling and more this goddamn current that spiked to hell and back when they shared the same space, that snapped into place like some law of nature. It thrived off their proximity, off the smallest physical closeness, and all the oxygen in the air would evaporate as soon as he looked at Shane, and the distance between them would, fucking, hum or flare when Shane looked back at him, and Ilya, well—he'd immediately lose whatever battle he was having in his head to what Shane's eyes were doing from the other end of the room. God, he'd spent his whole lifetime disciplining himself against stupid impulses like this, and still his body betrayed him, responding before his mind could even stop to intervene.

Over time, after years of swallowing it down and pretending it wasn't anything beyond sex, genuine affection would end up festering and taking root in his chest. And then, before he'd even realized it, before he knew he was ready, before he could've given time permission to move forward, it had moved anyway, and half a decade had passed, and—*love*. The love of his life. The reason he breathed, and woke up every morning, and put right foot in front of left.

There wasn't a sudden clarity, some shift in the air that might imply the ground was right about to split open and swallow him whole. If anything, it's almost irritating how subtle everything changed, how his feelings refused to announce themselves until they were obvious and right in front of his face or anyone who dared to look closely. He'd tried to brace for intensity, for upheaval, but loving Shane was a wrecking ball he had no time to prepare for. One day, he was *Hollander*. The next he was *Shane*. The next he was the love of his life.

It fucking *terrified* him. Ilya had spent his whole life disciplining himself against everything that could burn bright and burn out just as fast, and he knew staying wasn't something people did lightly—much less stay with someone as... well, someone like him. Staying implied patience, after all, attention, a willingness to see what unfolded rather than what dazzled, and so Ilya kept expecting the moment where Shane would grow bored—*Mister Boring himself growing bored*, he thinks now, warmly—or disappointed, or distant. The moment where the effort of

knowing Ilya, of having to put up with him and all his moods, would finally outweigh whatever reward he got from being with him. He waited for Shane to withdraw like he'd wait for pain after impact against the boards: already flinching, already rehearsing the snicker, the casual shrug of indifference masking the pain and the gasp stuck inside his throat.

Except it didn't come. Shane tried, sure, but he also learned Ilya, and the pauses in his speech, and how his eyes drifted when he was overwhelmed, and the special kind of silence that meant he was thinking too hard and the other kind that meant he'd stopped thinking altogether. He noticed when Ilya ate less, slept worse, or withdrew without explanation. And Shane never interrogated him, either—just placed a hand lightly over his own when they were alone, or tried an earnest attempt at a straight-face joke that fell flat but humored Ilya all the same, and mostly he kept their routine alive and unbending for years on end. A constant in his life, for once.

And—fuck. He didn't know what to do with that kind of care. How the hell was he supposed to know? How the hell was he meant to cope with the stability of it? It felt undeserved, first of all. Suspicious, second. Tenderness, in his experience, had always come tethered to expectations—*do better, be stronger, do not falter, do not embarrass me, do not make this harder than it already is*—and Shane's affection arrived without any instructions, without any rules to follow, which made his spine chill and his blood curdle in a way his father's cruelty never had. Cruelty, at least, felt legible.

So he found himself holding back on instinct, rationing what parts he'd reveal. He gave Shane humor before honesty, charm before truth, kept his darker corners hidden away, convinced that if Shane saw too much—the doubt, the exhaustion, the despair that arrived without warning sometimes and wrecked him for a week straight—something would break.

And still, Shane never pushed, never pried those doors open. He held on, sometimes more inquisitive, others less so, leaving him to all his secrets and enigmas, but always patient, always waiting, and always *there*—so much so that distancing himself from him started to feel like an increasingly foreign concept to Ilya. And slowly, so slowly he almost missed it, his body started responding before his mind could. He felt more rested when Shane was in his bed, ate without thinking about it, laughed and didn't immediately feel like he needed to justify it to himself. There were these brief, disorienting moments when the static in his head softened a bit and, for once, he could feel at ease, like he could set something down for a minute without fear it'd be stolen.

He tried to tell himself this was only temporary, that everything meaningful was, rehearsing his exit even while he settled into it, keeping one foot always angled towards the door. But the longer he and Shane kept their arrangement alive—as years passed, and they pushed each other *harder, harder, harder*, until it was just the two of them standing together at the top, no one to challenge them, no one to match them, no one to

understand them quite like each other—the harder it became to imagine ever leaving.

And for the first time, the idea of Shane's absence started to hurt in advance, rather than just in his imagination. Between all his fear and all his wanting, Ilya came to understand the real danger of love: that it would ask him to *live*, rather than destroy him outright. Force him to choose presence over paralysis, to stay awake in a life he'd spent so many years barely awake inside.

He'd never understood what living in a constant state of pain was until Shane, not really. Or, well—he'd known suffering, of course, deep, gargantuan suffering, had endured an aching so fucking tectonic and colossal it had rearranged the very ground beneath him—but this was different. This was the pain of attachment, of anticipation, of having something to lose. With Shane, he learned what it meant to love fully, every fracture exposed, with no real plan for survival if it went to shit someday. Love that didn't ask for permission, that didn't wait for him to be ready, that didn't care about any of the defenses he'd spent a lifetime putting up. Love so joyous it constantly hurt, because he kept waiting for it to disappear.

He didn't know then, couldn't know, that his whole life up until Shane had been the darkness before dawn. That the waiting, the confusion, the fear, that constant feeling of standing on the edge of an unstable cliff—those were all signs of motion, not failure. That joy, when it finally came, wouldn't arrive all at once, but would instead come in small, little pieces, in accumulated

moments, so small they were easy to miss if he wasn't paying attention and looking out for them.

He'd often think of his father's mantra. How lonely he'd felt all those years, twisting the words in his mouth, convinced no one else would ever understand their weight. But if there was anyone who could understand greatness quite like Ilya Rozanov, it was Shane Hollander. *The* greatest hockey player of his generation.

Greatness is made of beginnings, the voice whispered, harsh and insistent, reminding him.

But Shane had never asked Ilya to be great. He'd only asked him to be there.

The words would echo, and for the first time, not feel like accusation or demand proof in trophies and legacy and national pride. He'd think of Shane, and the life they were building together, married and in bliss, and he'd almost nod along. *Greatness. Yes. Finally.*

The love he'd always dreamed of. The career he'd once barely dared imagine. The home of his dreams, their cottage tucked away from the rest of the world, a hidden corner of paradise of their own. Shane, of course—Shane everywhere, every time, for the rest of his days. Yuna and David. Svetlana. The Centaurs. The dog he'd always wanted and never let himself get until now—Anyas asleep under the table, her fur forever being cleaned off the

couch, curled up against Shane in their bed despite all his rules, the smallest smile on Shane's mouth whenever he thought Ilya wasn't looking. Grocery lists, house keys, vet appointments, towels in the drier. Even Hayden fucking Pike. Even Hayden and Jackie sending them home with leftovers after Sunday lunch. Even Shane's pissy little moods after Montreal would lose some random game, sulking through the house for days while Ilya just found him endlessly amusing. The whole domestic little picture he'd once thought was impossible.

Was this the life he'd chosen, or had this life chosen him? Sometimes it felt like he'd drifted his entire existence from purgatory to hell and then back again, never quite landing anywhere long enough to build something solid. And then Shane appeared, and the drifting didn't stop, necessarily, but it changed shape. Suddenly, there was direction, however faint. Suddenly, the ascent towards something livable, if that's what it was, felt possible.

The pain didn't leave. It persists and remains to this day, but now he carries it differently. He tolerates it, uses it as a talisman that protects him and reminds him not to fear love or connection, not to flinch away from companionship, but to let them in, tend to them, nurture them, watch them *grow*.

He was living life on his own terms now, and it hadn't been fate that'd got him to that point. No God had reached down, no prophecy had unfolded. Ilya had been the one responsible for all

the hard work, him who'd crawled on his knees out of the pit of complacency over the shards of his broken past.

It wasn't easy, but he'd done it. Not for Shane, not really, and not for anyone else, either. He did it for himself. And he did it because pain is fleeting, and love is endless, and his heart, fractured though it may be, was still beating.

Right?



WELL, NO.

Loving Shane hasn't cured him, hasn't sanded down the worst of depression—*that fucking word Galina loves to use so much*, he thinks ruefully—hasn't made his sadness manageable like how people imagine love can. The loneliness hasn't evaporated. The old ghosts haven't packed up their things and gone.

Shane knows this without needing to be explicitly told, Ilya thinks. Galina knows it too, of course, more so than anyone else. She knows it in how she watches him enter her office, how his shoulders sit in their sockets some days, how his hands either clench or lie uselessly open in his lap.

For years, he'd learned to swallow his pain whole, keeping it lodged in his throat and knowing how to read the dismissal before it could be voiced out loud. His father. His brother. His old coach back in Moscow. He could always see it just about to pop off—the thinning patience, the jaw tightening, the implication he wasn't trying hard enough—if he ever gave his suffering a name. Now, at least, he knows the truth.

His pain is real. Profound, undeniable, validated. Clinically recognized. Clinically named.

And still. Still, there are mornings when doubt slips in, when he wonders if anyone's really looking, if therapy's really peeling back the layers of his mind or if Galina's just remapping the same surface-level terrain over and over again from different angles. He doesn't feel much improved, in any case.

His father surfaces again in these moments. *I have taught you this too many times: look ahead. Chin high. Sit still. Stand straight. No, do not rush. No, no—look up, Илья¹, up. Not down. Only cowards look down, only cowards study the corners. Are you a coward?*

The harsh gaze, the tight frown, the barked orders that never, ever softened.

Enough, Илья. I will tell you this again, and not once more. No one wants to watch a man explain his own failure. The world will measure you before you open your mouth. Do you understand? Grigori's voice sounds

¹ Илья

in his head, and echoes, echoes, echoes. *Remember this—greatness is made of beginnings.*

And mine are too small to reach it, Ilya answers back, always the same words. *Yes, Papa². I know.*

Years later, the words still have weight. His father's dead now, he knows, and there's no one left to ask what he'd make of Ilya's greatness anymore, of his beginnings, no one left to decide whether any of it amounted to the life Grigori Rozanov had once imagined for him. But when he looks at his life, even now, Stanley Cups and records and history and Shane and marriage and Anya notwithstanding, Ilya—greedy, selfish Ilya—still can't find the grandeur he'd been promised. If greatness means standing at the top and basking in the glow and warmth of the sun, thoughts uninterrupted, finally at peace, steady in who he is, then—well, he feels like anything but the Great Ilya Rozanov.

He feels the furthest thing from *great*, actually.

The goddess of time laughs, then, completely indifferent. She leans in close and whispers *incapacity* into his ear, convinces him that *this is just what you are, emotionally amputated, resigned to spend the rest of your life in my icy company*, tells him he's *forever tired, forever stagnant, forever waiting for your final breath*. Her opaque finger curves

² Father

in his direction and assures him that *you are already in debit to life, Ilya*, that nothing else explains the deficit.

Ilya tries to calculate it like he calculates everything else: how much he owes, how much he's already paid, how much is left in him to give before the balance tips against him. When the thoughts become unbearable, he conjures Shane's face, and the pressure in his chest eases and softens, just enough to breathe around.

Shane, his harbor. The world could end at their feet and the intertwining of their souls would still feel sufficient, self-contained, complete. Anya. Yuna. David. The family he's found. The family the universe has handed him, belatedly, like karmic cashback for all the years spent wandering without a map, searching without knowing what he'd been meant to search for all along.

The family he has *with* Shane. The family he has *because* of Shane.

Ilya's chest tightens at the realization. Shane has become the axis around which everything else in Ilya's life turns—every future worth imagining has him standing at the center of it, every version of *home* has his face, and Ilya can't even look at their life together for too long without becoming convinced he'll somehow ruin it or fuck it all up or lose everything the more he tries to preserve it. Sins of the father, yada, yada—the past had corroded him too thoroughly, the future's too abstract to trust,

and every time he opens his hand, something seems to fall through it. And in the hollow of his grip, only the echo of what might've been remains: images that time refuses to preserve, like photographs left too long in the sun.

If Shane's the best thing that's ever happened to him—and he is—then how could Ilya bear to become the worst thing that's ever happened to Shane? And besides, what would he even say? *Shane, I, uh. I need to tell you something. любимый³, I—Jesus Christ.* He can already picture himself fumbling through the sentences, Shane's face falling, the silence that would follow, the questions, the realization settling between them. No fucking way is he putting either of them through that kind of misery. He loves Shane too much for that. It's the kind of devotion where, if Shane was drowning, Ilya would already be underwater before anyone could think to stop him, he knows—lungs burning, arms outstretched, not concerned with the tides or the currents or how some rescues are never meant to actually succeed. Waves rowing against the sea, folding into the wind and dissolving into the air. It doesn't fucking matter. Instinct doesn't negotiate. *Love* doesn't negotiate. Shane would drown, Ilya would dive in after him, and somewhere beneath the surface, he'd realize he'd been the one drowning all along. That was the way of it.

Ilya will survive himself. He always has, either way, but there's no chance he's letting the one good thing in his life slip away,

³ Beloved

especially when Shane already has enough to carry, already worries too much. There's no reason for him to lose sleep over shit that doesn't belong to him. So Ilya will carry whatever needs carrying—he'll swallow it down, he'll smile, he'll say he's tired, and needs sleep, and wait until he's alone to have whatever ridiculous meltdown has been eating away at him all day. He'll blame practice, or the travel, or the weather, or the retrograde motion of the planets, or literally *anything* else. Anything but give Shane more weight to carry, or more reason to worry about him. Anything but become someone that needs to be handled.

He thinks of therapy again. Of Galina, and the armchair in her office, and her notebook, and the crossing and uncrossing of her legs as she shifts in her seat in front of him, watching him, studying him, listening to him. Of how giving words to the weight he carries has made it tangible and measurable, capable of being set down, even if only for a moment.

On the good days, that's enough. The people he loves, the life he's built with them, the support system he's painstakingly put in place—they can all be enough. They *can*. Shane and Anya every day, therapy once a week, David and Yuna every weekend, Svetlana once every few weeks, the team here in Ottawa often enough. Little things, ordinary things. Enough to keep his worst impulses at arm's length. Enough that therapy can stay therapy, and home can stay home, and the ugly parts of him can stay exactly where they belong—between himself and Galina. And Shane never has to see the worst of it. And all is well, all is normal, all is *fine*, thank fucking God.

Besides, what honor is there in asking the people he loves to carry what he should be able to carry himself? His father was a very flawed man, he knows, but there's still some lessons worth taking from him. Grigori Rozanov did not raise the sort of son who hands other people his burdens, or brings them home, or, worse, falls apart in front of his family, imagine that. Men like him are built to endure, and preferably while accomplishing something useful and not wasting anyone's time. If he can manage that much without dragging Shane into it, then everything will turn out just fine. Of course it will. He'll endure whatever he needs to endure, for however long he needs to endure it for, because it means life will carry on exactly as it has, exactly as it should.

But then the night comes, and Ilya's reminded that he's even more fucked in the head than he always gives himself credit for. Late hours while Shane snores next to him and tears soak into Ilya's pillow over futures he'll never get to *live—so fucking pathetic*, he thinks—entire lives he builds up in his head with meticulous patience, ingenious in their detail, before watching them collapse every time. Like dye in water: first dissipating, and only then coloring. A loving brother. A proud father. A living mother. Walking hand-in-hand with Shane through his neighborhood in Moscow for his birthday. Showing him to the bakery down his street he'd spent half his childhood in. Walking in and finding his family already inside, delighted he'd finally come home, grinning and smiling and hugging and laughing and *loving him*.

Whole nights tangled in these thoughts, restless and awake, carried along on the currents of memory. Images of him as a child—little Ilyusha with his combed blonde curls, his mother’s headscarf caught in fingers that don’t quite know how to hold on—and then the rest of it follows, unfolding inevitably like a prophecy.

That child staring back at him late at night, trembling on the precipice of catastrophe. *Not much time left before life comes crashing into him*, Ilya thinks. Barreling down, rushing towards him and sweeping over him, reminding him of fate’s true master and how it lives in the bottom of a bottle of pills, and the silent room at the end of the hall, and the frozen stillness of his mother’s body sprawled over the bed, and the pit in his stomach as he finds her, forever imprinted. A tidal wave that would crash without mercy, and little Ilyusha would be swept with it, utterly helpless beneath it. Colossal and holy and terrible, that unflinching, unstoppable titan of a force, meeting an object it couldn’t move and would thus be forever unmovable as a result.

It all collapses at the first rays of sunlight, dissolving in a lazy smoke that’s both merciful and merciless, all at once. A mild flame of arson fire that burns as it aches, turns to ashes as it bites, but never kills him, not even when it dies. And in the last instants of darkness, she always comes back. The goddess of time, tireless in her collection, charging her tax, meditating over the poetry of a life so well considered, so thoroughly dissected—*but frankly, so poorly lived*.

At night, she stands by Ilya's bed, sees the shadows pooling under his eyes, and asks him what he's searching for.

And as he answers, laughter fills the room: deaf, sardonic, ancient. *Oh, Ilya.*

He knows. The goddess of time's always known irony.



LATE ONE NIGHT, the cassette of Ilya's life plays, rewinds, and plays again, the same track on loop in the dark.

Shane snores lightly at his side, and Ilya thinks of older, simpler times. He hears the wild, messy clapping of children echoing through a sunlit Moscow schoolyard, sees their clasping hands, remembers their careless laughter trying to fill even the coldest spaces like light breaking through the cracks. The brightness of children before the weight of years would settle in over time, unashamed for all they wanted, not yet burned by time or the hollow hope of what might've been. The hands hover right behind his eyes, like these opaque echoes of another life, one that's both too far away and crawling just beneath his skin.

Ilya thinks of the singsong games he and his classmates would play, play-guessing the futures stretched before them. Who would

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be Blonde or Brunette, Bald or Thick-haired, Short or Tall, Fierce or Forgotten? Who would be King or Thief, Policeman or Captain? Lives sketched in minutes, futures mapped like stars, all full of promise and glittering light and terrible, wonderful hope.

The world was their oyster back then, wide and wild and waiting, full of everything and nothing at the same time. He had a lifetime ahead of him at the time, endless and sprawling, days so vast they could stretch forever and swallow him whole without notice, long before the world would get heavy enough to crush. Decades unwritten, like blank pages waiting for stories to be carved into them. How large were those days? How long were the years in front of him?

The river bends, the current pulls, and time steals it all away.

He thinks of the boy he was back then—little Ilyusha, small and tiny, a messed heap of tangled, blonde curls, tugging at his mother's headscarf, soft hands fumbling with the threads, unaware, unknowing, unafraid, unbroken. What would he say if he could reach back through time and speak to that child? Would he laugh, smile at him with the reckless hope he never really lost? Or would he cry? Or scream? Or maybe he'd just hold that boy—hold him tight and close, stop him from ever slipping away, cradle him in silence and try to soothe him with words, words he knew could never fully heal the both of them.

Maybe I'd just rip the band-aid off, he thinks, because sometimes love means breaking the heart open before it breaks on its own in

silence. Because love means telling the truth, plain or blunt or honest or harsh, even if it's so sharp it could cut clean through glass, so that you can finally see what's waiting for you. Because existence is a cold weight that presses down as much as it lifts you up, and maybe it's kinder to know that early on, to go on living already braced for that weight, for the discomfort that always comes, rather than shattered and surprised. *The world is unkind, Ilyusha, unfair. A ruthless master with hands cold as ice.* Ilya would shake him hard and say: *do not believe the lies. Do not let your heart get stuck in the cracks.*

That little boy, so small, eyes bright, hands trembling—Ilya would tell him about the silence that comes, the mother who was there and then wasn't, the father who would never really love him, about the pit that opened in the room where his mother's body was lying still. And about how time, that indifferent bastard, will keep moving even if you freeze in place, leaving you to watch the world march on without you.

Life will barrel into you, Ilya, over and over and over again.

But then time and space fold in on themselves, crashing and colliding until, suddenly, little Ilyusha sits in his stead some, what—twenty-five or so years later? He lies in the same bed Ilya does now, listens to the same rise and fall of Shane's chest beside him. Little Ilyusha, growing and growing and growing just to become little old Ilya—no Gods or religions to catch him, no holy book to latch onto, devoid of purpose except to hold the fragile

remains of his life and clutch them in his shaking hands. Days pitifully passing by him, dripping and slipping and ticking like a clock. Life perpetually suspended, wasting away like mold growing on bread. Patiently waiting for a cosmological Big Bang-like explosion that would justify everything that came before, and then realizing that Shane—Shane, who's his home, who tears through the darkness and shatters the silence and burns steady and bright like a lighthouse and demands Ilya keep living—was that cosmological explosion, and if loving him hadn't yet fixed what was wrong with him, he didn't know what would.

Little Ilyusha, he'd tell him, time is the cruelest villain, slipping and sneaking through cracks, stealing your footprints as you walk above them. It will leave you with nothing but ghosts to haunt the corners of your life. It will give you something back, just to take it away from you again.

A thousand and one dichotomies will live within you, swirl inside you, he would say, and you will but watch.

Ilya knows the river of life flows only once, but... if the child he once was is to live, it's inside him. Ilyusha's dreams are Ilya's—though his fears even more so. That boy with curls tangled in his mother's scarf, small enough to disappear but big enough to dream impossible things. He's still here, somewhere inside, still carrying a light that flickers even now. The boy he was, the man he is, and the love he holds all fold into each other inside him like the tangled roots of an ancient tree, wrapped tightly around the heart of the stubborn man lying next to him.

So, what else is left, if not to hope?

Not the wild, reckless hope of youth. No—something raw and true, a little pocket of light that won't be snuffed out. Hope that maybe there's still a chance to rewrite the story, that maybe he's not just trauma and scars and all the dark diagnoses Galina keeps throwing at him every time he walks through her door. That maybe he can grow beyond the wreckage, choose to hold onto Shane, and through Shane, hold onto life itself. That under all his ruins, all his ghosts, all his sadness that never quite leaves, there it is, that glimmer, that stubborn flicker that refuses to be crushed.

What else is there, really, if not to clutch that spark of hope? So very tiny, yes—fragile and trembling, most days—but real, ultimately. Hope that maybe he's still young, and therefore foolish. That an eternity of days is still ahead of him, still unwritten. That maybe he's scarred and traumatized, yes, but not resigned to his circumstances, not yet, not quite. That maybe there's solace to be found in what is to come, not just in what was, and—who knows, maybe the question isn't really who he is anymore, but who he might still become. That maybe he's still master of his own fate, and his future waits for him to sketch it, pregnant and waiting.

Hope—that maybe he's still growing, still becoming, and he can damn well build a new life from the dust if he wants to, still choose the days to come, still fight for something more than just bare survival, something that feels more like living.

Even the slowest river moves forward and carves a path, no matter how many stones lie in its way. Right? This inertia, this decay, this weight... It doesn't have to be his story, it doesn't have to define him. Not if he doesn't want it to. Not if he doesn't let it.

Life can still be good, he tells himself, like it's even a choice he can actively make himself. *It can. It must. It will.*

Ilya turns his head and watches Shane sleeping next to him. The weight in his chest eases a little—just enough to let a full breath come in, for his heart to steady. It feels somewhat like relief.

Shane's still asleep next to him, chest rising and falling, indifferent to Ilya's spirals and time's cruelties and the long arithmetic of survival. Ilya looks at him again with his eyes burning. He catches a smile on Shane's mouth, lips curved halfway through like he's content with just...being here.

For now—or as long as *now* will hold—he can keep going. A few more days. A few more nights like this.

He curls closer, turning into Shane's warmth, pressing his ear to the drum beneath skin, pumping incessantly. The sound anchors him, tethers him. It feels solid, tangible, real, like a promise he doesn't have to articulate, like something he can hold onto even when everything else fractures or scatters into the dust.

He hears the goddess of time laugh once more, that old familiar sound, but it doesn't cut as deep this time. It echoes once, a little

duller now, and passes. The world holds still, and for a single moment in the night, only the hope remains.

For now, I can keep going.

He just needs to let Shane in.

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Chapter Two

HE DOES NOT let Shane in.

He tries, really—earnestly, desperately—and still the words refuse him, turning to sand the moment he reaches for them, slipping away before they can ever be shaped into something usable.

He *knows* it. He feels it every time he opens his mouth to tell the truth and finds nothing there that will obey: his throat tightens, his jaw locks, his eyes slide away on instinct, walls rise faster than he can think to stop them, already in place by the time he realizes what he's doing.

It's almost funny, he thinks. My soul and Shane's are as intertwined as two souls can ever be. And yet.

They sit on opposite ends of the sofa, their feet still touching—a small, accidental mercy—and Shane's speaking. Ilya hears the sound of his voice before the words themselves catch up.

“Ilya, what's going on?” A beat. “Why did you sleep in the guest bedroom last night?”

And still, despite it all, he tries.

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Shane, I can't sleep. Shane, I hate myself. Shane, I don't know why, but I loathe every single fiber of my being. Shane, hockey no longer means anything to me, not like it does to you.

Shane, I love Yuna and I love David and they've done nothing wrong and they've opened their home to me without hesitation and made room for me like it is easy and made me feel like I belong, but every time I'm with them, I feel like an impostor, because my family is broken and yours is not.

Shane, I love you more than anything. Shane, you are everything to me. Shane, I miss Moscow. Shane, I think I resent you for being the reason why I can't go back home. Shane, I do not think I would be a good father. Shane, I think only you would miss me if I was gone.

Shane, I'm not getting better.

Shane, you are the only thing keeping me here.

Shane, Shane, Shane. I really am not getting any better.

Shane, I hate my mother, sometimes. Hate her so deeply for leaving me behind and all alone.

Shane, I miss my mother. I miss my mother so much I think of following her into death, sometimes.

"You snore too loud," he jokes.

And still, despite it all, he fails.



SUMMER COMES TO them slowly, and then all at once.

One day, the cottage smells of damp wood and musty earth and pungent lake water, and it's all just a *little* too much on his senses, and he thinks he finally understands what Shane means when he's talking about sensory overload, and, *well, maybe we should've stayed back in Ottawa this year, or gone on holiday abroad, maybe we're getting too old for*—and he can't even finish the thought because the next day it's like the world's rearranged itself around them and they're on paradise on Earth. The air stays warm well into the evenings, the light lingers, stretching for hours and refusing to darken. Time loosens, and all their million rules soften. It becomes possible, suddenly, to think that nothing's waiting for them on the other side of this.

Out here, it always feels like the summer belongs to them personally, like they've been singled out by it. Like the season's taken a look at the two of them and decided, *yes, you can have this. Yes, you can keep it. Yes, everything else falls like sand through your fingers, so yes, this is yours.*

The lake is glassy in the mornings and restless by the afternoon, sunlight reflecting off of it. Shane moves through the cottage like he belongs to it, not the other way around—like it's been waiting for him specifically all year long, since last August,

since last summer—and the dock creaks pleasantly under him, used to his familiar weight. *Welcome home*, it tells him.

Ilya watches him without even trying to stop himself, because out here there's no reason to pretend he doesn't want to, no need to hide his affection or ration his attention like it might run out. It's a bit terrifying just how light everything feels right now, knowing how dark things can get when he's back in his normal routine, but, well—those thoughts don't belong here. Anywhere else, maybe—*but not here*.

In the cottage, they spend hours doing nothing at all. Sitting while their shoulders brush and their fingers trace idle patterns. Lying back and letting their limbs drape over each other's. Cooking, tasting sauces and sizzled garlic and melted butter and grinning at kitchen mishaps, losing their grip on time and letting the bread turn charcoal crisp instead of browned. Kicking a football back and forth across the garden, the grass warm beneath their feet, making stupid jokes to each other that track in the air like birdsong over each missed kick or failed goal. Making love, slowly, without any urgency, re-learning each curve and letting time dissolve between sighs and laughter. Reading out loud to each other, sharing their favorite music through the home speaker, chuckling or teasing or growing somber when the notes call for it. Playing footsie under the dining table, toes brushing and retreating. Washing dishes side by side, their hands colliding every time under the soap water. Walking barefoot across the floor, letting the sunlight tan their skin. Smiling at each other

across the table, across the bed, across the length of an entire summer they refuse to hurry along.

Watching the light slide in, catch on dust motes like they're tiny drifting stars. Letting the days rot, golden and sticky and so goddamn pleasant. Just existing in the same orbit, without any expectations, without any demands, without any needs. Letting themselves heal, remembering the shape of each other without the world pressing in. Just them, and the soft pulse of being.

On the dock, Shane's sitting with one leg dangling over the edge, toes skimming the water, his other leg bent with his knee pulled in. His chin's resting against it in this thoughtless, relaxed posture, while one hand props his face and the other's resting idly between his legs.

This is where my life makes sense, Ilya thinks, the lake wide and blue behind his shoulders, the entire world reduced to just water and sky and summer heat. He looks to the side and smiles, seeing Shane's mouth halfway between a smile and a comment he's probably still thinking through, like he's on the verge of saying something or nothing at all.

It hits him just how at peace he looks like this—unposed, unrehearsed, entirely himself. Both of them, really—completely and utterly relaxed, like nothing could ever bother them here, and—fuck, maybe loving Shane was never much of a choice at all. Surely not, when Ilya's over here feeling like *this* and Shane's over there looking like *that* and the domino pieces of his whole

life seem to have fallen so perfectly in place that it's hard to believe the universe ever had other designs in store for him. Ilya must've loved him before he ever knew him, surely, and *surely* some part of him had been waiting for Shane all along, and *surely* this was all some grand design, woven and spun by the goddesses of fate into the threads of inevitability, and he just happened to discover it that one unremarkable morning in 2008, but, oh—*surely* it'd been set in stone long, long before he ever knew it. Surely, surely, surely.

He can't make sense of how any of it happened, how he ended up here. How, out of all the possible configurations of his life, this is the one that stuck. He would've ruined himself trying to earn this if he'd known it was coming, would've dulled himself down to nothing, cut away every softness and every indulgence if that's what it took, and instead it was just given to him freely. *How?*

But if he lets himself think about how much he loves Shane, he might just start crying—so, instead, and because the words insist on being said, because not saying them feels like lying, he just says—

“You are beautiful, *любимый*⁴.”

Shane laughs, soft and embarrassed. “Fuck off,” he tells Ilya, shaking his head and trying to shrug the comment away.

⁴ Beloved

Ilya grins. “*Ab...* so modest,” he tells him, because teasing Shane is half the pleasure, and because watching him fail to deflect compliments will never stop being funny to him. “But is true.”

One hand under his cheek, the other between his legs, the slight pucker in his lips...

“I would have been a fool not to fall in love with you,” he tells him, simply. “So I did.”

Out here, with the days stretching endlessly ahead of them, love feels vast enough to hold an entire life inside it. Vast and never-ending and incomprehensible in how permanent it feels. Worth carrying with them, for decades, even if everything else ever fails.

Summer wraps itself around them, bright and unrepeatable, and Ilya, well—he was never much of a fighter, really—he lets summer have him, ripe and flushed and easy, so easy, easy like breathing.



THERE’S A SPECIFIC hour of the day Ilya’s always hated.

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It's an hour that asks questions without asking them outright, arriving just as the day's technically ended but the night's not here yet. When the light outside starts to go dark and the world seems to pause, like it's waiting to see what he'll do with himself now that there are no more obligations left to hide behind. An hour that assumes he has something to do, somewhere to return to, someone to sit with, a way to occupy space without needing a reason to. But Ilya has nothing to do, and he's already home anyway, and the only diversion he can think of right now is counting the small little cracks in the wall paint, so his mind's already going into overdrive and his thoughts are starting to spin out of control. A normal person would, what, go outside to the balcony, watch the sunset, see it slowly come down the horizon, maybe hold their loved one in their arms? Well, not Ilya. He's spent most of his life powering through it, treating it like shitty weather, like standing under a store awning while the worst of the rain passes. Something to be waited out before he has a socially acceptable reason to go turn on the television and put on some random movie and sit on the couch and waste the hours away.

Shane's with him today. It feels like he's always with him now, actually, threaded into the very essence of Ilya's days. And it should feel like relief, like proof that something has finally gone right. It shouldn't feel like a problem, and it's not, not really, except that it kind of is. Not because he's doing anything wrong, necessarily, but because Ilya can already feel himself tightening

around his presence like how bodies tighten around cold water—instinctively, involuntarily.

The season's grueling schedule has stolen Shane in pieces, entire days and weeks resumed to travel and flights and practices and games that leave Ilya alone at home more often than not, and he's adjusted to Shane's absence with surprising ease, slipping back into old, familiar habits: meals eaten standing up, television left on without sound, thoughts allowed to spool uninterrupted for entire days at a time, no one asking him where he's going or if he's hungry or if he wants company.

He's always been good at being alone. Too good. Like muscle memory, even, something he learned so early it doesn't feel learned at all.

Shane moves between the fridge and the counter, humming while he prepares dinner. It's a low, melodic sound, emblematic of casual domesticity, and it should be comforting, but the knife hits the cutting board in this easy, unthinking rhythm, and each sound is landing behind Ilya's eyes like a pulse he can't tune out, like noise his body can't metabolize. It's kind of annoying how normal Shane can be, Ilya thinks. He wishes he could be the same way—not freaked out at the time passing, not freaked out at needing a reason to turn on the television. Just existing, just being, just making dinner, and—why isn't Ilya helping him, anyway?

“This might take a while. You want anything?” Shane asks him, not looking up. “I can make you something quick, if you’re hungry.”

“Uh,” Ilya says from the couch, where his fingers are curled around an hour-old mug of coffee that’s already gone cold, his phone held in his other hand with an article open that his eyes keep skimming without really absorbing, text sliding off his brain immediately. “No.”

Shit—he thinks the words might’ve come out too fast, or too harsh, and he winces. His grip tightens on the mug, and he’s already reaching for the reflexive apology, but Shane doesn’t react, doesn’t stiffen or pull away, just keeps moving. *And talking*, God help him.

“You haven’t eaten since lunch, Ilya.”

Irritation flickers. It comes less from what Shane says than from the fact he keeps needing Ilya to answer altogether, the sound of his voice layering itself over the silence Ilya’s been craving for hours.

“Not really hungry,” he replies, calmer this time, purposely trying to soften his voice, but the effort makes his throat feel dry and scraped raw, like something’s being dragged across it.

“You okay?” Shane asks, still not looking at him, just checking in like how people do when they assume the answer will be yes. So when Ilya answers, it’s—

“Yes.” And he again hears how wrong it sounds, clipped and too tight.

This time, Shane glances over.

Immediately, Ilya feels the familiar prickle of being perceived. He wants, irrationally, to apologize—for the tone of his voice, for the tension he hadn’t meant to reveal, for the fact of it existing at all—but the apology gets stuck somewhere between intention and execution and the old instinct not to explain unless asked, not to be vulnerable unprompted.

“I didn’t mean—” Shane starts, then stops, recalibrating in real time. “You just seem far away.”

Ilya presses his tongue to the back of his mouth. He shakes his head, trying to hide how he’s gritting his teeth. “I’m here.”

Which is true, technically, but not complete, and it settles between them like another piece of furniture neither knows quite where to put.



SHANE EVENTUALLY JOINS him on the couch. Ilya can feel the heat coming off his arm, the easy sprawl, the settled comfort with which he takes up space, and alongside the love that wells up

reflexively, there's something else too. Something thinner, more unpleasant, a sound just below the threshold of hearing.

Shane talks, idly at first, about practice, about a teammate who can't stop overthinking his shots, about how the season feels like it's speeding up and slowing down at the same time. Really, he just talks and talks and talks, never stopping, and Ilya listens, and nods in the right places, but he's tracking the steady rhythm of Shane's voice more so than the actual content, and he's waiting rather impatiently for him to finish, because, really, *when will he run out of things to talk about?*

For all it encompasses, Ilya's love doesn't translate cleanly into ease. He's spent so many years alone, in empty apartments and hotel rooms and the echo chamber of his own mind, that having another person track his appetite, his energy, his needs, expect him to listen, expect him to answer back—well, it feels less like care and more like this demand he doesn't really know how to meet. Being alone taught him how to make himself smaller, how to fold himself into shapes he can manage, how to disappear without anyone noticing, and being with Shane requires the opposite. It requires expansion and noise and presence, and some days that feels like relief, like proof of life, and others it just feels like unpaid labor. It presses down as much as it lifts him up, and sometimes it's just too heavy and demanding and tiring, and one of those times seems to be right the fuck now because, *why is Shane talking so much*, and now Ilya feels an itch crawling through his body and he can hear the refrigerator humming and the clock ticking and

he's tense all over and, *when will he stop talking*, and, *oh my fucking God, please stop fucking talking, Jesus Christ*, and—

“—I'm not boring you, am I?” Shane suddenly asks, half-teasing.

This is one of those moments Ilya's usually expected to fill, a gap he'd bridge with a joke or a comment or a smile, but he's out of currency. All he can feel is that fucking hum of the refrigerator, and that ticking of the clock, and that never-ending drone of Shane's voice, now replaced by his attentive gaze, and the reality of being seen by someone who loves him.

He doesn't answer.

“Ilya?” Shane presses.

“No,” he replies, and again it comes out wrong, too fast, too tight. He hears it again, hears himself doing that thing he hates.

Shane's eyes widen just slightly, cheeks flushing. “Wait—” He sits up straighter, a little embarrassed, letting out a high-pitched incredulous laugh. “—Am I fucking *annoying* you?”

Ilya stammers. “No, no, of course not, I just—” The sentence falters. “Fuck.” A beat. “Sorry.”

Shane blinks, surprised. “Uh. O-kay,” he says carefully, and then turns his body fully towards him, attention focusing instead of retreating.

It'd be easier, Ilya thinks, if he didn't always do this.

With Shane, confession is always seen as invitation, and most days Ilya just wants *okay* to really mean *okay, I understand and we're done*, and not *okay, now tell me more and let's talk*.

"I just—" He tries again, then trails off.

He thinks of deflecting, but the space Shane creates for him is so gentle that he owes it to him to try.

"Look—you know I spent a long time being alone, and I got very used to it, and now you are here, and you are—" He shakes his head, already regretting the direction this is going. "Is not you," he adds quickly, because that's what you're meant to say when you're afraid of causing damage, right? "It's *not*," he repeats, noticing Shane's raised brow. "Is just..."

Ilya pauses, exhaling hard. "I'm just really used to silence. Okay?" he says finally, and then, because honesty has momentum once it starts, "And it's just all a bit much sometimes. The talking, and the questions, and the—*блядь*, I'm not explaining this well."

Frustration twists in his chest. *God, this is so fucking humiliating*, he thinks.

Ilya takes a breath, covering his face with his hands. "Is just really loud sometimes," he adds, sound muffled by his fingers. "I'm sorry."

The words aren't pretty. He knows that. Shane would be justified in taking offense, in hearing complaint where Ilya means confession, in scoffing at him and standing up and leaving him to his demons, because *what do you mean he is gone most of the week and the short time we get together I'm already bristling at the sound of his voice and—*

“—Hey,” Shane says gently, nudging him. “Hey. Look at me.”

Ilya does, and whatever he expects to see there—hurt, or irritation, or withdrawal—isn't present. Shane's expression has softened instead, recognition settling into place.

“I get it,” Shane says quietly. “Really, I do. You know I do.” He pauses, steady and solid in front of him. “You don't have to entertain me, Ilya. It's okay. We can just sit.”

Ilya nods once, slowly. Shane reaches out, his hand settling at the back of his neck, thumb brushing over the short hairs there in an absentminded gesture, and Ilya leans into it before he can stop himself, resting there for a second like it's the most natural thing in the world.

He thinks of all the hours he spent convincing himself that being alone was a preference rather than the only thing he knew how to do, that all that isolation was a choice when in truth it was something he learned to do unwillingly. He thinks of how easy it would be to retreat even now, how familiar the shape of withdrawal feels, how instinctive.

NETTLES

Instead, he exhales.

“Okay,” Ilya tells him.

They sit together, the house continuing to hum around them. Ilya feels the itch to reach for his phone, to anchor himself to something that can distract him, to fracture the vulnerability of the moment before it can gain even more significance. He resists it.

Outside, the hour finally gives way, night settling in at last, and Ilya lets his phone stay off for a few hours, pulls the shades up, and risks letting himself get a little known.

Chapter Three

IN HIS DREAMS, Ilya Rozanov is born somewhere else.



IT STARTS WITH the light, and how it catches on every windshield and every leaf and how it turns the whole street into twenty-thousand white-hot needles pressing into the backs of Ilya's eyes.

He hadn't meant to stay out this long, but Shane's still at the rink, or maybe he's already on a plane back, or maybe he's just *away* and too busy to answer his fucking phone, apparently, and the house had felt too small and too full, like it was shrinking and collapsing on itself, and Ilya had figured he could outrun the claustrophobia if he just kept moving, if he just felt like a person who does normal things, if he could just walk his dog without falling apart.

The walk starts out like any other, or at least that's what he tries to tell himself, but the air immediately feels too harsh against his face when he steps out and the sunlight's hitting the pavement way too warmly and it's making his head throb. The world's too

open, the wind's humming in his ears like a broken radio, and already he can feel the sweat slicking his palms against Anya's leash. And the street—it's just too *loud*, and there's the distant hum of tires and the screech of a bird and the rattling of dry leaves on concrete somewhere, and it all feels like it's scraping against his raw fucking nerves.

He's trying to walk straight, trying to pretend his legs don't feel like they're made of wax, but every sound is landing on him like a physical blow. A car door slamming three blocks away, the rattle of a plastic bag in the gutter, Anya's wet, rhythmic panting at his side. It's all too much, it's all too *loud*, and he's now also very aware of the fabric of his own shirt rubbing against his skin, grating like sandpaper, until his jaw is locked so tight his teeth ache.

He just needs the sound to *stop*. He just needs five seconds of actual, vacuum-sealed silence so he can figure out how to draw a full fucking breath.

Anya's usually calm, but today it's like she's sensing the static in the air, the vibration of his shaking hands, and she's mirroring him, pacing and whining, her paws clicking against the sidewalk like a countdown. Ilya's thinking about how much his lungs feel like they're full of glass, but then Anya suddenly stops, ears twitching and body tensing into pure vibration—a squirrel, another dog, a shadow, he doesn't know what the fuck she even sees—and before he can even tighten his grip, she's already

letting out the first bark, a gigantic explosion of noise that immediately feels like it's happening inside his own skull.

Fuck.

She starts pulling at her leash, wild and electric, thrashing like a live wire.

“Anya, enough—” He tries to tell her, but her barking remains relentless and seems to never end.

Each new sound strikes the edges of his patience and grates him further and further until his breaths are coming short and ragged.

“*блядь*⁵, Anya, stop—”

He clenches his jaw, shuts his eyes, but she won't stop, she just barks, and barks, and barks, *and barks*—

Before he can stop himself, Ilya snaps, and a raw yell tears free, ripping through the air, his voice cracking. His hands twitch and clamp down hard on the leash, jerking it back with a desperate force that surprises even him—the force he reserves for the ice, for throwing players against the boards, for when he's looking to *hurt*.

⁵ Fuck

Anya yelps painfully as her neck's pulled and jerked sideways, startled into stillness. It's an abrupt, sudden thing, a crack in the tension, and her cries immediately die down.

For a moment, there's nothing but quiet. *Finally*, Ilya thinks. *Silence*. His chest heaves in relief, and he looks down.

But Anya's still there, and she's watching him now, ears pinned flat against her skull, eyes wide and uncertain, cautious and hesitant—and the sight of it nearly sends him to the floor.

Hesitant *with* him. Hesitant *because* of him.

A cold pit opens in his stomach, and it feels like it's swallowing him whole. His grip slackens immediately on the leash.

What the fuck just happened? His chest heaves, heart hammering. *What the fuck did I just do?*

He looks back at Anya as a tight knot of panic and shame starts twisting in his gut, and the silence stretches heavy between them.

"My girl," he gasps. "Anya, I—"

The apology gets stuck in his throat, and then a sob comes spilling out, breathless and tangled with ragged gasps.

"I'm sorry—" Ilya drops to his knees before he even realizes he's moving, reaching for her fur with shaking hands. "I'm so, so sorry—Anya—"

Tears are slipping freely down his cheeks. Jesus, he must look insane to anyone passing by, kneeling in the middle of the sidewalk and crying over his dog, but he couldn't care less. Anya's still—fuck, she's still looking at him like *that*.

"Please," he whispers, voice breaking. "Please—Anya, please forgive me, I—"

For a moment, she just watches him. Then, slowly, she leans forward, and her tongue brushes against his fingers—once, tentatively. Then again. And again. And then again, and again, and again, each lick slightly more enthusiastic than the last.

"Anyusha," he chokes out, "Anya, fuck. I am so sorry. Please—"

She presses closer, her tail giving a little uncertain wag, and he buries his face in the thick fur of her neck with another sob. "Sorry," he whispers. "So, so sorry. Fuck."

Her restless energy drains away, but the ache inside Ilya stays, and he abandons the rest of the walk. The ache keeps swelling and swelling, lingering long after they return home together, long after he knows the memory of his outburst fades for her and only love for him remains.

He hangs her leash by the door as he normally would, fills her water bowl as he normally would, even leaves a few extra bone-

shaped treats by the rug in silent apology. Then he drags himself up the stairs, crawls into bed, and cries the rest of his day away.



“WHAT ARE SOME new things you learned this week?”

Galina’s voice echoes in his mind. She asks him the same question at the start of every session, and it irritates him, sometimes—the labor of inventory, the demand to scroll back through his life and label what was new, what was old, what could be discarded. Resents how needlessly clinical it made all his interactions feel, how it forced him to re-evaluate the most basic of hello’s and the most ordinary of goodbye’s under a transactional light—*did I learn something here? did I gain something here?*—how it forced him to re-contextualize every single thing in his goddamn life, every single goddamn time. *Fuck.*

“Nothing,” he’d reply, more often than not, jaw locked tight. “I learned absolutely nothing. Sorry.”

Galina would lean back, nodding, already knowing the answer before he’d even spoken based on how he’d entered her office, how he’d sat in the chair, how tightly his body was holding itself together, and she’d open her notebook ready to write down to her heart’s content. Because they both knew he was *always* learning things.

Like how Yuna had kissed his cheek after he'd handed her a birthday gift last Friday, hugged him tightly, refused to let go for a solid minute until he couldn't help but collapse against her, heart ridiculously tender. Then thanked him, and called him *son*, and kissed his cheek again, and how his chest had throbbed so fucking hard he'd excused himself under the pretense of the bathroom because being loved like that still overwhelmed him, because having a family that loved him back was still new enough to hurt, because being called someone else's son made him ache every time for a mother who he desperately loved but couldn't grapple with the fact she'd left him behind and all alone.

Or how Shane had looked at him immediately after when he returned to the table, eyes warm and kind and completely knowing, and how the sensation had landed like sunlight as his hand found Ilya's thigh under the table and traced a heart on the denim of his jeans, using his index finger.

Or how Ilya'd caught him last Sunday morning, head hunched over at the kitchen table, making annotations in a book where he could make out the words "Russian" and "Language" and "Course" from over Shane's shoulder, how he'd approached him then, and Shane had looked up, and smiled, and said *wait, listen to this and tell me if it doesn't sound right*, and carefully sounded out *Y-a te-by-a ly-u-bly-u⁶* and smiled that embarrassed smile of his, and Ilya's heart contracted in real time at the sound of the splintered

⁶ I love you

syllables and the broken Russian that had somehow never sounded so loving as it did coming out of his husband's lips, and he thought *I need to start teaching him, I really do, I've been putting it off for way too long—*

How he learned every day, slowly and against his own disbelief, that love is elastic, against all odds and physics. That every time he thought his heart had reached its limit, that he couldn't fit more love into it, there it went, expanding anyway, making room, restructuring itself without tearing. That when he'd think, *no, I can't possibly love Shane any more*, his heart would tell him it beat and vibrated and pulsated and ruptured and somehow stitched itself back together again for him.

Galina's exercise matters, he knows, even when he resists it. It anchors him to forward motion, reminds him that days are passing, that time hasn't stalled completely, that he's changing even when it doesn't feel like progress. That if nothing else moves, he's still accumulating something—knowledge, awareness, proof of continuity.

But that's on the good days.

Today, he feels inert. Today, he feels like he lives a half-life. Like he's paralyzed, like he can't move forward, like he only knows how to stop moving altogether. Today, he feels like he's been existing, but never truly living, like he's immobilized in some ancient fucking grief, like this sadness is a second skin, a skin he can't fucking shed. Like he can't help but to measure his

worth in the footprints left behind him, empty as always. Like he lives a life that, if not screamed, will vanish unmarked and unremembered, and right now, it's barely whispered.

Today, he feels like he's a subordinate to that stubborn, old parasite of depression, who'd learned to pull the strings of his puppet a long, long time ago, from how early it'd festered within him. Like there are shadows deep inside his chest, choreographing a dance that's been playing long before he knew what to call the music, before he ever understood what love or hope even meant.

Today, he feels hopeless.

Today, it feels like a bad day. A *really* bad fucking day.

And so when he grabs his computer while Shane's away grocery shopping, opens an Incognito Window and anonymously starts to type in an online forum for writers, *I'm writing a book where the main character is a doctor and I'm trying to write a scene where he finds his friend who tries to kill himself with pills and I need it to be serious enough that a hospital would have to intervene but not serious enough to be fatal, how many would he have to take for the scene to feel realistic*—then pretends not to wait hours until he hears the ping of a notification, and when someone finally replies with a guess, neat and practical, he leans back in his chair.

A number, free of any qualifiers, like a dosage chart. Like a simple recipe he can follow.

NETTLES

There, he thinks. There's something new I learned this week.



ILYA HOLDS THE knowledge close to his chest.

He doesn't act on it, doesn't do anything stupid. Just keeps it locked away in his mind, far from view, just out of reach. Like a bridge he's memorized the height of, counting the steps to the railing every time he crosses but never actually stopping, never actually looking down, just keeping the geometry of the fall tucked in his pocket for future reference.

He doesn't do anything with it, even though months have passed, and the seasons have bled into one another, and the sky's turned grey again, and *maybe he should, maybe he really should*, because he can't stop fucking thinking about it and the temptation is heavy and everything feels bad and he pretty much knows Shane's finally run out of energy to continue pretending things are fine just for Ilya's sake. That this is just a phase, or that it's just a rough patch, or that it can all be excused away with a joke they can both laugh at, the same joke Ilya keeps throwing at him like a blunt stone until the edges have gone smooth.

And it's not just the guest bedroom thing anymore, either, or how Ilya will slip away from their bed in the middle of the night without saying a thing. It's how the air feels like lead every time

they're in the same room and how his heart does this sickening stutter when he hears Shane's footsteps getting closer because he *knows* that questions are coming, he *knows* that Shane's tired of being the only one reaching across the gap, and Ilya wants to say something, he really does, he wants to scream all those things he thought about on the sofa months ago and continues to think every night, but he just stands there silently and watches the hope die out of Shane's eyes a little bit more every single day, until there's nothing left but this fragility and exhaustion that makes him look decades older than he is.

So, when Shane follows him into their bedroom one night, when he doesn't let the door close behind Ilya, when he stands there in the dim light of a house that was never meant to be Ilya's permanent home but has sort of become his tomb anyway, it kind of feels like the end of a very long war of silence.

"You just need to let me in," Shane whispers while lying beside him, voice cracking with hope and desperation. "Just let me in. Talk to me. Please, Ilya."

Ilya's breath catches in his throat. He doesn't meet Shane's eyes, not letting himself look, just slowly turns away and curls onto his side. He bites his tongue hard enough to taste metal, red-rimmed eyes staring past the room.

You deserve so much better, he thinks.

"I don't know how," Ilya breathes out, voice barely higher than a ghost's.

NETTLES

A pause stretches, and Shane holds his breath. His gaze lingers on Ilya, waiting, pleading, desperate for a crack that won't come. His fingers twitch, reaching out, but stop just short of touching his skin.

And then Ilya's hand slides out from under the covers and, with a soft click, abruptly turns off the light. The switch cuts through the silence, and darkness floods the room.

He can feel Shane's eyes on the curve of his back for hours afterward. Neither man sleeps.

Chapter Four

THE THING ABOUT that night is—at first, it actually feels kind of nice.

Not before Shane arrives, of course. It's not like anything dramatic or catastrophic happened, but until Ilya hears Shane's key turning in the lock, he feels restless. He's moved through different rooms all day like he was being stalked, drifted from kitchen to living room to bedroom and back again without ever settling in any of them, and spent the whole day feeling anxious. He has nowhere urgent to rush to and nowhere lazy to exist in, either—Ilya prefers the days where he's taking two-minute showers, scrambling out the front door and taking his coffee to go, knowing a full day's worth of commitments will keep him busy until he comes back while it's already dark outside just to crash in his bed for the night. Or the days when his chest feels settled enough to lie down on the couch, prop his feet up, turn on the gaming console and spend hours shooting against virtual pixels without feeling guilty for it.

Today, he's done neither—just touched objects like they might somehow anchor him, scrolled through his phone without paying much attention, made coffee he never really drank so much as mindlessly sipped, checked what hour it was no less than three thousand times, and stood at the window watching the

weather like he was waiting for it to change, before reprimanding himself for wasting his day away and not even remembering to at least work out.

Tomorrow, he'd thought. *There's always tomorrow.*

Really, the day passed like how most days have been passing lately—pretty unremarkable, vaguely exhausting even though he'd done nothing taxing, full of motion but no direction. He ate, he drank, he showered, he stood, he sat, he answered messages, he took calls—he performed being fine with full knowledge that convincing other people is much easier than convincing himself—and the house has carried the residue of it all. A half-finished glass of water left on the coffee table, a lamp turned on even though the light outside was still good.

You are fine, he'd told himself earlier, standing by the kitchen counter with his hands braced against it. *You are resting. You deserve rest. This is what normal days are like.*

By the time Shane's key turns in the lock, Ilya has already built and dismantled three versions of the night in his head. In one, they're loving and easy. In another, they're distant but civil. In another, they're careful but trying. None of them involve raised voices, none of them involve shouting matches, none of them involve slamming doors, none of them involve the cruelest thoughts they could think of spoken out loud—because he doesn't *plan* for a fight, much less the worst fight of their fifteen years together. He doesn't wake up thinking, *tonight, I will ruin us.*

Tonight, I will say the worst things I've ever said to you. The narrative that he's volatile by default is one he resents precisely because it's so easy to believe. Because, really, it doesn't even start as a fight, but something affectionate and light, like nothing at all.

Because, again—between Shane arriving and their night taking a turn, the energy feels, for once, *nice*.

Shane comes in later than planned, jacket slung over one shoulder, hair slightly damp and looking especially tired—which probably only Ilya notices, because he's learned to read his husband like it's a second language. Ilya knows what *tired* looks like on Shane—the depletion of being needed by too many people for too many hours, of having spent the entire day performing on command.

He looks good like this—a little undone, more raw and less composed, less picture-perfect—and Ilya, sprawled on the couch with his phone in his hands and a bag of chips abandoned near his thigh, feels the familiar warmth run through him.

“There he is,” Ilya calls, already smiling, because the smile is real, the relief is real, because loving Shane is the only reflex he's never had to practice. He feels something finally unclench in his chest. “You alive?”

Shane pushes the door closed with his heel, then exhales, rubbing the back of his neck like he has to come back to himself.

“Hi,” he says, and then he smiles back—lips curving a little small, a little exhausted, but curving nonetheless. “Barely.”

He starts taking his shoes off, dropping his bag by the door and placing his keys in the bowl, before padding across the house in his socks.

“You know, people usually sleep here,” Ilya teases him. “Are you coming back to live here again, or...?”

Shane snorts, ready to answer him back with some smart-ass reply, but Ilya’s already crossing the room without thinking and angling to press a kiss to his lips, breathing him in like Shane’s proximity alone could be, fucking, medicine or something. He runs his hands through Shane’s chest, and he feels solid under Ilya’s fingertips, a fixed point around which he’s learned to orbit. There’s a solidity to Shane that Ilya’s built parts of himself around, like scaffolding raised against collapse, and today—or, just, *late*ly, really—it feels like being away from that solidity for more than just a few hours at a time feels like every molecule of his entire body is compressing and contracting on themselves.

“You’re *late*,” Ilya whines, voice fond.

“I know, I know,” Shane grimaces. “I’m sorry. Practice ran long, and it was—”

“—Is okay.” Ilya cuts off the explanation before it can become too much of an apology. “Well, it always runs long, but it’s okay.

I know how Theriault is. The Montreal circus would collapse without its star monkey, yes?”

Shane laughs, moving into the kitchen, and the night *finally* starts to settle into something so ordinary and so normal and so *them*, Ilya could cry. *Thank fucking God he's here.* Shane rinsing his hands beneath the tap, filling a glass with water, stealing a banana from the fruit bowl and starting to peel it. Ilya opening the cupboard under the sink, nudging the trash can with his foot. Shane dropping the peel inside, lifting the banana for the first bite, but Ilya already leaning in and stealing half with his mouth, as if by instinct. The choreography of two people who have memorized each other's movements without a single word needing to be said out loud.

“You know...” Ilya starts to say, mid-chewing. “Your career keeps ruining my romantic plans.”

“Oh?” Shane pauses to take another bite, amused. “My career is the same as yours, but okay. And what plans are those?”

“Well, you know. Me all alone... very sad... My husband out in the city while I wait for him at home, missing him...” Ilya grins, teasing. “Oscar-worthy, yes?”

Shane's smile widens, and he laughs. “I thought you already missed me all the time, dickhead.”

NETTLES

God, everything feels *easy*. Everything feels true, and light, and uncomplicated.

“But I missed you too,” Shane adds, back now turned to Ilya as he opens the fridge and scans it absentmindedly. “So much. Spent all day itching to come home, actually. Hayden kept ribbing me about it, the asshole—like he doesn’t act the same way with Jackie and the kids.”

This is how evenings are supposed to go, Ilya thinks. *No harsh angles, no sudden turns*. His world feels like it’s finally narrowed, finally snapped back into alignment now that Shane’s here. And it’s so—

“—Did you eat?” Shane asks, interrupting his thoughts.

Ilya presses his lips, immediately a little annoyed at how Shane is looking at him—glancing over his shoulder, trying his hardest to look casual. Eventually, he nods.

Shane raises an eyebrow at him, and Ilya rolls his eyes. “I ate, *dad*. Jesus,” he says, leaning against the counter. “Relax. No, I did not starve to death without you.”

And then, because Shane still has a disbelieving expression on his face, Ilya moves past him with a huff to stand in front of the fridge.

“See?” He points at the container sitting in the second row. “I made dinner. Or, well, I ordered dinner. Same thing. There’s still

some leftovers for you, if you want. Not that you will, because is not your usual bird food, but I try.”

Shane laughs, and Ilya pretends not to notice how his shoulders loosen. “Just checking!” he sing-songs.

“Yes, yes, I know. You worry.” Ilya watches him, lips slightly pursed. “Very cute.”

There’s a version of this night where everything stays light. A night where no voices rise, no one argues, no accusations are thrown around, and the hours slip by gently in the home they share together. Where it’s just another calm, unremarkable end to the day, the weight of the long week settling between them while they hold each other on the sofa and watch some bad TV. Where the light thins out, and time slows just enough to let them breathe, and heal, and love, and rest, and *be*.

But that’s the moment—Shane smiling and humming and turning back to the fridge—where it starts to shift, even though he doesn’t know it yet. Because beneath the teasing, there’s an observation, and beneath the observation, there’s an old tension that’s been accumulating over months, perhaps years.

Worry can feel like devotion, yes, but it can also feel like surveillance. And for Ilya, the line between being cherished and being monitored is much thinner than he likes to admit. Because Shane always checks, always calibrates, always asks if he’s eaten, always asks how he slept, always asks what his mood is like in

these barely-subtle, badly-disguised ways, and always fucking doubts him when he answers. And sure, it's loving, but it's also exhausting, and it's also careful, and worst of all—it's fucking *constant*.

He watches Shane move through the kitchen, notices how efficient he looks, how assured, how steady, like nothing bothers him—like living's the easiest, most normal thing in the world—and something inside him, already restless, stirs at the sight. *Look at him*, Ilya thinks. *Just walking around, making himself food, asking normal questions, having a normal fucking day*. Meanwhile, Ilya's spent all day wanting to bash his head against the wall. And Shane knows, of course he knows. Shane probably took a single look at him and knew exactly what kind of day he'd had. That's what all the checking was for, wasn't it? *Did you eat? How did you sleep? Are you okay?* And Ilya doesn't get it, not really, he doesn't get how someone like Shane wants to come home to him. *How are you okay with me?* he wants to ask him, sometimes. *How the fuck do you look at me and think 'this is fine, this is what I want'?* *Why do you pretend like it is normal? What do you get from pretending that it is?*

Ilya narrows his eyes, already convinced by the direction his thoughts are taking. It's just that—well, he's learned, over time, that quiet moments are where his thoughts grow teeth. Quiet moments are dangerous and invite thought, and thought invites inventory, and inventory invites questions, and questions, well. Questions are rarely kind, questions don't usually have answers he can live with.

So, he nudges.

“You know,” Ilya starts, voice light, still joking, still smiling, because he can’t leave the silence alone, “most people would maybe take a day off every now and then. See their husband in daylight, go out for lunch. Get out of the rink, yeah? Check if the sun still exists.”

Shane looks at him, eyebrow raised, smiling.

“Just once,” Ilya continues, still joking. “Just for science, you know?”

Shane chuckles. “*For science?*”

“*Aa*⁷, yes. Just to see if the world would end.”

It’s teasing, and affectionate, and they’re even laughing, and it’s nothing, really. But teasing is rarely just teasing—more a blade wrapped in velvet, more affection with a question embedded inside it. And Ilya knows this about himself. He knows that he picks, that he can’t resist pressing on places that might bruise, not because he wants them broken, but because he needs to know how strong they are.

“Well, I think it definitely would survive.” Shane laughs.

⁷ Yes

Ilya tilts his head. “You know,” he starts, twisted smile playing on his lips. “One day, I will start thinking you just don’t want to see me.”

Shane’s smile falters, and it immediately sparks a faint pleasure inside Ilya. It’s not like he means for the words to cut, or for his voice to sound like that, or for the conversation to shift from teasing to accounting, from playful exchange to ledger-keeping. It just does, like boats in steady currents that can’t help but pull away from the dock.

“Relax, Hollander.” Ilya waves his hand away. “I’m just joking with you.”

But Shane’s not really smiling anymore, and his fingers are wearily rubbing the back of his neck once again, and Ilya knows the tell of that gesture all too well. *The body always betrays first.*

Shane looks down. “You’re right, though,” he admits, softer now. “I know I’ve been gone a lot.”

“*Ab*,” Ilya says, smile thinning just a fraction. “Would you look at that? I thought you would not admit it. I would say this is progress, but you already tell me that you know every time.”

“And every time it’s true.”

“Mhm,” Ilya hums. “Very convenient.”

Shane forces a laughs, and his gaze steadies on Ilya. And he feels it—that small internal checklist Shane always runs when conversations change temperature. *Don't*, he thinks, but he doesn't know what exactly he's asking for.

“I just—” Shane starts, then exhales. “Sorry. This week's been a lot.”

Ilya immediately narrows his eyes. “For you.”

The words are small, almost nothing, but he hears the unnecessary edge while he says them, feels the shift in the air like a pressure change. He doesn't know why he says it like that, really, except he kind of does, because somewhere inside him, there's that ledger he can't stop updating.

When he'd announced to Farah and his team he was planning to take the year off, calling it a leave of absence and saying they could frame it publicly as something advised by the MLHPA behavioral health program, like that made it sound better instead of desperate, it'd felt like the smartest decision available to him at the time.

His moods had been worsening every day, and he knew he couldn't dismiss it as just fatigue any longer when his temper was flashing hot and fast over things that shouldn't have irked him, and never had in the past. Another season of airports and hotel rooms and locker rooms and media interviews full of expectations... he'd knew, humiliatingly enough, that just one

more month of that would split him open, much less a full season. The travel, the constant relocation, having to perform night after night, the weight of the “C” stitched to his chest—he didn’t trust himself to carry it without cracking. *Captain Ilya Rozanov* couldn’t stand in front of a room of grown men and ask them to be composed and disciplined, when the words rang hollow even to him.

He hadn’t been happy about stepping back, though, and the relief of the decision had been immediately followed by embarrassment and humiliation. And Shane, for all his gentleness about it, hadn’t been entirely convinced either. The idea that one of them would so radically scale back while the other kept moving at full speed sat between them like an unanswered question: Ilya home alone for stretches at a time, too much quiet and not enough stimulation, while Shane chased another season, another Stanley Cup, gone for days that blurred into weeks, only being able to come home in the narrow cracks the schedule allowed. It didn’t look like balance. Didn’t feel like it, either.

Still, when Ilya admitted one night, low and ashamed and not able to quite meet Shane’s eyes, that he wasn’t coping well with the pressure, and that something about this year felt different and he didn’t trust it, Shane had relented without making him fight for it.

Your peace of mind, Shane said, matters more than anything. More than your pride or... optics, or any of that shit. That’s all bullshit. If you

feel you need to step back, then step back. You know I'll be here for you every step of the way.

A few months into the season, though, and the certainty of that choice had started to erode. The games kept happening without him, Shane kept traveling, the silence at home kept stretching, and both of them, in different ways and rarely out loud, had started circling the same question with varying degrees of unease. How much good had it actually done?

This week's been a lot.

For you.

Shane looks at Ilya, studies his face for a long beat. “Yeah,” he replies carefully. “For me.”

And God—something in Ilya fucking *resents* the carefulness in his tone. *Why are you already managing this? We're not even fighting yet.*

But he shrugs instead, like it's meaningless. Like the truth isn't that he no longer knows what to do with Shane's forward faith anymore—the belief that effort pays off, that patience is rewarded, that the things you love can always be protected. Like it doesn't all cave in his chest and land as a whimper, as a thud.

Like it doesn't irk him, deep down, to watch him travel the country and play the sport he loves and have a father and a mother to return to and succeed every damn time and just

be *so* composed through it all, while having this whole life *bursting* around him, throbbing, moving, *alive*, and Ilya, by contrast... doesn't. Like it's not bitter jealousy that spikes in his chest when he thinks of how greatness—all that greatness Grigori Rozanov once expected of *him*—feels like a middle name for Shane, settling so naturally on his shoulders it seems it was always meant to be there.

Shane's voice breaks his thoughts. "Hey," he says, gently. "I was thinking... since I've barely been home, maybe we could just have a really good weekend."

"We always have good weekends." Ilya smiles by instinct. "You going soft on me, Hollander?"

"No, no, I know," Shane replies. "I just mean, easy. No stupid stuff, you know? Just us."

Easy. The word echoes unpleasantly, and Ilya listens for the crack, leaning forward on instinct. *Easy.*

Easy. Easy. Easy.

It feels like implication, for one. That something about them is not, well, *easy*, or that they're predictable in a bad way, or that weekends together now require preemptive management, or something, like bad weather you can forecast if you study the sky or if you watch the clouds closely. Like *Ilya's* the bad weather in question—rain and storm and tide and tempest alike.

“Stupid stuff?” He repeats, still smiling, because he hasn’t yet decided if this is a wound or not. “What stupid stuff?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Shane says quickly. “Nothing specific. Hockey, for example, let’s not talk about hockey, or Theriault, or Montreal.” A pause. “Or the Centaurs. Any of it.”

Ilya tenses. “Okay...?”

“I just—sometimes things get more than they need to be, right?” Shane continues. “So, let’s just have a good weekend. Nothing heavy, nothing too serious. Just you and me. We can do whatever you want. Well—I have some ideas, of course, but—bottom line, I just want us to spend some time together and enjoy it. What do you think?”

Shane smiles, and Ilya thinks he almost looks proud of himself, like he’s not saying the words he’s actually saying. Like he’s not talking to him like Ilya’s a fucking five-year-old child.

“Wait, what?” Ilya laughs, surprised despite himself, starting to catch onto the hidden meaning. “You think we fight?”

There’s still some remnants of laughter in his voice, but weaker now, because his brain is a half-second behind his body.

“Uh, no, not really.” Shane replies, frowning. “I mean, I’m just saying I don’t want us to.”

“But we’re not,” Ilya insists, smile thinning. “You are the one talking about it.”

Shane blinks. “I just thought—”

“—You come home,” Ilya interrupts, and now the words are speeding up and his English is starting to fray at the edges, “you ask if I eat, if I am okay, and now you ask if we can not fight. Is... strange.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Shane says softly, cocking his head, and now he looks almost confused at how this is tilting. “I guess I just thought... Since we’ve been under a lot of pressure lately, both of us... I just thought to bring it up, but you’re right. Maybe I’m overthinking it. It doesn’t matter.”

The softness does it. The care, the immediate willingness to concede, the belief that this can be managed if handled with pincers. To Ilya, it doesn’t feel like overthinking—rather that Shane’s already accounting for volatility that hasn’t even happened yet.

“Well,” Ilya says, shrugging, but his pulse is picking up, “if you are already afraid of an argument, maybe that’s why they happen.”

Shane opens his mouth, then closes it again, frowning. “What? I’m not afraid.”

Ilya laughs, drily. “It sounds like you are, Shane.”

He feels the familiar urge to press harder, because part of him needs to know where the breaking point is, needs proof that their love isn't as fragile as Shane seems to think, or maybe that it is. He's not sure which answer would be worse.

But then Shane exhales, a little tired, and it all goes to shit.

"Alright," he says, finally. "Alright, yeah, you're right. I don't want us to fight this weekend, yeah." He glances down at his hands. "Look, I've barely been home lately, and I'm tired, and I miss you, and I just want us to have a good few days together before I have to leave again. That's all."

Ilya wants to scoff. Because that's the thesis, really, regardless of whether Shane means it or not. *Can we not fight?*

Fucking hell. Like fighting's a decision he makes in the morning, like choosing a shirt or a pair of socks. Like volatility's something he *chooses* to employ, like peace is something he *chooses* to withhold. The thing Shane doesn't understand, or can't, really, is that asking for peace feels, to Ilya, like an accusation dressed up as kindness, because peace implies that something in him needs managing, smoothing down, containing before it spills. It feels like being asked to behave, like being told in advance that there's something wrong with him, something inside him that needs to be toned down, and, who knows, maybe there is. God knows there have been days when he has scorched the earth around him without meaning to. But how Shane says it now, calm and hopeful and a little too earnest, well. It makes it

sound like a choice Ilya's actively failing to make. Like the only thing standing between them and a perfect, uncomplicated weekend is his utter inability to *be*.

Yeah. Yeah, you can fuck right off.

The irritation festers fully now. There's many, many things Ilya can't stand—and being anticipated ranks pretty damn fucking high. He's Shane's partner. Not a fucking risk assessment that needs to be handled.

"We are *fine*," Ilya tells him again, purposely slower this time, like Shane just didn't hear him properly the first time. "Nothing's wrong."

"Okay." Shane's smile is tender, which somehow just makes it worse. It makes all of it worse. "Great!"

"We *are* okay," Ilya insists, and he hates how defensive it sounds.

Shane shifts his weight. "Hey, you don't need to convince me. I didn't mean to imply something was wrong, or something. I just want us to be good," he replies, smiling, before continuing. "If you say we are, then we are. I'm excited for the weekend. It's going to be great."

A pause. "Okay, so, do you wanna go down to my parents' tomorrow and grab lunch with them? Mom mentioned she had something she wanted to discuss with us, and I think it might be

sponsorship-related? I think she's gonna float some brands for you to work with while you're away this year. That'd be cool, right? Don't ask me how I know, but I mean, you know how she is, and..." His voice trails off.

You don't need to convince me. I didn't mean to imply something was wrong.

Yeah, yeah, Ilya thinks, you implied enough alright.

It does land wrong. It lands *so* fucking wrong. It lands like reassurance, like something you say when you think the other person's already catastrophizing, and the word *convince* lodges itself under Ilya's skin. *Convince* implies doubt. Doubt implies instability. Instability implies that somewhere in Shane's mind, there's a version of Ilya who can't be taken at face value.

He thinks I'm spiraling, he realizes. He thinks I'm already fucking spiraling. What the fuck.

"—I'm not convincing you," Ilya suddenly interrupts.

Shane pauses mid-speech, looking at him with a frown. "Uh... what?"

"Before, when I said we are okay. You told me I was convincing you. I'm *not*," he says, then forces his voice to soften. "I'm telling you. We *are* okay. We *are* good."

“Oh. Yeah, okay,” Shane replies, smiling, and he even lifts his hands up in surrender, jokingly. “Great, like I said. I think so too.”

That should end it. It’s designed to. An exit ramp, a neat little period at the end of a sentence that’s gone on for way too long already.

And for a moment, Ilya almost lets it, almost laughs it off, almost reaches for Shane and lets the evening reset itself into something salvageable. A healthier version of himself would probably take the offered peace and move on, but something’s already started to twist inside him, something that feels older than this conversation, older than their home, older than even Shane. It feels like the echo of every time he was told to calm down back in Moscow, to *be reasonable, Илья*⁸, *for Christ’s sake*. So, instead, he hears subtext where there may have been none, and recognizes something else underneath Shane’s words.

Relief. Like he’s glad they’ve dodged something.

The thought needles him. *Why is Shane bracing at all?*

“Why do you say it like that?” Ilya asks. “Like I’m—” He stops, searching for the words, irritation making his fluency in English temporarily slip. “Like I am a bomb you have to walk around with, or something.”

⁸ Ilya

Shane looks at him, surprised. “What? I didn’t say that.”

“You did not have to.” He laughs, drily. “It was kind of obvious.”

Shane frowns, confused. “Ilya, I just meant I’ve missed you and I don’t want to waste the weekend arguing about dumb shit. That’s all. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“*Dumb shit*,” Ilya repeats. “So we are fighting about dumb shit, now?”

Shane goes to protest, but Ilya continues. “That’s what you meant, yes? You come home and already you are planning how to avoid me. Well, that’s just fucking great.”

“I’m not avoiding you.” Shane laughs, a little incredulously. “What’s happening right now? I’m literally telling you I’m trying to be with you.”

“By telling me in advance not to fight?” Ilya snickers. “Very romantic.”

“Okay, look, Ilya, I don’t want this to turn into—”

He cuts in. ”—Into what?”

Shane hesitates, and the hesitation is gasoline.

“No, no. Finish what you were about to say.”

Shane takes a breath, and then another. “Into one of *those* conversations,” he starts to say, carefully, choosing each word like he’s stepping across thin ice. “where we both get hurt and nothing actually gets resolved.”

Ilya stares at him, hollow look in his eyes. “So you already know how our conversations end now.”

Shane’s mouth tightens. “Don’t be like that, come on. I just mean when we end up having the same argument over and over again and it never ends.” A pause. Then, softer, “I really didn’t mean it in a bad way, Ilya.”

But the phrase lands wrong, again, like all the other fucking phrases, and Ilya sees how it clicks into place alongside a dozen others. Inventory’s happening in real time now. He can feel it—the categorization of their dynamic, the implication that their arguments are, what, *recurring incidents that need to be mitigated*, or *addressed with intentionality*, or *processed constructively*, or *held with compassion*, or whatever other ridiculous phrase Shane’s been underlining in relationship therapy books instead of talking like a normal person?

Ilya scoffs. “Okay. So now it’s a pattern,” he says. “Good to know.”

Something inside him tightens, defensive and mean, and he knows this feeling—how the ground gives a little, then a little more, then a lot more, until stopping is no longer possible. He can feel his pulse in his throat and in his fingers, his body already

halfway into fight-or-flight. “You know, you talk to me like I’m a case study sometimes. And it does not feel great, honestly.”

Shane exhales. “That’s not—that’s not what I’m trying to do.” He pauses. “I was just... saying something stupid, I guess. It’s meaningless, really. I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m sorry.”

He looks tired and worn down, and it makes Ilya’s chest ache even as it enrages him, because *still* he feels the argument tipping, still he feels it slipping out of the realm of misunderstanding and into something darker, something with teeth, uglier the more Shane apologizes, the more he makes this blurb of nothing into an actual *thing*. Ilya watches it happen in real time the more Shane gives it name and shape and corporeal form.

He keeps apologizing. He keeps fucking apologizing, like I’m going to break apart right in front of him if he doesn’t say sorry.

The rain outside is louder, or maybe it’s just that Ilya’s blood is louder in his ears.

You can stop this right now, he begs himself. You can laugh. You can push him to your lap and kiss him and say sorry and tell him you are being stupid and let it die down and go enjoy your weekend together and—

“—No, no. You always do this, actually,” Ilya continues. “You always decide ahead of time what conversations we can and can’t have. Why are we setting rules for how I’m allowed to exist in my own home for the next two days? I don’t get it.”

“Huh?” Shane frowns. “*Our* home, Ilya. And—*allowed*—what? That’s—that’s not what’s happening. To me, at least, but...” He stops, and takes a moment, shaking his head.

Our home, Ilya repeats in his head, mocking. *Like he’s ever fucking here, anyway.*

“No?” Ilya tilts his head, mouth curving. “Shane,” he presses. “I say something wrong, you stay calm. I get upset, you stay calm. I say something mean, you stay calm. It makes me think you are just forcing yourself to not react. Is very impressive, don’t get me wrong, but...”

Shane groans softly. “Oh, come on. Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Ilya asks, frowning. “Say that you like me better when I’m quiet? When I agree? When I don’t make, *ab*—” he gestures vaguely, “—mess?”

Shane’s looking at him like he’s grown two heads, so Ilya thinks: *make him understand, explain it, make him feel it.*

“I talk. You talk back. I talk. You talk back again. And in the end, still neither of us is satisfied.” He laughs drily. “Like, wow. *What a great relationship*,” he mocks.

Ilya keeps going, voice tightening. “You want me to... what? Turn myself off so you can relax? Say sorry if I have a shitty feeling at an inconvenient time and it ruins your weekend?”

Shane's jaw sets. "Of course not. I want to be here with you. If you're feeling bad, then of course we can talk about it. You're not—you're not listening to me." A pause, and then he looks to the side. "We can't keep doing this every time one of us says something slightly wrong, Ilya."

"And *this* is what, exactly?" Ilya snaps. "Or are we pretending we did not have the same conversation last week, and the week before?"

That's Shane's point exactly, he knows, but right now everything works as ammunition.

Shane exhales slowly. "I'm not attacking you."

Oh my fucking God, he thinks, viciously. *You sound like a fucking parody.*

"No," Ilya says, laughter already clawing its way up his throat, "you are dissecting me. Much better, so nice of you. Thank you so much, Shane. Do you want me to suck your dick as a reward?"

Shane's eyes flicker with hurt for a brief second, before the shutters come down again. "Come on, Ilya." He takes a breath. "That's not fair. I'm talking with you, I *listen*—"

React, Shane. Fucking—react, for once. Say something real, say something awful, say something you actually mean. Don't just stand there like a fucking mannequin.

“—You are talking *at me*,” Ilya replies. “And you listen just so you can *fix*. Not so you can actually hear me.”

Tell me you hate me, Ilya wants to beg. Like you actually mean it. Make me feel something, anything, like I exist here.

Instead, Shane keeps talking, explaining, clarifying, choosing his words like they’re glassware he doesn’t want to break, and something inside Ilya twists on itself, ugly and mean, because he can *feel* the raw emotion bubbling just beneath all of Shane’s restraint, and the knowledge that he can still pull that reaction from him settles into his chest with shameful relief.

He still has some power. Still has the capacity to destabilize. Still matters enough to not be indifferent.

Not yet, anyway.

“You treat me like I’m made of glass, Shane,” he continues, and now the wobble in his voice is there, that crack he hates. “You act like I’m about to break. Like I am *this* close to ruining everything.” Ilya’s voice drops to a whisper, eyes starting to wet. “It makes me feel like I’m just work to you.”

Shane’s composure fractures. “Because I’m scared!” He drags a hand through his hair, breathing harder now. “And—and so are you! You don’t have to pretend you’re not, it’s fine to say it. *I’m* fucking scared, okay?”

There it is. The underbelly of this whole argument. And Ilya sees it—the chink in Shane’s armor, the exposed place, the honesty, the fear—and instead of softening, something in him hardens.

“Scared of *me*,” he says, already deciding that’s what he heard.

“No,” Shane says, immediately. “No, not of you.” His voice drops to a whisper. “Just scared. Of this whole situation. Of not knowing what to do, or what to say. Of messing up.” A beat. “Scared of losing you.”

And it should be sweet, should land as devotion, but it just makes his chest ache. Ilya’s smile twists, bittersweet. “But maybe you are already losing me. Have you thought of that?”

Every day, there’s less of me left, he wants to say.

Shane flinches, registering the words with pained surprise. “Don’t say that.”

“*I say what I want,*” Ilya snaps, and then he looks to the side and shakes his head to himself. “What the fuck is going on today...” he mutters under his breath, and his eyes return to Shane’s. “You think you have to *manage* me! Let’s talk about that! How fucking normal do you think that is, huh?”

He knows he should stop. Knows that this is the moment where he should de-escalate, step back, say, *okay, I hear you* and

mean it. But he's on autopilot, and the brakes aren't working, and the foot on the pedal won't lift. From here on out, the slope can only steepen.

"Okay, look, we're not going anywhere with this, so—"

"—No, no, no, hold on. Hold on, because I'm learning a lot of things about our relationship that I did not know about, so maybe it's good that we are finally talking. Is good that you are finally being honest, Shane, for once."

They stop for a second and stare at each other, flushed, breathing hard.

"Tell me," Ilya says, calmer now. "Why do you manage me?"

"*Ilya*," Shane stresses the vowels of his name, voice tight. "Fuck—I don't—I *don't* manage you."

And the intensity in his voice comes back full force. "Oh my fucking—yes, you do! Yes, you fucking do, Shane!" Ilya yells. "You check, you double-check, you monitor how I sound, how loud I am, how quiet I am, you walk on, fucking, *eggshells* around me, and you tell me you love me like any of this makes any fucking sense!"

Shane swallows, and Ilya can tell frustration's starting to creep in now, despite Shane's best efforts to keep it contained. "I *do* love you. I just try to keep things from exploding because I know sometimes you don't mean what you say when you're

pissed off, and these arguments are, like, pointless, anyway. Why are we even fighting about this?”

“So now I hurt you?”

“Sometimes,” Shane admits, because he’s honest to a fault. “Yeah. Yeah, sometimes you do.”

Maybe Ilya could absorb that and hear it as pain and not as blame. Instead, he just feels the familiar pang of humiliation, which he quickly reshapes into offense.

“And you don’t?” He asks. “You don’t hurt me? I see how you look at me every day. You think I am, what, unstable?” He barrels on before Shane can respond. “You think that makes me feel good? Knowing I’m married to someone who thinks I’m a—a—” He searches for the word. “—a loony, or something? You think that does not hurt me?”

“No.” Shane shakes his head. “No, I don’t think that. I think you’re struggling, yes. In fact, I *know* you’re struggling, and I try to make things easier for you, because I *care*. I’m allowed to care, Ilya. I’m allowed to worry.”

“*Care*,” Ilya repeats, chuckling. “Or control?”

The words don’t ring true even as he says them—he’s never felt that with Shane, not really—but he needs them to sting.

“*What?*” Shane barks in disbelief, letting out a scoff and not taking the bait. “For fuck’s sake. I’ve never controlled you. I try to get you to talk to me, to open up, and you tell me you can’t, that you don’t know how. So, I back off. I wait for you to come to me. I don’t pressure you. I don’t corner you. What else can I do?”

Ilya’s smile twists. “You could be here, to start.”

Shane’s expression falters instantly, and Ilya hears how it sounds as soon as it leaves him. Too bad he doesn’t give a shit.

“No, no, no—” He shakes his head, bristling. “—do *not* give me that look, Shane. *You* said it yourself. *You* admitted it. Not me.” A beat. “You are never home anymore! We barely see each other! And then when you are finally here for just one fucking weekend, you tell me not to argue and to be quiet. Like, *what?*”

The air between them tightens. “But fine,” Ilya adds, voice brittle. “We don’t have to go there, since apparently it makes you *so* uncomfortable.” He exhales through his nose, looks away, then back again. “So, you don’t think I’m unstable. I mean, clearly you do, but—okay, Shane. Sure.” He ponders for a moment, and then he continues. “What, then? I annoy you?”

“What?” Shane’s head snaps to him. “Ilya, no. Of course you don’t annoy me. What kind of question is that? I spend half our time together wondering if *I* annoy *you*, and—”

“—I exhaust you?” Ilya presses.

Shane hesitates, just a second too long, and there it is. *Confirmation.*

“*Ab.* So, you are exhausted. Okay, well. Good to know,” Ilya says casually, voice lower now. He tries to make it seem he’s fine with it, but the hurt laces through all the same. “Exhausted because... why? You resent me? Because you resent that I’m not getting better? Help me understand.”

“What the fuck. No, no—of course not,” Shane says, the horror evident in his voice. “I’ve never thought that, I have *never* resented you. I don’t even know... Jesus, Ilya, is this what you’ve been thinking this whole time? You—”

Oh my God, there he goes again, Ilya thinks, *just talking and talking and talking and never actually saying anything of substance.*

Shane’s voice trails off, continuing to form these polite little sentences that slide cleanly into one another and eventually loop back on themselves, carefully choosing his words to be as inoffensive as possible, and Ilya feels his patience disintegrating. His thoughts are splitting, one half listening to him spout his empty words, while the other is pacing restlessly inside his own skull.

Shane shakes his head to himself. “No, never. I’ve never resented you,” He repeats. “I *have* wanted you to feel better, yes, but that’s not the same thing.”

“Okay, sure.” Ilya waves a hand dismissively. “So, you don’t resent me, but then you keep asking me not to struggle? How does that work?”

Shane doesn’t miss a beat. “I ask that you don’t destroy us while you struggle.”

Ilya’s rendered silent for a moment.

“*Destroy us?*” he echoes softly.

The surprise and hurt must show in his eyes, because Shane’s face falls. “I don’t mean—”

“—But you do.” Ilya cuts in. “You do mean it. You think I ruin things.”

“I *think*,” Shane says carefully, “that sometimes you push until it hurts the both of us. And I don’t know why.” A pause. “Like today. What are we even fighting about?”

And Ilya doesn’t know the answer to that either, so they just stand there, silent for a moment.

But then Shane sighs, and his voice comes out soft, wavering under the pressure, trying to wave the white flag. “I’m just trying to help you, Ilya. I really don’t want to fight.” A beat. “We can just let this go and still have a good night.”

Ilya considers the word for a minute, rolls it around in his mouth. “Help,” he repeats, a knife-shaped syllable. “Is that what you call what we have been doing for the last ten minutes?”

Shane’s lips tighten, eyes frowning, but he stays silent.

“Funny you call it help,” Ilya continues. “because, to me, it feels like a cage, if I’m being honest, and—”

Shane’s patience thins. “—Okay, yeah, no. We’re not doing this anymore, Ilya.” His eyes narrow, and his hands drop to his sides. “Sorry, but—no. I know sometimes you feel that you need to push away the people that love you for some reason, but you can’t do that with me. I’ve known you for too long and too fucking well to let what you’re saying get to me, ‘cause I know you don’t mean any of it. So let’s just drop this, okay?”

Ilya’s smile twists. *Not just yet.* “That’s a new one. Push away?”

Shane sighs, exhausted, looking up towards the ceiling, but he eventually nods.

“Aw. And you stay anyway. *How nice of you,*” he mocks, and then he’s shaking his head, disbelieving. *What the fuck are we even arguing about?*

“Yes.” Shane nods. “I stay because I love you.”

“Or because you like being the good one,” Ilya says, and now it’s turning, really turning. “You like being the stable and

reasonable person in this relationship. You feel superior, yes? It makes you feel better?”

Shane’s eyes flash. “I have—*never*—felt superior to you.”

Ab—Ilya can tell Shane’s starting to feel cornered, because all of his arguments are wrapped around trying to defend himself now. *Bite back*, he thinks. *Come on, lash out, hurt me.*

“Sure,” Ilya replies. “but you feel, *ab*... sane next to me. That is what this is, right?” He gestures vaguely between them. “You calm. Me chaos. You patient. Me difficult. Is a nice balance for you. Especially now that I’m not on the ice anymore. Must be *great* being able to go out there and say your husband stayed home. Not having to split all the attention with me.” A bitter laugh. “Cause I take up so much space, right?”

Shane clenches his jaw, but he stays silent, which only encourages Ilya to keep going.

“*Actually*,” he adds, like the thought’s just occurred to him, though it clearly hasn’t, “it was you that told me it was better to skip this season. Funny, right?” His eyes flick up, accusing, and his mouth twists. “Maybe—”

“—Ilya.” Shane cuts in, firm now. “I’m going to stop you right there. I’m going to ignore what you just said, because it’s so ridiculous and so absurd and so fucking offensive to me, it doesn’t even *merit* a response.” He pauses, and when it returns, his voice is tight and strained. “You think I enjoy not seeing you

play? You think I'm happy every time I'm out there playing against the 'Cens and you're not there? That it didn't fucking *gut me* to have that conversation with you? What, you think it was easy?" A beat, and he shakes his head. "I told you to put your health first. That's all. Don't twist it into something it never was. Not for one fucking second was I thinking about *anything* other than your health."

Silence settles between them, and Ilya doesn't know what to argue back. He just stands there, shoulders rigid and his jaw locked tight, staring over Shane's shoulder like the answer might be written somewhere on the wall.

"Anyway," Shane continues, voice low. "it's not about balance. It's about loving someone even when they're not at their best, and—"

A laugh breaks free of Ilya before he can stop it. "—Which book did you take that from? No, no, wait, let me guess." He gestures theatrically. "*Loving someone when they are not at their best and*, uh, what, I'm never at my best? I have not been at my best for years?"

Shane's eyes flash like he's about to say something, but Ilya continues before he has the chance. "That's the problem, yes? You miss that guy you were fucking when you were nineteen and everything was simple. You are disappointed that he turned out like this. Hey, I get it." He shrugs, smile turning mean. "Nice

dick, nice abs, funny. World at his fucking feet. Good lay, *da*⁹? Yeah, I miss him too.”

“That’s not—”

“—You are tired of me,” Ilya says, cutting him off again. “Just say it. Is fine. You think I don’t know?”

Shane looks stunned. “I’m *not* tired of you, Ilya! Do you even hear yourself?”

“I do!” He exclaims in an outburst. “I do hear myself! And I’m also hearing everything *you* are saying! You are telling me I push until I hurt you and that I distance myself from people and you are making me sound, fucking, *insane*, and—and, *horrible*, and you want me to, what? What am I supposed to say to that? What am I supposed to feel, except—hurt and, and—upset, that this is what you think of me, apparently?”

Ilya pauses for a second to gather his thoughts, and when he does, his voice returns as a small whisper. “I know I’m a little sad sometimes. Okay? I know that. But I just want to be left alone in those moments, that’s all, and you don’t *respect* that—”

“—Because I love you—”

“—And—*oh*, so you agree, then? You *don’t* respect it?”

⁹ Yes

“No, I—fuck. You know what I mean—” Shane stops, and shakes his head, clearing his mind. “I just want to understand you, and help you get better, and be there for you, and sometimes you make it pretty damn hard to... fuck, to just be around you sometimes, because—”

“—Excuse me?”

Shane closes his eyes immediately, and he goes silent. The *fuck* muttered under his breath is quiet, but loud enough for Ilya to hear it, and his voice comes icy then, a full octave lower.

“No one is forcing you to stay, Shane,” Ilya says, coldly. “If this is too much work for you, you can go. I’m not keeping you prisoner. We are in a *relationship*—or, I don’t know, I thought we were, anyway.” A beat. “You want to leave tonight? Pack your bags? Fine by me. Take your shit and get out, then. See if I run after you. Or maybe you will not leave—maybe you are too much of a coward for that.” His smile twists. “Want to bet?”

Shane flinches, his face shifting, but he takes a breath still. “Look, I’ll keep saying it as many times as you need me to—I *stay* because I *love* you,” he says, enunciating the words clearly, and there’s no restrained composure left in his voice. “I stay because you’re the love of my life, and you’re the most important thing in the world to me, and you mean, fucking, everything to me, and our relationship means everything to me, and I don’t *want* anyone else.” He spits the word *want* like it hurts him

to say it. “I want *you*, and I want to try my best to help you get better—”

“—Try!” Ilya exclaims suddenly, leaning forward in a rush, because he’s like a dog with a bone and only knows how to pick at the scab. “Of course! That’s the issue, right?” His voice is venomous now, words falling fast. “You are always trying. Always trying so damn hard to be the good guy that you forget you can be angry, you can be selfish, you don’t have to be so fucking calm all the time. You can be, *ah*, real and—”

“—Real? Real like you’re being now, you mean?” Shane scoffs. “What, would you prefer if I yelled?”

“Yes!” Ilya exclaims. “If that’s what you want, then yes, fucking yell! Or are you scared that if you stop being so perfect all the time and start saying what you are really thinking, I will not want you anymore?”

Silence. Then Shane laughs, once, hollow. “I don’t know, Ilya,” he says. “Would you?”

Ilya’s eyes narrow as they meet Shane’s, and he shouldn’t say anything, he really shouldn’t, because things are going too far now and he’s about to say words he doesn’t mean, but he’s already in free-fall and cruelty feels easier than vulnerability and some part of him would rather burn the house down than admit he’s afraid of losing it and—

“Maybe not.”

It slips out before he can stop it, before he can sand down the edges or make it into sound less brutal, and the second it's out in the air between them, Ilya understands clearly that it won't go back into his mouth. The implication lands heavy between them, like a glass set too hard on a table, not cracking but never the same again.

There's a split second, small and desperate, where he wants to lunge forward and rewrite his words, to say *no, I'm sorry, ignore that, that was cheap, I was aiming for the bruise and I found it, I would want you in any version of yourself, even the worst one, especially the worst one, even if you were swallowed whole by your own darkness I would always still choose you, Shane, I am not that cruel, I am not that small, remember the man you married, the man you fell in love with, I am still here, I am still him.*

But the moment for correction passes in the three seconds it takes for Shane to go still. Ilya sees it happen—his gaze narrowing inward, like he's already filed the sentence away, stored it somewhere in the back of his mind. He doesn't explode, or even flinch—just absorbs the blow, takes it on the chin with defeated resignation, and Ilya can almost see how the phrase finds a small corner behind Shane's eyes to settle into and live in, to be replayed on nights when sleep won't come. In that awful instant, Ilya knows he's built a future doubt, weakened Shane's self-worth—taken one of his very worst insecurities and given it tangible reason to exist.

“I just mean—how would I know, right?” he adds quickly, clumsily, the words tripping over each other in their rush to do damage control, to plaster something gentle over the crack he’s just driven through the center of them. He hears how weak his voice sounds, but he needs Shane to recognize the panic underneath his words, needs him to understand that he didn’t mean it, not like that, that it came out wrong, that it was just fear talking, that he knows sometimes Ilya’s mouth outruns his love. But it just sounds like backpedaling now.

Shane looks at him, silent. Just that stare, unnervingly blank, like he’s stepped outside his own body in order to survive the moment. He opens his mouth like he might argue or defend himself point by point like he always does, articulate and thorough, but then he stops, closes it again, swallows dry.

“Ilya,” he says slowly, each syllable voiced with such restraint, his voice fragile. “You’re being cruel.”

He knows he is. Fuck, he knows he’s being an asshole, knows how much he’s hurting Shane. It’s so perfectly clear, like pouring alcohol straight into an open wound. Ilya knows there’s no confusion he can hide behind, no misinterpretation he can cling to. He knows this isn’t about tone anymore, or about misunderstanding, or about miscommunication, or about Shane being too sensitive or Ilya being too blunt. He *wanted* to land a hit. He knows that. He *wanted* to be cruel, to hurt, to make Shane flinch, because he felt cornered, because something in him was

panicking at the thought of being the only one exposed here. He *wanted* to draw blood because he himself was bleeding.

Ilya's jaw is locked tight, so tight it aches, teeth pressed together. He should stop. He knows he should. He can see the apology, the exhale, the confession that he's spiraling and doesn't mean half the shit he's saying, and he can still choose it. He can still let the argument collapse under its own weight and apologize and—

“—You have always known I was cruel,” he says instead, and the words come out steady, which is the worst part. Steady and casual and almost conversational, like he's just offering Shane a simple fact, a shrug. It's almost like there's a dare tucked inside it, a challenge, a test for him to pass. “This is not news to you.”

What he really means—*you knew what I was when you chose me. You saw my short temper and how I can be mean when I'm scared and how I don't know how to stop when I start. You saw how I push and prod and twist and stab until something breaks just to see if it will, and how I say the ugliest thing possible just to feel less exposed. You saw the worst of me, and you saw every crack in me, and you saw how small I can be, and you loved me for fifteen years anyway, so how can you be surprised now, how can you throw it back in my face when I have been the same since the start*—stays lodged in his throat.

“No,” Shane says immediately, and the certainty in it is so instinctive, that for a whole second Ilya doesn't know what to do with it. He expects hurt, or anger, or acceptance, but Shane looks

almost offended on Ilya's behalf, like he's said something cruel about someone he loves and he won't allow it to stand. "No, I've never known you like that." He pauses. "You're being cruel now, though."

The words hang there, and for a moment, Ilya feels how they sting. But then a laugh escapes him, and once it's out it's like he's given permission for all the rest to follow. All his resentment and bitterness spill free in an exhilarating, grotesque rush, like tearing off your own skin just to see if there's anything alive underneath, like a creature gnawing at its limbs just so it can bare its teeth. Yeah—it was an ugly thing he said, but it's still not *enough*. It still doesn't calm whatever beast's inside him, still doesn't feel like having the advantage, still doesn't feel like finally standing on higher ground, still doesn't feel like sweet relief.

The seal is broken then, and insults follow, sharpened like knives, each one more accurate than the next and growing in pitch and cruelty. Their voices rising, climbing and climbing, like the higher they go the closer they'll be to finally shattering the glass between them. At some point, they move from the kitchen to the living room and from the living room to the bedroom, Ilya following Shane around with a desperate need to break through the walls he's putting up and tabulate the clean slate of their dynamic.

This is what you signed up for, he thinks. Come meet the monster you married.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ilya—*enough*,” Shane says when he catches sight of him stepping into the bedroom after him, his voice a little shaky, trying to hold himself steady.

“What?” Ilya provokes him. “We are done talking just because you say you are?”

“Yes! Yes, we—” Shane pauses, runs a frantic hand through his hair. “We’re just saying hurtful shit to each other now, *you* especially, and I don’t want to argue anymore, not like this—so yes, we’re done talking.”

“Oh, come on.” Ilya laughs. “I thought you loved playing the therapist!”

“No, that’s not true—” Shane replies.

“—No?” Ilya presses. “You sit there, all patient and, uh, composed, and you act like I’m going fucking crazy, and somehow *I’m* the problem every time? Not you?”

“Ilya, that’s not what I said. That’s not what I said *at all*, and if you’d just—”

“—But is what you meant!” he shoots back, words like flying arrows, each one aimed dead center at his composure. “You always mean it, don’t you, Shane?”

Shane doesn’t answer, and Ilya keeps going. “You know what I think? I think you *want* me to be sad. I think you *need* me to be

like this, because if I'm not, then what the fuck are you doing here?" His smile twists. "You *like* that I need you, don't you? You like it, because you *love* being the hero. You fucking love it. Saint fucking Hollander, like always."

Shane keeps breathing deeply, his eyes welling up, but he stays silent. Ilya keeps going.

"You don't want me to get better. You don't."

Silence.

"What? Just say it."

No answer.

"Just fucking say it!"

He doesn't stop there. It feels like free game now, like everything's now finally out in the open, and so he provokes Shane, and provokes him again, and provokes him again and again and again and again, not even chasing a reaction anymore, just incapable of stopping the momentum of the argument. Ilya pushes, and pushes, and pushes until he knows he's gone too far, until the sand gives way beneath his feet and he recognizes the exact moment he's crossed the line and Shane's reached the end of his tether, finally, because his voice suddenly snaps.

"*Okay*—" He breaks, at last, voice wet, but then he's shaking his head viciously, eyes wide, and Ilya's not really sure he's ever

seen him like this, and—"you know what? *Go fuck yourself*, you fucking asshole."

Shane drags a hand over his face, and a frustrated groan escapes his lips. "Is this what you wanted? Huh? You just—what, you wanted me to snap? Wanted me to be mean to you? Stoop down to your level so you could feel good about yourself for five fucking seconds?" He laughs once, humorless. "Well, congratulations. There, I was mean. Happy now?"

His eyes are bright, furious, and when he looks at Ilya again, there's nothing soft left in him. "My fucking *God*, Ilya. You just keep—*pushing*, and pushing, and pushing until somebody finally breaks, and then—then suddenly you're the victim. Every time. Like, you *just. Keep. Going.*" He throws a hand helplessly between them. "Every time I try to walk away, every time I tell you I'm done, every time I tell you I can't have this conversation anymore, you just keep fucking going until you get exactly what you want."

He drags both hands through his hair, pacing a step before turning back again. "And then what? Tomorrow I'm apologizing again, and suddenly none of the shit you said matters because you were sad? You think that just makes it all okay?" Shane's voice cracks with sheer frustration. "Do you have any idea what it's like for me? Do you have any idea how fucking exhausting it is? I spend every goddamn day wondering which version of you I'm

coming home to. And I know you're hurting, I know you are. But—Jesus, cut me some fucking slack.”

Ilya doesn't answer.

“You think, what, that nobody can love you?” Shane laughs again, bitter. “How the hell is anyone supposed to when you won't let them? You push me away at every fucking turn! You become cruel! You say the nastiest shit you can think of! You pick fights for no reason, and then you act all fucking surprised when I finally snap back!” He takes a breath, but the pause just makes his eyes well up with tears. “Fuck!” he cries out, sound cracking apart halfway through his throat, shattering the façade. “What the fuck do you actually want from me?”

Shane covers his eyes with the palm of his hands, his shoulders hunched, his breathing ragged.

“I mean, who knows!” Shane suddenly interjects, head snapping up. “Maybe this isn't the, the—the depression anymore! Maybe this is just who you really are, and I'm just finding it out fifteen years into our relationship, I don't fucking know. But—” He throws his hands up in the air. “Fuck, look what you're doing to us, Ilya. Look what you're doing to *me*. I don't—I feel like I don't fucking know you anymore.”

Ilya opens his mouth, then closes it again.

“—I want kids!” Shane wipes furiously at his tears with his hands. “Did you know that? Yeah, you know that. Jesus Christ,

Ilya, I fucking—I fucking *want* them. So much, so fucking much, you know I do. But we can't—" His voice breaks. "We can't bring children into this. Surely, you know that. We can't make some kid grow up scared of you waking up in a bad mood before they even know how to pick up a book, it's not—" His voice trails off. "*Fuck—*"

Ilya stumbles backwards, his legs buckling.

What the fuck?

Shane sees it, and his chest rises while his face twists into an expression of pain, and he brings his head up to his face, covering his eyes. "Fuck, I don't wanna say shit like that. I shouldn't—I don't even fucking mean that, or—I don't know, I do, I guess, but—I don't, like—" He shakes his head, letting out a loud wet groan of frustration. "Fuck! You see what I mean? You see why I don't wanna fucking do this?"

His shoulders sag, and he looks around the room. "We can't keep doing this, Ilya. We—just because you feel bad, you can't—you can't keep treating me like shit, because—*fuck*, because then I'm going to start saying horrible shit too, shit I *don't* mean, and we're just gonna end up hurting each other even more and making each other miserable, and I don't—" He lets out a pained cry. "It shouldn't be like that. It shouldn't fucking be like that, and it's not fair to you, and it's not fucking fair to me. It's not fair to me to have to stand there and take it just because you're having

a bad fucking day, or a bad fucking week, or, I don't know, a bad fucking month, or a year, or whatever the hell this is."

He shakes his head. "No. No, we—we can't keep doing this to each other. I don't want to fucking fight with you, I don't want to say these things to you, I don't want to look at you and feel this fucking angry, and I don't—I don't want to *hate* you one day, okay? I love you—I, I love you so fucking much, Ilya, you know I do, so, so much, but—no. You're a thirty-four year old man. You're—you're an adult. You can't make me responsible for everything that's wrong with your life. Okay? It's—it's fucking pathetic. And you can't—"

But instinct is detonating before thought can intervene and Ilya's hand is already moving without permission, something in him breaking loose. His fingers suddenly snap around Shane's wrist, too tight, immediately too tight. Shane's eyes widen, shock giving way to fear as he instinctively tries to jerk back, pulling against Ilya's grip.

The world stops, and Ilya goes horribly, catatonically still. His hand freezes, still wrapped around bone and tendon, and in that frozen second, he's no longer inside himself at all. He sees it from the outside—the grip, the angle of his hand, how Shane's body recoils—and the name that rises in his head is not his own.

Grigori.

His father's face overlays his own with ease, and Ilya thinks he's going to be sick. It's nauseating, how memory immediately

snaps into place like a photograph: his mother's wrist grabbed mid-gesture, the intake of breath she never managed to hide, how violence in that house had followed him his whole life.

How? he thinks, horrified. *How is it possible that even dead you still reach me, still teach me how to move?*

Shane stares back at him, stunned, like he doesn't recognize what he's seeing, and Ilya drops his hand as if burned.

For one second, neither of them move. They just stand there, words failing them both, and the distance between them feels suddenly immeasurable. Connected and severed all at once, too close and far apart. He's never felt farther from Shane in his life.

Shane wordlessly pulls away, and the bedroom door closes behind him with a hollow sound, wood meeting frame. Ilya remains standing by their bed, his chest caving inward. He exhales on a shaky breath, and his gaze drifts around the room, unfocused.

Is this all I am? The thought comes. *Is this what remains when you take everything else away?*

He feels the self-loathing bloom all over his veins, and there's a comfort in it, as perverse as it may be. Disgust for his body, revulsion for the soul inside it. These are familiar restraints—harsh, yes, but familiar. He knows how to live inside them.

Of course his father was never proud of him. It makes sense, of course it does. What use would Grigori Rozanov have had for a son shaking apart, chest heaving, throat threatening to collapse, weakness dripping from him in open defiance of everything that man valued?

A spoiled, arrogant child, too loud in his needs, who mistook wanting for deserving, who believed, somehow, that love was something you could ask for or cry your way into, instead of earning it? Too soft, too sensitive, too porous, everything leaking out of him when it should've been locked down and buried, every feeling a small act of rebellion against the discipline he was supposed to embody?

No wonder his mother left. Why wouldn't she? Who would stay in a house where weakness pooled in every corner, where her son mirrored back everything fragile and failing about her own life? A boy who cried too easily, who needed reassurance like oxygen, who could never learn the basic economy of affection—*take little, expect nothing, survive with what you have*? What would she say if she could see him now, hand clutched tight over Shane's wrist? He tries to imagine the look of disappointment in her eyes and feels so suddenly sick he half-imagines the bed linen covered in yellow-green from the bile in his throat.

No wonder his father looked at him and only saw excess, indulgence, softness that would never harden. No wonder love turned into disappointment before it could ever become anything else.

This is ridiculous, he thinks, even as the spiral tightens, and yet the ugly thing inside him keeps surfacing, reminding him of all the subtle ways he manipulates Shane into staying, of how condescension and bitterness leak from Ilya like a toxin, aging Shane by years and dragging him down into the same mire as him.

Ilya tries to tell himself that at least the self-hatred only runs inside his bloodstream, that at least the mask still holds. *No, no, it's contained, you see. Shane sees arrogance, not rot. Charm, not contempt.* But he knows better. Shane knows he despises himself. He knows that Ilya's tired, so goddamned, fucking tired, of forcing meaning where there may never have been any, of being surprised by the daily kiss of disappointment, of watching the floor drop out again and again and somehow always finding a lower level beneath it. Knows how he measures his pain against others', how he convinces himself his sadness is bigger, grander, worthier, of how he then questions why he ever thought he had the right to police pain and measure it in scales.

And as his throat tightens and his breathing fractures into ugly, choking sounds, the shame rushes back in. *I must look pathetic*, he thinks. *A scratched record of self-pity.*

What does he know of pain, really? He, the eternal sufferer, the self-appointed martyr, who turns misery into armor and excuse, who wields it like proof of superiority, even as it eats him alive? He, who lashes out at the slightest intrusion, snarling *you*

don't know me at people who see him from the outside in, and therefore see him more clearly than he sees himself?

Ilya locks the door, turns the key, and slides down until he's sitting on the floor, back pressed to wood, lungs refusing to cooperate. Tears come without permission, and he can't stop them. He can't *fucking* stop them.

When he finally looks up, it's into the mirror and the face he despises most in the world, reflected back at him. Time stalls around the sight of it. The clock ticks—once, twice, seven times—and then a raw sound tears out of him, a noise that doesn't feel human at all.

I hate myself. He hears himself say it, again and again and again, until it loses language and becomes incantation. His gaze drifts around the room, until a new thought follows—terrifying in how calm it arrives.

I want to die.

It settles over him, already fully formed by the time it reaches him, and his head drops forward in exhaustion.

Die without agency, die without the killing, he thinks, but die. Wake up one morning and just be gone.

Right now, he doesn't care what Shane would feel. Doesn't care about grief, or about aftermath, or about the damage it would cause. There's no room left to grow when every step is

taken in a body he abhors and a soul he despises, when every movement feels like running a marathon through sand in a latex suit four sizes too small, when he's hyperaware of the version of himself he presents to the world, living under the constant surveillance of his own third eye. Judge, jury, executioner, the most merciless critic of this long, far too long, feature-length disaster of a life.

When self-esteem turns his insecurities into predators and himself into prey, when his insomnia is written off as a personality quirk instead of what it is, a symptom of something chemically, catastrophically wrong. When he dreams of inhabiting a body assembled in pieces, Frankenstein-like, a face vaguely inspired by his own grafted onto a torso, legs, arms, hands, feet that don't belong to him.

When all that runs through his veins is rage—at the world, at others, at Shane, at his father, at his mother, at himself, at what he is, what he isn't, what he'll never be.

When more than unhappy, he *is* unhappiness. When he is so, so tired. So unbearably empty.

Ilya stops to assess and re-assess who he was, who he is and who he might become, and finds nothing stable enough to hold onto. If yesterday he was one thing, and today another, and tomorrow something else entirely, what narrative remains? What consistency? What self?

If he no longer remembers who he was before depression—or worse, maybe, remembers it all too well—what’s left? If days blur into weeks, and weeks into months, and months into years, and years into a life?

Shane could leave, he thinks. He wouldn’t, Ilya’s almost sure of it, but he *could*. And what then? What then, when the only prophecy that has ever proven reliable is that, in the end, you can’t really count on anyone but yourself? If even that guarantee is shaky for him, what remains? What cards are left to play?

He looks at his reflection again, hyperaware of the unforgiving nature of reality, of the fact that the world doesn’t pause to mourn something that might never have truly belonged to him in the first place. Broken humanity in its rawest form lives inside him—guttural sounds threatening to paralyze his throat, his skull turning into a boxing ring where his own mind beats his soul into submission, and his body into defeat.

Oh, the irony of time. This is the dark before dawn, after all. *The darkest* before a hypothetical dawn.

And so, he cries.

Both his hands go numb in the time it takes to feel the warmth of Shane’s lips pressing against his forehead, murmured apologies stacking softly, voices blurring into each other—*I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry*—shoulders tucked together as they crawl into bed, and they fall asleep sobbing in each other’s arms.

Chapter Five

SHANE, DO YOU take Ilya to be your lawfully wedded husband? Do you promise to—

—I, Shane, take you, Ilya—

—And Ilya, do you take—

—I, Ilya, take you, Shane, to be my lawfully wedded husband. I promise to love and cherish you, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. For richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, and forsaking all others, keep myself only unto you, for so long as we both shall live.

In good times and in bad.

For better or worse.

For as long as we both shall live.



A FEW DAYS later, their home's gone quiet.

Everything feels muted and padded, like the whole world's been wrapped in cotton and the volume turned down. Even the

light seems to hesitate before coming in, the dust motes suspended in the air like they, too, don't want to fall too loudly.

Shane moves like he's learned a new choreography overnight—slower, more careful. He doesn't reach for Ilya without looking first, doesn't interrupt like he used to, doesn't talk just to hear Ilya's voice answering back. There's no casual overlap of sounds anymore, no brushing of shoulders or random sentences going back and forth, and where Ilya once missed the silence, now it sits in his chest and makes him feel like fucked up or did something wrong.

"You are making tea?" Ilya asks, breaking through the quiet. Shane has his back to him, shoulders hunched over a kettle as he fiddles with the tea bag. "Can you get me a cup?"

Shane glances over his shoulder like he's afraid to startle a deer. "Uh, yeah. Of course. Do you want honey?" He asks, softly. *Too softly.*

Ilya blinks, forcing a genuine smile. "I always want honey. You know this."

He notices the immediate smile Shane gives him back, quick and relieved, like he's passed some secret test. He tries for a joke, looking to break through the ice. "You married a Russian man, Shane. Remember? We would shower in honey if we could."

And, sure, Shane chuckles, but it's softer than he would've hoped, and his shoulders loosen only a fraction.

He reaches for the jar, then hesitates, hand hovering mid-air. “I can do lemon,” he adds. “Or ginger, I don’t know. We don’t have to do honey every time.”

“I want honey,” Ilya repeats, a little harsher than he means to.

Shane stills. “Okay.” A beat, and then he nods, once. “Honey.”



They’re sitting at the table, and Shane angles his chair just slightly towards Ilya. Every glance of his eyes seems to say *I’m here*, but equally, *I won’t crowd you*. The spoon clinks against the tea mug, and the sound echoes a little awkwardly—it feels too loud for a room this quiet.

“So,” Shane says after a while, voice careful. “I know we said no hockey talk, but you should know I called Theriault last night. I told him I’m not getting on the plane with them today.”

Ilya tenses halfway through lifting his mug. “You didn’t—”

“—I was supposed to leave to Detroit, as you know, but—” Shane continues. “I told him I’m staying an extra two weeks, maybe the full month depending on how things go. Family emergency, so they’re treating it as a leave of absence.”

Ilya looks up, meeting Shane's eyes and seeing the hesitation there, how he's already bracing for a fight. "Shane. Please tell me you didn't do that."

"It's okay!" he says quickly. "There's no harm to my career, if that's what you're worried about. Teams deal with this kind of stuff all the time. Theriault said he understood."

He rubs the back of his neck, eyes dropping for a second. "I told him I'd miss this road swing and we'd reevaluate after that. If things still aren't stable, then I'll take longer. If they're good, then maybe I can come back earlier." A beat. "I just—I want to make sure you're okay. I *need* to. And I can't do that unless I'm here."

Shane stops, like he needs to make sure Ilya understands this part most of all. "I *want* to be here. Okay? And my schedule isn't working for us, and I *need* to be around so you don't have to carry all this weight alone. I know we said a lot of ugly shit the other night, but you were right when you said I've been gone way too much, so that's settled."

Ilya's stomach drops. "Shane. I'm okay." It comes out too fast, too practiced, so he makes himself breathe before he goes on. "Really. I am. You don't have to do this."

He *is* okay. Or—as okay as he can be right now, given the circumstances.

"I know." Shane's mouth presses into a thin line. "I just meant—"

“—I know what you meant,” Ilya snaps, then immediately winces. He exhales, scrubs a hand down his face. “Fuck, sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“It’s fine,” Shane says. He reaches out, then stops himself, his hand hovering over the table before retreating. “It’s fine,” he repeats to himself. “The decision’s made, either way. Farah’s already coordinated everything with the team, and they’re putting out a statement today or tomorrow, so I don’t care if you disagree. I’m staying.”

Ilya closes his eyes and nods resignedly, because nodding is easier than explaining the sudden ache behind his forehead, easier than starting a fight when the memory of their last one still echoes, easier than admitting the humiliating truth underneath it all that—yes, underneath all his pride and posturing, he does need Shane to stay, does need him to forfeit hockey for a moment and put him first, does need to feel Shane love him in ways that are tangible and unambiguous, does need the simple fact of his presence like oxygen, and Ilya doesn’t really trust himself to survive the night alone with his own head anymore, so *yes, please stay, Shane, I need you, please.*

His chest burns a little, though. It feels like Shane’s care has become so meticulous, clinical, even: *don’t raise your voice, don’t crowd him, don’t touch him without asking, don’t ask too much, don’t assume he’s stable.* And yes, part of it is love—so much love, pure, unadulterated devotion—and Ilya knows he’s never been more

grateful to have Shane in his life, has never loved him more deeply, has never looked at him and thought, *you are the axis on which I turn*, with such certainty. But it's also love expressed as restraint, domesticity, but held back, intimacy, but handled with pincers, and it might just be the most hurtful thing Shane could ever do to him, because this, *this* is how it starts, isn't it? The recalibration, the shrinking, the re-mapping of someone else's life around the volatility of his own.

Shane smiles at him, tentatively, and it'd almost be endearing if it didn't make Ilya's chest seize up on reflex, noticing how his eyes keep checking Ilya's face like they're waiting for permission to look there.

"We can watch a movie later," Shane offers, voice low like he's already prepared to retreat. "Or not. Whatever you feel like."

Whatever you feel like.

Fuck, like Ilya even knows. Like feeling is a stable concept, something with edges, with coordinates, with a center he can come back to instead of this constant churn that pulls him in opposing directions at the same time, the desire to be held colliding with the urge to be left alone, the craving for noise crashing against the immediate exhaustion it brings. Every impulse already contradicted by the next, until the very question itself is meaningless.

Ilya watches him shift in his chair, an inch at most, but even a movement as small feels deliberate, somehow, hesitant, taken from

some rulebook he never agreed to follow. There's something about how restrained Shane looks that makes Ilya's throat tighten, because he's always been so open, so tangible, so reachable, and now there's this carefulness there that looks so out of place, and Ilya can't help but wonder when someone this gentle learned to be afraid of him.

Before he can stop it, there's a pressure building behind his eyes. It's not Shane he's angry at. He knows that, even while the emotion curls in his chest, because he's not doing anything wrong. He's doing everything right, actually—being considerate and attentive, paying attention to his words, his touch, all his implications. There's no misunderstanding to fix here, really. Shane's instinct to soften, to make their home safe, to make space for Ilya to rest and be comfortable in, is *beautiful*. But he's also sanding himself down so that there are no harsh edges to cut on, and Ilya feels like he's being, fucking, reclassified, or something. Like he's being moved down from equal to handled, from husband to dependent, and, like—he's fucking *seen* this before. That's the fucking issue, here. He's *seen* how a person adopts a completely different posture when they start moving around someone else instead of *with* them, he's seen how rooms and houses start trying to anticipate someone else's fragile mood swings. He's seen it all. And he's seen how it's left them all fucked up, too.

He stops to look at Shane. The constant awareness, the little adjustments, how he keeps carefully monitoring his tone and adjusting how much space he occupies and how fucking silent he

suddenly is, and—Jesus, Ilya instantly recoils at the recognition. It feels like his own memories resurfacing suddenly, or coming to life again. A different kitchen. A different table. The scrape of a chair leg across the linoleum floor. His mother's voice trailing off mid-sentence, everyone holding their breath to see what might come next. Her presence bending everything else into silence, this invisible force the whole house started to orbit with whispers and light steps. The axis hanging over her head and around which him and his brother would try to move, pretending it didn't exist.

Long before Shane, when he was a child, Ilya had bent himself into shapes no child should've known, had moved earth and stone with his bare hands trying to prove he was worth staying for. Hadn't he? He'd strained and sacrificed and made things happen and tried and tried and tried, or so he thought—not because he genuinely believed he'd be rewarded for his effort, but because, well, the alternative was unthinkable, and that way then maybe one day he could at least say he'd lived for the possibility that his relationship with his family might be more than what it was—more than silence, more than endurance, more than bare-thin transactional coexistence.

He'd been good enough, hadn't he? Quiet when noise was admonished, exceptional when mediocrity felt like a personal failure, careful not to ask for more than he could justify. He learned early on that love was a reward system, that affection followed effort, compliance, performance, and that being wanted was conditional and revocable. So, he became useful, impressive,

and—*still*. Still, it hadn't been enough. It was never, *ever*, going to be enough.

It was all so futile. So futile, and so *pointless*, and he knows, he knows something turned to stone inside him the day he came to that realization. He knows his heart fully calcified when he understood that there was never going to be any configuration of himself that would satisfy his father, no version that would dull his mother's pain, that no amount of trying could somehow alchemize their grief into tenderness. That some absences were structural, and some hungers could not be fed.

And now here is Shane, the only reason his heart's not still made of stone, trying to feed all his hungers anyway. Here he is, stalling his career and rearranging his life around Ilya, speaking gently to him, offering him love and care and concern and it all just makes him feel even more fucking splintered and like his nerves are spraying open.

Ilya's never hated his parents more.

He *hates* them. God, he hates them, right this very second—father and mother both. Hates them for the cruelty they built together and called a home, for how it seemed to function perfectly from the outside while hollowing everything inside it, for how it all left no evidence beyond two very fucked-up boys. Hates them for how, decades later, he has to sit here and listen to Shane's voice soften, has to listen to him hold his breath, has to watch him move with caution instead of with ease.

It'd be so much easier if things had been louder or uglier—if there was some bruise he could point to and say, *this, here, this is where it all went wrong*. But there's no starting point, no singular incident he can hold up as proof. Only his entire lifetime, reduced to, *where to even start?* and then never starting at all. A lifetime of accumulated little adjustments. There are only memories, scraping against his ribcage and refusing to be buried or dismissed, that prove not everything lived only in his imagination—even if he was taught to doubt himself early and often.

Cold Moscow mornings. Breath fogging the air while he waited to be told which version of himself was required that day. His father's hand, heavy on his shoulder, never striking, never gentle. Corrective doctrine that left no mark but lingered longer than pain ever could. Crying—not forbidden outright, but treated as malfunction, as something inefficient and embarrassing that needed to be corrected early, before it became habit. Softness as defect, vulnerability as rot.

Boys did not sob. Boys did not tremble. Boys did not *need*.

If both he and Andrei are hollowed out now and their inner worlds resemble Goya's Black Paintings, all rot and shadow and screaming figures swallowed by darkness, it's because of all the choices made long before either of them could contest them, because grief and rage were siphoned into two young boys until resentment was their native tongue. Spoken in different dialects, perhaps, but rooted in the same soil.

If they don't know how to love cleanly, without bitterness or punishment or withdrawing or keeping score, it's because the two people who should've taught them what love looked like modeled it as something you endured, something you braced yourself against rather than moved towards, something that demanded constant negotiation. Because they taught them that marriage was a battlefield where everyone involved lost, somehow, and the remaining spoils of war were survived in increasingly diminished ways. Because they poured everything they couldn't process themselves—all their disappointment, all their mourning—into those two boys, impressionable to a fault, desperate for the proud, warm hand on their shoulders, until the damage ended up replicating itself and they became the very thing they swore they'd never become: their parents.

If Ilya knows anything with certainty now, it's that Grigori and Irina Rozanova live on, not in photographs or stories or even Ilya and Andrei's memories, but in reflex, in a hand that fires forward on instinct to grab a wrist, in the sound of pain coming from someone else's throat.

And now the cost is tallying itself, like it always does when something keeps going, for years, just because it's easier to let it happen than to put a stop to it—which is why Shane's gentleness reads to Ilya like a warning now, why the sight of someone he loves recalibrating their entire life around his moods makes him fucking *terrified*. Because he *knows* what that does to a person. How

it erodes them slowly, how it teaches them to edit themselves mid-thought, mid-gesture, mid-feeling.

He watches Shane now, and he sees it all, every single damn thing—the careful distance, the self-editing, the restraint—and he leans back in his chair so suddenly it screeches against the floor, body recoiling in horror. Shane looks up at him suddenly, likely wondering what the hell’s going on, or maybe thinking that Ilya’s about to flip again, and the fact that’s even a possibility now makes him want to sob.

Ilya still very much feels like that same child, some days. Still twelve years old, still walking into the bedroom where his mother’s body is lying, still thinking that if he can be a little easier to love, a little less volatile, a little more contained, then maybe he can come out whole on the other side of tragedy. But now he’s in his thirties, and married, and no longer a child. There’s no bedroom to walk into anymore, no tragedy to survive. There’s just Shane’s sitting right there in front of him, looking up at him with his eyes wide, not some distant, faraway dream or some future concept Ilya can pretend not to see, but—the man he *loves*. The person he vowed to share a life with. Close enough to hurt, close enough to lose. Whatever Ilya does now will land somewhere—no, not somewhere. It’ll land on *him*.

Ilya sits back down in his chair, slowly, eyes narrowed. *No*.

He loves Shane too much to ever allow him to learn that posture, to ever let himself become the axis around which Shane’s

life turns, to ever accept a devotion that comes with self-erasure attached. Love shouldn't require this kind of vigilance. Love shouldn't feel like a structure built only to withstand collapse, no matter what his parents instilled on him.

No. Love should be the cottage, and the summer, and easy, so easy, easy like breathing.

"Shane," he says, barely louder than a whisper. "What you said the other night..." A beat, and then the words slip out before Ilya can second-guess them. "I do not want you to be scared."

Shane frowns, immediately. "No, no—I already told you. I'm not scared of you," he replies quickly. "I could never be scared of you."

Ilya's smile is sad. "But you are," he answers, gently. "Maybe not of me directly, but—Shane, you are. You're scared of hurting me. You're scared of being yourself around me, of saying the wrong thing. I need us to be—"

The words snag. He stops there, breathing in, letting the air out through his nose. His eyes slip shut for a moment, because it's easier to say the next part without having to watch Shane hear it. "I need us to be normal. Even if everything else is... fucked, and completely wrong and messed-up, I at least need *us*, you and me, to be normal, to be okay, for things to be like they always were. If not..."

He falters. For a second, Ilya nearly swallows it, nearly does what he always does and makes it smaller—but Shane’s already looking at him, and the truth is already out there between them anyway, raw and waiting, so he forces himself to say it. “If not, I think I’m going to get even worse, and I don’t *want* to get worse. Okay?”

Shane’s shoulders give at his words, and he stops to swallow dry. His breath hitches, eyes dropping to where his hands rest on the table.

“I just want to do this right,” Shane breathes out, and *God*, it sounds so simple said like that. It sounds so, so simple, like a child’s basic plea, and it almost breaks Ilya’s chest open.

Ilya tries to smile at him, a small curve of lips. “I know, *любимый*¹⁰. That’s the problem.”

He reaches across the table and cups Shane’s wrist in his hand, deliberately holding it loose. He’s almost exaggerating in how softly he’s holding it, like he’s trying to prove something not just to Shane but also to himself, like he needs to feel the complete lack of force, the absence of any strength.

“There is no right way to do this,” Ilya tells him, quietly. “I do not want you to watch every step you take. I don’t want you to have to tiptoe around me.”

¹⁰ Beloved

“I’m not, though,” Shane insists through wet eyes, though his voice wavers. “I’m not, I just... I really don’t want to fuck this up, Ilya. You mean too much to me. Alright? I want you to feel safe when you’re with me, and especially when you’re home. You’re fighting enough battles in your head. I don’t want you to fight them with me around.”

Shane hesitates, like he’s weighing whether the next thought is allowed to be voiced out loud, and then he adds, softer: “Plus—kids, you know?”

Ilya’s head snaps up to his, panic suddenly grabbing him by the throat. His mouth drops open, and he doesn’t really know what to say, and maybe he—and—

But Shane just smiles tentatively at him, and immediately Ilya knows: *we’re okay. We’re going to be okay.*

“We’ll have them running around here soon enough, right?” Shane adds, dropping his hand from Ilya’s and raising it to his face, thumb caressing his cheek like he’s trying to overwrite his words from the other night, and—God, Ilya loves him so fucking much he could burst with it. “I want you to be comfortable at home so your memories aren’t, like... tarnished one day, or something. I want to make it good. For us. For them. You know?”

Kids.

NETTLES

It lands with a strange weight, tender and terrifying at the same time, an abstract future-shaped *thing* that glows faintly and casts a very long shadow. Shane says it like a promise, like something inevitable and good, and Ilya feels the familiar swell of love that always follows.

Shane, that steady drum. Shane, that stubborn heart that anchors him when he flies too close to the sun. Shane, the only constant in a world that spins too fast, too cruel, too silently for Ilya. Shane, the steady pulse beneath his fingers, the warmth in the cold, the wild and fierce and irrational promise that he won't be left alone to drown in this ocean of shadows.

Shane, the lighthouse and the shadow itself.

Shane and Shane and Shane and Shane.

Ilya nods, once. "I know," he says, simply.

And he does, he really does know. That's the cruelty of it. Knowing doesn't make it easier, doesn't make the love smaller or the fear duller, doesn't fix the contradiction of wanting to be held while fearing what that holding might represent. Knowing doesn't change the fact that sometimes love can be enough, but you still reach the end of what you can do for someone and have to let go, even when it feels like a slow unraveling of light and bone, even when it feels like you're slipping through your own grasp.

Shane grabs his hand again and squeezes, thumb brushing over Ilya's knuckles. "I'm sorry if I've been making it weird," he says, with a smile. "We'll figure it out."

Ilya nods, rather than say everything that crowds his throat, and he leans forward until their foreheads rest together, breathing Shane in.

But then Shane's thumb stills absentmindedly over Ilya's knuckles, and Ilya suddenly feels the future open under his feet. He's always been too good at reading omens in the tea leaves, and what he sees now is—his hand closing around Shane's wrist again. Shane's breath catching again. The two of them, years from now, standing in some room that looks nothing like this one and everything like it, the house silent around them for reasons Ilya doesn't know, but can probably already name.

His worst prophecy fulfilled: becoming exactly who he'd spent his whole life swearing he'd never become. A hand that closes, a house that quiets.

NETTLES

Chapter Six

ILYA, SHANE STARTS in that fond voice of his.

I look around me and wonder why I'm here sometimes, too. I think, 'why do I bother?' because, sometimes, it feels like none of this matters and everything feels a bit pointless. But... we bother anyway. You know? Despite everything, despite all the shitty things, a part of us will always think it does matter, and that there is a point to all this, somewhere. There has to be, right?

So, we wake up, and we get out of bed, and we put right foot in front of left, and we try our best, and we live anyway. And sometimes it gets better, sometimes it gets worse, sometimes it even just stays the exact same. But at least we try. And then he shrugs, the faintest twitch of humor in his jaw, like it's a secret joke between him and the universe—or, uh... at least I like to think that, because God knows I'd probably go insane if I didn't.

Life—the blade and the wound and the miraculous healing after it all, too.



ILYA DREAMS, AND his mind drifts.

NETTLES

Ilyusha, some voice whispers. *Ilyusha*, my love—

His heart vaults. *Мама?*¹¹

*Ilya—Илья*¹², my beautiful boy—

Sensation thinning out—sound dissolving—

—*Мама—Мама, нет*—¹³

Darkness, or—maybe blinding brightness—

—*Нет, Мама—Я—Я тебя люблю*—¹⁴

—*Илюша*¹⁵—

—*Мама*—

Ilya wakes up.

The room slowly comes into focus. The early morning light, the ceiling, the fabric around him. He looks to the side, last threads of lullaby still clinging somewhere behind his eyes.

Shane, right there next to him. It relieves and devastates him in equal measure.

¹¹ Mom?

¹² Ilya

¹³ —Mom—mom, no—

¹⁴ —No, mom—I—I love you—

¹⁵ Ilyusha

He's already awake, head leaning against the pillow and watching him intently. Ilya wonders if he watched him through the whole crossing back, if Shane witnessed whatever flickered across his face while he was somewhere else entirely. And for a moment, he doesn't speak or move, because the dream still hasn't loosened its grip—*Mama*¹⁶ still lingers somewhere in his head, and the echoes of *Ilyusha* remain warm against his chest, and he can't yet separate that tenderness from the sight of Shane inches away from him, real and breathing and solid in the pale light, until his hand lifts to brush a curl back from Ilya's forehead, his fingers cautious.

"Hey. 'Morning," he says softly, gaze tender. "You were talking in your sleep, I think."

"Good morning." Ilya swallows, still halfway between two worlds. He blinks the remnants of darkness away. "I was?"

Shane gives a small shrug.

"For how long?" Ilya asks, his voice coming out rough, like he hasn't used it in years.

"Oh, not that long." A beat. "You sounded sad, though."

Ilya sighs at that, averting his eyes. "I already told you, Shane." A beat, and he stretches his legs. "I'm fine," he adds automatically, because that's the script, that's the answer that keeps things from

¹⁶ Mom

unraveling. But even as he says it, he can feel how weak it sounds, how weak *he* sounds.

Shane studies him, while his thumb presses against the mattress. The full month had passed like he'd promised Ilya, but it still felt like he didn't believe a single syllable that came out of his mouth any more than he did three months ago.

"You were saying something in Russian," Shane whispers. "I didn't understand it. I think you were calling out for your mother at first, but the rest, yeah, I didn't understand." He shakes his head. "I guess it doesn't really matter now. I just—"

He stops himself, and Ilya waits. That's one of the things about Shane—he'll circle around something, try to beat around the bush, and then re-calibrate when he sees there's no way around it and try to land gently. But he'll always finish a thought.

"I didn't like how you sounded," he says, finally.

Ilya lets out a breath. "People talk while they sleep. That's not new."

But Shane just stares back at him, like he's trying to solve a puzzle. "Ilya..."

There's no accusation in it. Just his name, whispered softly between them, and the silence stretches. Shane's fingers flex against the sheets, then still once more.

“You don’t have to tell me,” he says, and he sounds so gentle it almost wrecks Ilya, “but if it’s about you not sleeping, or the headaches, or whatever *this* is...” His hand gestures vaguely between them. “You don’t have to handle that alone. You know that, right?”

Ilya looks at him vacantly. “Handle what?”

He presses his lips. “Everything that’s been eating away at you.”

“*Shane*,” Ilya huffs his name. “Again with this. Come on, I just woke up. I told you, I’m *fine*.”

“But you’re not.” He shakes his head with a sad smile. “You haven’t been. And it’s okay, really. It’s okay. I can help you.” A beat. “If you let me.”

Ilya sighs. “I don’t need—”

“—I know.” Shane cuts in, and his voice is so gentle, so certain, so tender. “I know you don’t need it. I know you’re... used to carrying it all by yourself. But—” He pauses. “—I’m here anyway.”

His gaze never once wavers, eyes wide and hopeful and devastatingly open, and that’s when Ilya starts to see it. Concern, and love, and devotion, and everything he’s used to seeing, yes, but he also thinks he can see a dangerous belief starting to settle in behind Shane’s eyes—the idea that this is *his* to fix. That if he stays long enough, pushes hard enough, gives enough, then he can mend

whatever's fraying inside Ilya, absorb the damage and still stand, still live to tell the story. Ilya sees exactly how the idea takes root, and then the certainty floods Shane's face so nakedly it makes him want to look away, because he's clearly choosing something enormous without fully knowing the cost.

I can save him, written all over his face. I can save this broken person who broke me in return, this ruined puzzle that only I can complete, even if it costs me pieces of myself. I can hold him together, and carry what he can't, and be enough for the both of us.

The thoughts aren't spoken, naturally, but they're loud anyway, so loud they press against Ilya's skull.

Of course Shane believes they'll find a way to rebuild afterward. Dependable Shane. Reliable Shane. Unbreakable Shane. Shane who gives, and gives, and gives, and never learns how to take. Shane, who thinks that if something is broken, you work until it isn't, if someone is hurting, you stand in the doorway and refuse to leave.

The thought that he'll stay by Ilya's side through it all settles with warm comfort in his chest, and in the few seconds that follow, it consumes Ilya entirely, shaking him to the core. Because for a single, desperate moment, he believes it. He actually believes it. Every instinct of self-preservation dissolves, and it feels like he's falling in love with Shane all over again, like their fifteen years suddenly replay in full in the span of a few brief seconds.

Maybe Shane's doing the same. Maybe that's why he reaches out, hand shaking just slightly, fingers coming to hover between them but never reaching the face they seek. A promise, forming without words. That he *will* get better, that Shane *will* be there for every step of it, that they *can* push through this, that they can move beyond this, *together*.

"I'm here," Shane tells him, and it sounds like a vow. "Whatever it is. I'm not going anywhere."

For a moment, Ilya almost lets him. For one second, it almost feels possible.

He can see the future Shane's promising, can see all the concrete and the cement paved under tower cranes of wedding vows he swore to uphold. He sees the promises, the persistence, how Shane will give and give and give until there's nothing left in him that isn't shaped around Ilya's fractures. Every warning signal in his body falters, and Ilya feels himself tipping towards the warmth of being chosen like that, towards the relief of letting someone else shoulder the fight, and the wanting is so overwhelming it's humiliating.

Ah—that unbearable, glorious almost. *Almost* he leans into it, *almost* he lets Shane touch him, ground him, tether him back to the world. *You just need to let me in*, he remembers, from their bedroom all those months ago.

God, he wants to. He wants to lean forward, and put the weight of his body into Shane's hands, and let himself be held up for once,

instead of being the one doing the holding, the pretending, the surviving. He wants to believe that love can be enough if it's this stubborn, this relentless, this unwilling to let go. But because Ilya loves him—because he loves Shane *too much*—he forces his face to soften, to settle into something calm and resigned and at peace. Forces his features to ease out, just slightly, just barely, but enough where Shane could see it. *I'm okay*, he tries to convey, letting acceptance wash over him like a mask, because he knows Shane well enough to understand what he needs to see in order to stop questioning him all the time.

But then—because Shane is Shane, because he's always been like this—he reaches for Ilya anyway. Head raised confidently, gaze locked on his, hand still hovering, still reaching, still trying.

Dependable Shane. Reliable Shane. Unbreakable Shane. Shane who gives and gives until there's nothing left and then digs deeper anyway. Shane who never learned to take *no* at face value, who never learned how to believe that Ilya breathing, existing, *living*, might not be as inevitable as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west, as birds chirping and flowers blooming in the spring. Might not be as certain as the cottage in the summer, where they first found and loved each other all those years ago now, or as certain as the flies that hang low around the dock, or the loons that call out at night, or the shadows that hit the counter just right when the sun shines down above them.

To him, Ilya existing is part of the natural order, the truth around which his entire life is built, and everything secondary.

There's no Shane without Ilya, no Ilya without Shane—so, Ilya *must* exist. As does the rain, as does the wind, as does the sun, as does the moon. As does the cottage, as does the summer. But Ilya had wanted to live, not just to exist.

I can change your mind, Shane must think, but Ilya's eyes burn and the truth tastes bitter. He looks away.

The disappointment hits him first, and Ilya watches it in real time from the corner of his eye—how Shane's mouth presses thin, how it looks like he's swallowing something bitter, how his eyes start to water. It looks too much like Ilya's own reflection on bad days, like the brutal collapse of self-worth, and it makes his chest tighten. He thinks he can see in Shane's face the idea that he's not enough start to settle, that Ilya's need to crawl into his own skin outweighs his will to live for Shane, and, well—Ilya can't disagree, no matter how much it feels like tearing himself open to admit it. But then there's something else in Shane's face too—a question. That maybe this isn't really about illness, or despair, or any of the thousand and one reasons Ilya's given him over the years, but something simpler and crueler. A lack of love.

You idiot, he wants to say, but his throat's too tight. *How could you ever think that? You are the best part of me. The only thing I ever did right. And even that I managed to ruin.*

Outside, the world carries on. A bird calls, somewhere beyond the glass of the window panes, and light keeps creeping along the

wall. The whole world, indifferent to whatever marital collapse seems to be happening between them, unspoken.

Shane swallows dry.

“Okay,” he whispers to himself, as though anything about this is okay.

But then he shifts slightly, and leans just a fraction closer, and his eyes lock onto Ilya’s with a clarity that cuts through everything else.

Still. Still, after all the signs, after all the exit-ramps where it would’ve been easier to turn away, to tell himself this was too much, too hard, too painful, Shane reaches for him like it’s a habit he never learned to break.

“I have to leave tonight,” he tells him. “But I’ll call you. Every day. I won’t let you be alone for a second longer than I have to. Mom and Dad will come around too, and—we’ll get through this.” A beat. “Okay? We *will* get through this, Ilya. I promise you.”

Ilya swallows and nods, once.

But the look Shane gives him back makes him want to curl up to his chest and disappear, like he could somehow shrink enough to not be seen so completely. He sees how Shane’s eyes measure him, and he hates that it makes him ache, hates that he feels stuck somewhere between shame and the urge to cry and never stop crying.

Because, for the first time, Shane looks at him not like something inevitable, as he always did—not like the rain, or the sun, or the summer—but like something mortal. Like he’s suddenly realized how that inevitability was just a story he told himself to feel better.

He looks at Ilya like his existence is something fallible and fleeting and, for once, not fully certain.



ILYA’S WORSE NOW.

Shane’s been gone for a week, buried deep in the chaos of the playoffs, and Ilya’s left behind with nothing but the hum of their home, and the sound of his own breathing, and a mind that refuses to stop spinning, and the slow poison that’s seeping into every crack and corner it can find.

Shane’s voice crackles on the other end of the line, calling daily—hourly, almost—and Ilya listens, nods, even smiles sometimes, but hockey’s a distant thunder outside these walls, and mostly he’s alone with himself and all the things he doesn’t want to face but can’t escape. No crowds, no noise, no distractions. Just the silence pressing in and the exhaustion settling inside him, a thick weight pressing down. He breathes it

in, exhales it out—slowly, like a ritual—but the heaviness never lifts.

One night, while Shane's saying his goodbyes and they're half-asleep, settling down for the night, he tells Ilya he loves him. So simply, so casually. And, really, it's not the words themselves that split something open inside him. They've said them a thousand times, in kitchens and airports and asleep and laughing and absentminded, and Shane says them every night, even. They both do, after all. But the *I love you* that arrives this time... The pause before it, his voice going smaller, words slowing like they have some unknown weight, like Shane's turned them over in his mouth a few dozen times before saying them out loud, like he's trying to place them down carefully in front of him, choosing them instead of reaching for them instinctively and out of habit and tossing them like they're this easy, familiar thing... He tells Ilya he loves him like he's bracing for something, but not wanting it to look like he's bracing. Like he's making peace with a fate he hasn't yet voiced out loud, like it's clear Ilya's nearing the end of the cliff and Shane's decided there *will* be a fall.

He says it like he *knows*.

Ilya nearly comes undone, then. Suddenly, all the words he's been holding back for months come back to him in a clumsy, desperate flood that's too large to fit inside his mouth, and he wants to tell Shane everything: that he sees what this has cost him, that this vigilance wasn't part of the contract, that loving him was never supposed to require all of this. That he's sorry, so

sorry for how he's turned him into someone perpetually worried, perpetually rattled, perpetually braced against the next worst thing.

He wants to tell Shane this isn't his fault, that it never was, none of it. Not the silences, not the spirals, not the days when Ilya couldn't reach for him even though he wanted to. He wants to say that loving him is the best thing he's ever done, the single most certain thing in a life that has otherwise felt like unstable ground. That if there's anything he's done right, it's this, it's Shane. That every night he lies awake terrified his own instability will someday erode everything they've built, that he'll wake up one morning and find the life they have reduced to ashes because he didn't know how to hold himself together properly, that he prays whatever comes tomorrow doesn't cancel out the fifteen years that came before it.

He wants to say *thank you*, and *I'm sorry*, and *forgive me*, and *I know this is not easy*, and *I'm trying*, and *please do not let me ruin you*.

And the thing is that there *is* time. They're not being chased, there's no interruption at the door, no clock ticking down. There's nothing stopping him, just the darkness and the distance across each end of the line. *There's no time*, Ilya tells himself, but, really, there was never enough time, not even when he had all the time in the world.

I love you too, he says back, instead.

He loves Shane too much, enough to want to stop breaking him. Ilya knows—fuck, he knows what he’s been doing, knows that he’s been shattering piece after piece of a heart that’s already endured too much, already given too much. But he also loves Shane enough to know that staying just to barely hold on, just to survive out of some misplaced sense of duty or fear or love—a love that might one day even feel more like a chain than the sanctuary it is now—would slowly eat them both alive. And he just... he doesn’t want that for Shane. He doesn’t want him to look back decades from now and realize he only lived a half-life, one that was stitched together by obligation and fear and not much more, doesn’t want him looking back with regret and realizing that, ultimately, Ilya was just too heavy of a weight to bear. He knows that living like that will hollow them both out until there’s nothing left but a fragile shell, nothing left but a house made of two living, walking ghosts.

He won’t be that ghost. Not when Shane dreams of children, *real* children, whole and grinning and flesh and bone, not just broken, empty promises. Not when he dreams of laughter echoing through a sunlit house, of a little girl with his stubborn fire and a little boy with his shy smile. Not when he dreams of a family, when he imagines a home brimming with love and messy joy filling every corner, when he pictures Yuna and David watching their grandchildren play under a golden sun by the lake. Not when he sketches a family woven through time like threads of gold and a life bursting with everything he’s ever hoped for.

He can't bear the thought of shrinking Shane's world down to a cage, where every moment is a trap, and every silence is a warning, and every day is this delicate tightrope walk above an abyss. Can't bear the thought of inadvertently raising new Ilya's—children who, like him, will grow up scarred and scared, inheriting his shadows and carrying hidden scars that ripple forward, from one generation to the next, until they're teaching their own children the same choreography of fear and self-erasure, unconsciously.

No. Ilya's still conscious. He's still conscious enough for this, and he won't be the reason Shane learns to live on edge or turns into a constant guard against pain. Won't let him inherit a life of endless vigilance, of measuring every silence, of monitoring every dark moment, of treating him like a fragile glass about to shatter. Won't let him become a husband shaped by fear or a father aged by worry. Won't let his children bend themselves into shapes no child should ever know, like he once had, only to grow up resenting him, like he now does. *No.*

God, Shane as a father. The vision burns through him, fighting off the shadows he feels creeping closer every day. It's a distant, fragile dream that cuts like a blade, but it's one that Ilya wants to protect, treasure, even as it tears him apart.

Thoughts drift and swirl and scatter. He paces the house sometimes, restless as the wooden floorboards creak under his feet, or sits with his knees pulled to his chest, staring at nothing,

or watches himself from across the room, drifting like a ghost in his own skin, trapped between moments and memories, between the life he's living and the one that feels just out of reach. Days pass, and it feels like the edges of his vision keep darkening, like he's blinking too slowly. Each time the fatigue recedes, it comes back stronger, thicker, harder to push through.

I feel cold, Ilya thinks one morning. It's a lack of warmth more than anything else, really, but it settles into his limbs, into his chest, right beneath his skin, makes everything feel further away. *Ah*, he realizes. *The world's finally letting me go.*

He thinks back to how purpose was once something he grasped for, something he chased relentlessly. A steady beacon, a lifeline, a flare of something real in the relentless grey. Now, it's all faded into an abstract shape he can't hold, and the harder he tries to find it, the slimier it becomes, like water slipping through his fingers. Even the mirror's a stranger these days, a ghost that looks back at him with unfamiliar eyes and twists away when he looks too hard.

Every night, he stays up late, waiting for *something* to happen, for divine intervention to reveal itself, for some grand meaning to come to him, for some fracture in the surface that might let the light in. But it never comes. For all he's suffered, *still* greatness slips away, still it dissolves into ash every time he tries to reach for it. And, who knows—if he hadn't suffered enough for it to mean something, then maybe he'd just suffered in vain the whole time. Just pain for pain's sake, really—

no story to tell except the cautionary tale of a boy-man who had everything and stood unmoving.

The idea of catharsis is long gone—it's flickered away without the roaring release Ilya'd once hoped for. Now, all he has is apathy, settling like dust on every surface. He should call Galina, he knows. He really, really should. But what's the point? The idea of hope feels very distant these days. It keeps coming and going—by now, it's a word he barely remembers, just yet another thing that belongs to someone else's life, yet another thing for him to envy in someone else. Someone who never has to stare down the scope of long nights and even longer days. Someone who, unlike him, doesn't have to grapple with the most painful realization of all—*this* is the baseline now.

Accepting a life that's been hollowed out and stretched thin—can he do it? Can he accept his circumstances and resign himself to an eternity of... whatever *this* is?

The goddess of time comes at last to collect her tax, and Ilya realizes the currency of her credit's shifted.

He realizes then—*love's not enough*. Not really, not even close, not even when it burns in his chest like a fever that won't break. No matter how much he wants it to be enough, no matter how much he begs himself to believe it.

It just isn't.

But—if love’s not enough, if *Shane’s* not enough—then, what is? His mind tries to catalogue what he has left inside him to fight for, and he finds he’s run out of reasons to hold onto a life that feels more like a shadow than anything real.

He recalls the memory of Shane lying beside him in bed, chest rising and falling, that steady rhythm that would anchor him every time. *I’m sorry*, Ilya almost says out loud, even though the words sound so painfully insufficient in his head. *I’m so sorry I could not be better at this*. But there’s no one there to hear him, just the empty rooms and the plasterboard walls that stare back at him, flat and indifferent.

Yuna calls, and he doesn’t pick up. She calls again, and again, and again, until it becomes clear he’s purposely not picking up. David tries him then, once, twice, thrice, and Ilya turns his phone off and buries it in the crack of the sofa so it won’t stare back at him anymore.

I can’t go on like this much longer.

He closes his eyes, fingers curling into the rough wood of the table, breath shallow and trembling.

*Mama*¹⁷, he thinks, soft and broken, and it’s all he can conjure. These days, Irina Rozanova is more mirror than mother. *Mama, I’m tired.*

¹⁷ Mom



LITTLE ILYUSHA, TEPID steps through a long house, silent room at the end of the hallway, door tilted slightly open.

The frozen stillness of a body sprawled over the bed. A headscarf on the floor, his favorite. The bottle of pills, cover knocked loose over the sheets. The pit in his stomach, forever imprinted.

Life crashing into him, barreling down.

Yes, Ilya. The still body, the bottle of pills, the pit inside a stomach. *Life will crash into you soon enough.*



ILYA WALKS INTO the en-suite bathroom. His shoulders are hunched, the shadows beneath his eyes deeper than usual, like they've settled there for good.

Anya follows him in, paws echoing in the room, her wet nose pressing insistently and knowingly against the curve of his knee. He kneels, kisses the crown of her head once, settles his face

against the fur of her neck for a minute. Then he stands, fishes his hand in his pocket, places a treat just outside the bathroom door. She hesitates, but eventually follows the scent, tail thudding softly against the wall as she leaves.

Ilya remains where he is, body still, bottle of liquor in his right hand—a gift from David. He draws in a slow breath, then another, and then another.

The door closes behind him, and the bolt slides into place.

Softly. So softly it barely makes a sound at all.



A MEMORY COMES to him, at some point.

It's summer in the cottage. Late in the day, when the light has slackened, and a younger Ilya and Shane lie back in the grass. The ground is warm, and the night sky above them slowly starts to open, stars blinking without any urgency.

He turns his head slightly to look at Shane, and feels something inside him give way completely. Words tumble out of him—in Russian, because it comes out easier that way, because he doesn't feel embarrassed of himself when he's speaking in his mother tongue. Their meaning stays lush and full and his only, like a secret the language barrier keeps safe for him.

Shane blinks. “What’d you say?”

Their hands find each other like they always do. Fingers threading together, thumbs brushing over knuckles.

Ilya smiles. “I said that you’re my—” He starts to repeat himself in English, but then he stops abruptly. For some reason, it feels like he’s stepping onto ice, and he’s nervous all of a sudden. He swallows, tries to search for the right word, and it comes out slower, stripped of whatever candor Russian had given him. “My, *ah*, utopia,” he says finally, hesitant and soft. “A thousand dreams rolled into one. My only fantasy to ever come true.”

He watches the words settle between them. Shane smiles, eyes shining, but he also looks just a little dazed, like he’s waiting still. Like he gets the meaning, but still wants more.

Ilya rolls his eyes, amused. “It means,” he continues, “that you are everything I never thought I could have.”

And Shane’s face crumples completely at that, like the words are too much and also not enough.

“I mean it,” Ilya adds, unnecessarily, because he always needs to say more, because loving Shane has turned him into someone reckless with sincerity. “Really. All of it.”

Shane swallows dry, breathing in deep. He nods, once, but Ilya can tell he’s holding back, knows he’s afraid of what will spill if he

lets go. He can see it in the slight quiver of Shane's jaw, in the glistening of his eyes just before he turns back to the night sky.

Seconds stretch between them in silence, and Ilya thinks the moment's passed. But then Shane's voice suddenly breaks the quiet again, softly.

"Ilya," he breathes out, then closes his eyes. "A life without you..." he falters.

He opens his eyes and turns them to Ilya, like he needs to make sure he won't shatter if he finishes the thought.

But Ilya already knows the rest. He'd know it in his sleep, in his urn, in his grave.

"It wouldn't be a life at all," Shane continues. "Not one I'd want, anyway."

If wishes were ever his to claim, Ilya, that lonely architect of hamlets, would ask to hold time in his hands. To have it slow at his command, then race ahead. Beg it to stand still, then watch it crawl at the constant, unflinching pace it knows. He would push and pull and prod at it, only then to freeze it—right here, right now.

He'd trap this instant still, hold it like a breath suspended. He'd spend years revisiting it, like how people revisit childhood homes or elementary schools, stepping carefully back into its light and tracing the air for what it once held. He'd linger there, relearn the

exact cadence of breath in the air around them, until the geometry of two bodies unafraid was etched in his mind, until the flicker of living memory assaulted his senses like breathing, and he could recreate the scene entirely, with his eyes closed, or in his sleep.

Ilya knows, all at once, that he'd spend a lifetime returning to this moment, referencing it like an heirloom. Unflinching time, draped still over that held, idyllic possibility, as fixed as the evening sky.

They stare at each other, distant remnants of wetness in their eyes, until hands find faces and fingers rest on cheeks. A somber look. A caress. A tender touch. Eyes shine in the soft mist between them, and lips, *finally*, find lips, plump and smooth and full of recognition, like the sealing of a future Ilya will spend years trying not to destroy, and failing anyway.

NETTLES

Chapter Seven

THERE IS NO clean break.

That's the first lie people tell about dying—that there's this one moment where everything just stops. For Ilya, it's more like slipping underwater with his eyes still open, the world blurring but not disappearing, sound warping instead of cutting out entirely.

The bathroom recedes, and the light above him hums and hums until it feels like vibration. His body keeps doing small, stubborn things without his permission—his left hand taking the vodka David gave him for Christmas, his right hand pulling the pills from the cabinet. Ilya remembers the motions almost as if from outside himself: the pills rattling into the palm of his hand, the vodka pouring down his throat, the burn as he swallowed. The gestures had been automatic, simple, like watching someone else's body going through someone else's ritual. The faucet had dripped once, twice, the light had blinked, the edges of the room had melted, fragments of days and months and years had bled together.

And that had been that.

But somewhere beyond the ringing in his ears, the world stirs. Footsteps, rushed and uneven, stirring somewhere beyond the ringing in his ears. His breathing picks up, suddenly. A doorframe thuds somewhere, and the air shifts. Then—noise. Too loud, too

sudden, coming from outside the quiet of the bathroom. A frantic impact against the door, shuddering in its frame, and then the bolt rattles once, twice, again.

Ilya knows immediately.

Fuck.

No. No. He was—he was supposed to be away.

For years, or, God, their entire lives, really, Ilya's moved through the world certain that Shane would be there at the end of whatever corridor he walked down. That Shane is a constant, like how summer is, how it follows spring and precedes fall whether he wants it to or not. He's relied on that inevitability for as long as he's known him: resentful of it sometimes, suffocated by it occasionally, grateful for it always, but never really doubting it. And now the door shudders again, and something in that certainty fractures, and he feels like he's slipping underwater with a boulder strapped to his chest.

Another thud, even heavier this time, and his heart vaults into his throat. *No—no*—he can't be found out. But the idea of being perceived feels distant, theoretical, like something that happens to other people.

An even harder shove, a shoulder being thrown without care for what it breaks, and then a familiar voice is cutting through the ringing in his ears. The door gives with a loud crack, and the bolt rips free. Abruptly, the bathroom floods with movement, and then

Shane's rushing inside in less than a mere second, throwing himself through the door with a desperation so visceral Ilya's breath fully catches in his throat. And Ilya, who's always known him as controlled, restrained, steady—maddeningly so, at times—watches him become someone else entirely. But he stays folded over the tub, too heavy to lift his head, too slow to pretend this is anything other than what it is, suspended in the thin place between decision and consequence, where nothing hurts and nothing feels real enough to matter.

For a split second, Shane doesn't move at all. His hand comes up to his chest like he's trying to hold something in, like if he presses hard enough, he can stop whatever sound is trying to claw its way up. His eyes are fixed, wide, and there's this pause where Ilya can tell his brain is refusing to name what it's seeing even while his body understands it all too well. He sees it like how he sees the rest of the bathroom: edges soft, movement delayed, everything blurred and hazy. Shane's hand eventually goes from his chest up to his mouth, eyes going even wider, even brighter, and the color suddenly leaches from his face.

There's a sound then, breathing gone wrong from Shane's lungs.

"No—" he pants, barely shaking his head. His voice stutters, breaking apart before it can finish forming actual sounds, and his breath catches in his throat. "Oh my God—Ilya."

The words press against him, vibrating through the room.

“Baby,” Shane calls out, and it comes out wrong again, thin and barely there. It hurts to hear it. The tone of endearment sounds so wrong in Shane’s mouth like that, stripped bare, cracked open. “What—what are you doing?”

He hasn’t noticed the empty bottle of pills yet, Ilya realizes. I’ll have to break his heart.

Some distant part of him acknowledges the door again. How it’s been shoved open, how the lock is hanging. Hockey flashes again in his mind, even though it’s completely irrelevant right now. *He was supposed to be somewhere else.*

Yuna, he realizes then. David. The phone calls.

But the thought slips away as fast as it comes, and what stays is Shane. Always Shane. Whole body leaning forward, like if he stops moving even for just a second, he might shatter, his eyes never leaving Ilya’s face.

His feet are planted on the bathroom tile, unmoving, giving him nothing to anchor himself to, nothing to hold onto, and Ilya wonders if he might actually fall from how much his knees are buckling and his legs swaying. His breaths keep coming too fast and too loud, and his head keeps shaking, like he’s still trying to outrun something that’s already on top of him.

Ilya tries to apologize with his eyes, or maybe he actually even whispers it, who knows—it’s not like Shane would hear it, anyway. His attention seems fixed elsewhere, like his ears are too busy

trying to remember how Ilya's voice sounded, the timbre of his words. His eyes are locked on his, like he's cataloguing them, their shape, how the corner of his right eye bends downwards just slightly. His lips—trying to commit to memory the texture, the shape, the taste of Ilya's own, trying to remember how a smile would always escape when he was nervous, or how the corners would almost reach his eyes when he was smiling, or how they'd twist just slightly when he was slightly amused, or pretending to be okay. The moles—here, and there, and everywhere. The inventory of memories.

God, Ilya's going to be sick. The shame keeps making his stomach turn. Being seen like this. Caught in it. He wants to erase the memory from Shane's mind, dilute it, repaint it into something less ugly, something survivable. But Shane's right there, laid bare in front of him, a hundred different emotions flickering behind his eyes, and—*fuck*, Ilya's ruining his life, isn't he, letting him see him like this, letting this image of him on the tub, eyes bloodshot, decision made, burn itself into Shane's retinas forever, or—*fuck*, worse, he's letting his own anguish trap Shane in some, fucking, purgatorial in-between, watching in real time as he gets forever stuck in time, letting his own torment define him, he, he's—funneling it all towards him, he's, he's, he's, fucking, turning him into the last thing Ilya'd ever wanted him to become, Ilya himself, and, *fuck*, fuck—he's—God, he's going to be fucking *sick*—but every day feels like drowning, it does, or, like—sinking into quicksand, like suffocating hysteria, and—and—*fuck*, Ilya had tried to tell him as much, again and again, hadn't he? He had, he

had, he—fuck, maybe not in so many words, but—it was obvious, it had to be—how he carried himself, how he lived for short, small bursts of happiness, how he merely existed for the hours after, how—this was inevitable, Shane had to know, he had to, and—is this it, is this the moment where it all becomes real, where Shane finally believes him, understands him, or—worse, fuck, maybe Shane will blame himself for this, or—no, maybe Shane will blame *him* instead.

Yes. That's it.

He'll hate Ilya for it. Surely he will. He'll hold onto that hatred like a lifeline. He'll think Ilya has deceived him, masked their co-dependency as love, and he'll blame Ilya for how he'd romanticized it, he will, surely, he'll hate him for turning his own desperation into desire, his despair into need, for dressing it all up and hammering it in until Shane couldn't help but think he was refuge, of course, yes, until he believed himself to be a shield, salvation, hope, instead of what he really is—kryptonite, catalyst—yes, surely—surely—*please*—

But then Shane lifts his eyes, abruptly, and they're wide and hopeful and so devastatingly open, and when they snap to Ilya, the answer arrives all the same.

Let me save you. Let me help you. Let me love you.

For a moment, Ilya almost lets him. For one second, it almost feels possible. He's so—God, he's so tired, so bone-crushingly tired, and tomorrow feels as long as a whole entire lifetime, and he

can't even imagine what the future would ever look like. Love itself feels like a pointless effort, wearying, the promise of happiness too exhausting, too distant, too abstract. He imagines a life where he swallows his hopelessness down and tries to live on, out of spite and out of love and out of, what, a sense of obligation to Shane? He imagines the discomfort, the endless strain of being alive inside a body that never quite feels like home, the *almost* of it all.

The unbearable, glorious almost. Almost he leans into it, almost he lets Shane touch him, ground him, tether him back to the world. Almost he chooses the long, hard road of staying, of waking up tomorrow and the day after and the day after that with the same ache still lodged in his chest. No matter that it's pointless, no matter that it's too late now, no matter that even love—even that tidal wave, that colossal, unstoppable titan of a force—covers in the face of biology and chemistry and a bottle's worth of pills coursing through his bloodstream.

Save me, then, he wants to say. Condemn me to a life that hurts. I will suffer every day if I can suffer beside you. I will bleed slower if it's you holding the knife.

Hope swells, and he hates himself for it, tries to deny it, to refuse it, to shove it away, but he can't help clinging to its warmth, because it reminds him of mornings and coffee cups and Shane's weight pressed against his side in bed, of all the small, stupid reasons he'd stayed alive for long after staying alive had stopped making sense.

I could try again, he thinks, weakly. *For you.*

But trying again feels infinite and endless, too exhausting for Shane alone to fix. The shape of that future stretches out too far and wide, an endless corridor of effort and recovery and explanations and small daily survivals, and love—even love like this—doesn’t make the corridor shorter, or narrower. If anything, it stretches it further and further and further, endlessly.

You just need to let me in, he remembers, from their bedroom all those months ago.

God, Ilya wants to. He wants to lean forward, and put the weight of his body into Shane’s hands, and let himself be held up for once, instead of being the one doing the holding, the pretending, the surviving. He wants to believe that love can be enough if it’s this stubborn, this relentless, this unwilling to let go. But Ilya’s watching him with red-rimmed eyes, bloodshot and tired, outlined by dark circles, and—

*I’m so tired, любимый.*¹⁸

The words carry obvious subtext, and he only realizes he’s spoken them out loud when Shane’s eyes slowly widen. His breath stills for a few seconds, like he’s just waiting for Ilya to contradict his own words, like time itself might reverse if he waits, but then

¹⁸ Beloved

the hope drains out of his face. His eyes finally leave Ilya's, and they trail down.

The pill bottle clutched tightly in his hand. Close to empty. The cover loose on the floor.

Recognition hits Shane all at once, and he freezes, entire body turning rigid. "No—"

Shane...

He takes a step forward and stumbles, slipping over his feet and catching himself on the wall, face blanching. Ilya thinks, absurdly, that he's never seen him look like this—unmoored, terrified, completely unraveling right in front of his eyes.

"Ilya, please—Please, no—" He shakes his head, pleading while his voice cracks, but Ilya still doesn't answer.

I am so sorry.

Shane swallows hard, and tries again. "Ilya."

I am so, so sorry.

Then, louder, more desperate, a broken sob pouring out of him. "Please, no, Ilya. Please, God—!"

His lips keep moving—*please* keeps happening. Ilya can't follow everything, just the feeling of it, the desperation, how badly he's being wanted to stay.

You deserve better, he thinks, *so much better*.

Something inside him starts to give way, finally, like a tired muscle letting go. There's no moment of clarity, really, no catharsis—just the realization that the choice has already been made, that whatever he thought he was still weighing had already been decided for him minutes ago. Maybe hours. Maybe years.

The world narrows, and his body feels both heavy and light, like it no longer belongs to him. He slides against the tub, the porcelain cold against his back, but even that feeling is distant, dulled.

Shane moves closer, frantically, and Ilya feels the floor creaking, the fabric brushing tile, the weight dropping beside him, but the bathroom feels too bright, too dim, and the buzzing sound of the overhead light almost sounds musical, almost sounds soothing.

His thoughts blur, Shane suddenly flickering into the center of them, and Ilya feels everything at once. Love—so strong, so immediate, a reflex he doesn't even question anymore. Resentment, smaller but no less real, for how easy it's always been for Shane to want him alive, for how simple he makes surviving look, for how his goodness makes this so much harder. Guilt, because—and, *Jesus*, he feels like he's going to be fucking *crushed* under its weight—because he knows Shane will

carry this, whether he wants to or not. And under it all, curling in his chest like smoke—

Relief.

It terrifies him more than anything else. If this was just hurt, just despair, just anguish, well—Ilya could explain it away. He could justify it. But relief means this was never just about escaping pain. It's about escaping effort, escaping having to be maintained the rest of his life, escaping having to be loved by someone who refuses to give up on him, no matter what.

He looks at Shane, so close to him, and sees a future unspooling in fragments: Shane, alone in their kitchen weeks from now, staring at a mug that still has his fingerprints on it. Shane in a grocery store, reaching automatically for the brand Ilya prefers and only realizing halfway down the aisle. Shane waking up in the middle of the night certain that something's wrong, that something's missing. Shane, retiring from hockey long before anyone imagined, a shell of a man reshaped by grief, carrying bitter resentment for the sport that took so much time away from him. Shane, thinking about how he'd scaled back his schedule and still it wasn't enough, and I should've just quit hockey altogether, and this is my fault, and one month, one month is a joke, how could I have thought one month was enough, guilt eating him alive and swallowing him whole. Shane, alone in the cottage, not knowing what to do with the space Ilya used to occupy, late-nights spent questioning where he'd gone wrong, where he'd failed, where it became clear for Ilya their love

wasn't enough to hold on. Shane, years—no, decades—from now, frail of mind, asking after Ilya when his lucidity slips away, before realization inevitably dawns and he's forced to relive the grief all over again, another echo of time's interminable cruelty.

Shane starts screaming his name, and it lands somewhere far away. He's known the shape of Shane's voice for half his life—how it dips when he's scared, how it tightens when he's trying not to be, how Ilya's name sounds different in Shane's mouth than it does in anyone else's. That shape reaches for him now, calls out for him, and Ilya hears it, distantly, but he also can't truly register the sound, just the weight of it, the vibration.

"I'm here," Shane is saying, even if the words don't quite land. "I'm right here, Ilya—just hold on—don't—don't close your eyes. Oh my God—"

Ilya wants to answer. The urge is instinctive, his mind forming the response automatically, like muscle memory.

I'm sorry. I love you. I didn't mean to hurt you like this. Give Anya a kiss for me.

But thought no longer translates into action. It's like trying to shout across a frozen lake and realizing the sound won't carry.

"Please, Ilya, please—"

Oh, now. His body feels strange now—heavy in places, light in others. His hands don't really feel like hands anymore so much as

things attached to other things in his torso. His mouth doesn't feel like a mouth, just something that exists somewhere below his eyes.

"No, please, God, Ilya—!"

There's a brief flicker of panic, then. Last flares of instinct, maybe.

This—this was not how it was supposed to feel. He thought there'd be certainty at the end: peace, or darkness, or at least clarity. Instead, there's this liminal, suspended state—half-in, half-out—where he can still feel Shane's presence, a force pulling at him while everything else starts to dissolve.

I made a life with him, a distant part of him thinks. *Fifteen years—* fifteen years of shy smiles and stolen looks across the ice, of face-offs with knowing grins just before the puck dropped, of long drives and longer winters, of cottages and coffee mugs and two lives stitched together by routine and devotion and the simple miracle of being chosen, over and over again. Love, love, love, love, love—

It drifts through him and passes on, and memories start bleeding in, crashing and overlapping, smearing together and refusing to stay in the past.

Saskatchewan, 2008. Too young, too cold, Shane's *I'm not sure you're supposed to smoke here* so startling and charming in the winter chill. How he'd looked at Ilya in the years that followed like he was

something rare, like he was someone worth risking it all for every time. Two boys becoming men together in hotel rooms with thin walls. Shane almost asleep and smiling anyway when Ilya crawled back into bed. An ice rink at dawn, empty except for them—Shane having rented it for a night for Ilya's birthday after he'd randomly said one day he wished they could skate together like they'd done at All Stars. Shane skating lazy circles while Ilya watched from the stands and didn't even try to pretend he wasn't staring and just thought, *I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.*

Shane's hand, always warm against his skin in a crowded room. How he always lets him steal the blankets, even when it leaves him cold. His unconscious habit of reaching for Ilya even in his sleep, fingers catching in his shirt and clutching the fabric like an anchor, like letting go was never once an option.

Ilya swaying him in his arms at their wedding, the swell of piano—*love is touching souls, and surely you touched mine, 'cause part of you pours out of me in these lines from time to time...* Shane's face tilted up towards him, like the future had already been decided long before either of them had realized it, and Ilya's heart—God, his heart—that stubborn, disobedient thing, doing what it always did and straining past its own limits, past what it thought was possible, past where he could tell one of them ended and the other began, cracking open and mending in the same breath, expanding again when he'd sworn there was nothing left to give.

Full, so full, so unbearably full. Beating and vibrating and pulsating and rupturing at the sight of his husband in his arms, grinning up at him, his warmth beneath his hands, his breath brushing against his throat, his hips swaying within the circle of Ilya's arms, like this was always where he was meant to be, his lips mouthing him beautiful words. *You're in my blood like holy wine... I could drink a case of you, darling, and I would still be on my feet...*

Just love, and love, and love, and—*God*, Ilya thinks, helplessly, as he's hit by a rush of affection so intense it borders on delirium. *God, I love you. God, you are everything to me.* He feels it in his body, in his chest, in his throat, tightening until it hurts to swallow. Feels it everywhere, everywhere he can notice and everywhere he can't yet tell—feels and feels and feels until he can't help but surrender to the feeling. *God, Shane—Shane—*

The bathroom tilts, or maybe it's Ilya tilting inside himself. He's aware, dimly now, of pressure at his shoulder, at his arm, of Shane's hands—one frantically shaking his shoulder, the other holding his phone, screaming maniacally about how *there's an emergency* and *my husband took pills*, sobbing their home address into the phone and repeating it twice when the hiccups rough up his words.

Shane's always had steady hands. Ilya has watched those hands lace skates, sign contracts, cup his face with maddening certainty. It feels wrong to register them like this.

Don't, he wants to say, though his lips stay shut. *Please don't remember me like this*. But he knows that memory's already forming, already calcifying, already embedding itself and pressing into bone. He can feel it happening—how our minds harden around fear. How this moment will lodge itself into Shane's brain whether either of them wants it to or not, how it'll become a fixed point in his life and surface every now and then, something he'll carry in every room he walks into.

Ilya hates that. Hates himself for it.

The cottage is right there in front of him—the summer heat, sunlight flashing down, the golden lake water, the grass warm under his feet—two children running past Shane, laughing, calling out his name—

You will be an amazing father, Ilya wants to tell him, *believe me, любимый*¹⁹, *you will*—but his vision dims and his eyes close, and Shane's voice is still there. Not clearly, not as words. It comes in fragments, syllables breaking apart, talking to someone—on the phone, maybe—but the shape of it is still unmistakable.

The edges of his vision darken, like blinking too slowly, and each time the darkness recedes, it comes back stronger, thicker, harder to push through. He hears his name again, and this time, he doesn't even register the sound. The meaning presses against him like a hand against glass: close enough to see, too far to touch.

¹⁹ Beloved

Shane, I'm with you, he thinks, and the thought is oddly calm. *I will search for you on whatever life is next, and the one after, and the one after that. I will find you, and I will be better, and I will do this right next time, I promise. Wherever I go next, I will look for you there.*

The panic fades, and something gentler than fear replaces it. A loosening, an unspooling, that constant ache he's carried for so long softening and that background noise starting to dim, like turning down a volume knob that's been stuck on high for years.

This is what I wanted, he realizes, weightless. *For it to stop hurting so much.*

The irony—that it's Shane who once made everything bearable, and Shane who now makes even leaving unbearable—registers, but without bitterness now, without panic, not even with regret. The dichotomy swirls inside him, and he just watches it spin, as he's done so many times.

Ilya thinks of how Shane was the first and only person to give his adult life shape and meaning. The first person who ever made him feel real. Chosen. The first and only person to see him, really see him.

It's only fitting, he thinks hazily, *that you're the last.*

His hand sounds so small when it gives out and hits the walls of the bathtub, and, *oh, am I little again,* but he's feeling pressure somewhere—fingers curling around his, desperate, grounding,

tethering. A grip so tight, terrified, like he might slip away if it's loosened for even a second.

Whoever you are, Ilya thinks, fading, you will be okay. You have always been strong—stronger than you think—

The thought drifts. Then another. Moscow in the summer. *Greatness is made of beginnings.* His father's gaze, harsh and loving and proud and tight all the same. The smell of honey cake in his babushka's oven. The feeling of a boy's lips on his at thirteen. Pushok, the stray cat he and Andrei used to feed every night, the tuna cans they'd hid in their neighbor's toolshed and paid for with their birthday money, split evenly. The bakery by his old house, the path drilled into him, memorized: thirty steps from the front door, eight to the right, down the side alley—

Shane, Shane, *Shane*—

A woman's voice, a fragile thread of song, lulling him to sleep with a familiar lullaby, weaving through the darkness like a thread of light. Her tender hands through his unruly curls, tucking him in his bed, her lips brushing his forehead, so softly it feels like air. The faint warmth of her fingertips lingering on his skin.

Ilyusha, my love. My darling boy.

He hears it then—*Ilyusha*, pronounced just right: the l's, y's, and u's rolled exactly as he'd once heard them, exactly as he'd spent the last twenty years echoing in his head.

*Мама*²⁰, he thinks finally, finding her in the dark. *Мама, I missed you. Мама, I forgive you. Мама, I'm coming to see you.*

And then—

Nothing, nothing that feels like a thought at all. Just sensation thinning out, sound dissolving.

Nothing, or maybe something softer than nothing, and Ilya lets go.

Ой, the thought comes, somewhere. *Оно мягкое. Очень мягкое. Мягкое, как*—²¹

²⁰ Mom

²¹ *Oh*, the thought comes, somewhere. *It's soft. So soft. Soft, like*—

NETTLES

Part Two:

Shane

NETTLES

Chapter Eight

2020

THE LAKE SHINES on.

Ilya's sprawled across the dock next to the empty beer bottles, head resting in Shane's lap. He's spent the whole afternoon laughing at Shane for how he'd kept slipping into the lake while trying to pull the canoe in, and it's taken its toll on him, clearly—he's either yawning and stretching, or rambling in these loose, drunk sentences, punctuating his stories with gestures towards the sky and occasionally sloshing beer onto their chests. Every time it happens, he waits for Shane to smile first before dissolving into stupid giggles himself.

"Do you think we would have always found each other?" he asks. He tips his face towards the sun, squinting up at Shane through the light, and, *fuck*, it's so ridiculous how Ilya looks at him sometimes, like love's stripped him of every instinct but trust.

"What kind of question is that?" Shane laughs. "Yeah, okay. You've officially had too much to drink."

"I'm serious!" Ilya nudges his knee. "Answer me."

Shane shakes his head, smiling despite himself. "You're impossible."

Ilya's mouth curls into a bright and triumphant smile. "What's that?" he asks, hand cupped to his ear, grin widening. "You *loooooove* me, Shane Hollander."

"Yeah, yeah." Shane rolls his eyes, laughing. "Unfortunately, I do, asshole."

"Not as much as I do, of course."

"Oh, *please*." Shane threads his fingers through Ilya's hair. "I definitely love you more. Who else would put up with your bullshit?"

Ilya laughs, tipping his head to look at Shane again and smiling, already dissolved into happiness like it's the easiest thing in the world.

Shane chuckles. "You're so goofy today."

"Uh—excuse me, I am *not* goofy."

"You are!"

"I am just drunk, *малыш*.²² And—" Ilya grins. "I do feel great." He stretches his body, letting out a little groan of contentment, and his eyes linger lazily on Shane's face. "You make me feel like I have a star inside me. Like—" He searches for the words. "I don't know. Like it is trying to come out, or something. It feels crazy."

²² Baby

Shane threads his fingers further into Ilya's hair, lips curling. "It's the same with me."

Ilya blinks up at him.

"When I'm with you, it's like—" Shane's voice trails off. "You know. Like I'm full of bees inside, I guess."

And Ilya's smile goes ten thousand megawatts. "Holy shit—*yes!* Bees! *Или нет*, right?" He covers his face with one hand, groaning. "Fuck, I love you so much. How do you even come up with shit like that?" He shakes his head, exasperated. "Ugh, I can't deal with you."

"What'd I tell you?" Shane grins, raising an eyebrow at him. "*Goofy.*"

Ilya laughs out loud, burying his face against Shane's thigh. "Stop making fun of me!" he whines. "Well, you are goofy too, then. You just said you're full of bees!"

"Alright. Maybe I'm a little goofy, then."

"Is okay." Ilya yawns. "We can be goofy together."

"Sure, baby," Shane tells him. "But I still love you more."

NETTLES

“Mm-hmm,” Ilya murmurs, heavy eyes drifting shut. “If you say so, *любимый* ²³.”

He settles against Shane’s thigh, all loose limbs and warm skin and the easy weight of a summer that could never end. Shane looks down at him, and the smile finds its way to his mouth by second nature, reflex and instinct alike.

He’s looking at the rest of his life. The whole terrible, beautiful future sits alive between them, bright and infinite and twice blessed beneath the light of a thousand and one suns, and everything’s exactly as it should be, and nothing can hurt them, and his entire existence narrows to the man in his lap, and—

“—Shane?”

And the wind moves softly through the trees, and the lake folds endlessly into itself below, and the light stretches golden across the water, and the world closes, and closes, and closes.



IT RAINS IN Ottawa.

Shane walks through the house, lights turned off. It rains on the roof, against the windows, into the gutters and down through the

²³ Beloved

streets. It rains over the houses and the trees and the cars parked along the curb.

There are dishes in the sink, spilling onto the counter next to the coffee grinder. One of the windows is open—the floor’s wet where the rain hits it. He’ll have to clean that. Later, maybe.

A bird whistles somewhere in the trees outside, calling once, singing a song, then not anymore. Shane pours himself a glass of water, listens intently to the sounds around him, stares at the shadows like they might move just to spite him.

Maybe, if he does it just right, light will come in golden through the blinds. Maybe, if he closes his eyes, all the water in the world will stop at once—lakes and rivers and oceans and flooded streets and rainstorms over highways and Moscow snow melting by his feet. Maybe, if he lies perfectly still through the night, the rain will stop, and the world will realize it made a mistake, correct itself, like a rite. Maybe if water stops moving, so will time.

Shane looks down, breathes deeply.

The world rains on. He closes his eyes.

NETTLES

Chapter Nine

WHAT SHANE KNOWS about love, he learned mostly from hockey.

Wanting's not enough. Excellence comes from repetition, muscle memory, a hundred million small corrections made before anyone else can know there was something to correct. You show up, you look the part, you *play* the part, and you trust the universe to do the rest, for your body to learn what it needs to do before your mind can catch up—blade to ice, shoulder to glass, hand to waist in the dark. You'll have to grit your teeth through pain—but that's par for the course, really—until, well, until one day you can't anymore, and by then the damage's pretty much already been done.

All this sentimentality without—without discipline, or ambition without any... suffering, or any sacrifice. It's just easy, Shane. It's too easy. It's—it's appetite, you know? That's all it is.

He remembers his grandfather's words, his eyes looking down at him, the appraising nod. *And appetite, well—appetite is for animals and children, right?*

Who was he to know? So, he did the work, kept his head down. Trusted his skills, his body, the idea that failure could be fool-proofed against. Those million small corrections, playing through

strain and pain, the steadfast belief that he'd be good at something simply because he refused to *not* be good at it. Looking ahead, focusing on the long game, the long play, refusing the myopia that plagued the fools around him.

Sue him if it made sense that love might work this way too. Love as something he practiced at, something he did—stupidly, or maybe even nobly, or maybe both. Love as attention, as showing up, noticing, adjusting, returning, repeating. It just—it made sense, okay? Coffee made just as Ilya liked it. A hand at his back when the Centaurs' get-together got too much. Giving space before married life could ever become a cage, or a prison with walls made of windows. Swallowing any questions he might have because, well—asking them could be seen as prying, couldn't it, and the last thing Shane wanted was for Ilya to think he was prying. Leaving the door open, again and again and again, because love surely meant letting the other person choose when to cross the threshold, right? Right? *Right?*

Years later, here he was, and there Ilya was, or wasn't, and here they all fucking were, and what good had all that open space done? Oh, the patience. Oh, the restraint. Oh, the carefulness. *Fucking idiot*. Shane looks back now and sees himself standing outside Ilya's every locked room, hand raised and useless, telling himself, *not yet, not now, not like this*, and Ilya somewhere on the other side of it, waiting or not waiting, wanting to be asked or terrified that he would be. There's no simple math for that, no replay that gives him the right angle, no version where Shane knows how hard to

knock without breaking down the walls and cracking the floor. No version where he knows what the fuck he's even doing.

All he knows now is the phone ringing for too long, or what the bathroom door sounds like while it's being busted open. How the kitchen chair creaks under him at eleven in the evening, or how red and blue lights feel against his eyes, how they reflect off his cooling skin, the kaleidoscope of his worst fucking nightmares. His own personal game show, he thinks—congratulations, sir, husband of the fucking decade, here's your reward, here's all you've learned: your hands will remember what they failed to hold, and your knees will bruise without you noticing, and sounds you won't recognize will leave your mouth and never fully come back to you afterwards, and, well, ultimately, sir, a door's still a door, you know, and—oh, yes, congratulations, sir, now you know that some silences are vast and spacious and, oh, would you look at that, some others are even retaliatory and punitive, but, hey, really, come on, you were there the whole time, weren't you, you helped build all those silences along, helped them settle over years, so why do you look so green in the face now, sir? Sir? Sir? Sir?

Yes, yes—he'll take the Jeep and the air fryer and the cash prize and go fuck himself straight to hell with the whole lot—maybe a noose too, if you have one, thank you very much.

It's fucking pathetic, is what it is. Two people, trying so hard not to hurt each other they just end up hurting each other even more. Self-fulfilling fucking prophecy. His family should've told

him at five years old his life was going to amount to no more than a hamster's spinning wheel and left him to his whims—probably would've done him a bigger service than they did telling a twelve-year-old child about *sentiment*, and, *ambition*, and, *shutting yourself off to protect yourself*, honey, and, *they'll say awful, abominable things on the ice*, sweetheart, but you can't say anything, okay, you need to power through it, focus on what you can control, honey, and, *we know it's hard, we know*, Shane, but you'll need to be the bigger person, there's too much at stake for you, okay, baby? and who knows what else.

All he's left with are those pointless mantras, now. Love as hockey, hockey as love. Throwaway mandates he'd taught himself over time, like souvenirs chronicling his whole career. *Timing is holy*, he remembers from all the way back in his junior years, *and a second too late is still too late*. Or, *protect what's yours*, and, *don't abandon your line*, and, *take the hit for the team*, and, *keep the team together*, and all the other bullshit soundbites Theriault drilled into him for an entire morning the day it was announced Shane was being made captain. A whole empty philosophy being delivered to him one soundbite at a time, but Shane had been so happy that day they could've made him go mop up the locker room piss for all he cared—he would've gone smiling, bucket in hand. He thought there was nothing in his life he'd ever work harder to protect than that team at the time, which, well, look at him now. Turns out he'd been wrong about that, too—add it to the list. And, finally, the not-so-grand finale of pointless moral lessons: *even the greatest pass in the world means nothing if there's no one there to receive it*.

Cue the fucking curtains.

It's all useless now, anyway. There's no correction for him to make. No potential mercy, no hail Mary, no sudden revision of the play just out of sight, waiting to be discovered. What's the point? Shane can look back now and see whole years lit up with significance he'd missed the first time, every hesitation made obvious by hindsight, every joke carrying a bruise beneath it, every ordinary morning suddenly ripe with meaning because it'd been ordinary and he hadn't known to kneel before it. He can know all of it now. He can know *too late* so well it feels almost like a prophecy, but in reverse.

It changes fuck all. Ilya's still dead.

Ilya is dead.

Ilya was dead yesterday. Ilya will be dead tomorrow. Ilya will be dead on every morning Shane wakes up, every morning he reaches for him before remembering. He'll be dead through summer, through playoffs, through birthdays, through Anya's muzzle going grey, through old age. Through all the years Shane has no choice now but to enter, because his body, that treacherous thing, keeps carrying him forward. Through his whole entire fucking life, right until the day he's lowered onto dirt and soil to rest and become, fucking, moss, or whatever it is.

He thinks of how he'd once told Ilya that life was all about putting right foot in front of left, getting out of bed, trying our best, living anyway, and it feels like the sickest joke the universe could think to pull on him. Saying it so gently, too, like he even

knew what the fuck he was talking about, like he had any right. Giving Ilya the emptiest of platitudes, and now having to live by every last one.

Even if it all feels pointless, he'd said. Even if it feels like none of it matters, he'd said. Even if it gets worse, he'd said. There has to be a point to all this. Right?

The point? He wants to scoff. *If he's dead, what the fuck was the point?* But that's the wrong question, probably. The right question is what would Shane have been without him, and that question he can't really finish. He tries to reach for the answer and gets nowhere, or gets somewhere and doesn't really like what he finds. He can't even finish the thought, much less follow it all the way to its end. He reaches again, and again, and there's nothing there he can hold onto, nothing that will stay still long enough. The answer is too large maybe, or too small, or maybe there's just no answer at all—only the question, only the reaching.

He supposes it's a small mercy that Ilya doesn't stay dead, though. Dead people don't really stay in the grave, he's realized, or the urn, or the closed drawer where he put Ilya's crucifix because he can't even touch it now without immediately wanting to cry, or his wedding ring, or the last shirt that still kind of smells like his sweat and whatever detergent he used despite Shane's perfectly good one. They leak. They get into the walls, the floor, the windows, the, fucking, curtains and roller blinds. They sit down next to him in traffic, they wait in the frozen aisle at Loblaws next to the awful microwave dinners Ilya would stack the fridge with.

They appear in those last few seconds right before he falls asleep, in the familiar smell of a random person's cologne, in a string of Russian words he overhears on the street, in the crease of the other pillow on the bed, in the fridge humming at night and keeping him awake, in all the small, stupid places love once touched and ruined for him forever.

The very end of Ilya's life isn't what he'll remember, Shane tells himself—it won't be, he won't let it. He owes Ilya that much. The precinct, sure, he'll remember that, the officers looking over at him from the other end of the table while he answered all their questions, all their implications, gave his statement while snot kept running down his nose, the photographers posted outside, the pictures hitting the internet in minutes. The funeral, yes—the hugs, the pats on the shoulder, the pity nods, no one knowing what to do, or what to say, or how to be, stammering over their words, tripping over their condolences. He can remember that. Those first few mornings after, when light would come in through the blinds and the sun would rise outside, and he'd forget, for the briefest moments, reaching for Ilya and finding only the empty air behind him. Yes and yes and yes.

He'll remember the weeks when everything was still happening, when there were people to call, things to arrange, someone always asking how he was doing, when the pain and grief were so all-encompassing he couldn't do much more than cry and sleep and eat and piss and shit, when there wasn't room for anything else

that wasn't his most primal, human instincts. Sleep, wake up, remember, cry, eat, bathroom, cry, sleep, wake up, remember.

But after the emergency ended, and everyone else stepped back into their own lives, and the pity check-ins stopped, and the press releases were issued, and the league moved on because the league would always move on, because schedules exist, and games are played, and executives make bullshit statements like *honoring his legacy* while Shane stands in the kitchen staring at Ilya's favorite mug, blue and chipped around the rim, that he'll never be able to wash again, the fucking mug he'd kept shoved all the way at the back of the cupboard for years so Shane wouldn't throw it out, because apparently coffee tasted different in that one, and, *no, Shane, you just don't like coffee, so you don't understand, but I swear, it's different*—when the world assumes that the worst thing has already happened, and Shane discovers that, no, actually, the worst thing can *keep* happening, forever.

Nobody told him that beforehand—how grief is so much smaller than he could've ever imagined it to be. Smaller and pettier and a million times more humiliating, living in abandoned bottles of shampoo, forgotten in a random drawer somewhere, in old denim jackets left hanging in the closet, unwashed, in the sink full of dishes. In muscle memory, in reaching across the bed in the middle of the night and still expecting warmth. In Anya whining by the door, in the blinking light on the ridiculously-complicated coffee grinder he has no fucking clue how to operate because only Ilya used it, in laundry folded wrong because he's not there to complain about Shane's way of pairing socks. In randomly

remembering small domestic disputes that once meant nothing and now bring a dead body with them.

In grocery store runs, dentist appointments, grief counseling, cooking dinner with the speaker turned off. In useless fucking traffic lights the good-for-nothing Department of Transportation can't even manage to sync, so Shane keeps having to stop every five minutes on a red light, unable to distract himself with the roads, the driving, the cars, anything, except the daydream of running over that couple crossing the road while holding hands, and—*oh, fuck*, now it's May again, *oh, fuck*, now he's barging through the bathroom door, *oh, fuck*, now he's kneeling on the tile, now he's saying, *Ilya, baby, please*, now Ilya's sighing *I'm so tired*, *мой любимый*²⁴, now the paramedics are here, now he's fucking *dead*—and now the light is green again and the cars in his rearview mirror are starting to honk at him and Shane can't breathe and, *oh, fuck*, *oh, fuck*, he's having a panic attack in the middle of fucking traffic, and he's back in that fucking bathroom again, and some part of him will always be trapped there, some part will never leave, some part will be sitting there forever waiting for a different outcome to take pity on him, and *oh, fuck*, *oh, fuck*, *oh, fuck*, the cars are honking, honking, honking, they just keep fucking honking, and someone's yelling at him, and, *oh fuck*, *Ilya, Ilya, please, Ilya, come back, no, no, please*—

²⁴ My beloved

It's Shane's own heart, continuing to pump inside his chest, beat after beat after beat, long after the rest of him is gone. A life continuing, the hardest miracle ever asked of him.

He guesses he's been trying to remember Ilya fairly enough ever since he died, but it's become its own kind of labor, somehow, and he's managed to fail at that, even. He builds a domestic picture of him out of memory, piece by piece, and then immediately doesn't trust it. Too gentle, and he's lied, made excuses for his actions. Too cruel, and he's betrayed him, punished him. Too sick, and he's reduced him to the thing that killed him. Too happy, and he's pretended like the problem never existed.

There are moments when he remembers Ilya laughing on the dock of the cottage, sunburned and beautiful, and Shane can almost believe nothing ugly ever managed to find them. There are other moments when he remembers the closed doors, the deflections, how Ilya could weaponize silence and exile Shane from his own house, and then the anger comes so fast it scares him.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Ilya frowns.

Shane raises his eyebrows, taking a step back at the unexpected bite of his tone. He's just arrived home. "Huh?"

"Get out." Ilya gets up from the couch in a blink and grabs Shane's shoulder, tugging him in the direction of the front door. "I do not want you here."

“Uh—what the fuck?” Shane tries to squirm away, but Ilya’s hold is too strong, and suddenly he’s being pushed out through the doorframe. “What the—Ilya, you’re fucking joking, right? Don’t be an asshole, I live here—

“Not tonight,” he snaps, and the door shuts in Shane’s face.

“Ilya!” Shane yells, pounding against the door. “Motherfucker—Ilya!”

No answer comes.

In the end, death turned out to be the simplest part, he supposes. Brutal, yes. Catastrophic, of course. A wrecking ball through the center of his world, splitting him open and twisting the universe upside down, but simple, in a way. One day, you’re here, the next, you’re not.

Grief, though—now that’s the thing with teeth. Grief is cruel. It’s a dirty archivist with even dirtier hands, Shane’s learned, touching everything, mislabeling boxes, preserving the wrong things and letting the important ones rot. It places the beautiful beside the unbearable and refuses to tell him which one is truer. It drags ordinary days back under the light and makes Shane look again: Ilya sleeping late, Ilya sleeping bad, Ilya laughing too loud, Ilya not laughing at all. A plate left practically full, a text answered too quickly, a call picked up too late. Every harmless thing made suspicious, every suspicious thing made obvious.

Shane will remember the exact sound Ilya made whispering his name in bed, but somehow forget the moles near his shoulders

until a random photo on his phone gives them back to him. He'll remember one of the worst things Ilya ever said to him, but forget the specifics of an entire weekend they'd spent doing nothing but watching westerns and falling asleep on each other in different rooms of Ilya's Ottawa apartment. Did they sleep on the kitchen floor? Or, no, it was the hallway, definitely, lying on the carpet curled up with Anya. Or, maybe just the sofa? And did they watch three films? No, maybe just two. Maybe they didn't watch a film at all, just scrolled on their phones and laughed at stupid videos. Or did the weekend never exist? Did he make it up?

Memory doesn't really care about fairness. It keeps what it keeps. It makes a museum of his life and leaves Shane to walk through it every day, filling in the blanks, furious at what's missing, furious at what remains. It hands him the same damn question every day, from a hundred different directions, and forces him to answer.

What was love supposed to notice, and what is love supposed to forgive?

And still. Still, he wakes. Still, he eats, sometimes. Still, he picks up the phone when Hayden calls three times in a row and then texts him, *Shane I know you're looking at this, call me back asap*, and then, *sorry not asap, no emergency here don't worry*, and, *hey man didn't mean to freak u out*, and, *I'm so sorry, fuck, I totally didn't realize how it sounded, pls call me back when u can, but nothing urgent ok?* Still, he stands in front of the kitchen sink with one hand braced against the counter and tries to resist the urge to throw that ugly blue chipped

fucking mug through the window to get it out of his goddamned sight. Still, he feeds Anya, and still, he walks her, and still, he entertains her whims, and still, he throws the flying disc and the optic yellow tennis ball at the other end of the house, and still, he resents how much of Ilya he sees in her, and—*I don't know, maybe I should give her away*—and then cries himself to sleep for the thought even crossing his mind while holding her tight in bed against his chest. Still, he opens the closet and immediately closes it again when he sees Ilya's jacket up on the hanger and the leopard print shirt and the—*nope*. Just—*no*. Still, he cleans the dust on Sunday mornings and vacuums on the afternoons and folds laundry on the evenings and then tries not to retch when he sees one of Ilya's boxers forgotten at the bottom of the hamper. Still, he finds himself turning towards random sounds before thought can stop him.

Too far from the start, he tells himself.

Staying, it turns out, isn't always noble. It probably never will be again. But there's nothing else for him to do *except* stay, so he stays—badly, shittily, with resentment and devotion and hatred and longing and guilt and affection braided so tightly together he doesn't know which one tightens his throat first. He stays because Ilya's gone and Anya still needs walking, still needs feeding, still needs playing, and the house still has pipes, still has bills to be paid, and his body still has hunger, and his parents still need him, and hockey, well, hockey's still hockey, isn't it. He stays because, somewhere beneath all the wreckage and the anger and the

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shameful wish that memory would either fully harden or leave him the fuck alone, there's love, persistent as a bruise and twice as tender when pressed.

Love, after everything—all that discipline, all that philosophizing, all that remembering and surviving and enduring—remains the least useful thing in the world, and somehow the only thing that's stayed intact.

Lucky fucking him.

Chapter Ten

YOU ARE BEING so funny right now, Ilya's voice echoes. *You look miserable, малыш!*²⁵

His foot sliding under Shane's thigh, the heat of his body heavy through his sweatpants. A playoff game on the TV, the one Shane'd just lost forty-eight hours ago, replay stinging like salt in an open cut. Ilya watching him with increasing delight, a bag of chips on his chest. Under the coffee table, a high-pitched squeak—Any'a's teeth sinking into a rubber toy.

I'm just annoyed. Shane's eyes glued to the screen. *Stupid fucking loss.*

Ilya's foot, nudging him in the thigh, a blunt pressure. Shane taking it in one hand without looking, hand moving on instinct and fingers curling around the ankle. The bone under his fingers, the sock half-slipping off Ilya's heel, the crystals of chip salt clinging to his shirt.

Hey, Ilya's voice, calling out, dragging him back. A flash of white teeth, the grin on his lips. *Next one you win for me, yes?*

²⁵ Baby

Shane glancing over, amused despite himself. *You want me to win you a Cup?*

Obviously. Ilya's eyes, crinkling at the corners. *It is very romantic. I deserve a big gesture, no?*

I mean, Shane's frown. *Sure, I guess, but—it's literally our jobs, Ilya.*

So? Ilya jamming his foot hard into Shane's armpit. The spike of tickling, the physical jolt, Shane trying to squirm away, Ilya's toes wiggling into his most sensitive spots. A booming laugh ringing from the other end of the couch.

What? What's that? Ilya's teasing voice, and Shane laughing, laughing, laughing, sound overlapping with Ilya's own. *Go win me a Cup, Shane Hollander, come on.* The sing-song tone, pleased as ever. *Or are you admitting you cannot do it and I am better?*

*Oh, I'll fucking show you better—*a flail of limbs, Shane lunging, trying to plant a boot into Ilya's ribs. His leg, catching the plastic bag and knocking it to the floor, chips exploding all over the rug, Anya's loud, startled bark.

No music swelling, no ache in the room, no instinct in Shane telling him to *stop, look, keep this, hold this up to the light, memorize it, one day the memory will come back hardened.* Ilya, laughing until he couldn't breathe. Shane, rolling his eyes, smiling, smiling, smiling. Anya, making hopeful, disgusting noises because chips had fallen all around her.

The game on the television going to commercial—some truck ad, some beer ad—but Shane already moving, tackling Ilya and climbing all over him on the cushions, burying his face in the crook of his neck. Ilya, helpless beneath him, laughing himself silly right against Shane’s lips. Shane scrunching his nose, the vivid taste of All-Dressed chips. *That’s so fucking gross*—tangy barbecue, sour cream, onion, ketchup, sharp vinegar. Ilya flexing his eyebrows suggestively, blowing a warm breath right into Shane’s nose, bursting out laughing—Shane groaning out loud, pulling him closer, smiling against his mouth, smiling, smiling, always smiling.

Next one you win for me—next one you win for me—next one you win for me—next one you win for—



SHANE’S BEEN IN his childhood bedroom for nine days.

Or twelve. Or six. Or one. Or a hundred. Or twenty-three thousand. Time stretches and folds now, makes him lose entire afternoons in the softness of his bed. The blinds stay closed for days at length, and he’d probably admit his room smells god-awful if only he’d retained any of his old nerve endings, or his nostrils, or the olfactory bulb in his brain had managed to keep on working. He supposes the room smells of, what, dog fur? That awful smell of an animal resting at your feet after someone’s taken it out for a

walk and not bothered to clean them with wet wipes, the smell of street, the little crusts of dirt still clinging to its paws. Smells of stale, unwashed sheets, of the toast his mom keeps bringing up and then taking downstairs and then bringing up again the next morning. Smells of these little dried out crumbs of food, in front of him and behind him and under his pillow and over the covers, crumbs of Anya's bone-shaped treats, half-chewed at the end of the bed, crumbs of his own heart, too, why not, while he's at it—*itself* fully chewed, or, fucking, *munched*, and chomped, and—and—spat back out by his feet when he's done with it.

Smells of sweat and armpit, most of all.

His mom tries her best to air the room out, reminds him of the importance of ventilation as gently as humanly possible, of letting some sunlight in, some wind through, but, well, his body's just a body, at the end of the day—even if it once belonged to Shane Hollander. He doesn't know what she'd expected, really. For it not to reek after decomposition, not go putrid after death, not become necrotic too?

He hasn't really showered, come to think of it—at all. Or, maybe two days ago? Maybe just last Sunday. And he knows it was a Sunday, it was, had to be, because he could hear the televised Catholic Mass from the living room TV downstairs, and they only air that on Sundays, right, and he remembers the priest's words, still—Matthew something, something, and, *blessed are those who mourn*, the priest's assured voice, *for they will be comforted. In the name of the Father*, he'd intoned, and then the rest of it followed, and the

congregation all dutifully answering back in a lovely little chorus of *amens*, the whole faithful lot. Well, Shane feels anything but blessed, and anything but comfort, really. And neither did his father, probably, having to carry his adult son to the shower later that day, stripping him of his clothes, having to kneel on the floor and pointing a shower head at him, water raining down over him. He remembers his dad's hands rubbing circles all over his skin, the bright green puff in his hands, going up and down his back, under his armpits, the soap trickling down, down, down—down his leg hairs, pooling on the floor. The small little vortex it left on the tile, spinning viciously, alive for a mere few seconds, before it all went down the drain, gone from his view.

His skin feels wrong on him, still—too tight, somehow—and his mouth feels dry, tastes like battery acid. His phone's somewhere here in the bedroom, it must be—dead, maybe, or dying, or maybe just buried beneath a sweatshirt on the floor, who knows, who cares. People keep trying to reach him, apparently, or so his mother tells him.

Honey, Farah called. Darling, Hayden's left you a text, would you like to see it? Shane, Jackie sends her love. Honey, it's—oh, it's Svetlana, she—she says she'd really like to talk to you, and—honey, your phone's ringing, let me check who—oh—it's, uh, it's your coach—I thought Farah—look, don't worry, honey, they're not supposed to be reaching out to you, so you can just ignore their calls right now, okay? Darling, it's—oh, it's Troy Barrett, he sends his condo—uh, he sends his best, alright? Shane, if the commissioner's office calls you, don't pick up—all calls are being routed through me and

Farah, honey, don't worry about any of it right now. Oh—Hayden called again, would you like to speak with him?

Names he knows and numbers he doesn't. He imagines the notifications stacking up, one on top of the other, endless. Imagines throwing his phone somewhere into the cottage lake water before he has the chance to read any of it.

Anya's lying at the end of the bed, curled up to him, heavy and warm as ever. She's become suspicious of movement lately, of anyone who tries to lead Shane away from the bed, and it's like she's appointed herself his guardian. When his mom comes in with food, Anya watches her. When his dad appears in the doorway and gently asks, *do you want anything?* Anya watches him. When his phone rings, down from wherever the fuck it is in his bedroom, she watches it, too—watches the air like a hawk, ears perked up like she's ready to maul the source of the sound, if need be. She watches everyone and everything now, including Shane—*especially* Shane.

He keeps one hand in her fur. It gives his fingers something to do, nails scratching up, down, up, down, left, right, left right, and, really—the slow rise and fall of her torso as she breathes is the only rhythm he doesn't resent right now.

Sometimes he sleeps, but, well—he mostly just falls in and out of consciousness for minutes at a time, before waking up gasping with his heart already running at sixty miles an hour. That one first second, though, right before memory catches up—less than a

breath of nothing, that single airless moment where no one's dead yet, no one's died—and his hand reaches out, as if on instinct. Then—

Well. Everything else.

Every morning, his mom knocks at his door, waits long enough to let him pretend he has a choice, and then she comes in. Thankfully, she's learned what sounds he can and can't tolerate: no bright greetings, no high-pitched *bello's*, no opening the curtains before he agrees to it, no bringing the tray set—just the plate with the toast and the mug with the coffee, please—no grand speeches about needing to eat, or taking a shower, or grabbing some fresh air, or getting out of the bed, or going for a walk. Never, at any point, absolutely not.

Maybe if he took a moment to really think about it, he'd feel a pang in his chest seeing how hard she's trying, how every morning she's knocking, every morning she's walking in with coffee he won't drink and toast he won't eat, every morning she's calling him *honey*, or *darling*, or *sweetheart*, or *baby*, and asking how he slept, if he dreamed, if he had a nightmare, if he needs anything, sitting for hours on end rubbing circles into the back of his hands, waiting to see if her son will come back to life.

This morning, she comes in wearing one of his dad's sweaters, sleeves pushed up to her forearms, hair still damp from the shower. She looks older than she did two weeks ago—the skin under her eyes is dark, bruised with sleeplessness, and her lips look

dry, as well. She loved Ilya too, Shane tries to remember. Or, well—he keeps remembering it, and then forgetting it, and then remembering it all over again, more like.

Ilya slept in this house. Ilya ate from their plates. Ilya lounged in their living room. She'd loved him, of course she did. Ilya had been very hard not to love once he let himself be loved. Shane knows it all too well.

“Good morning, honey,” she tells him, quietly, like always.

Anya lifts her head, then thumps her tail once against Shane's hip. *Traitor*, he thinks.

She sets the coffee on the nightstand next to yesterday's untouched mug, swapping them out without a word. He thinks that'll be that, but then she looks down at the old mug in her hands, silent for a long beat, and she purses her lips like she's trying not to cry, and—*fuck*, it makes *him* want to cry, too. Everything makes him want to cry now. His mother grabs a cup of coffee and he's tearing up, Anya makes these little moans and groans in her sleep and his throat starts to tighten. Every little thing sets him off, has his nerves immediately firing some ridiculous panic cues to his brain about how dry his eyes are, how heavy his chest feels, like the fucking Bat-Signal, or something—*alert, alert, moisture required*, all his synapses flaring—and then, before he can even blink, his cheeks are all wet when he goes up to touch them. Fuck, it's like being fifteen and on Accutane all over again.

“You slept a little,” she says. “I heard you snoring.”

Shane stares at the wall. “I don’t snore, Mom.”

“You’ve snored since you were thirteen, Shane.”

“No, that’s not true.”

“Yes, yes, it is.” She smiles, just barely. “You and your father both. A house full of lawnmowers.”

Anya sighs heavily, like she’s agreeing.

Something flickers in Shane’s chest, and he thinks he might make a joke, set things back to normal. Ilya would, probably. Ilya would said something about Canadian men, their tractor noses, would turn his face into Shane’s pillow, would—he’d—

Fuck. He closes his eyes, and exhales on a shuddered breath.

Mom sees it, because of course she does. She sees everything these days—every nook and cranny of his broken heart, laid bare for the world to see, worn loosely on his sleeve now, against his best wishes. She takes one step towards the bed, then stops herself. He can tell she wants to come closer, touch him, hug him, envelop him in her arms, but she’s afraid of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing. Or maybe of Shane snapping at her. It all just makes him feel worse, honestly.

“Sorry,” he tells her, because it’s sobering to realize his mother’s scared of him, or for him, or just—scared, in general, but also specifically in relation to him. He doesn’t really know exactly what

he's apologizing for, but it sounds apt, either way. Sorry for being like this in front of her, maybe. Sorry for making her have to enter his childhood bedroom with toast and coffee every morning, like she's his maid, or something. Sorry for being thirty-four years old and unable to sit up. Sorry for everything, all of it. Sorry for existing.

"Oh, baby," she says, and her voice breaks. She sits in the chair next to the dresser, hands folding in her lap.

For a while, the only sound in the room is Anya's breathing and the distant hum of the house under them: dad making coffee, probably, the television on, a car moving down the street outside. Shane hasn't gone downstairs since last Tuesday. Maybe Wednesday. Maybe a century ago. He can't tell. All he knows is the house has become vertical in his mind—parents below, dad in hallways, mom at the door, Shane in bed, Ilya nowhere, Ilya everywhere. His own version of Dante's *Inferno*, all nine circles of hell reduced to a two-story home in suburban Ottawa.

His mother sighs, and looks at him. "Montreal lost last night."

Shane feels nothing. *Montreal lost*. Okay. The playoffs are over. Should it hurt? It doesn't, not really. Or maybe it does, and he just can't feel it, can't reach it, can't touch it.

"Okay," he tells her.

Her hand tightens around the mug she's still holding. "I know you worked hard for it this year. I'm sorry."

Who cares? One man gone, twenty men out. *Who cares, who cares, who cares.*

“Um—Farah called.” She looks down at her hands. “She said you don’t need to answer anything, okay? Your coach, the GM, the team, anyone. She’s handling it, don’t worry.”

He wasn’t, really, because of course she is. Farah’s handling *it*. His mother’s handling *him*. His dad’s handling the door and the groceries and the coffee and the house. Everyone’s found a task to do.

He closes his eyes. “What’s everyone saying?” he asks.

“About the game?”

He shakes his head. “About me.”

She’s quiet for a moment, looking down at the coffee mug once more instead of at him. “Nothing you need to hear right now, honey.”

He laughs once, hollow. “So it’s bad.”

Her eyes snap up to his, wide, immediately trying to diffuse it. “—No, no, it—it’s just *noise*, honey, you know how it is, it—”

“—No, actually.” His voice is cold, void of any emotion. “I don’t.”

For a moment, he hates that she's his mother, hates that he has no choice but to let her see him like this, hates that she's not just a random manager he can bark an order to or send home with a severance package. But whatever scraps are left of his pride feel very, very thin under the blankets. "Tell me," he tries to add, voice softer, but it just comes across as begging.

She looks like she might stay silent, but eventually she sighs. "They're asking when you're going to say something. If you're coming back next season." She stops, swallowing. "But—honey, listen—Farah told them to leave you alone, and—"

"—Next season?" He cuts her off, frowning. "*What?*"

She exhales. "I know. It's too soon, and that's what I've told Farah as well, but..." She trails off. "Well, you know how they are."

His throat closes. *What the fuck?*

"I don't care," he tells her. "I don't care about hockey right now." He forces himself to swallow hard—once, twice. "Okay? Tell Farah that. *I don't care*. They can say whatever they want. They can—threaten me, or—" He pauses again, then repeats it, shaking his head. "I don't care, mom."

She gets up from the chair and comes to sit on the mattress. "Okay," she says, and her voice cracks. She tries to turn her face away, but it's too late, and he sees the tears already there, the fight she's losing with them. "That—that's alright, honey."

She's lost him too, he forces himself to remember. There's a part of him that still insists on hierarchy, though—*not like me, not like I did*—but it's an ugly, possessive thought, and he shoves it all the way down. Death's made him ungenerous with Ilya, apparently.

"I'm sorry," Shane tells her again, because—fuck, why not, it's all he can say these days.

Her face crumples. "No. No, baby—no."

He doesn't say anything else. Just keeps thinking of how his mother's lost Ilya too, how she loved him too, how she misses him too, how she's crying in Shane's childhood bedroom because her son-in-law is dead, and her son's still alive in the bed but also not really, and there's some losses that multiply instead of divide, some absences that wreck a family apart, some—

"—Honey," she cuts him off, and now she does touch him, hand caressing over his hair, because his breathing's turned ragged again and he hadn't even noticed. "Can you look at me?"

Outside the bedroom door, the floor creaks. *Dad. Of course.*

Shane ignores her request, and keeps his face turned into Anya. He hears her sigh.

If you're coming back next season. He can't stop thinking about it. *Coming back next season—coming back next season—coming back next—*

"He, uh," Shane starts. "He said something once."

“Who?” Her hand stills in his hair. “Ilya?”

He nods. “After I lost one year. During the playoffs.” His voice is raw. “I was—you know. I was sulking.”

Her lips curl, fingers still caressing over his hair. “You do sulk.”

He draws a breath, then keeps going. “He, uh—he told me I should win the next one for him. The Cup.” A beat, and his throat tightens. “I mean, he was joking, obviously—it was nothing, just a joke. But he, uh—he said it was romantic.”

Shane feels something gather in his chest, like a hand closing around the closest solid thing in a burning room.

“Well,” he says out loud, almost to himself, eyes narrowing. “I can do that.”

For days, everything’s felt impossible. Everything’s felt impossible, and not real, and not even vaguely imaginable, because, well, it’s all been about how Ilya’s dead, Ilya’s gone, Ilya’s never coming back, Ilya, Ilya, Ilya. But now—here’s this one thing that *is* possible. Here’s this one thing that’s not enough, not remotely, not even close, not in his wildest dreams, his wildest fantasies, but—it *is* possible. It *is* something. Something he can do—*finally*.

He can’t go back. He can’t get Ilya off the bathroom floor. Can’t pour the pills back into the bottle or put breath back into his lungs or make his own body cling to his when the paramedics tell him to step away. He can’t ask sooner, can’t knock harder. But he *can* win.

Fuck, it—it’s—hockey’s always done this to him, he knows, turned the obscure, the unclear, into an actionable sequence of events. Skate, lift, shoot, sleep, train, repeat, lose, fix, win. The only thing it’s ever asked of him is to be useful, and maybe that’s a cruel facet of it he should one day unpack, but right now, it’s kind of its sole saving grace, too.

Something moves across his mom’s face, and her lips twist. “Shane...”

The pity in her voice makes his stomach turn. “*Don’t*,” he tells her coldly.

“I wasn’t—” She starts to say, voice quiet. “I was just saying your name, honey.”

She takes a breath, wiping under one eye with the cuff of her sweater. “You don’t have to decide anything right now,” she tells him. “You know that, right?”

“I know.” He whispers. “But—I *can* do this. I can. What’s there to decide, mom?”

“*Shane*.” Her voice gives a little, and she has to look away before she can continue. “I don’t think you do. You’re—you’re in bed. You haven’t eaten more than a few bites in days. You barely sleep. You keep looking at the door like—” She stops herself, even though they both know the rest. *Like he might walk in*. “I’m not

saying don't play, okay? I'm not. I just—please don't make this the only thing keeping you here.”

Shane sinks further into the sheets, hiding his face in the pillow. “I'm not planning anything.” His voice comes out muffled.

Does she even believe him? He doesn't know. He doesn't know if he himself does.

“Look, I just need...” He stops, embarrassed. “I need to give him *something*, okay?”

Shane hears himself like he's standing outside his own body, watching a child in his bed, his hands empty, looking up at his mother with wide eyes, close to crying. *I need to give him something, mom, okay?*

Her face immediately changes, and she sits closer to him, bed dipping under her weight. Shane doesn't move when she takes his hand *She feels so warm*, he realizes. Her hand's smaller than he remembers, or maybe he's bigger now and keeps forgetting.

“You gave him a *life*,” she tells him.

He shakes his head immediately. “No.”

“Shane—”

“—No, Mom—”

“—You gave him all you could. All you had—”

“—Yeah, and it wasn’t enough!”

She tightens her grip around his. “No,” she says. “No, it wasn’t.”

Shane blinks.

“It wasn’t enough to keep him here.” She exhales. “That’s true. I hate it, Shane, but it’s true.” A beat, and she continues. “You know I loved him too, right, baby? I know it wasn’t the same, but—no, don’t look at me like that, I know—but I loved him, and I miss him, and I am so angry with him sometimes I, I can’t...” Her voice trails off, and she shakes her head like she’s ridding herself of the thought. “And then I feel ashamed, because he was sick, and he was hurting, and...”

She closes her eyes momentarily, then presses his hand to her mouth and kisses it. “So, no. Your love wasn’t enough to keep him alive. Mine wasn’t. Your dad’s wasn’t. Anya’s wasn’t. All of us loving him, all of us, and still...”

She looks down briefly, breathing quietly for a few seconds, before leaning over him and wrapping as much of herself around his body as possible.

“And it’s also true,” she says into his hair, “that he was loved by you in a way most people go their entire lives without seeing. I saw it, your father saw it. Everyone who mattered saw it. And Ilya knew it too. He knew, Shane.”

“No,” Shane chokes out. “No, he—”

“—He knew.”

“Mom, he killed himself—”

“—*He knew*,” she repeats, harder this time. “He knew you loved him. Do you hear me? He *knew*. This isn’t your fault. What happened to him is *not* your fault.” A beat. “You gave him so much, honey.”

Shane shakes his head immediately.

“You did.”

“No, Mom.” His voice rises too fast, and Anya’s ears perk up at once. *Always watching, always watching*. “No, you don’t—you don’t get it. You don’t know. You weren’t there, you didn’t—you didn’t *see*—”

The pill bottle. The tile. Ilya’s head, his face, his eyes, his lips. His hand going slack. The paramedics. *I’m so tired, любимый*²⁶. God, he thinks he might actually vomit now, and—fuck, then he’d have to get up, which is the last thing he wants, change the sheets, fix the bed, and he—he—he doesn’t, he—he can’t—

²⁶ Beloved

Shane turns his face into the pillow and shuts his eyes closed, breathing through his nose. *Inbale, count to four, hold, count to four, exhale, count to four—*

He feels his mother's hand closing around his. "I didn't see," she says, barely above a whisper. "No."

They're both silent for a moment, and she nudges closer to him. "I don't think you should go back, Shane. You're not—" She exhales. "You're not *okay*, honey. You need to—you need to give yourself time, to—to—" Her voice trails off.

Shane's jaw locks. "I'm going to. I *have* to." A beat. "One season, mom."

She doesn't say anything for a few seconds, but he registers her fingers tightening around his.

"Just one?"

"Just one," he agrees. "I win it for him, and then I'm done."

The truth is—the future's become too large to survive in a single piece. *One season* is a smaller metric, more measurable. *One season* has a clear shape: pre-season in September, games through March, flights and drills and bag skates and the Stanley Cup next June. *The rest of your life* is too long. A game is—it's—it's *clear*. Straight-forward. He can see it, can visualize it, can sketch it out and map it in his head. And, shit, maybe his mom's right—maybe

this is an absurd idea, maybe it's deranged, and unhealthy, and dangerous, and—and—and—but it's also suddenly the only thing that doesn't dissolve to ashes when he tries to reach for it.

She turns her face away from him, looking back at the closed blinds. It's mid-morning now in the summer, so sunlight's definitely pressing against the slats—it's just that Shane won't let it come in. *Not just yet.*

After a long beat, she looks back at him with red eyes and nods once.

"Okay," she says, voice hoarse. "I'll tell Farah to fly out here."

Shane blinks. "You're not going to tell me not to?"

She smiles, caressing his cheek with her thumb. "I'm going to tell you to eat today—"

He scoffs. "—Mom—"

"—I am. I'm going to tell you to eat, and I'm going to tell you to speak to a grief counselor, and I'm going to tell you Hayden has been calling every day because he doesn't want to push you, but he also doesn't know when he can come see you. I'm going to tell you a lot of things, Shane, and you're going to hate most of them."

He stares at her.

"And I'm also going to tell you this once, because I have to." Her mouth trembles. "It won't bring him back."

He looks away, jaw clenched tight.

“You can do it for him.” She keeps going. “You can do it because you love him, or because you need something that gets you out of bed. We’ll help you. Your father and I, Farah, Hayden, whoever you’ll let get close enough. But don’t decide the whole rest of your life from this room, okay?” She squeezes his fingers. “Please. Not from here.”

The whole rest of your life? The phrase itself sounds ridiculous. Years, summers, rooms, groceries, birthdays, Anya gone, his parents aging, the world continuing. Weather still changing, errands still running. All of it without Ilya. All of it in a silent house. Shane can’t picture any of it.

“One season,” he repeats, because that’s the only unit of time his mind can accept right now.

She exhales. “Okay,” she says. “One season. *For now.*”

He hears the addition. His mother, negotiating with catastrophe like it’s a difficult agent on the other end of a line.

He turns his face into Anya’s fur again before she can see him cry—hopefully she takes it as a clear signal he’s done talking for the day, but of course she sees his tears start to fall. She sees it, and she squeezes his hand, and she stays—the three of them, really, staying there in the dim bedroom while his dad stands silently out in the hallway, listening and never once knocking.

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Next one you win for me, yes? Ilya's voice says from memory.

Shane breathes in. The air still doesn't go all the way down, but at least it goes deeper than before.

Chapter Eleven

“BEFORE WE TALK about what you want,” Farah says, opening a folder, “I need to tell you what *they* want, so you can make an informed decision. Okay?”

Shane looks down at his hands. “Right.”

“Alright.” She draws a breath. “So—they want clarity. They’re saying that so often I might have to file an injunction against it, but—yes, clarity. For roster planning, for media strategy, for league comms, for sponsors. Obviously, they’re saying their first priority is your wellbeing and that they don’t want to pressure you, which, I mean—it might even be true.” She looks away. “Funny way of showing it, though, trying to reach me over twenty times in the last two days.”

Shane’s mouth tightens.

Farah continues. “They want to know if you’re planning to attend exit interviews. I told them no. They want to know if you’re issuing a statement. I told them the existing statement we already sent out is the only statement we’re putting out. And they want to know if you’re considering leave, or an indefinite leave of absence, or a public appearance, or anything they might need to prep for. Maybe even a video message to season-ticket holders sometime down the line, or a private team visit in the next few weeks, if

you're comfortable. And I'm paraphrasing." She pauses. "Charitably."

"Jesus Christ," his dad mutters.

His mom slowly turns from the kitchen sink, face very still. "They asked him for a video message?"

Farah nods, with pursed lips. "They asked me if he might consider one at some point, yes. When appropriate."

"*When appropriate*," his mom repeats.

"Yes."

The room's completely silent for a moment.

"And when would that be, exactly?" She's gripping the counter so tightly her knuckles have gone white. "Before or after he can sleep through the night without waking up looking for Ilya?"

Shane flinches. God, he just wants to put his head down on the table and not lift it again until the season's over, or until the earth stops spinning, whichever comes first.

Farah's eyes soften. "Yuna, I know that. I told them they'd get nothing from Shane until we say otherwise. And I also told them direct contact would be treated as harassment, like we agreed." She turns to him. "Look, Shane—I'll tell them whatever you want me to say. I can say you're not available, indefinitely. I can say you're not discussing next season right now. I can say that any hockey-

related decisions are suspended pending medical and family consultation. I can—”

“—I’m going back,” Shane interrupts. “One more season. Then I’m done.”

Everyone stops to look at him. *Huh*. So his mom didn’t mention anything to Farah—probably hoping he’d still change his mind. *Too late for that*.

Dad lowers his head, and when Shane looks at his mom, she’s closing her eyes and sagging back against the kitchen counter.

Farah stares at him for a moment. “Okay,” she says quietly, furrowing her brows. “So—you’re retiring.”

He nods.

She looks down at the leather folder, silent for a moment. “Shane, is this—” She stops herself, then starts again. “You’re sure?”

He looks straight at her. “I’m sure.”

Farah swallows. For a few seconds, she says nothing. Then she exhales through her nose and gives a small, disbelieving shake of her head. “Wow.”

She holds his gaze for a long moment. “Okay.” Her voice is softer now. “Okay.”

She blinks.

“Okay. Alright.” She folds her hands over the leather folder. “One more season, then.” She folds her hands together. “Wow, uh—okay, well, in that case, we need to figure out how you want to handle the announcement. Are we announcing it now or later on?”

Shane doesn’t miss a beat. “Now.”

His mom turns towards him, arms already raising. “*Shane—*”

“—No, mom.” He cuts her off, then pauses. “I’m not having this conversation for the next three months. I don’t want them asking me the same shit every week, and I don’t want reporters making it, I don’t know, a fucking countdown or something. I’m not giving anyone time to think this is just a phase.” He exhales on a long breath. “It’s already decided, isn’t it? So let’s just get it out.”

Farah looks at him for a long beat, studying him. “It’s gonna be the story of the season, Shane. We can try to block some questions, but you’re gonna keep getting asked about this all year long.” She pauses. “Are you sure you’re prepared for that?”

“I mean—” He scoffs. “They’re gonna talk about it either way. They’re gonna talk about me, and they’re *definitely* gonna talk about him, as well.” He shakes his head, letting out a bitter chuckle. “They’re going to say I’m making an emotional decision, that it’s just the grief talking, that I’m destroying my legacy, that I’m being rash. C’mon. I know the playbook, Farah.”

Her gaze flicks briefly to his mom's, then back to him. He can tell no one here approves of this decision, but Shane doesn't really care, either way. All he's thinking is—*let them*. Let them question him. Let them put his marriage on the line. Let them talk about mourning and grief and his future on segment panels between betting ads and highlight reels. Let them say *emotional, rash, incomprehensible, tragic, concerning, premature*—let them say it all, and then let them see him winning the fucking Cup next June.

Shane's eyes meet his mom's, and the look on her face, it—*fuck*. It hurts him more than he expects it to, and he has to look away before she does, swallowing down his flinch. He wants to tell her he's still in here somewhere, the son she knows, the boy who started snoring when he was thirteen and sulked over soggy cereal, the man who brought Ilya to their home and watched them grow to love him. But he doesn't really know how to say any of it without it sounding like a lie.

Farah lifts her phone. "Okay, your call, Shane. We do it now." She pauses. "Do you want me to talk to them, or do you want to?"

"You. But I'll be here. I wanna hear it."

His mom opens her mouth, probably to interject and say it's not a good idea, to remind him it's better to let Farah handle this, but then she stops, pressing one hand to her forehead and closing her eyes again. His dad approaches her, leaning an arm over her waist and hugging her sideways, and she leans into his touch, the familiar warmth of it.

Shane looks at them for a long minute.

He—fuck. God, he wants to kick them out right now, kind of, even though this is their home and he's been staying here out of their generosity because everyone knows he can't be left alone right now. But—Jesus.

Look, they can *be* here, okay? They can interact, they can talk, they can laugh, they can touch each other. That's—that's fine. Just don't... don't fucking *bug*, okay? Or—don't fucking *kiss*, don't do any couples shit, don't look at each other with, like, open tenderness all the way through, or with heart signs on their eyes, or—because Shane, he—*fuck*—he doesn't think he can take it, he doesn't think he can watch them act that way without the panic clogging his lungs, or his breaths coming up short, or his heart rate spiking, or his whole body ending up collapsed on the floor. It's not—it's not fucking *fair* of them to do that here, like—right in front of him, right there in his face, like they're snickering at him, like they're pressing their fucking boots down on the open wound sitting in his chest, like they're fucking, *stomping* on it, knowing perfectly well he can't exactly turn to Ilya and do the same, that he can *never* turn to Ilya and do the same ever again.

Farah interrupts his thoughts.

"They're expecting me to call at four," she tells him, unlocking her phone. "I can ask to move it up, though."

Shane exhales, averting his gaze from his parents. He presses the nail of his thumb against his index fingers, feels how it bites,

the sharpness of it, and it anchors him back to the present. He can lose his shit later. “Just call them now.”

She studies him for a moment, then nods, once.

“Shane, listen to me.” Farah pauses, turning her body fully towards him. “You can leave the room at any point. You don’t have to say anything. And you can change your mind—just signal to me and I’ll cut the call. Alright? It’s not a sign of weakness, or anything like that. I’m here to represent your interests. Remember that.”

“I know.” He keeps his eyes on hers. “Thank you.”

She makes the call, speaker on, and the phone rings twice before someone’s voice is filling the kitchen.

“Farah, hi. Thank you for making the time—”

Next one you win for me, yes?

Shane closes his eyes.



SOMEWHERE ON THE other side of the country, someone’s receiving a statement right now and reading the words ‘SHANE HOLLANDER TO RETIRE FROM PROFESSIONAL

HOCKEY AFTER 2024-25 SEASON.’ Probably the nice folks over at the Montreal office first, he supposes, then the league office, surely, then the long chain of people who have to know before the rest of the world can—legal, comms, representation, the players’ association, sponsors whose contracts have exit clauses attached to retirement announcements.

Farah’s trying her best to explain the overall gist of it to him, something about, *final version*, and, *approved language*, and, *no edits without written consent*, but Shane’s sitting on the couch with Anya’s head across his thigh and nodding mostly absentminded, watching from outside his body as the gears of his life come undone. The whole ordeal just feels dreamlike.

Any time now, he thinks. He’ll be waking up from this nightmare any second now, surely.

It’s funny, in a way, how naive he’d been before about how this whole process would actually unfold. He’d thought—what, that as soon as the decision was made, it’d become public immediately? Everything laid out in the open? But the world at large doesn’t know yet, doesn’t have the faintest idea. Well—some whispers are probably spreading already, sure, some bird somewhere in the chain almost certainly having talked by now, but that’s par for the course. He’d probably know if anything had leaked, if only because his and Farah’s phones would probably be blowing up with social media notifications, at least. Right?

Instead, there's just this strange interim, this weird limbo where the statement *exists* but isn't *out*, where a handful of people are currently reading the words *retire from professional hockey* and sitting back in their chairs, shaking their heads, muttering something under their breaths about how one of the world's most famous athletes is throwing his career away, but life-ruining NDAs are keeping them from dropping their friends a quick text and a series of shocked-face emojis about it. A limbo where his career's already over, technically, but somewhere on the other side of Canada some poor sod's making travel plans to go watch Shane Hollander hopefully score a hat-trick next October at the season opener. *Hope you ticked off the flexi-tickets add-on, bud.*

His mom keeps wiping the same clean section of the kitchen counter, while his dad stands by the window. At first, Shane thinks he's watching out for reporters, which, again—how could that be even possible, since *no one knows yet*. But then he realizes that one of his hands is curled around his phone, and he's staring down at the screen, gaze unmoving, fingers clenched tight.

“Dad,” Shane calls out. “What are you doing?”

His dad immediately glances at his mom, then back to Shane. “I’m, uh.” He stops, looking almost guilty, which makes Shane sit up a little straighter. “I’m going to call Hayden.” A beat. “If that’s okay with you, of course.”

“Oh,” Shane breathes out.

His mom turns from the counter. “We just figured he should probably hear from us first, honey. You know, before the statement goes out.”

He feels a little stupid. He should’ve thought of that. He should’ve thought of Hayden, and J.J. too, probably, and Rose, maybe—should’ve thought of how they’ll see the news, how they’ll know what one more season and then retirement means, or at least what it *might* mean.

“I can call him,” Shane offers, but there’s nothing he wants to do less, honestly.

His dad’s expression softens. “It’s okay, kiddo. You don’t have to.”

“I should, though.” He frowns. “Shouldn’t I?”

“Maybe,” he replies, looking down at the phone again while his thumb hovers over the screen. “But I can do it.”

Shane nods, and his dad steps into the hallway to make the call. It rings for just a few seconds.

“Hey, Hayden. It’s David.”

Shane closes his eyes. His mom sits down next to him, finally abandoning the counter.

“Uh, yeah. No, no, he’s—he’s here.”

He can't hear Hayden at all, just his dad's voice.

"He's okay. I mean—no, he's not. But, listen—" A pause. "There's, uh, going to be a statement in a little while. We wanted you to hear it from us before it hits your phone." A beat. "Shane's retiring after next season."

From the hall, silence. Shane can imagine Hayden on the other end—the sharp inhale, the hand over his face, his fingers stilling over Amber's hair in his lap, Jackie somewhere nearby asking *what*, *what is it*, and Hayden looking at her with wide eyes.

"No," His dad says, and his voice changes, firmer. "No, I don't think anyone's talking him out of it." Another pause. "Yeah, he is." Then, softer: "I know, Hayden. I know."

Shane looks away.

His dad comes back a few minutes later, and his face looks different, older around the mouth. He stands there for a second, hand still around the phone, and Shane can tell he wants to say more.

"He, uh—he sounded scared," he says, eventually.

Shane looks at him.

His dad swallows, then continues. "Hayden. He tried not to, but he did."

Shane purses his lips. He feels something akin to panic wrapping around his throat—other people being scared for him, other people hearing *one more season* and then the silence after it, other people hearing *done*, hearing *cliff's edge*, hearing the implication Shane hasn't yet voiced out loud. He squirms a little in his seat.

"I'm not trying to scare anyone," he says.

His mom looks over at him. "We can still delay public release, honey. It might leak, but—"

"—No. No." Shane keeps his hand on Anya's head. "If we delay, the office will start thinking it's a negotiation, and it's not."

She nods. "All right."

So they wait, pretending not to watch how their phones are face down on the table and keep lighting up and lighting up and lighting up again. Instead, Shane's mind locks onto the television remote his dad keeps fondling and turning and caressing and clutching in his hand, how his thumb keeps scratching the rubber edge of the volume button, a faint red mark across the bridge of his nose from where he must've taken his glasses off and pinched too hard.

His dad looks old, Shane realizes with a twisting stomach. Not really old like—well, like how everyone's been noticing for years and pretending not to, not old of age, just... old *suddenly*. Like—in the shoulders, in the mouth, in the eyes, most of all. His dad's been aging in increments all week long. Everyone has, really. Ilya died, and time didn't stop.

He sits down finally, lowering himself into the armchair across from him, television remote still in his hand. “Um. I just wanted to say—” He doesn’t look at Shane. “Hayden sounded bad. On the phone, when I called him. He asked if you were sure.”

“Yeah.” Shane frowns. “I mean, everyone’s going to ask that, I guess.” A beat. “What’d you tell him?”

His dad rubs one hand over his mouth. “I said yes.”

Shane nods. *Okay, then. Great. Good talk.*

“I don’t know if—” His dad looks up at him. “I don’t know if I should’ve said yes, Shane.”

Something hot moves in his chest, and he feels a flicker of anger. *Not this again.*

“I *am* sure. Fuck, we keep going over this—at some point, you guys are gonna have to respect my decision, and—”

“—I know, Shane—”

“—Trust—*no*, no, you don’t know, because you keep—”

“—I know you’re sure!” His dad’s voice rises, then immediately drops. “I know. Okay? That’s not what I mean.”

And, God, Shane has to *really* resist the urge to roll his eyes, now. He knows the speech is coming. The careful father, hand on

his shoulder, voice grave, telling him, *son, we love you, but we're worried. Son, grief makes choices feel clear when they're not. Son, hockey isn't everything*, even though his dad's never been too great at speeches, choosing to handle most crises in Shane's childhood with car keys already in hand, knowing that wherever they were going, he'd get them there—a broken wrist, a hospital, a tournament, an airport, the dentist, a school meeting after another boy hit him in sixth grade. His dad had driven, and waited, and bought shitty coffee from vending machines, and stood near enough that Shane knew he could lean on him if he wanted, far enough that he didn't have to. Now there's nowhere to drive to, so Shane's gonna have to sit here and listen to him say, *son, we know that you know you're sure, but are you actually, if you really stop to think about it, are you sure this is healthy, are you sure this will—*

“—I'm scared shitless, Shane,” he says, instead, bluntly.

His mom closes her eyes. Shane's mouth drops open.

“I'm scared,” he repeats, quieter, rubbing both hands over his knees now. “That's—that's all I've got, honestly. I've been trying to make it sound better in my head since Hayden asked, and it just keeps coming out wrong, so there. I'm scared shitless.”

His throat tightens. “Dad—”

“No—no, let me—” His dad stops, grimacing, then shakes his head. “I don't know what to say. Goddamnit. I hate this.”

He lets out a breath.

“Look,” he starts. “I want to be happy that you have—*something*. I do. Your mother told me what you said the other day, about Ilya, and I get it. Or, maybe I don’t really get it, I guess, but I understand enough. You—you need a thing in front of you. You always have, so—that makes sense. You know, when you were a kid, if you were upset and we told you to rest, you’d just get worse.” He smiles faintly. “But if we gave you something to do, anything, even just taking the trash out, you’d calm down because at least you were doing something with your hands. So—I *get it*, Shane.”

His hands are still in Anya’s fur. She’s fallen asleep against his thigh. His hands look normal, he thinks. *Don’t they?*

Dad’s voice roughens. “So, a part of me heard *one more season* and thought, *okay, good. Okay, there’s a thing. Great. He has a thing.* But—Jesus, Shane, I don’t think I should feel relieved in a moment like this.” He turns the remote over in his hands, then drops it into the cushion and lets his fingers flatten against his knees. “The word *great* shouldn’t even—it shouldn’t even cross my mind, you know? I don’t want to be relieved that you found something to do instead of, I don’t know, falling apart. That feels—” He pauses, searching for the word. “I don’t know how it feels. Awful, I guess? Like bad parenting? Like I’m watching you fall apart in the worst moment of your life and thinking, *well, thank God, at least he’s moving.*”

His mother’s hand is on his wrist, caressing, caressing, fucking *caressing* over and over again—

“I’m not trying to—” His dad starts, then stops again, frustrated. “I’m not saying don’t go back. Okay? I’m not—I know that won’t help. And if it gets you through the day, then okay. Great. I’ll drive you to the rink myself if you want. Me and mom will sleep over at your house if you want us, or we’ll stay here and drive up to yours and grab you, or you can stay here with us for the rest of your life, or—” He pauses. “*It doesn’t matter.* I’ll sit in the parking lot, I’ll, I don’t know, I’ll sharpen skates, I’ll—I don’t care, I’ll do whatever you want.” His eyes are wet. “But I need you to understand something.”

Shane looks at him. His mom’s full-on crying now, her face turned away. He wants to tell her *thank you*, for one second, wants to thank her for the mercy, for sparing him the sight of what his life’s doing to hers.

“If you stop eating, we’re coming over. If you don’t answer your phone, we’re coming over. If you tell your mother you’re fine and she thinks you’re not, we’re coming over. You can be mad. You can tell us to fuck off. And if you don’t open the door,” he says, and his voice breaks, “We’re using the key. Alright?”

Shane laughs—it sounds absurd to be getting the key talk from his parents at thirty-four years old—but it’s wet, barely laughter at all, really, and it immediately turns into crying. He covers his face with one hand, and his mother moves closer.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Shane says, the words muffled. “I just need—”

He stops.

He needs—well, he needs Ilya, obviously. He needs the last month to un-happen. He needs to win the Cup. He needs no one to touch that fucking Cup. He needs hockey. He needs everyone to stop looking at him like he's already gone, even though he kind of is. He needs to be allowed to feel like shit without feeling even worse for making his mother cry. He needs—fuck, he needs so many things, too many things, and none of them are in this room with him, and the biggest of all will never be in this room again with him.

He needs God, maybe. Needs religion, spirituality, a higher force, a higher power, something to ease the weight of the days to come. But he knows he can't force himself into faith, can't force himself to believe in God—no matter how much he wants to, how much he wishes to, how much he grits his teeth into deluding himself that some voice might one day answer him back. He's spent the past few weeks, or days, or whatever stretch of time has passed since Ilya's death, praying to any deity that'll hear him, and only the silence answers back. Either God doesn't exist, or he just doesn't care about Shane, specifically.

Yeah, well. Shane watches with bloodshot eyes as his mother gets up from the seat next to him to go hug his father, arms naturally finding their way around his waist, clutching tight. *Fuck you, too.*

NETTLES

Chapter Twelve

THE SUN IS warm, and something small runs past him. Brown hair, freshly clipped, catching the light as it goes, dark at the roots, gold at the edges, and there's laughter, bright, breathless, fearless. Promise, pregnant and waiting.

Shane turns, but the hair keeps going, laughing, laughing, laughing—



HE DOESN'T REALLY remember the night that well.

Some parts are awfully clear, rendered in horrible forensic detail, while others have been taken from him entirely. There are gaps where there should be sequence, whole minutes summed into raw feeling—some memories just sound with no image, others just image with no sound. His own hands, everywhere. The cap hitting the floor. The tile under his knees. The tub against his hip. The phone against his fingers. Ilya's name, leaving his mouth over and over again, until it'd stopped sounding like a name at all.

He remembers the dispatcher asking him questions, remembers answering some of them wrong, or—maybe not *wrong*, maybe just

too slow. Maybe just stunned, or just kind of incompetently, since his life was splitting open right in front of him. *Address. Age. What did he take? How much? When? Is he breathing? Sir, I need you to stay with me. Sir. Sir. Sir, what is the address? Sir.*

Oh—actually, Shane does remember hating her. Viciously, at that. *Poor woman*, he thinks now, looking back, but in the moment, listening to how calm her voice was, how determined, how detached, how professional, how clear it was that this meant absolutely nothing for her, nothing like what it meant to him, all Shane felt was frothing vitriol. He wanted to know what that voice would sound like if she went home and found her own husband dying in the bathroom, or her wife, or her kid, or her mother, or whoever she loved most. He wanted her to have to listen to a stranger ask *her* to stay with them while the person she loved died five feet away. *We'll see*, he'd sneered to himself. *We'll fucking see*. And then it passed, obviously—Ilya was still there, after all, and why the fuck was Shane thinking about the dispatcher's family while his husband was dying right in front of him?

Okay. Okay. Yeah. So—never mind. Right.

Shane keeps coming back to that memory, although, well—*coming back* is probably too gentle of a term for it. He's dragged there, hauled back by the goddamn throat. Ilya was still there only in the technical sense of the words, really, because—sure, his body was warm, his eyes were still open, kind of, and his breath was stuttering, or rattling, but at least it was fucking *working*, and his

mouth moved once, or Shane thinks it did. Maybe he only wanted it to move so badly he made it up. He can't know anymore.

He remembers saying, *stay with me*. Over and over, probably. God, such a pathetic, television phrase. *Stay with me, baby. Stay with me. Come on. Come on, look at me. Look at me, Ilya. Please. Please, baby, look at me.* Useless words, like Ilya had just forgotten to close the door behind him, and Shane was standing on the other side of it, calling through the crack to make him turn around.

Too much pressure, he'd thought. *Too little now*. Then, *forget it, just hold him*. But, no, actually, maybe he was thinking, *don't crowd him*, or *lift his head now, yes, exactly*, or *don't move him*. Or he was thinking, *oh, fuck, the dispatcher's still here, listen to her, follow her instructions*. But, well, if Shane was listening to her, then how come he could listen to Ilya's breathing—because he did, he remembers that, remembers counting his breaths even, and he couldn't have done both, couldn't have counted Ilya's dying breaths and listened to the dispatcher at the same time. Or maybe he didn't—maybe the only heart he was listening to by that point was his own, beating so violently while Ilya's was trying to leave.

Who the fuck knows.

He remembers thinking that Ilya would be upset about the mess, that he'd make some stupid comment later, ashamed and embarrassed, and Shane would forgive him before he even finished apologizing for it, just like he'd forgiven him for everything else, time and time again, just like he'd go on forgiving him many more

times, of course he would, and they would survive this because—Jesus, how many other things had they survived, and Shane was on the phone, and help was coming, and Ilya was loved, and surely there were still laws in the universe against this much love arriving too late. Surely, surely, surely, surely, surely, surely.

He believed that for maybe thirty seconds. Maybe even less than that.

The woman on the phone kept talking. Shane kept answering. Somewhere in the house, Anya was barking in a room he'd shut her into, or maybe whining, or maybe silent, or maybe not even aware her owner was dying, he can't decide. Maybe she could smell it, smell death gliding over the house. Ilya's left hand was in his, his wedding ring against Shane's skin, or—shit. Which hand had he worn the ring on that day? Shane knows this. The rest is, *fuck*, but this, no—this he remembers. He held that hand. He pressed it against his lips. He counted the knuckles like prayer beads, and—left hand. It was the left, it has to be. Wasn't it? Or—did he even have the ring on? Had he taken it off?

Shane tries to recall the memory, but he can't know anymore. He can't know anything for certain anymore.

If he did have it on, then Shane pressed his fingers against it, he remembers that, pressing hard enough that later there were red half-moon marks in his hand. Remembers telling Ilya things, too many things, too late for most of them. *I love you. I'm here. You're*

okay. You're okay, baby. You're okay. Lies, coming easily. Habit of a lifetime, really—one not even death could break.

He remembers the sirens, but only when they were already close enough to be unmistakable, and even that feels... wrong, somehow, because surely he should've heard them earlier, should've felt salvation coming from blocks away, should've noticed the sound, the tires running down their street. Instead, there was just the front door flying open, and people suddenly entering their home with large equipment, and heavy boots, and raised voices, and Shane, probably already alone by that point, praying and begging to whatever God there was that this was all a dream, or a nightmare, or that time could be rewound, or that if he had magical healing superhero powers, this would be a swell fucking time to reveal them. *Please, please—fucking—please, no—please, anything, I'll do anything, please.* Then, the air changing all around him as these strangers ran into the bathroom, strangers with gloves and bags and radios trying to move him aside with urgency, or gentleness, he can't fucking remember, but they'd done this before, they'd touched someone else's catastrophe with those same efficient hands, they knew where to stand, he didn't.

He sure made them work for it, though. Someone asked him to step back, and he must've said, *no, no, are you—are you fucking crazy, no, no*—or he thinks he did, anyway. Someone else said his name, but he doesn't know how they knew it. Maybe he'd told them. Maybe the dispatcher had asked him who he was earlier, logged it in the system for EMT response to have it at hand, and he just

doesn't remember. Maybe everyone knew, or maybe they recognized him from the television, or the ads, or maybe they were thinking, *shit, is that Hollander*, or, better yet, *oh, fuck, does this mean he won't be playing Florida next week*, and, *fucking hell, we're gonna lose the game, fucking Rožanov, man*, or maybe his resentment of hockey had already started to crystallize by then, who knows. Maybe *Shane Hollander* had already stopped being a person, or maybe he was already part of the crime scene—husband, witness, obstacle, man on bathroom floor refusing to understand emergency response. Suspect, too, surely. Definitely suspect.

He remembers saying, *I'm his husband*, in response to something—maybe a paramedic asking about their relationship, or some logistical question, or maybe there wasn't a question at all, maybe he just said it randomly right after he'd heard his own name. *I'm his husband*. It changed nothing, but he remembers one of the paramedics looking at him, really looking. It doesn't look like pity exactly in his memory, but—or maybe yes, maybe pity had already started to find a home in every face that would henceforth turn towards him, but the man's expression softened at the implication, and Shane instantly hated him for that, *hated* him, because it meant he knew something Shane was still refusing to accept.

He remembers his hand on Shane's shoulder, firm but kind.

"Sir, we need space."

Space. Space, after all those years of leaving space. *Space*, the thing he'd given Ilya too much of, like proof of trust, like proof of

patience, like proof he wasn't trying to own him. And now these strangers needed it too, needed space, needed Shane to step away so they could save him.

So Shane stepped away.

Now *that* part—that part he can't forgive himself for. Not on the good days, not on the bad days, not on any fucking day for the rest of his godforsaken life. He stepped away. He actually, willingly, stepped the fuck away.

Okay. Alright—yeah, okay. Yeah.

He let himself be moved back, let one firm hand on his shoulder be stronger than fifteen years of loving Ilya, let himself stand in the hallway like a moron while his husband died in front of him. Maybe he didn't know. Maybe the part of him that could still speak to the paramedics and answer questions and follow instructions and understand words like, *pulse*, and, *pressure*, and, *sir*, *please step back*, didn't know. But his body knew. Oh, his body knew. His body knew, and his heart knew, and hell, maybe even the paramedics looking down at him knew it too, and Anya knew it as well, for sure, all the way from outside the door or the other end of the house, or wherever the hell she was—everybody knew, like how a house feels the fire before the smoke alarm even starts.

Ilya was scared, Shane thinks. He can't prove it, but he knows it's true. Ilya was scared, and alone, and dying, and Shane stepped away. Dying inside his own body, inside whatever darkness was

taking him, or had already taken him, and Shane, who'd made it his life's mission to stay put, moved. He moved, for the first fucking time, just because he was asked to. He stood in the hallway, one hand braced against the wall, and watched. Watched them work through the bathroom door, thought of how intense they looked, how professional, how confused Ilya must've felt hearing all those clipped English words flying quickly over his body. *I'll tell him after*, Shane'd thought. *I'll explain to him everything they said. So he can understand.*

He remembers the cold creeping into his feet, remembers looking down. He'd lost a sock, somehow. It fills him with rage every time it comes back to him—one bare foot on the floorboards, one sock still on. His husband dying in front of him, and Shane remembers his bare fucking feet.

The police came because... well, because police come. The paramedics didn't tell him that in advance, or maybe they did and he just didn't hear it, because, Jesus, there's a limit to what a person can handle, there's only so many indignities you can imagine before the whole concept of reality just makes you numb to it all. Police come when someone dies like that, there. There's no mystery to it. Police stand in your hallway if you call 911 and scream-cry-barely-choke-out that your husband might be dead in a recorded call that may or may not get leaked to the press and go up on YouTube before lunchtime tomorrow, and they ask questions while paramedics keep moving around the bathroom and your dog scratches at a door and your feet are so fucking cold and you're distantly aware you need to piss and your husband's body is still

close enough that you could reach him if these people would just stop fucking *standing* between you and the person you belong to.

Police ask whether he'd seemed different—*well, I mean, his, his depression was getting worse, yeah, but he has a therapist here, and, and he's medicated, and, and, and*—whether there was a note—I *don't, I don't know, I mean, I just arrived, I haven't really, like, looked, I came straight home after, after my mom called because Ilya—he—he wasn't picking up, and none of us could reach him, and*—whether they'd ever discussed hospitalization—*no, we—we just thought that would make it worse, maybe, and, I mean, I don't*—whether there had been an argument—I *wasn't, I wasn't here this week, I was traveling for work, but we've been good, I, I thought—things were okay, but*—whether they were having problems—I *just told you, we, we were—no, like, we were okay, I think, we spoke this morning on—on the phone and he, I mean, he seemed okay, and*—whether Shane knew where the bottle came from—*it, it was my father's, he gave it to Ilya, like—a gift, I mean, for Christmas, but, I mean, like, it's—it's just a gift, it wasn't*—whether he knew how much medication Ilya had access to—*we never—I mean, I, I never thought, and, and the pills, it's... we're athletes, they prescribe us these kinds of dosages, I, I*—whether he'd ever been worried that Ilya might hurt himself—*no, I mean, yes, obviously, I knew he—I knew he had depression, but I didn't—I didn't think, but, I*—whether Shane had touched anything.

Had he touched anything? Jesus. He'd touched everything. He'd touched Ilya's face, his hands, his hair, the back of his neck, his shirt, the tub, the floor, the phone, the bottle before someone told

him not to, or maybe after, or maybe never. He'd touched everything, because Ilya was there and Shane had hands and the world had narrowed to the simplest, most basic rules of contact: *if I hold him, he stays. If I hold him, he knows. If I hold him, he's loved.*

He didn't know what else to tell them. He didn't know what he'd moved, what he'd knocked over, what he'd picked up and put back down. He couldn't remember where the bottle had been, if he'd moved the medication, if he'd wiped Ilya's mouth or touched his face first or knocked something onto the floor or put it back. He just remembered holding him, and begging him not to die.

Too fucking bad, the universe preened at him. *You're too late.*

Shane will remember it for the rest of his life, even through the fogginess of the rest of the night. The frantic motion calming down. The urgency of the previous minutes slowing all of a sudden. The standing up, the glances over Ilya's body, one of the medics looking back at him. The voices lowering, someone touching a radio. A whole room of gladiators, trained to fight against the clock, stopping to fight it in the same way. The officer asking Shane to sit down.

What—what's happening? Is—

—No—don't come here, sir, stay back—

—Is he—

—Sir, we're still doing all we can, please step back—

—No, you're not, clearly you're fucking not if he's still on the floor and you're talking to me, so tell me what the fuck—

There was no point in fighting back. He knew, they knew, everyone knew. The whole thing had already become ceremonial.

And that was that. The line, drawn through the sand of Shane's life, permanent. Everything before, and everything after.

After, Shane sat at the kitchen table while the officer spoke to him and wrote things down. *After*, a blanket appeared around his shoulders. *After*, his phone kept lighting up. *After*, the officer asked if there was any family they could call.

Family? He wanted to laugh. There was family everywhere, suddenly. Family in Ottawa, family in Moscow, family in Boston, family by law, family by blood, family by proximity, family by history, family by the fact of who'd have to be told. His parents. Svetlana. Troy. Farah. The team. Marleau. Hayden and Jackie. Galina. Andrei, probably—but through Svetlana, and out of courtesy only. Fuck, so many people would have to be told, and he'd have to recite the same words over and over again, wait for the sudden inhale, the shocked gasp, the long silence, the stammered response every time. People arranged around Ilya's life like points on a map Shane couldn't read anymore. Every call a little grenade waiting in his hand, pin already pulled.

He called his parents first, or maybe the police did, he can't remember. His mother's voice only exists in his memory after she

already knew enough to be crying. His father's voice, panicked in the background, asking Shane questions he couldn't make out or decipher. He just remembers saying, *mom*, or, *dad*, or maybe just, *Ilya*, and then nothing useful. Remembers his mom saying his name like she hadn't since he was a child, split open with fear. *Oh, God, oh my God, Shane, Shane, honey, no, no. Honey, I'm so sorry, I'm so, so sorry, this, this can't be happening, no—*

Oh, he remembers realizing, distantly. He'd become something that was happening to them, too.

When they arrived, his mother rushed towards him, touched his face—*that* he remembers. Both hands on his cheeks, cold from outside, smelling faintly of, what was it, peach hand lotion? Yes, peach. She used to have one in the bathroom, didn't she? Little bottle, pink label, something with a fruit logo on it. It had little black grains mixed with the cream, for scrubbing, so it must've been good, must've been expensive, but he doesn't really know, his dad's the one who bought it for her. Or no, that was the one she kept for travel, so maybe she was smelling of car fragrance, instead—the same brand she'd gotten him when he bought the Jeep Cherokee, a little freshener hanging from the rearview mirror, but it had this awful synthetic peach smell that always made him sick whenever he got in the car. And he'd told them that, he'd said exactly that—*Mom, Dad, thank you, but I think the air freshener you bought me makes me sick, I'm sorry, and—yes, it's every time I get in the car—yeah, really, I know, but—yes, the peach one, and—or no, maybe not peach, maybe apricot—but he did hate it, he remembers that much, and Ilya did too, he'd told them once, even, Ilya hates it too,*

yeah, the peach one, or maybe it was the lavender one—there was a lavender one, too—and—

His mother's voice cutting through it, calling his name. *Shane, honey. Shane.* Calling him back, looking at him like she couldn't tell if he was still there. And Shane suddenly just wanted to be very small, wanted to be folded down into her arms and become a little boy again, hang his legs over his father's lap, twirl his fingers through the strands of wool in her cardigan, be someone whose injuries could be named, wrapped, kissed, hugged, healed.

Instead, he just stood in the kitchen he'd shared with his now dead husband while people moved behind him, looking at his parents with bloodshot eyes, and his mother just said, *oh, Shane, oh, honey, oh no, baby, no, no, baby, no*, and—well.

It felt like the end of one life and the start of another.

His father hugged him harder than he ever had, and Shane didn't cry even then. Sometimes, he thinks he didn't cry because shock had taken hold of him. Other times, he thinks he didn't cry because some part of him had already died with Ilya and left behind a decoy standing in their kitchen to answer questions. Other times even, he thinks he didn't cry because he was already turning to stone from the inside out, becoming the sort of frozen statue where birds nest in the hollow places.

He cried later, of course. Cried in ugly, hideous bursts, in the bathroom while his father stripped him of his clothes at five in the

morning that night; in the police precinct two days later after giving his testimony; in the middle of his parents' kitchen a week later when a jar of pickles shattered under his mother's hands and the sound immediately sent him back to the plastic bottle hitting tile, running back up the stairs and into his childhood bedroom. Cried into Anya's fur every day, really, until she'd inevitably squirm away from the overwhelming dampness. Cried in bed with his face pressed into Ilya's clothes, horrified when they started to smell less like him and then even more horrified at himself for being able to notice how quickly fabric could become fabric again. Cried as he hyperventilated time and time again and told his mother he wanted to die, once, twice, too many times—*no, no, it's all wrong, no, I—I, mom, no, I don't, please, I don't—I don't want to be here, no, not anymore, please, no, please, I need Ilya, I need to, I need to go, he, he needs me, he's waiting for me, and—*

But that night, in the kitchen, while his mother held his face and his father stood beside them, both looking older than they ever had, Shane never once cried. White knuckled, stony faced, he just said: *I was here. I saw it.*

Nobody knew what to tell him after that, and, really, what was there to say? *I was here. I saw it.* Meaning: *I was in the house.* Meaning: *I loved him.* Meaning: *I was close enough to hear.* Meaning: *I couldn't save him.* Meaning: *I should've known.*

His mother cried harder, and his father only told him he knew, they knew, *shh, Shane, it's okay, we know, we know.* That was all. *We*

know. Like knowing could ever comfort him. Like knowing had ever saved anyone.

For days after, Shane would keep coming back to that sentence in his head. *I was here. I saw it*. At the right angle, it looked like a confession.

I was here, and I saw it, and Ilya still died. I was here, and I saw it, and the pills were still swallowed. I was here, and I saw it, and his body still went slack beneath hands that had loved it for fifteen years. I was here, and I saw it, and paramedics still had to rip the front door open. I was here, and I saw it, and none of my being here mattered.

It should've, he thinks. To be there should mean something. To love someone should let you decide whether they live or die. Shane had thought, once, that as soon as Ilya was his husband, there'd be some jurisdiction to it, some legal, moral, cosmic right to reach him in whatever dark room his mind had locked him inside and protect him, shield him, love him unconditionally. But that night in the bathroom takes that belief from him and leaves a pit in its place—which is why, when people later hug him and say there was nothing he could've done, he nods. He nods because they need him to, and they're being kind, and some part of him knows they're probably right.

And then he goes back to their home instead of his parents' house and kneels on the bathroom floor, putting both hands flat where his knees had been that night, like the house might still be

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holding Ilya there. Like he might rise through the floor if Shane's quiet enough.

Like some version of him is still stuck beneath the tile.

The floor is cold.

The floor is cold, and the house is quiet, and Shane is alone, and Ilya is dead, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Chapter Thirteen

HE LEARNS QUICKLY that people can accuse him best by trying *very* hard not to.

It's not like anyone outright says it. No one corners him in a hallway and asks how he missed it, how he let Ilya's suffering slip past him. No one says, *bad husband, bad witness, bad partner, bad keeper of the gate*. No one says, *you were there*. But, well—they don't have to, after all. They just say other things instead. They say, *I'm so sorry, he loved you so much, you did everything you could, take care of yourself now, Shane*, with their hands hovering by his elbow, his shoulder, the back of his neck, never touching, like he's fucking contagious now, or something. They say—

“—*You were so good to him*,” the woman in front of him tells him. Someone from Ottawa's front office, maybe. She has kind eyes, and Shane can see her trying to offer him something—comfort, maybe? Recognition, kindness. Small mercies, he guesses.

You. Were. So. Good. To. Him.

They're standing in the corridor outside the arena press room, Shane's tie pressing too tight against his throat and his hands clasped loosely in front of him. *Keep them busy, keep them busy, keep them busy*—

“So good to him, Shane,” she says again, softer now, like repeating it might help. “Really. You were. He talked about you all the time, you know. He’d be so happy about what you managed to put off tonight.”

She gestures around her at the memorial event he’d been supposedly responsible for planning, at least as far as the public knew, but—really, it’d been wholly handled by his mother, Farah, the Centaurs and the MLH. He thinks of telling this lady he’d spent the entire summer barely able to get out of bed, much less capable of *putting off* whatever she thinks he put off, but he holds his tongue. She keeps going. “Happy, and... proud, certainly. He’d be very proud of you. As we all are.”

Shane nods, one of his many. There’s the brief nod for reporters. The slow one for other players, who come up to him to offer condolences and assume that just because they knew Ilya as a fellow player that means they knew him at all. The small, looks-grateful-enough one for strangers who cry into his blazer at memorial events like this one. Shane has a nod for all of them now. *Yes, thank you. Yes, I know. Yes, he was remarkable. Yes, it’s very sad. Yes, I’m still standing in front of you,* which appears to be what everyone’s decided to admire.

So he nods, and the woman’s face trembles with relief, like he’s accepted her gift. Inside him, something turns ugly.

You were so good to him. What a stupid phrase. Good to him like, what—someone who remembered birthdays and other important

dates? Someone who made coffee in the morning just as he liked it? Who knew which side of the bed he preferred to sleep on, no matter if it was their bedroom or a random hotel room in the middle of Florida? Good to him like someone who came home with expensive dog food in the car trunk, because Ilya'd always insisted Anya had a discerning palate and then acted offended every time Shane pointed out she once ate half a napkin? Or maybe just good to him like someone who they assume managed to learn the difference between Ilya being quiet and Ilya being gone somewhere inside his mind, sometime in their years together. Eh—he'll let them have the lie.

Good to him, yeah, sure. Shane wants to laugh. *Good to him, and Ilya still dead.*

It'd be horribly inappropriate if he actually let the laugh out—mid-memorial, everyone freshly grieving, his mother's gaze probably snapping to his from the other side of the room in an instant—but he can feel it sitting at the back of his throat, except, well, maybe it's actually closer to a sob.

Good to him. Good to fucking him. And Ilya still dead.

He wonders if people can see it on him. Not really the grief, because grief they expect, obviously. Grief has made him thinner, quieter, older, given him wrinkles, a hunched back, dark circles around his eyes. Grief's given everyone something obvious to stare at. But guilt—well, guilt feels crystalline, transparent, a sheer, filmy fabric that lets everyone see into the rot at the center of him. It

stands behind his body with both hands on his shoulders, nails carving down into his shoulder blades, writes its name across his back and then sends him into rooms full of people who try to pretend they can't see it.

Bad husband.

He looks past the woman's shoulder and catches his reflection in a glass somewhere in the distance. *Shane Hollander* stares right back at him—black suit, memorial ribbon pinned to his lapel, widower, survivor, witness, fraud.

There's nothing on his back, obviously. For all he wishes it so, all he hopes, there's no mark, no brand, no scarlet letter glowing for everyone to see. Just the straight tailored seams of a blazer jacket his mother had to grab for him, because Shane forgot—turns out there's still errands to run before having to go spend a night publicly grieving the love of your life. And yet he feels it all the time—mark, brand, scarlet letter, whatever it is—feels it every time someone looks at him and looks away too quickly, every time a conversation pauses when he enters, every time someone tells him, *Ilya was so lucky to have you*, like all that luck didn't end up running out spectacularly under Shane's very watch, every time someone brings up Ilya's depression with a hushed voice and Shane wants to ask if they know what it's like to become evidence in someone else's death, to be the nearest surviving witness, to have loved a man so completely that your failure to save him becomes the most damning fact of your entire life.

The woman's still talking. Something about tonight's memorial? How much it means to the Centaurs, how brave Shane is for being here, and—*brave?* Jesus fucking Christ.

Shane hears himself say, "Thank you," somehow. His voice is calm, purposely engineered to make people think he's handling this with dignity. She even touches his arm, which would normally make him flinch, and Shane doesn't even grimace, doesn't even let his lips twist, doesn't even let his eyes flicker—even though he really, really fucking wants to throw her off him. These days, someone reaches for him and all he can think is, *don't*. Someone says he did his best, and all he hears is, *not enough*. Someone says Ilya loved him, and some part of Shane wants to ask: *then how come he killed himself?*

Shane just nods at the woman again and quickly makes his way down the nearest corridor—he tells her something about how he has to go, *sorry, but thank you so much for coming tonight*, and she nods too, smiles at him, grateful, because she knows, he knows, they all know there's always another place to stand in, another person to thank, another condolence to hear, another smile to bear, another pat to resist flinching at.

He looks up, and Ilya's face flashes down at him from a few screens. A looping tribute video, or a montage reel—Ilya younger, smiling, beautiful as ever. Shane has to look away before his knees go out under him.

He barely makes it to the bathroom before the bile in his throat just about catches up. The door swings shut behind him, muting the outside noise into a distant hum, and he's left alone inside the empty bathroom. Shane walks up to the sink vanity and grips the edge of the counter with both hands, before looking at himself in the mirror.

There you are. He turns slightly, twisting his right shoulder around so the back of it is visible in the mirror.

Nothing, of course. No mark, no proof, no indictment. No iron-branded scar announcing to the world what everyone already knows: that Ilya Rozanov had been loved by him and died anyway. That Shane had slept next to his husband through the worst months of his life leading up his suicide and dared to call it a bad stretch, something temporary, something they could work through. That he'd given space where he should've attached himself to Ilya's fucking insides, like a tapeworm would, talked where he should've listened, waited patiently where he should've dragged Ilya out into the world on a non-stop year of traveling and endless stimulation and countless distractions and refused to let go until his sixth visit to the Great Wall of fucking China and back had tired him out enough to quiet the voices in his head.

His breath catches, and he presses both hands flat to the counter, leaning forward until his forehead nearly touches the mirror. Shane looks away, jaw clenched so tight his teeth ache, and for one second, he hates Ilya so fucking deeply, it shocks him clean through. Hates him, hates him, hates him, God, he—he—he

fucking—*loathes* him, even. Then, immediately, loves him twice as hard—so much he almost doubles over.

This is his punishment, isn't it? It must be, has to be. Maybe all of this would be easier if his guilt would just stay one thing, shrink down to a single, easily digestible feeling, but instead it just constantly moves around, constantly rearranges his spine as it crawls inside him, constantly sheds its skin as it climbs up his fucking nerve endings. It wears love's clothes, uses love's voice, writes love's name—it tells him, *if you loved him, you should've known. If he loved you, he would've stayed.*

The bathroom door opens, and a man steps in. He sees Shane at the sink, and stops. For a second, they just stare at each other through the mirror, and his expression changes immediately: recognition, pity, panic, then a quick search for the right face to make.

“Oh. Uh, sorry,” the man says, though he's done nothing wrong.

Shane straightens his back, opening his mouth to say, *it's no problem at all, or, all good, or, fuck off, or, what are you even apologizing for, dude, or, what, can't I take a fucking leak in peace without one of you fuckers wanting to come with just to make sure my dick doesn't get stuck in the zipper?* or maybe just to stay silent after all. But before he can even think of something to say, the man retreats without using the bathroom at all.

And thank God for small mercies, really, because his hands, they're—fuck, they're shaking, and *he's* shaking too, but—why are his hands shaking—and then he's washing them—cold water first, then colder still—and he's watching the water run over his fingers, running, running, running, through his nails down through the pads of his thumbs through the knuckles and down his wrists, and then he's thinking of every purification ritual the world's come up with through thousands of years of storytelling: confession, penance, prayer, punishment, time, baptism. He's thinking of Lady Macbeth too, suddenly, because, fuck, why not at this point, thinking of the Three Weird Sisters, thinking of *tomorrow*, and *tomorrow*, and *tomorrow*, thinking of Macbeth killing Duncan and hearing a voice cry out, *Macbeth shall sleep no more*, so maybe now that Ilya's dead, Shane will hear a random voice crying out from the bathroom stall too, will hear someone whisper at his ear that *Shane Hollander shall sleep no more*, or maybe that voice has already been crying out for three months now, because that's how long it's been since he last slept a full night. And then he wants to laugh, because Ilya would make some obnoxious comment about it all, and Shane would roll his eyes back and tell him to *shut up*, or *fuck off*, or *kiss me*, *goddamnit*, and maybe, in another life, that would've been enough to keep him here.

In this one, though, the water keeps running, and Ilya stays dead, and Shane just wants to fucking cry and go back home to his bed to lose his mind in peace.

He dries his hands slowly. One finger at a time, paper towel pressed to skin until there's nothing left to dry—nothing left to do, really, except go back outside and face the music.

Before he opens the door, he looks at his reflection one more time, almost curious.

Bad husband, he thinks, like a fact he's placing on the bathroom counter between him and himself. He waits for some inner voice to contradict him, but none comes.

So Shane adjusts his tie, smooths one hand down the front of his jacket, and steps back into the corridor with his back straightened—like a prisoner walking into death row—as if the invisible branded mark might've really been there all along.



A SPOTLIGHT SHIFTS. The black fabric starts to rise, and the arena holds its breath. Then Ilya's name appears.

ROZANOV. 81.

The crowd erupts, and Shane looks up. It rises higher and higher and higher, until he has to tilt his head all the way back to follow it. The banner finally settles into place—fixed, at last. *Like that's even possible*, Shane thinks to himself, frowning. Like Ilya ever

agreed to stay one thing long enough to be hung from a ceiling. Not even Shane himself could ever contain him.

He's standing under it, head craned back. and suddenly he feels like he's going to fall. His knees hold, thank God, but some part of him *is* falling—falling and falling and falling—or, well, some part has *been* falling, ever since the bathroom, ever since May, ever since Saskatchewan, ever since *Ilya Rozanov? Shane Hollander, I wanted to introduce myself*. And now the arena's tilting all around him, and the applause's turning into this marching band from hell, like sounds he's hearing from underwater while his oxygen tank's running out, like noise that's crashing somewhere very far away while light's blooming at the edges of his vision.

The arena disappears, and he's suddenly back in his kitchen at midnight, laptop open, cursor blinking for hours on end next to an unfinished sentence because he'd been asked to write something for tonight's memorial.

Ilya was—

Ilya was what?

Brilliant, generous, impossible, loved. Cruel, afraid, lonely, sick. The love of Shane's life. The person who made him laugh hardest. The person who hurt him worst. The man who taught him what happiness looked like. The man who died, who left, who tried, who failed. The man *Shane* failed.

Ilya *was*. Maybe that's all the public deserved. Maybe that's all anyone gets, in the end. A verb in past tense.

Shane had ended up sending nothing back, so the program probably just says something generic now instead, like, *Ilya was loved beyond measure and will be missed beyond words*, or something like that. Beyond words, and yet everyone keeps expecting him to find them, somehow.

The applause keeps going, and his hands hang at his sides. Thousands of people clapping for Ilya, for Shane, for both of them, for greatness, for brilliance, for tragedy, for hockey, for love, for whatever story they think this moment might represent, and Shane thinks, suddenly, of a circus. The spotlight, the height, the expectation that he can cross from one side of time to the other without falling through the abyss. He imagines himself suspended high above all these people, a trapeze swinger in a glittering costume he never asked to wear, doesn't remember putting on, his hands chalked, the whole crowd looking up with their mouths open, waiting to see if he'll make it or break his neck. The arena roaring, and Shane hanging somewhere above.

"Ilya Rozanov was many things..."

Shane stares at the banner up on the rafters.

"...a competitor unlike any this league has ever seen..."

True.

“...a teammate whose passion changed every room he entered, of extraordinary generosity...”

Sometimes true.

“...complicated, yes, like all great men are complicated...”

Word salad, Shane thinks, and his jaw tightens. *Complicated, difficult, private, troubled*—words people love because it lets them say nothing at all.

The speech keeps going. Shane watches as the crowd chuckles, cheers, *oohs, ahhs*, in all the right places—some funny story about Ilya refusing to leave the ice after practice, and everyone laughs warmly. *Fondly*.

Would Ilya even want that? Probably. No—definitely. Ilya would want to be remembered with laughter. Wouldn't he? He'd love the stories, surely. He'd want all the dramatics, all the applause and the big screen and the whole arena clapping for him, chanting his name like a spell. He'd want people to remember him with a laugh, surely, as someone bigger than all the places that tried to contain him. He'd hate the pity, the sadness, the lowering of the eyes. He'd want the fondness. Right? He'd hate to know he'd been reduced to the worst thing he ever did.

Around Shane, people are turning towards him with fond eyes, wanting to share the moment with him, wanting to see him smile. And Shane, he—God, he tries, he swears he does, swears he does his best to make his face obey him, to school his features. *Smile*,

nod, lower your head—smile, nod, lower your head—smile, nod, lower your fucking head—let them have this, let them fucking have this, let them, let them, let them—

But then he does the opposite—looks *up* instead of down, up at Ilya on the scoreboard, up at the looping fucking montage that hasn't stopped tormenting him ever since he first arrived all the way back at the start of the night, up at all the clips of Ilya smiling, sweating, grinning, laughing, frowning, scowling, talking, skating, alive, alive, *alive*, and Shane, he—God, he's just so happy to see his face again that for one single second, the rest of the world disappears, and he just—he—he—he *forgets*.

Then the clip ends, and the screen changes, and Ilya's gone again.

His first thought is—*no one noticed that*. There, good. Done. No one noticed the sound that just came out of his mouth, certainly, the one he almost just about swallowed, the short broken inhale that barely made it past the microphone clipped in front of him, here in the podium in the middle of the arena while all the Centaurs players are standing behind him. Right? Surely, no one noticed it. It was too small to be noticed. And the arena's too large, the crowd's too loud. *Just stand still, stand still, stand still—*

Then another breath catches, harder this time, and his face is folding before he can stop it. He turns away from the crowd, like there's somewhere to go, but the spotlight and the phone cameras and the thousand pairs of eyes all follow him, and then the whole

arena is quieting by degrees, applause dying in ragged patches while everyone starts to realize that something's wrong. *Sorry, sorry, that was me, ignore that, keep going*, Shane wants to say, like you would when you're twelve years old in sixth grade and accidentally swallow too loud in the middle of a test, and the whole class snaps their neck back to look at him—*yeah, uh, that was me, my bad, sorry*—but he's pressing one hand over his mouth before he realizes he's even doing it, then both hands, but then it's just making it sound worse, really, it's making it sound, like, *trapped* and, fucking—*wet* and—God, it's so humiliating, and his breaths are coming too fast through his fingers while his shoulders are jerking—once—then, *fuck*—twice, and—

Whoever's speaking stops talking, and Shane sees the panic suddenly passing from staff member to staff member. No one's prepared for this, he realizes. They probably had some dignified image of Shane built up in their heads—solemnity embodied, his head bowed, the brave widower with damp eyes, caught in black-and-white from a distant camera, a photograph collage they could share to the team's official Instagram feed with soft piano music, or maybe an acoustic cover of *Rasputin*, or *My Marmalade*, or whatever. What they're not prepared for is Shane Hollander folding in on himself at center ice while the entire building watches him try and fail to breathe around the montage clips of his dead husband.

Someone's calling his name. Maybe the announcer, or maybe Troy, or maybe Bood, or maybe his own mind, trying to call him back, trying to anchor him to the present. Or maybe his

grandfather, dead now, but also alive, like all the dead people in his life are alive these days—*Shane, all this sentimentality—Shane, it's, it's—*

He shakes his head, or tries to, anyway, but he doesn't even know what he's saying *no* to. The attention? The eyes on him? The screen up above? Ilya's face disappearing, again and again, forever? One of his hands is still pressed to his mouth, the other going to his chest. His fingers curl hard into his suit jacket, like he might physically hold himself together through willpower alone.

“—I—I can't—” he starts to say, and the microphone catches part of it, the words echoing through the arena before someone abruptly kills the feed.

Someone get me out, he thinks, or says, or breathes, or—or—*someone get me out, out—out—get me the fuck out—*

When he looks up, Hayden's walking briskly through the tunnel, already halfway out of his coat, crossing the ice with no concern for the ceremony or the young lady in a headset he just walked by who looks like she's whispering something that vaguely looks a lot like, *oh my fucking God*, or maybe, *no fucking way*, or maybe, *take a load of this fucking guy, Jesus, what an attention-seeking prick*. Jackie's walking behind him for three steps before someone catches her elbow, shakes their head at her—no one really knows the rules anymore—and when Hayden finally reaches Shane, he angles his body close enough to block the main camera angle.

“—Hey, hey, hey—” Hayden says, low enough that only Shane can hear him. “—buddy, hey. Look at me. Breathe.”

Shane tries, he really does. The problem is that Hayden’s face looks really kind, and he looks kind of devastated, and he’s looking at him like he loves him, and Shane has no defenses left that can stand someone looking at him like that. A sob breaks out of him, and he bends forward under its force, head shaking while breaths start tearing in and out of him and the arena keeps watching in horror and fascination—Shane Hollander, car crash in human form.

One of Hayden’s hands wraps firmly around Shane’s shoulder blades, the other coming to the back of his neck, and Shane leans into him. “I’ve got you,” Hayden whispers to his ear. “I’ve got you. Come on.”

Shane’s still trying to apologize. He’s crying so hard he can barely stand, but he’s still trying, through his hands, through gasping breaths, trying to say, *sorry, fuck, fuck, I’m so sorry, Hayds, ‘m sorry, Il—Ilya, I’m sorry—I’m sorry, everyone worked so hard, ‘m sorry—* Hayden’s hand tightens at the back of his neck. “*Don’t*,” he says, the words rough, and his voice breaks. “Don’t you fucking apologize.”

He guides him towards the tunnel, spotlight losing him halfway through and catching only his back: the black suit, the stiff line of his shoulders, Hayden’s arm around him, one hand fisted in the fabric like a child, the iron-marked brand, the scarlet letter. *Bad*

husband, bad husband, bad husband. Nobody claps, or says anything. They just watch him go.

Then he's in the tunnel, and someone's offering him water, someone's saying his name, or, well, *everyone's* saying his name, someone—*oh*, he realizes, *the girl from PR I spoke to last week*—she's saying, *I'm so sorry, I—we should've—I thought we consulted you, we—we—I*—eyes wide like she's just watched a disaster unfold, a tornado roll across town.

Hayden turns to all of them with a look Shane's never seen on him before. "Give us a minute."

For once, people do as they're told, and before he knows it, Shane's up against the wall, bent forward with both hands on his knees. There's snot under his nose, he realizes, and he probably looks disgusting, and—*fuck*—it—it—it's so goddamn humiliating, so fucking embarrassing to realize the whole world's just seen him with snot down his nose, that a fresh wave of crying hits him all over again.

Hayden crouches in front of him. "Shane," he says. "C'mon, you—you've gotta breathe, buddy."

Shane shakes his head. "I *can't*."

"You can, you can." Hayden nods encouragingly at him. "C'mon."

“No—no, I can’t—” His throat closes again, and he presses his fingers hard against his eyes. “Fuck, they’re—they’re going to think I’m—” *Weak. Embarrassing. Unstable. Pathetic. Attention-seeking. Selfish. Making Ilya’s moment all about myself. Ruining it. Making a spectacle.*

Hayden shakes his head. “They’re going to think your husband died, Shane,” he tells him softly, “and that you’re grieving him.”

Shane’s about to answer—the denial’s sitting right there on the tip of his tongue—but then—a sudden burst of movement from the corridor behind them. Footsteps, rushed, then voices. Someone saying, “he’s this way—” and then his father’s voice, tight with fear. “Shane?”

He opens his eyes. His parents are running down the mouth of the tunnel, getting closer—Jackie with them.

“What happened?” His dad asks, panting, looking from Hayden to Shane. “Is—is he hurt? What’s going on?”

Neither of them answers fast enough. His mother sees it, though—sees Shane’s face, his folded body, the hands on his knees, the index finger pressing against the nail of his thumb, and everything in her changes. Her eyes fill immediately, and she goes very still. Yuna Hollander in her dark dress, feared manager across the entire MLH—suddenly reduced to just his mother. Looking down at him like he’s five years old again with a fever, like he’s twelve with a broken wrist from an awkward backhand shot, like

he's thirty-four and widowed and shaking in an arena tunnel, like he's just become her child again after becoming someone's widow.

"Oh, baby." Her voice breaks, and she's already moving towards him. "Come here."

She takes his face in both hands, her thumbs cool against his cheeks.

"I'm sorry," he says, because that's all he knows how to say anymore.

"No." Her mouth trembles. "No, no. None of that."

"I couldn't—" he starts. "When I saw him, I just—"

She pulls him into her arms before he can say anything else, wrapping both her hands around his shoulders. "Oh, my boy," she says into his hair, crying now. "My sweet boy."

Shane makes a sound into his mother's shoulder, and she holds him tighter.

"I miss him too, baby," she tells him. "I miss him too." She kisses his temple. "Let's go home. Okay? Let's go home."

Shane tries to shake his head, weakly. Home—where Ilya isn't. Home—where Ilya's everywhere.

She smooths his hair back. “Come on, baby. We’re going home.”

His dad nods. “Car’s outside, kiddo.”

“I can—” Shane starts.

“No,” she tells him. “We’ll help, okay?”

He lets them move him. Or—that’s how it feels, at least. Hayden trailing behind him, Jackie carrying his coat, his dad with one arm around his shoulders, his mom with her hand wrapped around his wrist, thumb pressed to his pulse like she’s counting, over and over, checking that he’s still there.

Shane Hollander is thirty-four years old. Shane Hollander is one of the greatest hockey players in the world. Shane Hollander is a man whose husband’s name was just raised into the rafters behind him while the crowd stood and cheered. Shane Hollander is also, somehow, inexplicably, a child again, wrecked beyond imagining, being carried by his parents through corridor after corridor of his hometown’s hockey arena even though he has perfectly healthy legs of his own.

Nobody in the hallways says anything as they watch them pass—or maybe they do, but Shane doesn’t really hear them, anyway. Still, every glance feels like the white burst of the trapeze spotlight, another second suspended above the rink, another chance to fall, to cross, to break his neck, to be graceful or die trying. The arena, roaring further and further away with every step,

every hallway, every corridor—the night already turning to memory, to story.

Later, there'll be photos of the memorial. He'll see them by accident—Ilya's banner in the rafters, the Centaurs all lined up like the fucking Beatles, faces twisted in worry and devastation and sadness, the crowd half on its feet and half sitting down, their phones all pointing somewhere off-camera—Hayden hidden in the distance, right near the tunnel entrance, back turned to the camera and one arm around Shane's shoulders as he guides him out of the light. People online will call it *heartbreaking*, *beautiful*, they'll say it showed how much Shane loved Ilya. Or—at least the comments Shane's allowed to see. Maybe his team's going around deleting the negative ones—who the hell knows. Either way, Shane will close the app before he can read any more, see any more, remember any more—though remembering's all that's left for him to do, now. He'll close the app and go dive his godforsaken index finger onto the nail of his thumb, press *hard*, make himself feel the pain, the bite—because even then, even having seen the snot and the gasps and the hunched back and the hands on his knees and the way grief made him the smallest man alive in front of the entire world, they'll still try to make it look beautiful. And—hey, maybe it was. Maybe it really was, from the outside looking in. Maybe love makes humiliation look radiant at exactly the right distance.

Up close, though, it was just this—Ilya, then absence, light, then darkness, life, then death, everything, then nothing at all.

NETTLES

Back in the corridors, his mom's hand tightens around his wrist. "Almost there," she tells him.

Shane nods. For once, he doesn't try to be brave about the distance.

Chapter Fourteen

THE SUN IS warm, and something small runs past him. Brown hair, freshly clipped, catching the light as it goes, dark at the roots, gold at the edges, and there's laughter, bright, breathless, fearless. Promise, pregnant and waiting.

Shane turns, but the hair keeps going, laughing, laughing, laughing.

A constellation, scattered over a small nose, cheeks flushed pink from running. Dirt beneath fingernails, shoelaces undone, dragging through the grass. Shane crouches, and small hands reach for him, and the lake is silver, blue, gold—and the trees, they're—and behind him, a door opens, and the hair laughs, laughs, again—someone is calling—but the stars over the nose, scattered, endless, endless, endless—



WHEN SHANE OPENS the door, Svetlana's standing on the other side with black bread, honey, a jar of pickles, a bottle of vodka and a small red candle wrapped in a towel, along with a blue

notebook. She's holding the bag against her hip, cheeks pink from the cold.

"Hi," she tells him, standing in the doorway.

Shane runs a hand through his scruffy unshaved beard. "Hey there."

She smiles at him, nodding, then walks past him and into the house. Shane's immediately a little annoyed. He thinks of telling her it's rude to come in without asking, but he also knows Svetlana's like this, for better or worse—*take it or leave it*, Ilya'd once told him. Then again, she'd known Ilya for a very long time, and this *is* his place, technically, not Shane's, so he supposes she's just as entitled to it as he is. Or maybe Shane was just expecting her to be a little more freaked out by the idea of coming in, even though that's also not really Svetlana's MO. She wouldn't be scared of a house just because her dead best friend once lived in it.

She takes off her boots by the door and walks into the kitchen. Anya lifts her head from the rug.

"Привет, красавица²⁷," Svetlana coos, crouching next to her to scratch behind her ears. "Oh, look at you, sweet girl. Sweet, sad girl."

Shane can't help but bristle. *Don't call my dog sad*, he wants to say, but forces himself to stay silent.

²⁷ "Hi, beautiful,"

He turns towards the kitchen counter while Anya leans into her touch. “Tea?” he asks, because that’s something he can do with his hands.

“Ah, yes,” Svetlana replies. Then, softer, with her hand still buried in Anya’s fur, “Please. Thank you, Shane.”

Shane fills the kettle, gets two mugs down, grabs the tea bags from the box. Opens the drawer, closes it, opens it again because he’s forgotten what he was looking for, then stands there with one hand still on the metal handle, waiting.

“Spoons,” Svetlana gently tells him from behind, reminding him.

“Yeah, I know,” Shane replies—too quickly. Maybe a little too harsh as well, given how she looks back at him. “Sorry.”

She smiles. “It’s okay.”

It’s not, not really. But she lets him have it, which just irritates him even more. He swallows dry.

Behind him, Svetlana finally takes off her coat, and she hangs it over the back of a kitchen chair instead of the coat-hanger, despite that being its literal name. Shane frowns, and almost tells her not to—she’s hung it over the chair Ilya used to sit in, and it feels a little sacrilegious, a little blasphemous, especially since he’s made it a point to keep that chair empty for the last few months and she’s

just ruined that streak without thinking twice about it. But, well—it's also just a chair. He knows that. Objects are still just objects, right? A chair's still a chair, a coat hook's still a coat hook's, a mug's still a mug. They're not widowed like Shane is. The chair doesn't know it was Ilya's favorite, the coat hook doesn't realize Ilya's shirt is hanging on it, the blue chipped mug doesn't feel Ilya's lips on it still. How can one side of the bed know it's become holy ground? It can't. Shane's devastation is his own—the rest of the world doesn't care. So he closes his eyes for a moment, breathes deeply, and keeps fussing with the kettle, swallowing his protests down.

Svetlana unpacks her bag while the kettle starts humming, and she sets the candle aside carefully.

“What's that?” Shane asks.

Svetlana looks at him. “Oh, just a candle.”

“Yeah.” He frowns. “I can see that.”

She pauses mid-gesture, hands slowing.

Shane closes his eyes for a second. “I mean—sorry. I just meant...” His voice trails off.

“All good,” she tells him. “Do not worry.”

She sets the candle near the middle of the table, then looks around the kitchen before continuing. “We used to do this for my grandmother, after she died. My mother and my aunt would light

a candle, put food on the table, prepare some tea. My grandmother had done the same for her parents, and so on. It brings our family comfort.”

Svetlana smiles down at the table after the confession, and then she mutters something in Russian under her breath. It’s small, quiet. Maybe a prayer? Shane can’t tell—he only knows he can’t follow the sound, can’t decode it, and his body tightens instinctively.

“What’d you say?” he asks, as Svetlana reaches for the matchbox.

She looks at him. “Oh, just something my mother likes to say.”

He doesn’t miss a beat. “Which is?”

Svetlana pauses again, noticing the coldness in his voice.

“Something for the dead,” she says carefully. “To remember them.”

And, God, Shane suddenly wants to kick her out so fucking bad he needs to press his index finger against the nail of his thumb to keep himself from saying something unfathomably rude. He hates everything about whatever it is she’s trying to do here. Hates her saying *for the dead*, hates how comfortably she walked in, like she knew exactly where to stand, even though rationally he knows she’s been here with Ilya dozens of times, hates how she hung her

coat over his chair, hates her speaking Russian in front of him despite knowing perfectly well he can't speak it, hell, he hates the entire Russian language too, suddenly. Hates that he'll always hear Ilya every time someone speaks it, hates that Ilya heard it before he heard English, before Shane, before hockey, before everything Shane knows about him. Hates that some part of Ilya had always answered to sounds Shane could never make.

"Right," he tells her, and he looks down at the candle again. The kettle clicks off, and Shane continues. "You, uh. You don't have to do this."

Svetlana's brow furrows. "Do what?"

"This." He gestures vaguely at the table, at the bread, the vodka, the candle, her hands, everything. "Whatever this is."

"Yes—" she nods. "—I know. I wanted to."

His mouth tightens. "Yeah, well," Shane scoffs. "Maybe ask first."

Instantly, Svetlana's face drops. Her eyes go flat with hurt before she can cover it, and she looks away.

"I didn't think I needed your permission to remember my best friend," she tells him after a few seconds of silence, voice gone cold.

“No,” Shane says, and hears the defensiveness in his own voice. “You don’t—you don’t need my permission, Svetlana. That’s not what I said.”

She looks at him for a long beat, like she’s assessing him. Then, presumably after she sees whatever she’s looking for in his eyes, she exhales.

“Look, Shane,” she starts. “I came because you invited me.”

What?

Shane frowns. “Uh, you called *me*, actually. I just said you could come by the next time you were around. I didn’t ask for a—a—” He looks around, gesturing helplessly in front of him. “—a voodoo shrine.”

Svetlana’s eyes widen, and Shane thinks she might actually tell him to go fuck himself now. It was a piss-poor choice of words, he knows, but—*fuck*—his mind’s on auto-pilot, and everything about her is irking him right now—and—and—

She narrows her eyes at him. “*Ilya* would like it. It’s not for you.”

Yep, clearly offended. He grits his teeth. *Don’t say anything, don’t say anything, don’t say anything—*

“—I don’t know about that,” Shane replies, then chuckles dismissively for good measure. “Didn’t he hate scented candles?”

Jesus, he sounds so petty. So petty, and so small, and so... *bitter*. He's not trying to say this. He's not trying to say *any* of this. He's not even like this, usually—he's not this person, he's not like this. It just keeps coming out, again and again and again.

Svetlana pauses for another moment, closing her eyes and taking a long, deep breath. After a few seconds, she looks at him again.

"Yes." Her lips tighten. "He did. Which is why I thought it would be good, like—like a joke, you know. *Funny*." A beat. "He used to say these candles were *bougie*, even though—obviously, they are very cheap and you can buy them in the dollar store. And he made jokes about them all the time. So, you know—I thought he would laugh about it now, if he could see."

But he can't, Shane wants to tell her, gritting his teeth. *He can't, because he's dead, and it doesn't take a fucking genius to realize I'm not really in the mood to laugh about it. Good for you if you fucking are.*

He knows she means it as a peace offering, or an olive branch, some half-minded attempt to calm down his hostility with a funny memory of Ilya, something to bridge the gap between them with the only thing she knows they ever had in common, but—frankly, he has no patience to entertain Svetlana's childhood memories right now. Surely, she has friends of her own she can go to for that. Shit, go call Sasha, for all he cares.

Shane closes his eyes for a second, draws a long breath. He reminds himself—this is still Ilya’s oldest friend he’s talking to, here. His *best* friend. He tries to put on his most amicable face.

“Look, I don’t mean any offense. I just don’t need—” He stops, breathing hard through his nose. “I don’t need a whole ritual right now. Or—”

“—Okay—”

“—Or Russian, or—” He continues, even tries to gesture again, but he just exhales audibly and gives up the pretense, chuckling out loud. *Well, there goes that.* “You know what, just—do whatever you want, Svetlana, honestly. It’s not like you’d stop because I asked, right?” He turns his back to her. “Just make yourself at home, I guess.”

He moves back to the kitchen. The only sounds between them are the kettle cooling down on the counter and Anya’s soft breathing by the rug.

Svetlana’s voice, when it comes, is quiet. “Do you think I’m trying to take him from you?”

Shane turns, instantly. “No.” He looks at her with a scowl. “You couldn’t, anyway.”

She nods, stoney-faced. “Exactly. So what is this?”

He averts his gaze. “Nothing,” he mumbles.

“*Shane.*”

“Jesus, Svetlana—nothing, fuck.” He groans, covering his face with his hands. “Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “Do not do this. Don’t punish me just because he is not here.” Her voice is shaking a little, though with anger or grief he can’t tell. “You can be angry. I am angry too. I am angry every day, actually. But don’t act like I am stealing him from you. Do not take it out on me, okay?” She pauses. “Is this because I knew him before you, or something?”

Shane’s throat closes, and he’s still looking away. Svetlana takes his silence as an answer. “Well, *Shane*—” She stresses the vowels in his name. “I *did* know him before you did. So what? In fact, I *loved* him before you. I did.” She nods at herself. “When he was young, and very lonely, and he was trying very hard to not be like his father, I loved him. When he kissed me because he was sad, and bored, and I was there, and—and, we were *young*, and we were stupid teenagers, I loved him. And I also loved him when we *stopped* kissing because he’d fallen in love with you. I *knew*.” Her eyes shine now. “Okay? I knew, Shane. I was there. I saw it happen. I encouraged him. You have no reason to act this way with me.”

Shane grips the edge of the counter. “Okay,” he says, but it comes out wrong, so thin.

“No.” Svetlana shakes her head. “No. You think you know, maybe, but you don’t.” She wipes under her eyes. “You think, what, that there’s some part of him I have that you don’t? Because

of Russia, because of the language, because I knew his family, because I knew him when he was younger. And yes, there are pieces. Of course there are pieces. There are always pieces. You have pieces of him I don't. The dog has pieces. His teammates have pieces. His brother, his father, they have pieces. His mother has pieces she took with her when she died that no one else will ever see. Some bakery in Moscow has pieces, okay? The woman that was in the seat next to him on the plane from Russia to Boston fifteen years ago and saw him cry the whole time probably has pieces too. This is what happens when a person *lives*, Shane. They leave themselves everywhere. It is not an insult to you."

Shane grits his teeth. He feels so fucking exposed under Svetlana's gaze, and every word coming out of her mouth makes him feel butt-naked, makes him want to shrivel down into nothing, makes him want to walk out the door and drive to the nearest airport and take the first flight out to the middle of nowhere, as long as it's far, far away from here. Because, yes—it *does* make him unfathomably angry that Ilya scattered himself across languages and cities and people Shane will never know, never become. It makes him angry that even after so many years, even after their marriage, after wedding rings and winters in Ottawa and summers at the cottage and all those mornings apart and all those nights together with Ilya's mouth pressed against his shoulder, there were still so many doors in him Shane had never opened because they were out of the reach of the English language. Makes him angry that these rooms were built long before Shane arrived, that *Svetlana* can walk around them in her bare fucking feet while Shane's forced

to wait outside, listening to the faint humming of a life he could love at a distance but never fully touch. Makes him angry that he never made the effort to really learn the language. Makes him angry that now Ilya's dead, and those rooms are locked forever. Makes him angry that it sounds so, so fucking ugly and rotten and bitter now that she's voicing out loud everything he thought he'd kept hidden well enough.

He goes to sit down at the table, head hunched over. After a while, Svetlana sighs.

"Look, since we are already talking about this—" She pauses. "There is something else you should probably know."

He almost tells her *no, no more, I can't take any more*. But—"What?"

She reaches into her bag and takes out the blue notebook he'd noticed when she first walked in. It's one of those cheap spiral ones, with the cover bent at the corners. He's never seen it before.

"You know, I almost threw this away," she says. "Many times. And I thought a *lot* about whether it was a good idea to show it to you or not."

He angles his head towards it. "What is it?"

She sighs, pondering whether to continue. Then, she looks at him. "Russian lessons." A beat.

“For you.”

Shane stares at her dumbfounded.

Svetlana looks down at the notebook. “It belonged to Ilya. He started it... years ago, I think? I don’t really know when—there is no date—but he would ask me a few questions sometimes about teaching Russian to adults. What I thought about this, what I thought about that, that sort of thing.” She shrugs. “I thought maybe he was helping someone on the team, but...” Her voice trails off. “Well, I think it’s obvious who it was for. He gave it to me a few months before he died, around Christmas. When I was staying here for a few days—you remember?”

Shane doesn’t answer. She must notice the face he’s making, because she immediately follows it up. “Before you ask—I do not know why he gave it to me. He just asked me to keep it for a while. I don’t know if he was already planning—” She cuts herself off, and frowns down at the table. “Anyway. I did not touch it, obviously, not until a few days ago, but—well, it’s full of pet names. *Котенок. Малыш. Солнышко. Моя любовь*²⁸. Things like that. So it’s definitely for you.”

Svetlana smiles at him, tentatively. “So, here—” She slides the notebook across the table in front of him. “For you.”

²⁸ Kitten. Baby. Sunshine. My love.

Shane's hands have gone cold. He can't seem to move them, much less touch the fucking notebook.

"He never mentioned it to you?" she asks, noticing his silence. "Never said anything?"

His voice is stone. "No."

Svetlana's lips tighten. "Yes. I thought maybe not." She looks down at the table again and shakes her head to herself, muttering under her breath. "*Илюша, вечно такой чертовски упрямый...*"²⁹

And, suddenly, the rage comes so fast Shane's vision fully whitens for a second. "He had *years*," he snaps.

Svetlana flinches at the rawness of his voice, but he doesn't give a shit. "*Years*," he continues. "He had fucking *years*, Svetlana. He watched me stand there like an idiot while the two of you talked over me, watched me beg for translations like a lost fucking puppy every single time he said something in Russian, and he had this? The whole time?"

She purses her lips. "I don't know why he never—"

"—Oh, I know why!" Shane pushes the chair so abruptly the legs shriek against the floor. "I know why he never wanted to teach me! Because then I'd know when he was talking about me! Because then he'd have to stop lying about what he was actually saying!"

²⁹ Ilyusha, always so damn stubborn

He laughs, hollow. “That’s what I always thought. Isn’t that pathetic? I’d be standing there at some party while you two went off in Russian and I’d tell myself, *don’t be possessive, don’t be insecure, don’t be some controlling asshole who needs to know every word they’re saying—*”

“—Look, Shane,” she cuts him off. “I don’t know what is in it. I did not read all of it, like I said—just the first few pages. You know, it has the Cyrillic alphabet, some little phrases. The pet names I mentioned. Some notes to himself about things he wanted to teach you. So I think—I mean, eventually, yes, he would have taught you. There is no reason to think he would not have.”

“*No reason?*” He laughs. “No reason, okay. No reason except the fact he had *this—*” He grabs the notebook in his hand. “—for years and never started. But sure, let’s pretend he would’ve started *someday.*”

Shane takes a breath. Svetlana doesn’t say anything else to him, just keeps looking down at the table with her lips still pursed, and he notices how his knuckles have gone white, how hard he’s gripping the table. He needs to calm down. He’ll deal with this later.

“I *hated* it, Svetlana,” he says, eventually. “I fucking hated when you two spoke Russian.”

She looks up, raising her eyebrows.

“I know that’s—” He stops, and laughs once, hollow. “I know how that sounds.”

“How does it sound?”

He looks pointedly at her. “Not great.”

“Yes,” she agrees, voice soft. “Not great.”

He nods, unoffended. *If it quacks like a duck...*

“It made me feel like I was outside,” he explains. “Which is ridiculous, I know. I know I had him. I know what we were. But when you’d say something and he’d laugh before I knew what it meant, or he’d answer you like he wasn’t translating himself, like he didn’t have to—” His voice cracks. “I hated that. I hated that there was a version of him I couldn’t understand. Do you get that I had to teach myself the most basic Russian? Whole weekends I spent at the kitchen table with this book I bought myself, watching him come in and knowing he could tell what I was doing. And I kept hoping he’d offer to start teaching me, like, for real, but he never did. Not once. And now he’s dead—”

Svetlana’s face crumples. “Shane—”

“—He’s *dead*,” he says again, and the word still makes him want to bash his head through the wall no matter how many times he uses it, “and it turns out there’s this fucking notebook, and, what, the vague idea of a plan to one day, maybe, potentially, hypothetically start teaching me? But he’s dead, and I can’t—I

can't ask anymore. I can't ask him what you said. I can't ask him anything anymore. What school was like for him as a child, or what his favorite bread was when he was little, or ask him more about his childhood. I can't ask him what songs he loved as a teenager, or what his favorite restaurant in Moscow was, or if he—" He stops, pressing the heel of his hands against his eyes. "Fuck, I don't even know what I don't know. That's the thing. I don't even know what's missing. Nothing? Everything? I just—I don't *know*."

He rambles on.

"But it's also, like, not even that, really, because—I want to know what he looked like when he was thirteen because *I knew him* when he was thirteen. I want to know what his mother sounded like because *I've met her*. You know, I—I want to remember things with him. I want to have been there. I don't want—" His throat closes. "I don't want to be the person everyone has to tell. The guy who came after." He closes his eyes. "But it doesn't even matter anymore. It doesn't matter anymore, because I *wasn't* there, and I was *never* there, and because, like—he's dead. Right? Of course it doesn't matter anymore."

Shane laughs again, but there's no humor in it. "But you—you come here now with all of this—" he gestures at the candle, the bread. "—and you say things I can't understand, and you give me this notebook which he had *years* to give me, and all I can think is, *there it is. There he is. There's all the parts of him I can't reach*. And I know that's unfair to you. I know. I know you lost him too. I know he

was yours too, but I just—” He stops before he can make it worse. “I’m sorry.”

Svetlana’s crying openly now, full tears slipping down her face, and Shane’s never—Jesus, he’s never seen her cry like this. He’s never seen her cry, period. Svetlana, who once broke a Boston paparazzi’s camera outside of a nightclub and told him to go fuck himself for asking Ilya about his father’s dementia, who’d hugged Shane at the funeral with so much force he swore he felt one of his ribs shift. Seeing her like this makes him feel... God, it makes him feel awful. It makes it all real.

“He was yours,” she tells him. “Okay?”

Shane shakes his head, and he brings a hand over his eyes, incredulous. He lets out a short, ragged breath.

“He was.”

“*Svetlana*,” he stresses her name, then laughs, incredulous. “I couldn’t even keep him alive.”

Her face drops. “No—”

“—*Yes*! You—you know it’s true. I couldn’t—”

“—No—”

“—I was his husband. I was supposed to—”

“—*No*.”

“Svetlana—”

“—No, Shane. *No.*” She comes around the table so quickly the chair scrapes against the floor. “You cannot do this. You cannot turn love into—into a magic spell.” Her face is wet. “You loved him. And he loved you. Okay? What happened has nothing, *nothing*, to do with you.”

She takes a breath. “You think I did not hear his voice when he talked about you? You were the best thing in his life. *The best.*” A beat. “Stop this.”

Svetlana pauses to look around the room, silent for a few seconds. “He talked about you all the time, you know? You were the only thing he wanted to talk about, actually.”

Shane’s eyes fall down to the table, breathing hard through his nose.

“No, no—look at me.” She tries to keep her voice steady. “All the time, Shane. It was unbearable. *Shane said this, Shane did that, Shane thinks this, Shane bought this for me, Shane held my hand in the car. Shane, Shane, Shane.* He was so annoying about you.”

A sound breaks out of him. A laugh? A snort? A sob?

“He loved you very, very much,” Svetlana continues. “Okay? I knew him for twenty years, and I never thought he could love someone so much. You must know that. Even when he was...

angry. Even when he was sad. He loved you in ways..." Her voice trails off. "Honestly, Shane, in ways I cannot even describe. Not in English, not even in Russian." She pauses for a second. "There is nothing you could have done. And I know that it's awful, and I am truly sorry—really—but it's true."

Shane presses both hands over his eyes, tries to contain whatever's about to come out, but the tears burst out of him anyway. Svetlana wraps both arms around him, one hand at the back of his head like his mother would, like Ilya never did because Ilya always held him like he was trying to climb inside his ribs. Shane clings to her like she could be him, though, and he should feel embarrassed, he should feel humiliated, he should feel—

"—I'm sorry," he gasps into her shoulder.

"Hey, hey—no. None of that, yes?" She rubs his back. "It's okay. It's okay."

"No, it's—I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—"

"—I know—"

"—I miss him." He weeps, and his shoulders cave inwards. "I miss him so fucking much, Svetlana."

Her grip tightens. "*Shane*." And then her own voice breaks. "Me too."

They keep hugging while the tea goes cold on the counter. He feels close to Ilya like this, somehow. There's something about Svetlana that reminds him of the Ilya he first met all those years ago—the Ilya of 2011, 2012, 2013, that was so defined by his Russianness, that existed in Shane's head only as *Rozanov*, the generational KHL phenomenon, the rival from the other side of the world, the #1 draft pick that Shane knew would go on to match his greatness every step of the way. Maybe it's the accented words, the little stresses in the vowels, even though Svetlana hasn't lived in Moscow just as long as Ilya hadn't. Shane's heart tugs at the familiarity regardless, and he hugs her tighter, like he could almost pierce the veil of death through her.

After a while, Svetlana pulls back, wiping the wetness in her cheeks with her fingers. "He was very lonely," she tells him. "When we were children, I mean. We all were, you know—him, me, Sasha, the others—but him..." She exhales. "There was always this cloud around him."

Shane's eyes burn.

"He would make jokes, of course. Always jokes. Always showing off. He would do something stupid on the ice and look to see if someone noticed." Svetlana looks at the candle. "When he was... fourteen, I think, he came to my house after practice because his brother forgot to pick him up. Or maybe he didn't forget, I don't know, but it was snowing so hard his whole face was covered in—in, like, white—like, full of snow, when he came

in. My mother yelled at him for not wearing a warmer coat and made him soup, and he sat at the table, with his—" She laughs and mimics the gesture, fingers curled around something invisible. "—his little hands around the bowl of soup, and then he did not eat for minutes. Minutes! He was just sitting there, staring at us, while the soup was getting cold, right? So we asked if he was okay, and he said, *of course*." She exaggerates her expression, making her voice deeper to sound like Ilya's, then smiles. "He thought he needed our permission to start eating, and then he ate four bowls. *Four* bowls, Shane! My mother wanted to kill me! She had to make a completely new soup for us just because of how much he ate!"

Shane laughs weakly through his tears. "He liked it?"

"He *loved* it." Her mouth twists. "He came back every week after that."

Shane wipes his face and closes his eyes, smiling. *There he is.* Another Ilya. Little Ilya, snow in his lashes, hands around a bowl of soup, proud and hungry and pretending not to be.

Svetlana's thumb caresses Shane's cheek softly. "I used to hope," she says quietly, "that one day someone would love him like he deserved to be loved. You know, someone—very stubborn, with a lot of patience, who would stay even if he was being difficult and making it hard. And then he met you."

Shane closes his eyes. *Jesus Christ.* He can't look at her.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she adds, and there’s a little of her impatience there. “You were also very annoying, for many years. Sometimes I wanted to strangle you both so you would stop wasting so much time. I mean—Rose Landry, seriously?”

A wet laugh leaves him.

“But even in my... *wildest* dreams for him,” she continues, softer again, “when we were young and I thought how it might be one day for us to be married, I never imagined this. I never thought he could be loved like how you loved him.”

Svetlana takes a breath. “I know—I know he was not well, and—obviously, how things ended is, just, *awful*, so awful. But,” She pauses. “He had a good life with you, Shane. Okay? He did.”

His face collapses again, contracted like he’s in pain.

“I don’t know if that helps,” she adds.

He snuffles, then exhales. “I don’t think it does.” A beat. “But thank you. It means a lot, what you said.” His fingers find hers, and he clutches tight. “And he loved you too, you know? So much. You were his best friend, always.” He smiles at her. “Through thick and thin, yeah?”

“*Thick and thin*,” she repeats after him, eyes wet. Then, her lips curl, just slightly, a little sad. “I know. It was the same for me.” A beat. “I will miss him very much.”

Neither of them says anything for a minute. Then Svetlana reaches for the candle.

“Can I?” she asks, nodding at the matchbox.

Shane looks at it. The red wax, the small black wick. His throat tightens, but the anger’s gone now. “Tell me what to do,” he says.

Svetlana looks at him intently, and she hands him the matchbox.

His fingers shake as he strikes the match—once, twice, failing both times, but Svetlana doesn’t take it from him. On the third try, the flame catches, bright and trembling.

“What about the vodka bottle?”

“Oh—” Svetlana smiles. “I thought we could drink it together, maybe, to honor his memory.” She pauses. “But just keep it. It’s for you.”

He nods, smiling weakly.

Together, they lean over the table, and Shane lights the candle while Svetlana whispers something in Russian again. This time, Shane doesn’t immediately ask what it means. He just watches the flames, listens to the fire hissing.

Too far from the start, he reminds himself. *Too far, too far, too far.*

You can only go forward.

He turns to her. “Will you teach me?” His voice is quiet, a little embarrassed. “Russian?”

Svetlana’s eyes jump to him, and they fill again. “Of course.”

And she does. Slowly, word by word. Not enough to learn the language, really, and not enough to unlock every room or reach backwards through time and ask Ilya everything that death has sealed away, but enough for Shane to repeat the sounds after her, a little clumsily, hoping he’s not butchering the words, while the candle burns between them and Anya settles at their feet, and for one afternoon, the kitchen holds them together.

NETTLES

Chapter Fifteen

2021

THIS IS PRETTY fucking strange, Shane thinks.

They've been publicly out for a few months now, dust having finally started to settle, and the lived-in domesticity of the recent weeks has been... odd, to say the least. It's strange that Ilya can be in Shane's Montreal apartment in the middle of the morning, barefoot in the kitchen, waiting for Shane to finish making him a cup of coffee without either of them having to think about who might see him when he leaves. Strange that he can stay the night and still be there when Shane wakes up, not having to leave with the team bus. Strange that Shane can kiss him by the large kitchen windows if he damn well pleases, without checking who might be watching, or who might be listening, or if footsteps are crossing the hallway outside, or counting the minutes until one of them has to leave. And it's not like he doesn't know no one's going to burst through the door with a clipboard and say, *Mr. Hollander, according to our records, your rival has been horizontal in your apartment for forty-seven minutes longer than plausible deniability allows. Please explain the softness in his mouth.*

But, well—old habits die hard.

So, yeah. It's strange. Good, incredible, a huge exhale of relief, joyous enough that he wants to go out into the Montreal streets and start singing *times-they-are-a-changin'*, but—strange. All the secrecy that had hurt them had also housed them. It'd been a shitty house, sure, drafty and mean and full of dust, with claustrophobic rooms and narrowing hallways, but it had been theirs, and now it's everyone's.

So this is just their life now, then. Drinking coffee at the counter of his Montreal apartment. Together. In the middle of the morning. Without a care for who sees. Huh.

Times-a-fucking-changin' indeed.

Shane hands Ilya his cup, and he grimaces after the first sip.

"That bad?" Shane laughs. "I only have capsules here, sorry."

"Ah, no," Ilya says after a while, which probably just means *yes*. "It's fine, *малыш*.³⁰ Is just coffee."

"*Fine*," Shane repeats.

Ilya looks down into the mug. "I am just used to something different."

"Oh?"

³⁰ Baby

He purses his lips. “There is, uh, this place in Ottawa,” Ilya says, already sounding like he regrets the sentence. “They—you know. Deliver coffee.” He pauses, briefly. “Beans.”

Shane stares at him.

“Whole beans,” Ilya clarifies. “From Colombia. I grind them at home.”

Well, Shane wouldn’t have known that. There’d never really been time for things like that before—they’d always been rushing, hiding, stealing an hour here and there, and when they finally got each other alone, there had been other things to notice that seemed more important than what kind of coffee Ilya drank in the morning, so much as the objective fact that Ilya drank *some* form of coffee in the morning. Now Shane gets to find out, and immediately the fondness hits him so hard he has to look down into his own mug so Ilya won’t see what his face is doing.

It shouldn’t be so endearing, this coffee confession. It should be pretentious, fussy, a little ridiculous: this Russian man who can take a hit from a two-hundred-pound defenseman without blinking but has a whole routine for coffee beans and grimaces if he has to drink capsule. Shane can see it too clearly: Ilya in his kitchen measuring the exact grams of coffee, grinding beans in the morning, frowning down at the machine. Shane wants to tease him. He wants to know the name of the place so he can order the stupid beans for himself first, have them waiting in his own kitchen the next time Ilya comes over, just sitting there on the counter like

an accident, so Ilya can notice and pick up the bag with a small frown and say, *oh, любимыи*,³¹ *these are the same ones I get*, and Shane can shrug and say something normal, like, *maybe we just like the same brand*, anything except admitting he'd remembered every word of Ilya's little coffee confession and then spent three hours online finding the exact beans from the exact Ottawa place he orders them from—because apparently this is who he is now.

Worse, he wants to buy Ilya a ridiculous amount of coffee himself; fill his cabinets with bags and bags of whole Colombian beans; become the person who notices when there are just two mornings' worth of beans left and buys more before Ilya has to ask; buy him another grinder too, while he's at it—one better, more expensive, more sophisticated, more complicated too, hopefully, so he has an excuse to stand in Ilya's kitchen every morning and watch him grind those goddamn beans himself, still half-asleep, hair wrecked, wearing nothing but boxers, neck marked full of bruises, face drawn in that goddamn morning frown of concentration while trying to make sense of the machine, looking down at his already-ground beans from the fresh Colombian package on his brand-new expensive, sophisticated, complicated grinder with his brand-new permanent roommate-housemate-boyfriend-future-husband.

It's a very dangerous amount to want before eleven in the morning.

³¹ Beloved

Shane tries to hide his smile. “You’re such a snob.”

Ilya’s mouth curves. “I said it’s fine, Shane.”

“You have a coffee guy!”

“I do *not* have a coffee guy.”

“*Rozanov*,” Shane stresses. “You literally just described a coffee guy.”

Ilya looks away, faintly pink. “Drink your terrible coffee.”

Shane laughs.

“I can’t believe this is our life now. *Fuck*.” He leans in close to Ilya’s lips. “I’m so fucking in love with you.”

And the radiance in Ilya’s face is—well. What can Shane do but kiss him and seal the deal, terrible coffee be damned?

He feels Ilya immediately smile against him, the crinkle of his nose against his own.

“Like—” He pecks Shane’s lips. “—wise, *малыш*³².”

The rest of his life. A terrible, beautiful future, sitting alive between them. Bright, infinite, a thousand and one suns. Everything exactly as it should be, nothing hurting them, his

³² Baby

existence narrowing to this man, this beautiful, gorgeous man, right here, right in front of him, and—and—wind, moving through the trees—lake, folding endlessly—light, stretching—the world closing, and closing, and closing back up again.



SHANE DOESN'T LOOK at the empty chair.

That's stupid, first of all. Something people only do in corny movies where grief is this elegant or elevated revelation, and what Shane feels has never been elegant a day in its life. It's ugly and shitty and exhausting, and he feels it most noticeably in his jaw, his hands, the back of his throat. He could go on and on—he wants to, actually, let him list every single part of human anatomy before he's caught dead talking to an empty chair—but alas, Galina waits.

"You don't have to look at the chair," she says eventually.

Shane huffs, humorless, and keeps his eyes on the carpet. *Funny*, considering that he's sitting here *precisely* so he can look at the empty fucking chair.

He'd been given a list after the funeral: grief specialists, trauma therapists, people who could help him process Ilya's death—whatever that means. Jackie had even highlighted three names. Shane ignored every single one of them, and called Galina instead.

Everyone, including Galina herself, had strongly suggested he choose someone else. Someone without history, who hadn't already treated Ilya, who didn't know his struggles intimately—in *all the ways I never would*, Shane thinks—who didn't already know so much about their marriage from confidential conversations. Galina had tried gently explaining to him that she wasn't the right person for him, that dual relationships like this could complicate treatment instead of help him, that she knew too much, that another therapist could counsel him without history, assumptions, conflicted interests.

Shane listened to every argument, understood every reason she'd given him, and rejected all of them. All that history she had with Ilya wasn't the problem. It was the exact reason he'd called.

Ilya had sat in this office. On this couch. Probably made Galina work for every inch of honesty she ever got out of him. And Shane wants... he doesn't know. To be where Ilya had been? To sit where he'd sat? To go, for sixty minutes a week, to the one place where Ilya'd let someone know how much he was hurting?

When she finally agreed, it wasn't because she'd changed her mind. It was because Shane had made it abundantly clear he wasn't going to see anyone else, and, well—she could probably tell just how fucked up in the head he was. She'd agreed cautiously, with conditions: that they'd revisit whether she was the right therapist for him down the line, that she'd refer him elsewhere if their shared

history ever became a problem, and that he understood there were things about Ilya she could never, would never, discuss.

“You can look wherever you want,” Galina tells him.

Shane’s thumbs press at the edges of his sleeve. This used to irritate him about himself—the fidgeting, the restlessness, all the wasted motion. Now, he barely notices until the fabric’s gone loose and warped under his fingers.

“This is ridiculous,” he says. “I mean, he’s not—” He stops, jaw tightening. He glances once towards the chair and then away again quickly. “He’s not there.”

“No,” Galina tells him gently. “He’s not.”

Shane looks down at his hands. “So what’s the point?”

“I don’t know that there has to be one.”

He looks up with a frown. “Then why am I doing this?”

“Well,” she starts. “Gestalt therapy can be really helpful, you know? Like when a patient has unfinished business with a dead loved one, or there are unresolved things blocking the grieving process. Like... anger, for example,” she explains. “Or guilt.”

Shane averts his gaze.

“And I think there’s some things you need to say out loud before you can start to really process what happened.”

He laughs once. “Yeah, well. Isn’t that kind of how death works?”

Galina doesn’t flinch. “Shane. You wanted to come here,” she tells him. “And there’s no correct way to do this. You don’t have to forgive him. You don’t have to reassure him. You don’t even have to be nice. You don’t have to say anything you don’t believe in. But I think it will help.”

That’s the problem, though. He believes too many things. Contradictory things. Ugly, awful, true things. He believes Ilya had been suffering beyond what Shane could ever understand. He believes Ilya abandoned him. He believes he should’ve known. He believes no one could’ve known. He believes Ilya loved him. He believes their love should’ve mattered more. He believes it did matter. He believes it didn’t matter enough if it couldn’t stop Ilya from killing himself.

He believes, absurdly, that if he starts talking, maybe Ilya will even answer.

“If at any point this feels too overwhelming, we’ll stop. My job is to stay with you through it,” Galina adds. “Just start where you are.”

Shane presses his tongue against the back of his teeth. Where he is. *Fucking hell*. Where he is is thirty-four years old and widowed, although that word still makes him feel a bit sick, sitting in this room with grey walls and a box of tissues placed conveniently

within reach, being asked to speak to an empty chair because his husband's dead.

Shane exhales.

"Okay. Well, uh. Hey," he starts, voice stammering. The words barely make it out of him. "Hey, you."

Pressure builds behind his eyes, and he blinks it back immediately. *Already?* Two words in and already his body is caving in.

He clears his throat.

"This is stupid," he mutters, and then, louder, because he can hear Ilya's chuckle that would've followed it. "You'd think this was stupid."

His mouth twitches in a smile. "You'd be an asshole about it, probably. You'd say I'm paying your therapist to let me talk to furniture. Which—" He gestures vaguely. "I mean, you wouldn't be wrong."

A pause. The room's quiet, and Shane looks at Galina again. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

Galina says nothing, encouraging him with her eyes, and Shane swallows. His hands curl into fists on his knees.

"I, uh. I have a lot to tell you, I guess," he says, and hates how weak his voice is. "I think... I think that's the thing. I have—"

there's too much to say, and then when I try to say it, I can't remember any of it. Which is stupid. I remember everything I don't want to remember."

He closes his eyes. "I remember the bathroom." His breath catches. "I remember you. I remember saying your name and thinking, I don't know, thinking if I kept saying it, kept calling you, maybe you'd—" He cuts himself off. "Anyway."

Anyway. Like there's any moving past it.

"I don't want to talk about that today," he says, to Ilya, to Galina, to the carpet, to nobody. A longer silence. "Any's okay. She misses you, I think. Or, maybe I'm projecting, I don't know. I don't know if dogs understand death like that. But she still sleeps on your side—which is annoying, by the way, because she takes up more room than you did, somehow. I don't know how that's even possible."

His mouth twists again. "She's okay, though. She's good. She's still pretending like she doesn't hear me unless I call her Anyusha like you did. Smart-ass. Just like her owner." A beat. "Or... I guess I'm her owner now."

His eyes burn. "Svetlana called the other day. She's, uh—she's okay. I mean—no, she's not, obviously, but, you know. It's Svetlana, so she sounds okay. She was over here a few weeks ago. My parents are okay. They ask about you less now, which I know is normal, but I kind of hate it." A beat. "Uh, Hayden, you know.

Still around. Jackie too. The kids, they're good. Amber's birthday is coming up."

He breathes in through his nose. "I'm..." He stops. "I'm okay."

Shane laughs, and it comes out wet. "I'm doing okay—"

But the sentence collapses before it even finishes.

"—Fuck," he says, and presses both hands over his eyes. "Fuck. No, I'm not. No, I'm fucking not, Ilya. I'm not."

His shoulders curl forward. "I'm not okay," he says, and the words come out cracked. "I'm not okay without you. I don't know *how* to be okay without you. Like—I don't know what that even *means*. Everyone keeps saying it like eventually I'm going to wake up and there'll be this whole version of my life where you're not there and I know how to live in it, and I don't... I don't want that life. I don't *want* to get good at it. I miss you."

He sucks in a breath.

"I miss you," he repeats, and then he shakes his head. "So much, Ilya. I miss you so fucking much I don't know what to do anymore. All the time, I'm missing you. All the fucking time," he chokes out. "I miss you when I wake up, when I'm brushing my teeth, when I make coffee. I miss you when something funny happens and I want to tell you and you're not there. I miss you even when I'm fucking angry at you, which is so unfair. I miss you

and I hate you and I love you and there's nowhere for any of it to go. There's nowhere for any of it to fucking *go*, Ilya."

Galina seems to shift in her chair, but Shane doesn't even register it.

"You left me with so much." He clenches his fists. "Do you know that? You left me with all of it. Your fucking house. Your fucking dog. Your clothes. Your career—you, you left me with *everything*. And now there's all these people telling me stories about you, and they're all watching to see if I'm going to fall apart, and—and it's all your *fault*." His voice cracks. "It's all your fucking fault. How could you do it? Huh? How could you fucking do this to me? How could you think I'd be fine?"

He lowers his hands from his face. His lips are dry—they taste like salt.

"I'm *not* fine. I'm not. But..." A pause. "Fuck, I guess I'm still here. And Anya. My parents. The Centaurs miss you. Hayden misses you, Jackie, the kids. Svetlana, obviously. Marleau called. Everybody misses you, okay? We all miss you. You weren't—" He exhales shakily. "You weren't as forgettable as you thought you were, you fucking idiot."

Shane wipes under his eyes with the heel of his hand. "I want you to know that."

His voice steadies a little. "And I want you to know everything's still happening. I mean—I hate it, but it is. The world's still here. The cottage is, you know, it's still standing. Hockey's still going on. Your fucking ugly shirt is still in the closet because I can't—" He stops, swallows. "Because it's still there, I don't know. My point is, I'm still taking care of things, okay? Not great all the time. You'd have notes." He draws in a breath, and his lip curls. "You always had notes. But at least I'm winning a Cup for you, so go easy on me, yeah?"

Silence.

"I know you were tired," Shane says. "I know. I know you were so tired."

He shakes his head, eyes burning. "I can't say you had to go. I don't believe that—I don't think I ever will. And I think a part of me is always going to be just... so mad at you for going. But I know you were hurting. I know you were in pain, and I know you thought—I don't know, I know you thought *something*, I guess. I know it must've made sense in that moment, somehow. And I hate that, I do." He looks down. "But I don't want you to be scared anymore.

"I don't want you to be scared," he repeats, quietly. "I don't want that to be all you are. I can't—" Shane presses his fist against his forehead. "I can't have that be all you are.

"So, okay," he says. "*Okay*. I don't mean that it's fine. It's not fine. It will never be fine. I mean—" He breathes in. "I mean I

love you. And I'm angry. And I forgive you, maybe, or—I don't, fuck, I don't forgive you, Ilya, I'm sorry, not yet. But I—I want to. I'd like to—to *try*." He bends forward again. "Yeah?"

His vision's blurry now, and he leans forward until his elbows are resting on his knees.

"I don't know how I can forgive you when everything—everything's still fucking happening, every day, but—I don't want to, like, punish you forever." He exhales. "So, I miss you, and I'm still here, and I love you, and you can rest, if that's even a thing. You can... *go*, or whatever, if you need to. I mean, I guess you already did, and I'm just trying to let you."

Shane's hands shake, and he gulps. "Okay?"

No answer, obviously. But Shane waits.

He doesn't mean to. He knows better than to wait. His mind knows better, at least, or some non-delusional part of it does, the part that understands Ilya's death isn't, like a figment of his fucking imagination, or something. He knows Ilya's not in the chair. He knows he's not standing just out of view, arms crossed, or smiling, or waiting for Shane to finish making an idiot of himself. He knows there's no scoff coming, no eye-roll, no low, accented *Shane*, no

warm *sweetheart*, no *любимый*³³, no hand reaching for his wrist, no answer coming late because Ilya liked to make him work for it.

He knows. And still, Shane waits.

Ilya had been alive in this room. Galina had heard his voice here. Watched him pace. Watched him shut down. Watched him make jokes. Watched him cry, maybe.

Ilya had been here once, and now he's not.

Nothing in the room moves. The chair's still empty. Galina's office is still just Galina's office: the grey walls, the soft lamp light, the water glass on the side table, the tissue box angled towards him. Nothing gathers into Ilya. Nothing becomes him.

Shane inhales, once. Then again. Then again, and again, and again, and then his throat's tightening, his hands are going cold, and it feels like something's opening beneath him—or maybe the carpet's tilting, the floor's tilting, or—his vision is, maybe, and the chair across from him is the only thing he can actually see. Four legs. Cushion on top. Empty. Empty where someone should be sitting. Empty where a body should be. Empty where Ilya isn't and won't ever be and has never been this whole time, not for one second, not even when Shane could almost feel him sitting there hearing him say—say—fuck—

³³ Beloved

His breath catches.

“Shane,” Galina says, very softly.

He shakes his head, barely. The air won’t go all the way down. He tries again, gets half a breath, or maybe just a third of one. The oxygen catches in his chest and goes nowhere—it’s not enough for one lung, much less two. His fingers curl around the edges of the chair under him, gripping too hard, and he can feel the fabric under his nails.

There’s no answer. There’s never going to be an answer again.

Ilya’s dead.

No, but—

Dead. Ilya’s dead.

No, he knows that. He knows, of course he knows. He was there. He saw. He held. He signed. He burned, or buried, or kept, or whatever. He knows the sequence, the facts. Has recited them in rooms just like this one time and time again.

But the chair’s empty. The chair’s empty, and Ilya’s dead, and Shane’s talking to furniture in front of a woman he pays to watch him survive himself, and nothing in the world has the decency to split open and give him back.

A sound leaves him, and his hand flies to his mouth, but it's too late—another sound follows, so much worse.

“I—I *can't*,” he gasps.

Galina leans forward. “Okay. That's okay. You're in my office. You're here with me.”

“No,” Shane says immediately, and then again, louder, because *no* is suddenly the only word that makes any sense. “No—no—”

“Shane, you're having a panic response. I want you to put your feet on the floor for me. Okay?”

His feet? He looks down and his feet look like they belong to someone else.

“Shane.”

“I *can't*,” he says again, and his hands are shaking so fucking much, and he can't fucking *breathe*. “I can't do this. I can't—he's not—” His throat closes. “Galina, he's not—he's not answering.”

Her face flashes with understanding, or—*pity*—and her eyes immediately soften. “Shane—”

“—No—no, don't say it,” he snaps, anger flashing. “Don't fucking say you know. You don't—you don't fucking know, okay?”

It makes it worse. It makes all of it worse—her not fighting him, not correcting him, not giving him anything to push against, because *he's fucking dead, oh my God, he's actually fucking dead—*

Shane's breath comes faster now, too fast, and his chest feels like it's strapped to a bomb counting down to an explosion. His fingers have gone numb. Something's prickling at the back of his neck, and—Jesus, he's sweating so fucking much—and—

“He's dead,” Shane says, with child-like disbelief. “He's really dead.”

Galina calls his name again.

“He's *dead*,” Shane repeats, because maybe repetition will make it less insane, maybe if he says it enough times it'll stop sounding new every time. “He's dead, and—and I'm sitting here telling him the dog's okay like he's—like he's going to care, like he's somewhere listening, like he can—” He breaks off, gasping. “He can't hear me. He can't hear anything. He's not anywhere. He's not fucking—”

His vision narrows. Galina's talking to him, saying something, asking him to breathe with her, asking him to name five things he can see, four things he can feel, and some distant part of Shane recognizes the technique.

Five things he can see?

The chair.

The chair.

The chair.

The chair.

The empty fucking chair.

“—I need to go,” he says, already moving.

“Shane, I would like you to stay seated just a little bit—”

“—No, I—I need to go—”

“—Okay, okay, I hear you, but before you go, can you just take one breath with me?”

But he’s already on his feet, standing up too fast, the room blurring around him. His knee knocks into the small table beside him and the water glass spills all over the rim.

“Sorry,” he says, breathless. “Fuck. Sorry. I just—”

“—It’s okay—Shane—”

“—I need air—”

“—There’s air here—”

“—No,” he says, and nearly laughs because it’s such an insane thing to argue about. “No, there isn’t.”

He can’t get his coat on properly. His sleeve turns inside out, his fingers won’t work, the zipper catches.

“Can I at least walk with you to the lobby?”

He shakes his head.

“Can I call someone?”

“No.”

“Hayden?”

“No.”

“Your parents?”

“No,” he says, a little harsher, but Shane knows she’s trying and he can’t bear that either. He takes a breath, closes his eyes, and his voice softens. “No. Please.”

The *please* does something to her face, and he looks away. He can’t fucking *stand* it anymore, that goddamn look—

His hand finds the door. Okay. Okay. Real door. Real handle. Cool metal under his fingers. Okay. He grips it tight.

“Shane,” she says behind him, gently. “We can stop here. There’s no expectation that we have to finish this today, okay? Or even next week. You don’t have to do this again until you feel ready.”

The sentence stops him. Because—that’s the thing, isn’t it? There’s no finishing. No completed exercise. No being ready. No final conversation. No perfect words that can close the loop and let Ilya rest and Shane live on. Only this—trying to speak and the abyss speaking back in silence.

He nods, opens the door and leaves wordlessly.

And—oh, Jesus fucking Christ, the hallway’s way too bright, way too fucking noisy. Every sound makes him want to jump out the nearest window: the elevator chiming, the receptionist laughing on the phone, Shane’s panting breaths—it’s all so fucking *humiliating*. He starts walking too quickly, reaching the elevator and bracing against the wall with one hand, and he manages to make it outside before he bends over.

Cold air hits his face, and he finally draws a full breath, almost choking on it. One hand goes to lean against his knee, the other grips the wall next to the entrance, and Shane folds over his own body, shaking so hard his teeth rattle, while people pass behind him and don’t even try to pretend they’re not looking.

Circus fucking show, he thinks. *Circus bear of fucking Ottawa*.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. His heart lifts immediately—delusional, as always—and he rushes to take it out.

Hayden: *How did it go?*

Shane stares at the message until the letters blur. He breathes out shakily, closing his eyes, and the phone buzzes again.

Hayden: *Buddy? You ok?*

Shane lowers himself onto the curb. Traffic moves in front of him.

He presses the phone to his forehead, eyes squeezed shut, and laughs once, because *no*, no, he's not okay, he's not even within *sight* of okay. He's sitting outside the office Ilya used to come to every week and trying to breathe around the fact his dead husband didn't answer him from an empty chair. He types with shaking fingers.

Shane: *No*

Then, after a second:

Shane: *Can you come*

He hits send before he can talk himself out of it, then holds the phone in both hands. The answer comes almost immediately.

Hayden: *On my way. Stay there. 10mins*

NETTLES

Shane presses the heel of his hand against his mouth, rocking his body back and forth slightly, and for once—because he has no strength left, because the day has hollowed him out, because Ilya's dead and he doesn't know what else to fucking do anymore—Shane does exactly what he's told.

He stays there.

Chapter Sixteen

HE WONDERES IF Ilya went on to live his next life, after he died. If he searched for Shane there, if he found him, if he fell in love with him again.

Maybe he tried a do-over. Maybe in that next life, everything turned out fine. Great, even. Maybe in that next life, another Shane's living out the life of his dreams, and doesn't even know just how lucky he is. Probably doesn't even appreciate it. Probably takes it for granted. Probably wakes up next to Ilya every morning and never thanks whatever god put him there.

Probably doesn't know what it's like to wake up one morning and have everything taken from him, what it's like to spend the rest of his life wondering what would've happened if he'd done something different. Maybe everything comes easy to him. Maybe Ilya never once gives him a reason to understand just how much of a lucky fucking idiot he is.

Maybe Ilya stayed. Maybe Ilya stayed this time, and he's happy, finally. Happy and relieved and in love, and not sad anymore, and Shane's left behind in this one.

Take me with you, Shane wants to beg. Why didn't you take me with you? Why did you leave me here?

He closes his eyes. *Why'd you leave me here all alone?*



AMBER HAS FROSTING in her hair.

It's funny. A seven-year-old with blue frosting tangled into her hair, running laps around the living room with one sock off her foot, clenching a plastic dragon in her tiny fist while her parents chase her around—well, it should be funny. It probably would be quite funny if he'd been paying any attention, judging by how Jackie laughs every time she almost catches her with a wet paper towel, and Amber shrieks like she's being hunted for sport.

Arthur's on the floor with two other kids, playing with toy cars, and Jade's standing near the snack table with a paper plate in her hand. She's almost, what, twelve, now? Jesus. She looks so much older than Shane remembers. It's the cliché thing to say about children, he knows—*oh, look how big you've gotten, oh, you were so tiny last time I saw you*—but, well. He thinks he gets a pass, give or take the last six months.

Hayden's right next to him, both of them standing by the kitchen island, and he's holding a stack of napkins. He looks... tired, yeah, but also—Jesus, he looks *happy*. He looks so, so happy. There's a little shine in his eye as he stares at the chaos in front of

him, but maybe that's also just what people do when they have children. Shane wouldn't know.

Hayden's watching Arthur on the floor among the few dozen scattered toy cars around him, just about ready to cause a slipping accident and send someone straight to the hospital. Watching Jade, near the snack table, practically a teenager herself, looking around the room and—cringing? It looks that way. Watching Amber, too—though, really, everyone at this party is watching her—blue frosting in her hair, mid-shriek, running around the house and jumping over the couch, the rug, Arthur's toy cars, just about missing Hayden's mother's glass vase. Watching Jackie, how she's chasing Amber with wet paper towels in her hand, panting and laughing. Just watching on, eyes bright and a little misty.

This is his whole life now, Shane thinks. Good for him.

"You okay?" he turns to Shane and asks, for maybe the fourth time, smile still playing on his lips. "It gets a little crazy in here. But you know how it is."

"Yeah, I know, Hayds." Shane looks away from Amber and nods. "I'm good."

Hayden clasps his shoulder, nods. His face is a little careful, though, and Shane immediately hates it. It's his daughter's birthday, for crying out loud—why the hell is he worried about him? Shane's started seeing that face everywhere since he first noticed it—his parents, his teammates, reporters—and he finds it

so goddamn infuriating. What, do they want him to come out and outright say he's *not* fine?

"Cool," Hayden says, trying to be casual. "There's more food if you want. Jackie made those spinach things you like."

"I don't like them *that* much."

"Uh, I'm pretty sure you do, man, since you ate six last time." Shane cracks a smile, and Hayden looks relieved.

"So, listen," he starts. "How have you been? Things at home?"

Shane wants to scoff. Said like that next to a stranger, it almost sounds like Shane has much of a normal life waiting for him back at the house.

"Same old," he says, instead. "I'm okay."

"Yeah?" Hayden asks. "'Cause I've been a little worried, man. Or, I mean—I don't know if I should be more worried or impressed? You've been on fire lately. I know the season's only just started last month, but it's insane what you're doing on the ice." He clasps Shane's shoulder with a grin. "The rest of the guys think the Cup's definitely ours if we keep this pace up."

"If *I* keep this pace up, you mean," Shane scoffs. "They've been doing jack shit. I'm carrying the entire team on my back."

Hayden frowns. "Come on, man, don't be like that. You know it's a team effort—"

“Hayds—” Shane laughs. “Be serious. *I’m* doing something, *you’re* doing something. But Comeau? Drapeau? Come on. Theriault doesn’t know what the fuck he’s doing half the time, either.”

He looks intently at Hayden.

“We’ll get the Cup, yeah—” *next one you win for me—next one you win for me—next one you win for me—* “—but it won’t be thanks to a *team effort*, or whatever the guys wanna call it.”

Hayden throws his hands up. “Alright, alright. I get it.” He grins. “Hey—as long as you say I’m also doing something.”

Jackie finally catches Amber and pulls her into her lap, trying to wipe the frosting from her temple while she twists enthusiastically and tries to shove the dragon into her mother’s mouth. Someone’s baby starts crying in the hallway, someone calls for more napkins. A balloon bumps against the ceiling, music plays from a speaker—too loud, definitely too loud, and interrupted every five seconds by a child screaming over it.

Shane wants to crawl out of his skin.

Ilya would’ve loved it.

He would’ve pretended not to, of course, just to fuck with him. It was part of that little game they had. He would’ve arrived wearing something clearly out of place for a child’s birthday

party—maybe that leopard print shirt—despite Shane leaving him a freshly-ironed blue button-up on top of the bed, would've made a face at the noise, would've asked Shane how much longer they had to stay, like he hadn't been the one reminding Shane all week that Amber's party was on Saturday and they needed to get *a fun wrapping paper, Hollander, not some shitty one, okay?*

He would've eaten a large slice of cake, then insulted the cake because Hayden'd told him he'd picked it, then eaten a few more slices. Would've sat with Arthur on the floor by the hundred toy cars, listened intently to him explaining the whole plot of some new animated movie Jackie'd took him to see, nodded and asked questions like the fate of the nations depended on understanding which robot had betrayed which other robot. He would've let Amber paint his thumbnail purple, would've kept the polish on as long as it lasted. Would've stood with Jade making fun of some random boy on her Instagram feed.

Ilya loved Hayden's kids. He was always good with children, really, like their needs made sense to him because of how obvious they were. *I'm hungry. I'm tired. I'm bored. I'm sad. I'm angry. Pick me up. Look at this. Stay here. Love me.* Children demanded shamelessly, and there was no hidden language for him to decode with them, no adult pride to maneuver around. A boy held out a toy and Ilya took it. A girl cried and he crouched. A group of children asked if he was a villain because of his accent and he chased them around the yard until they were screaming with delight.

Shane used to watch him at parties like this and feel a little jealous, then feel something warm and a little hopeful bloom in his chest, and then a little jealous again.

They'd never sat down and talked about it properly—kids, he means. Sure, they'd circled it a few times, mostly joking—Ilya saying he would make a terrible father because he was too handsome and a child would have unrealistic expectations, Shane saying that wasn't how genetics worked, but laughing, always laughing, because laughing was easier than asking whether all those jokes had some hidden trapdoor beneath them.

Maybe Ilya loved other people's kids because other people's kids went home at the end of the night. Maybe he loved them because they came without any baggage or history. Maybe he would've panicked at their own. Maybe he would've been awful and distant. Maybe he would've been extraordinary and loving. Maybe he would've been both. Maybe he would've spent months pretending to be calm while reading every parenting book under the sun. Maybe he would've held a baby like it was glass and then, eventually, like it was his own.

Maybe Shane will never know.

He swallows and looks down at his cup. Across the room, Jackie laughs again, finally having cleaned most of the frosting out of Amber's hair.

“Honestly, this is the easy part,” she says to a blonde woman next to her, maybe a friend of hers. Jackie gestures towards the chaos around her with the paper towel, laughing. “Wait until you have them, then you’ll see. They humble you *so* fast.”

Wait until you have them.

No one notices how Shane goes very still, except maybe Hayden.

The sentence isn’t aimed at him, he knows that. It has nothing to do with him, absolutely nothing. It’s mindless and social, tossed out by someone who’s been very kind to him and doesn’t have a single malicious bone in her body, who looks tired and happy, who’s definitely not thinking about the dead man standing at the edge of the room, the one probably only Shane can see. But he still hears it like if Jackie had leaned in very close to his ear and said it with a smirk.

Wait until you have them. Oh, wait. You won’t.

He thinks of Ilya’s hands. Broad palms, long fingers, the gold ring. Thinks of those hands supporting a baby’s head, thinks of the life he and Ilya will never have—not because they chose against it, not because they had the conversation and shot it down, but because the question itself was taken. Because the possibility was suddenly removed from the table.

Arthur appears in front of him, holding a sheet of paper.

“Uncle Shane,” he calls.

Shane blinks. Arthur’s nine now—ten soon, maybe. He can never remember where birthdays fall anymore, which month belongs to which child. But he thinks Arthur was Ilya’s favorite, in secret. He certainly had Ilya’s favorite kind of seriousness in a child: intense, always suspicious, not concerned with adults following the logic of his inner world or not. Ilya used to say Arthur was going to grow up to be an artist, a musician, a movie director, a writer, or he doesn’t know, but—*he’s so fucking creative, Shane, I swear, that kid—*

“—Look,” Arthur says, thrusting the paper forward. “It’s a dinosaur.”

Shane looks. It is, generously, a big green oval.

Definitely not an artist, then, he thinks.

“That’s awesome, buddy.” Shane smiles at him.

“*Oooh*,” Hayden adds, next to him. “Very scary.” He smiles down at Arthur and ruffles his hair.

“—What’s that?” Jackie pipes in, approaching them. “Wow, looks great, honey!”

Arthur pays them no mind. “It’s for you, Uncle Shane.”

“Oh.” Shane takes it carefully. “Well, thank you. I love it.”

“And Uncle Ilya,” Arthur continues. “Because he likes dinosaurs.”

The music keeps playing. The kids keep laughing, running, jumping around—a baby keeps fussing somewhere down the hall. The world doesn’t stop. But the adult side of the party completely freezes—Hayden’s eyes widen, Jackie’s mouth drops open with the paper towel still in her hand.

Arthur looks around, confused. “What?”

Shane stares down at the drawing.

For you and Uncle Ilya.

Because he likes dinosaurs.

He did. God, he did. His stupid fucking Jurassic Park obsession. Making Shane watch entire documentaries about *Tri—a—ssic dinosaurs*, and then we will watch the one about the Jurassic dinosaurs, and then the one about the *Cre—ta—ce—fuck*, I do not know how to say these fucking names, *Cretace—ous dinosaurs*, Jesus, there we go, at one in the morning with him. *Okay, малыш*³⁴? Yes, perfect—do not fall asleep now, come on.

The paper bends slightly in Shane’s hand. It’s the first time he’s felt like smiling all afternoon.

³⁴ Baby

Jackie moves first, already panicking. “Arthur,” she says, voice slightly pitched. “Honey, we talked about this, remember? We don’t—” Her eyes flick nervously towards Shane and then away again. “We don’t say things like that right now, okay?”

Arthur furrows his eyebrows. “But—but it’s for Uncle Ilya.”

Jackie shoots a panicked glance towards Hayden, who seems to be frozen. “I know, honey.” She kneels in front of Arthur, touching his arm. “I know. That’s very sweet. But we talked about—”

“—Where is Uncle Ilya?” Amber asks from the couch.

“—Oh, Jesus Christ,” Hayden sputters.

Jackie’s mouth opens and nothing comes out. One of the other parents looks down at their plate with sudden interest. Amber, who’d probably only asked because Arthur had said his name and because Uncle Ilya always appeared at these parties with lavish gifts and ridiculous voices and his big watches flashing when he crouched down to let her climb him, looks around while her dragon toy lowers in her hand.

“What?” she says.

Shane hates them for it. All of them. Hates Hayden’s face, Jackie’s panic, the other parents’ fascination with paper plates and

napkins and anything that's not the child standing there waiting for an answer everyone's suddenly too cowardly to give her.

And, God help him, he wants one too. Where *is* Uncle Ilya?

No, no, Shane wants to say. Don't look at her like that. She's got a point. She's asking the only sane question anyone's asked all day.

Where the fuck is Uncle Ilya? Why the fuck isn't Uncle Ilya *here*?

Not *how are you holding up*, not *do you need anything*, not *can I get you a plate*, Shane, sweetheart, *sit down for a second*. No more of that.

No. More.

Where is he? Why isn't he here? Why isn't he making a face at the noise? Why isn't he making fun of Hayden's cake? Why isn't his thumb purple? Why isn't he standing next to Shane with one hand at his back, real and warm, bored and alive?

Amber's bottom lip starts to tremble. "I just asked—"

"—We know, baby," Jackie says immediately, and now she looks close to tears. "We know. You didn't do anything wrong."

Hayden's already moving towards him. "Shane," he says, voice low and wrecked. "Shit—I'm really sorry. Please—"

Shane shakes his head. "Uh, it's fine."

"No, it's—"

“—It’s fine, seriously,” Shane says again, and he wants his voice to come out steady, but it trembles instead.

Jackie stands with Amber attached to her leg, her face stricken. “Shane, I’m so sorry. We did talk about it, I promise, I just—kids don’t understand, and—”

“Jackie,” Shane says, because he can see she’s starting to tear up, and it makes him feel so fucking cruel, knowing that he’s the one causing it. “C’mon, you don’t need to—to—it’s okay—”

“—It’s *not* okay.” She wipes under one eye. “It’s not. I wanted this to be good for you too. I wanted—God, that sounds stupid. I just wanted you to have a normal day, or as normal as possible, given the circumstances, and now—”

The words hit him hard. *A normal day.* Jackie had wanted to give him a normal day, and it sounds so kind that Shane nearly breaks apart right there in front of them. He’d wanted that too. He’d thought, maybe a bit stupidly, that perhaps he could come to this birthday party and be normal for just a few hours. That if he smiled and ate the spinach things and talked to other people and didn’t flinch at the noise, maybe all the bad stuff would’ve stayed in the car, waiting for him to come back.

“It was good,” Shane lies, and Jackie makes a wounded sound. “I had a good time. Don’t worry.”

Hayden touches Shane's shoulder. "Come on, man. Let's step outside for a second."

"I think I'm, uh, gonna go."

"Okay," Hayden replies immediately. "Alright. I'll drive you."

"No, no. It's okay. You stay here. With your family."

"Shane—"

"—I'm fine to drive, Hayden. Really. It's your daughter's birthday, don't worry about it."

"You don't look—"

"—*I said I'm fine.*"

Around them, the party resumes, but it's a little awkward now, and the adults are limping slightly, trying to step around the open wound. Someone turns the music up a little, on purpose, and he can see Jade in the corner—she's taken Arthur aside and is whispering to him in hushed whispers. Amber hides her face against Jackie's hip.

Shane hates himself. He's ruined the day for everyone. Why the fuck had he come here?

Hayden tightens his grip on his shoulder, then loosens. "Alright," he breathes out. "At least let me walk you out, then."

Shane wants to say no, but he doesn't have the strength to refuse, and Hayden and Jackie both walk him to the door, one of them at each side. *So this is what it's come down to*, Shane thinks. Having to be escorted away from children's birthday parties before he crashes the fuck out.

They step outside, and Jackie hugs him first, crying against his chest.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm so sorry."

Shane closes one arm around her. Jackie loved Ilya too, he remembers. None of this is her fault. None of it is anyone's fault, really, except maybe Ilya's, and maybe Shane's.

He can feel Hayden watching with his whole heart in his face.

"It's okay," Shane tells her.

Jackie laughs wetly. "You keep saying that."

"I know. But it *is* okay. Don't sweat it, seriously."

She shakes her head. "It's not okay, Shane. It's not."

His smile is sad. "It's just how life is now, Jackie."

Hayden hugs him next, hard, one hand gripping the back of Shane's jacket. "Text me when you get home," he says into his ear. "I mean it. Don't make me be annoying."

“You’re always annoying.”

“Yeah, well, I’m grieving too, asshole. Let me have it.”

Shane almost loses it right there, on the welcome mat beneath the paper banner that says *HAPPY BIRTHDAY, AMBER* in glittering purple letters. He nods.

Arthur appears behind Hayden, hesitant, holding the drawing against his chest.

“Sorry, Uncle Shane,” he says, voice quiet.

Shane crouches before he can think better of it. Arthur’s eyes are wet, and his mouth is pinched tight with guilt.

“Hey,” Shane says, and his voice breaks. “You didn’t do anything wrong, buddy.”

Arthur looks doubtful.

“I mean it. I really like the dinosaur.”

“It’s for him too,” Arthur whispers.

Shane’s throat closes. “I know.”

“Do you want me to keep it?”

For one second, Shane imagines saying, *yes*. Saying, *that’s probably for the best, yeah*. Letting the drawing stay here, where it belongs

more naturally, taped to the fridge, maybe, because Shane doesn't trust himself to not bleed all over the floor with it in his home.

But the drawing is for Ilya, and there's no one else who can take it.

"No," Shane says, softly. "I'll bring it home to him."

Arthur nods and hands it over. Shane folds it once without thinking about it, immediately regretting the crease.

"Tell him I said *hi*," Arthur adds. "I miss him."

Jackie turns away, bringing both hands to her eyes, shoulders hunched. Shane looks at Hayden, and his eyes are—*fuck*. He can't stay here another second.

"I will, buddy," Shane barely chokes out. "I will."

He leaves before anyone can say anything else.

He gets into his car and sits there for several minutes, both hands on the wheel, looking through the window at Hayden's house. A child runs past the front window, and someone raises their arms to catch them. Someone else laughs.

There's so much life in there, he thinks. So much life, and Shane's spent all afternoon draining it, turning it grey.

Shane puts the car into drive and starts the journey home with the drawing on the passenger seat, the dinosaur's bent body trembling whenever the tires hit an uneven curve of road.

By the time he arrives, the anger has fully simmered.

It's been waiting for him to acknowledge it all day, all week, maybe since the funeral. Anger at the party. Anger at the happiness. Anger at Jackie's tears, Hayden's hand on his shoulder, Arthur's small guilty face, Amber's frenetic fucking energy. Anger at all the possibilities still available to them, the brightness of their futures, the cosmic favoritism of it. *Why them and not me? Why them and not us?* Anger at himself for being the kind of person who resents children for having years in front of them. Anger at Ilya, mostly. Anger at Ilya so large and fucking visceral that Shane nearly crashes into the back of another car from how hard he's gripping the steering wheel.

The apartment is dark when he enters. Anya lifts her head from the couch and thumps her tail.

"Hey, girl."

He doesn't turn on the overhead lights, just walks through the kitchen, dinosaur drawing still in his hand, and stops in front of the fridge. There are photographs hung up on it, held up by magnets from cities they'd been to and cities they'd bucket-listed into visiting someday. *Manifesting, right?* Ilya had said, and Shane'd laughed, agreed, kissed him senseless. Barcelona. São Tomé. Hanoi. Lisbon. A picture of Ilya and Anya on the cottage dock.

One of Shane with his parents. Irina's ID card picture. Another from years ago with Hayden's kids, all three of them smaller: Arthur missing a front tooth, clutching Shane's hand, who was grinning at the camera. Jade laughing with Ilya's sunglasses on, trying to keep Anya steady in front of them. Amber asleep against Ilya's chest, his hand hovering awkwardly over her back like he'd been entrusted with state secrets. Hayden and Jackie behind the lens, her hand faintly catching in the frame.

Shane loves that picture. Ilya complained about it after it was taken, said he looked stupid, said babies made him nervous, said Amber had drooled on him. Then, months later, it was saved as his phone background. *Our little family*, Ilya had joked when Shane teased him about it. *Preparation for the future, yes?*

Shane stares at the photo.

Maybe Ilya would've wanted it. Maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he would've loved the idea and panicked at the reality. Maybe he would've panicked at the idea and loved the reality. Maybe they would've fought over adoption forms and travel schedules and whether it was healthy for a child to learn Russian and English at the same time—because Ilya would have thoughts, of course he would, he'd have so many thoughts, and Shane would note every single one down. Maybe Ilya would've been terrified of becoming his father. Maybe Shane would've watched him soften into something he'd never thought he could become. Maybe there would've been a nursery. Maybe there wouldn't. Maybe the life

they had was already full enough. Maybe they would've changed their minds at forty, forty-five, fifty, and then they'd laugh at themselves for wanting impossible things too late.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. A whole universe made of doors Shane can no longer open.

He folds Arthur's drawing and digs it in his pocket, then shoots Hayden a quick text letting him know he got home safe. He throws the phone somewhere on top of the counter, and grabs the bottle of vodka Svetlana brought weeks ago, the one he hadn't touched because it felt ceremonial, uncomfortable. Now, though, he breaks the seal without a care and drinks straight from it over the sink.

It tastes *awful*.

Ilya would mock him, he knows. Ilya would tell him he's drinking it wrong, holding it wrong, grieving wrong, probably.

"Fuck you," Shane tells the empty kitchen.

Anya looks up.

"No, not—not you," he tells her, a little embarrassed, then takes another swallow.

The cigarettes are in the drawer next to the sink. Ilya's old pack, one of several Shane found months ago and didn't throw away, because—who the fuck knows, maybe every object once touched by Ilya now qualifies as a relic regardless of how disgusting he

personally finds it. He takes the pack outside with the bottle and sits on the balcony.

He's never smoked a cigarette in his life—until now—and the first drag goes straight into his lungs. He chokes immediately, eyes watering.

Fucking amateur hour, he thinks. *I look like a fucking teenager.*

“Jesus Christ,” he rasps. He coughs until his eyes water, porch blurring around him. “You liked this?” he asks the dark. “Seriously?”

It doesn't even do anything particularly useful, is the thing. He'd thought, maybe, you know—he'd feel closer to Ilya, or it'd taste like him, or remind him of when Ilya would kiss him when getting into bed after stepping outside to smoke a quick cigarette before sleep. But no, it tastes nothing like Ilya, nothing like closeness, nothing like anything except proof that Shane can still make himself look pathetic in new and humiliating ways. Sitting outside his dead husband's apartment, trying to poison himself. Maybe lung damage can count as intimacy if he's desperate enough.

The cigarette trembles between his fingers, and Shane takes a swing of the bottle again. He's only missing the crucifix around his neck to really sell the full picture—if only he could go put it on without feeling like he's desecrating Ilya's memory, or something.

“I went over to Hayden's,” he says.

It immediately feels stupid, ridiculous, absurd, but—well, the night doesn't really care, and Ilya won't really answer, and no one will really hear, anyway. Just Anya, who's watching him through the glass door.

"Amber's birthday," he continues. "You would've had fun, I think. Arthur drew us a dinosaur."

Us. Shane presses the heel of his hand against his eyes.

"He said it was for us, because you liked dinosaurs. I didn't even know he knew that. Did you tell him that? When the fuck did you tell him that?" He frowns, and his voice frays. "What else did you tell people when I wasn't listening?"

What else don't I get to know?

He takes another drag and fails, coughing again and flicking ash blindly towards the steps. The cigarette burns down between his fingers. He watches the ember brighten, dim, then brighten again. A tiny, little thing, eating itself to stay alive.

"I don't know what I thought," Shane says, and the words come faster now, a little slurred. Maybe it's the vodka, or the smoke. Maybe it's both. "I thought there'd be time to figure it out, I guess. Kids, no kids. Another dog, no dog. Buying a new house for—for the future. I thought we'd have years. I thought you'd get sick of retirement and start coaching and yell at teenagers, I don't know. I thought you'd maybe get glasses, and I'd have to fight you about going to the doctor every fucking time. I thought we'd get—" He

stops. “I thought we’d get more time. To be boring. I wanted to get boring with you. Do you know that? I wanted to get so fucking boring, Ilya.”

The mornings where Ilya complained about his back and Shane made fun of him for it, the old injuries, old arguments, old jokes. The tenderness of growing old. He wanted to watch Ilya become vain about wrinkles, then beautiful with them. Wanted to know what joy would make of them. Wanted to hear their voices go rougher, slower. Wanted to know if his accent would soften with time.

The entire future, turned speculative overnight. Every possible version of them now preserved in amber, before real life could dirty it with fact.

“I just thought I’d get to know,” Shane whispers, shaking his head.

He’ll never know if Ilya would’ve eventually wanted children. He’ll never know if they would’ve fought about it, if they would’ve stayed childless and happy, if some child somewhere out there in the foster system might’ve one day learned to call Ilya *nana*³⁵ and Shane *daddy*, ruined them both forever. He’ll never know if sixty-year-old Ilya would still reach for him in sleep, if therapy would’ve eventually helped more, if some new antidepressants would’ve changed anything for the better, if sometime in the future, they’d

³⁵ Papa

be spending the summer at the cottage, and Ilya would look around and think, *yes, okay, I can stay alive for this.*

“You told me so many fucking things.” He looks up at the sky. “You did. Every time you made a plan, every time you said *next summer*, or *when we’re old*, or *after we retire*, or when you asked to get another dog.” His grip tightens around the bottle. “You made it sound like we were going somewhere together.”

And now we’ll never know.

All Shane has are memories, and memories are not a life. They’re not even honest, half the time. They soften what should stay painful and give a harsher edge to what he’d give anything to forget. Shane reaches for them and gets nothing solid, just his hand passing through.

“Was it true?” he asks, voice breaking. “Did you mean it when you said that stuff?” A beat. “Or were you lying?”

The porch is quiet for a moment.

“No—” he says immediately, shaking his head, hating himself as soon as he says it. “No, I don’t mean that—fuck. I don’t mean that. Sorry.”

But he did mean it. For one second, the thought was there. If Ilya knew he didn’t want to live, what did it mean to let Shane keep building? What did it mean to talk about *next summer*, *next year*, *someday*, *when we’re old*, *let’s get another dog*, *the cottage needs renovations*,

all the normal scaffolding people use to imply a life will keep going? What did it mean that Ilya gave him hope falsely, that Shane believed him blindly, that love made them both liars?

He presses the bottle against his forehead. "I don't know."

And that's the whole thesis of the night, really. The understatement of the fucking year.

I don't know. I don't know what was true. I don't know what you meant. I don't know if you really imagined yourself old with me.

I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

Anya barks abruptly from inside, like she's scolding him through the glass, and Shane turns his head.

"What?" he says hoarsely. "You want to come out?"

She stares at him through the glass, then barks once more.

He smiles weakly. "You're very bossy tonight."

Ilya would've said something about the women in Shane's life always knowing better than him. He would've opened the door, let all the air in, called Anya *нелетный* in Russian, crouched and kissed her nose like she was a queen coming back from war.

Well, Ilya's not here. So Shane gets up, unsteadily, and opens the door without a word. Anya sniffs the porch, immediately investigates the cigarette, and Shane nearly drops the vodka.

“—No, no, don't—Anya, *leave it.*”

She ignores him, obviously. He grabs the cigarette before she can, burns his fingers slightly on the ember—*fuck, fuck, fuck*—and stuffs it into the empty flowerpot.

“Smart-ass,” he huffs.

She settles next to him, and Shane looks out into the night. After a while, he digs his hand inside his pocket and retrieves the folded drawing.

For Uncle Shane and Uncle Ilya, it reads in the bottom right corner. From Arthur Pike, signed in little cursive letters below it.

Anya leans her head against his arm, and Shane looks at the drawing. He smooths his finger over the crease, until the colors are blurring in front of him.

“I'm so angry at him, girl,” he whispers, eyes wet. “So fucking angry.”

The words leave him and don't kill him.

I thought we'd grow old, he thinks one last time, looking towards the city.

He stays there for another minute, until the wind starts to bite through his shirt. Then he pushes himself to his feet, unfolds the drawing carefully, and carries it inside to the kitchen.

Shane stands by the counter, staring down at the paper. The proportions are still all wrong. One corner of the page still curls upwards, and a long crease still runs straight through the middle, and the edges are still smudged with graphite. And the dinosaur—

Shane looks closer.

The dinosaur has fire coming out of the wrong end.

It's a fucking dragon.

His mouth twitches. *What the hell?* He stares at it, bites his lip, but the laugh slips out before he can stop it, boyish. It echoes through the empty kitchen, and for the briefest moment, he— forgets. Shane turns, still chuckling, ready to call out for—

Ilya.

The silence rushes back in. He closes his eyes, hears his own breathing.

Fuck.

God, Shane hates it. *Hates* it. Hates it, hates it, hates it—hates that, fucking, bodies keep being bodies through catastrophe, that lungs keep pulling air in, that stomachs keep needing food. Hates

that back at the house, while they were telling him there was nothing they could do, he'd needed to piss so badly he could barely stand. Hates that, at the funeral, he stood in a public bathroom with his forehead against the stall door while someone in the next stall coughed and flushed and went on living. Hates that he can't laugh at a kid's fucking drawing anymore without seeing Ilya's hands go slack against the side of the bathtub.

No one told him this about grief. No one told him anything at all. No one told him about all the vulgar shit, the forms, the calls, the urine, the dishes, the dog's medication.

His fingers tighten around the paper, and he lets out a slow, long breath. When he opens his eyes, he finds Anya watching him from the hallway, head tilted, uncertain.

He looks at her for a long moment.

"*Anyusha*," he calls, like Ilya would've.

Her ears immediately perk, and her tail starts thumping against the floor so hard her whole back sways.

"Yeah." He huffs a laugh. "Yeah, I know, girl."

Anya pants and jumps up, hanging her paws up on his thighs in her excitement.

“He’s not here,” he tells her, the corner of one lip faintly curved. “It’s just me and you now.” Anya licks his wrist, and he rubs behind her ears until the frantic wagging eases.

When she finally drops back onto all fours, Shane lets his shoulders sag, grabbing one of her bone-shaped snacks from the jar and handing it to her. Then, he steps back and turns towards the bedroom, Anya following after him. He leaves the drawing behind, exactly as is.

Crease through the middle. Smudged edges. Ridiculous dinosaur-dragon-hybrid fire coming out the wrong goddamned end.

Hung up on the fridge.

NETTLES

Chapter Seventeen

THE SUN IS warm, and something small runs past him. Brown hair, freshly clipped, catching the light as it goes, dark at the roots, gold at the edges, and there's laughter, bright, breathless, fearless. Promise, pregnant and waiting.

Shane turns, but the hair keeps going, laughing, laughing, laughing.

A constellation, scattered over a small nose, cheeks flushed pink from running. Dirt beneath fingernails, shoelaces undone, dragging through the grass. Shane crouches, and small hands reach for him, and the lake is silver, blue, gold—and the trees, they're—and behind him, a door opens, and the hair laughs, laughs, again—someone is calling—but the stars over the nose, scattered, endless, endless, endless.

Morning, maybe, or evening. Time is pointless. The dock stretching over the water, hands slapping against the boards. Feet in the water, flapping, laughing—a small voice calls from the shore—the sound of loons carrying over the lake—and somewhere, someone, a second voice laughing, rough, calling, calling, but Shane can't answer, won't—there's only the brown hair, clipped, dark and gold, freckles like stars, running—

“—Daddy?” the gold edges ask, and Shane falls, falls, falls.



2022

SHANE'S BEEN BANNED from the stove. Again.

“—Because last time,” Ilya says, pointing the wooden spoon at him, “you forgot the salt, remember?”

“Well, I didn’t think it needed salt—”

“—What the fuck, Shane, *everything* needs salt!”

Shane turns back to the cutting board, rolling his eyes. “Fine. Asshole,” he mutters, and moves to cut another clove of garlic—his final, thank you very much—at Ilya’s insistence.

Ilya hugs him from behind, propping his chin on Shane’s shoulder. “Hm.” He stares down at the cutting board. “Not enough, *малыш*³⁶.”

Shane looks back at him, exasperated. “There’s literally half a fucking bulb in there.”

“Trust me.” Ilya moves back towards the stove. “More.”

³⁶ Baby

“Ilya. I swear it doesn’t need this much garlic. Jesus Christ, you’re like the opposite of a fucking vampire—”

“*Любимый*³⁷.” Ilya gives him a flat look from across the kitchen. “More. Garlic.”

Shane laughs and reaches for another clove.

Music shuffles quietly from the speaker, barely noticed. The song currently playing ends, and there’s two seconds of nothing but the soft hiss of the stove. Then the opening notes of the next one come through.

I’ll light the fire...

Shane’s head snaps up. “Oh, shit!” he exclaims immediately. “I love this song!”

Ilya looks over his shoulder. “You do?”

“*You place the flowers in the vase,*” Shane sings, abandoning the cutting board entirely. “*That you bought—*” he pauses for dramatic effect, pointing the knife at Ilya like a microphone. “*—today.*”

Ilya stares at him, amused.

³⁷ Beloved

Shane grins and keeps going. “*Staring at the fire—*” he gets closer to Ilya, grabbing his shirt in his hands. “—*for hours and hours while I listen to you—*”

“Ah—Shane, no—”

“—*Play your love songs,*” Shane interrupts, punctuating the rhythm by pushing against Ilya’s chest. “*all night long, for—meeeeeeeeeee,*” he sings louder.

“Shane, *малыш*³⁸—”

“—*Only for meeeeeee—*”

“—*Nooo,*” Ilya groans, laughing. “Shane. No.”

Shane frowns. “How the fuck do you not know this song?” he asks. “I thought it was huge. You’re—oh, wait, wait, wait—*come to me noooooon—*” he keeps singing, beckoning at Ilya with his index finger, who shakes his head and goes back to the stove, pretending like he doesn’t have a big, fat smile on his lips. “You’re missing out on some culture if you don’t know this, I’ll just tell you that.”

“*Me?!*” Ilya spins around, faux-offended. “Shane Hollander is accusing *me* of not knowing culture.” He throws his hands up. “Okay—this is a new low for me, I think.”

³⁸ Baby

Shane laughs again, cooing: “*And rest your head for just five minutes, everything is done—*” He’s grinning so hard his cheeks hurt, and he reaches for Ilya. “C’mere.”

“Uh—” Ilya grimaces.

“Oh, come on!”

The song keeps playing in the background. *Such a cozy room...*

“Shane, I don’t dance—”

“—What the fuck, yes, you do! You dance at clubs all the time!”

Ilya laughs. “Yes, but those are *fast* beats. This is very slow. And—” he points at the stove. “Someone needs to make sure dinner does not burn.”

“You can finish cooking after, come on!”

The windows are illuminated by the evening...

“Shane—”

But he’s already caught Ilya around the waist, tugging him away from the counter.

“C’mon, please.” Shane smiles at him. “For me?”

Ilya tries to playfully resist, laughing as he tries to keep hold of the knife. “You are going to make me cut myself.”

Sunshine through them...

“Well, then put the knife down, dumbass.”

Ilya scoffs. “You are being so, uh—fuck, what is that word you like—” He looks off to the side. “*Goofy*. You are being so goofy right now.”

Fiery gems...

“*Ilya*.” Shane pretends to be stern, but the smile bleeds through. “Put. It. Down.” *For you...*

Ilya sighs, sets the knife carefully on the cutting board, and lets Shane pull him closer.

For the first few seconds, Ilya stays stiff in his arms, still looking faintly embarrassed by the whole thing. Shane sways him anyway, humming along as the music builds up to the chorus, and eventually Ilya gives in—a shift of his weight, then another. His hands settle against Shane’s side.

Only for you...

“There,” Shane murmurs. “See? You’re dancing.”

Ilya smiles, shakes his head, and then—

“*Our—*” Shane suddenly sing-screams into Ilya’s lips, completely off-tune. “—*house—*”

“—Wait—oh, shit!” Ilya exclaims suddenly, pulling back with wide eyes. “I *do* know this!”

Shane’s face lights up. “You do?!”

“Just the chorus, I think, but—” he replies, and then—

“—*is a very, very, very fine house!*” they suddenly sing into each other’s lips, grinning.

With two cats in the yard—

“—Well,” Ilya says over the music. “I think Anya would take offense to that, but—”

Shane bursts out laughing and swats him on the arm. “Shut up!”

Life used to be so hard...

Ilya laughs too, and they keep dancing in the middle of the kitchen while dinner cooks behind them, music spilling into the rest of the apartment.

“*Now everything is easy—*” Shane sings, still holding Ilya. “—*’cause of you.*”

The next verses keep playing, but Shane barely hears them. Ilya is staring intently at him, his gaze unmoving, and—*shit*. It takes Shane a few seconds to realize that Ilya’s eyes have gone misty.

Shane’s smile drops, uncertain. “What?”

Ilya doesn't answer immediately—just keeps looking back at him.

“Ilya?” he asks again, cautiously.

Ilya swallows. “Is true, you know.”

Shane furrows his brow, while the song swells distantly in the background. “What is?”

“The song,” he explains, fingers curling into the fabric of Shane's shirt, “Everything is easy because of you.”

Shane stares at him, blankly. *What the f*—and then he's pulling Ilya to his arms before he can finish the thought, crushing him to his chest.

“*Fuck*.” Shane blinks quickly. “You're gonna fucking kill me, someday.”

Ilya laughs softly and wraps both arms around him. “Shane—”

“—No, I'm—I'm serious,” Shane breathes out, voice catching in his throat. “You can't just say shit like that, Ilya, it's—it's too much.”

Ilya closes his eyes, nods once, but the smile's still there, residual. Shane crushes him further against his body, burying his face in Ilya's hair, and he smells of too much salt, too much garlic, too much love, yet never enough, smells of *mine, mine, mine, mine*—

There it is, glistening, shining, eternal once more. The rest of his life. Bright and infinite, those thousand and one suns, an infinite pocket of them. They shine on and on and on, and everything's exactly as it should be, existence narrowing down, down, down—this man, right here, right in front of him, his, his, his, and Shane would crawl into his insides and never let go, be swallowed down so he couldn't be coughed back up—intertwined, the same, just one, and—the kitchen, the music, the garlic—the wind, through the trees—the lake, endless—the light, golden—it's all too much, it's never enough, and the world is a door that closes, closes, closes.



“SOMETIMES I EVEN wish he'd cheated.”

Galina cocks her head. They're sitting in her office, rain pouring down outside.

“Or stopped loving me,” Shane continues. “Or, like, I found out he was throwing dogs into the river in his spare time, or having this whole double life. You know—a secret apartment, gambling debts, a cult.” He exhales. “I don't know. Something that would make this easier.” He pauses. “I wish I'd been less happy with him.”

She looks at him. “Why?”

“Well,” he starts. “Cause then I’d be angry, I guess. And, who knows.” He lets out a tired laugh. “Maybe anger would make this easier. Or fear, that’d be fine, too. Just... negative stuff.”

Galina is quiet for a moment, and Shane continues.

“I mean—you fear what you hate, right? My grandma used to say that. And you hate what you fear.” He looks down. “So... yeah.”

“You think anger cancels love? I don’t think it works like that, Shane.”

“Maybe not *cancel*, but—” His voice trails off, and he exhales. “I don’t really know what I’m saying.”

He stares at the bookshelf behind her. There’s a row of psychology books there. A fern that looks like it’s been dying since October.

Shane rubs both hands over his face. “I know it doesn’t cancel it. I know you can mourn people you hated. But still—” He looks down, purses his lips. “I’ll lie awake and start, like... changing things. You know?”

Galina studies him intently. “What kind of things?”

“Like, memories,” Shane starts. “I’ll remember a game that ran late, for example. But I’ll decide he came home late because he was with someone else.” A loose thread snaps loose between his

fingers. “Or I’ll remember him texting in bed. And I’ll make up a name. Sometimes she’s brunette, sometimes she’s blonde. Sometimes it’s another man. Sometimes it’s one of his teammates. Sometimes it’s Svetlana, his best friend, I think you know of her, probably. Anyway—”

Rain taps against the window.

“I imagine him walking into a hotel room, and I picture him, like, taking his wedding ring off before he goes inside.” He closes his eyes. “I’ll imagine the whole thing. You know, what hotel, what city, what he’d say to the person inside, if he’d mention me at all.”

He continues. “I even looked through his phone, after he died. I wanted to find something. Anything, really. Messages, girls, hook-ups... Maybe a secret child he’d kept hidden from me, I don’t know.” He smiles faintly. “I was almost, like, disappointed when there wasn’t anything.”

Shane shakes his head. “My point is, I’ll, like, sit there and make it worse on purpose. I’ll think, *okay. He wasn’t late because practice ran over. He was with someone. Fine.* Then I keep going.” A beat. “I’ll decide he lied to me. That he came home after being with someone else and still kissed me, which makes him, like, objectively disgusting, right? Even though he didn’t do any of it.” He looks behind her. “I keep adding new shit until I’ve turned him into this horrible person. Which he wasn’t, I know that. *You* know that.” Galina doesn’t reply.

“Look, I don’t...” Another breath. “I don’t believe any of it. Okay?”

“No?”

“No,” he stresses. “I don’t.”

“Then why do you think you do it?”

“I don’t know, I just—I just do it, okay? I can’t help it, Galina.”

“That’s fine.” She course-corrects. “What happens after? You say you start imagining these scenarios. The hotel room, for example. What happens then?”

His jaw tightens. “Well... you know.”

She raises her eyebrows, expectantly.

“I’ll imagine him, like. With someone. Together.”

“In bed?”

Shane looks down, embarrassed. He nods.

“And then?”

He sighs. “Well—there’s always a point where he, like, smiles. In the memory.” He pauses. “And it’s wrong. The smile is always wrong. It’s like I can’t... make him smile at someone else, or something. The whole thing just falls apart. So, I start over. I go

for another memory.” His laugh catches unexpectedly. “It’s like—Jesus.”

“What?”

“This sounds so fucking bad.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Like I’m vandalizing him, or something. I sound awful.”

Her eyes soften. “It’s okay, Shane.”

“It’s not, though. It’s *not*.” He rubs his eyes. “It’s horrible. Just—the fact my mind can even come up with shit like this. Rewriting whole trips, deciding that the texts weren’t meant for me, that he went for drinks with the guys only because he didn’t want to come home. Twisting everything he ever did so it has some horrible secret reason behind it, it’s—” He shakes his head. “And, like, I *know* I’m making shit up. It’s not like I believe it really happened, or something. I know I’m making up fake shit against him because I can’t...” His voice trails off. “Anyway.”

Because I can’t believe he could love me as much as he said he did and still kill himself.

“It’s just you and me in here,” she says. “Keep going.”

He takes a breath.

“Okay, well,” he continues. “I’ll, like, remember him cooking dinner too, sometimes. So I make him impatient, jittery. Like he can’t wait to get the fuck out of the house.”

He looks around. "I'll remember our wedding, which was such a beautiful day, you know, so beautiful, and I'll make him, like, distracted. Or disinterested. Or running off with one of the guests into the bathroom to hook up. I'll remember him waiting for me at home after I had a game, and I tell myself he must've been so bored." He laughs, hollow. "Life with me must've been so fucking boring. Like I took his best years away from him."

She notes something down in her notebook. "Do you feel like it helps? You feel relieved?"

"No." He shakes his head. "No, not really. It makes it worse, I think. 'Cause, like, halfway through, I'll remember the real reason. Like, why he stopped cooking dinner—which is because he knew I'd forgotten to eat that day and so he stopped to make me a snack. That kind of stuff. Or, like, I'll remember who he was texting in bed, and it's, you know—my mom, for example. Not some girl, but *my mom*. About a birthday present for me." He stares at the carpet. "I'll remember his face, and, yeah. That's all it takes. The whole thing just falls apart."

"And how do you feel after?"

Shane answers immediately. "Disgusted. Obviously."

Galina raises an eyebrow.

"By myself," he says. "Like I've just spent an hour trying to kill the best thing that ever happened to me, and I'm a fucking idiot."

He laughs once. “You know, it’s like, every time I try to do it, he always fixes himself, somehow.”

Galina smiles. “You say that like he’s the one doing it. But it’s you. You’re the one who fixes him. Because you love him.” She pauses for a second. “Tell me something, Shane. What do you wish would happen, if those memories could actually change?”

He considers it for a moment.

“Well, you know. I feel like there’s a script,” he starts. “Right? When you’re with someone who’s, like, an asshole, your friends tell you to leave him, they say *fuck him*, that kind of stuff. And I don’t have anything like that I can say. It’s not like I can call him selfish for...” His voice trails off. “You know, he—he loved me. I know that. And I loved him. And he still killed himself. And those three things just... they don’t fit together, Galina.” A beat. “They don’t. And I don’t know what to do with any of it.”

Shane gestures vaguely towards himself.

“It just keeps, fucking...” He sighs. “Like, every memory, every, like, conversation, every stupid shit he ever did, it all lands in the same place. I’ll think he was cheating and then notice his socks under our bed, just peeking out. And immediately I’m in love with him again. Like—”

He stops, running his hands down his face and groaning out loud. He can almost hear himself talking from outside his body

and it just—fuck, it sounds so fucking stupid. He wants to put his fist through his mouth, force himself to shut the hell up, because what the fuck is he even saying? He's not making any sense, he knows he's not. This probably all sounds like, fucking, gibberish to her.

“Well, for what it's worth.” Galina smiles sympathetically. “I don't think you're trying to make him unlovable. Maybe you're just trying to make the loss proportionate, in a way?”

Shane looks at her.

“It's okay, is what I mean,” she reassures him. “Having these thoughts does not make you a bad person. I just want you to know when they're making things worse for you, instead of helping you move forward.”

Shane lets out a hollow laugh. “I think we're way past helping, Galina. Or moving forward. I just...” he trails off. “I don't—I don't know if I have it in me to keep going. I really don't.”

Galina pauses. The room's silent for a moment, save for their breaths and the heavy rain outside.

“Can you elaborate on that?”

“I mean...” He looks down. “Fuck. It's pretty obvious what I'm saying, I think.” His voice tightens. “You know, it's—Jesus.”

“Shane?”

“I can’t imagine this being the rest of my life, Galina.” He exhales with a hollow laugh, shaking his head. “I *don’t* want it to be the rest of my life. I don’t.”

Galina immediately sits up straight in her chair. “Okay—Shane, I think we need to stop for a second. When you say that, do you mean you’re having thoughts of—”

“No, no,” he says, truthfully, or lies, or half-lies. He doesn’t know. “It’s not like that. Not when Ilya—no.”

“You’re sure?” she presses. “I’m not going to be upset. You have been through something very traumatic, so it would be understandable. But I need to know, so I can help you.”

He looks at her. “I mean—” He sighs. “I don’t think so. I don’t think I would.”

Shane drags his hands through his face. “But—fuck—having to live a whole life now without him, it’s—I mean, I’m thirty-four, Galina. I have—I have my entire life ahead of me. And I had all these ideas of what it’d look like, with him, and now, there’s just, like—nothing, yeah?” He pauses. “You know, Ilya—he wasn’t just, like, my husband. He was my best friend too, you know? My favorite person. And now I have no one to talk to about stuff. I mean, there’s Hayden, I guess, but it’s not—it’s not the same. Obviously.”

Wasn't it Nietzsche who'd said, *marriage is a long conversation*? Shane vaguely recalls reading that somewhere once. Something about how most of the time you're married will be spent in conversation, while everything else is transitory, so you better hope you're able to imagine yourself still having things to talk about with the person you married, right into old age.

Well—Shane'd married someone he actually liked talking to, for a change, and now the conversation's over. What now?

Shane looks to the side. "It was me and him, always. And it's just... this, now. Just me, forever. And, like—how am I supposed to do that? How am I supposed to, to..." he trails off. "Fuck."

He's silent for a moment, looking down at the carpet.

"I wish I'd never met him," he whispers at last, still looking down. "I wish we'd never gotten together, never fallen in love, never married."

Galina shakes her head. "You don't mean that, Shane."

But Shane's nodding incessantly, refusing to hear it. "I do. I do. I wish I'd never met him if it meant I'd never have to lose him." A beat. "You know, I—maybe I would've gone through life at, like, half potential, right, and I wouldn't really know how happy I could be. And yes, my—my life would be smaller, and I'd be less alive, and less fulfilled, and—but, fuck, at least it'd be better than *this*." He shakes his head. "It'd be better than having it for just a few years, and then it being taken away from me, and having to go on

living without it. You know how—how fucking cruel that feels? That I get fifteen years with him and, and—most of those years don't even count anyway—but, fifteen years with him and, what, sixty without him? What the fuck am I supposed to do with sixty years without him? All that time, I—" He trails off. "How fucking unfair is that? It's only been, like, half a year, and already I—Jesus."

Galina opens her mouth to speak, but Shane immediately cuts her off. "—No, seriously. I'm asking you. You tell me, Galina. You tell me how unfair you think that is, because I, I—" He shakes his head, letting it hang. "Fuck, I can't even make, like, *sense* of it."

Her face is forlorn. "Shane—listen to me. I understand. Really, I do. It is a huge loss, *huge*, and I cannot even imagine how much pain you are in right now, but—that is what we're here for, right? To help you grieve, to help you process his death. But in order for me to help you, I *need* you to tell me if you're thinking of hurting yourself. You told me no, and I believe you, but you need to tell me if that changes, or if you think you might—"

"—No, you don't—you don't get it," he cuts her off. "That's not what I mean." He pauses, sighing. "I don't *want* to get better. I don't want to wake up one day and have, like, moved on. That's not... that's not what I'm here for."

"Okay," she nods. "What are you here for, then?"

Now isn't that the million-dollar question.

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Shane rubs a hand down his face. “I don’t know,” he sighs. “I don’t know.”

And the rain pours on, and on, and on.

Chapter Eighteen

“FOR YOU...”

It’s the middle of the night, and Shane bolts upright. *What the fuck?*

“*Only for you...*”

Ilya’s voice, singing, from inside the en-suite bathroom. The shower, running.

“*Our house—*”

Anya stares at him, startled awake.

“*—is a very, very, very fine house—*”

The water running, the tile creaking softly. The sound of weight shifting, of someone moving, reaching for a towel, and maybe—

No. Shane squeezes his eyes shut. *No. No.*

“*With two cats in the yard—*”

His hand is shaking, and he presses it hard against his forehead, like he can grab the loose wires himself, pull them out—

Anya barks at him, briefly illuminated by the blinking Christmas lights out in the hallway, and for a second she muffles the singing, the shower running, but—

“Life used to be so hard—”

There’s nothing there. There’s nothing there. There’s nothing there. There’s nothing there. There’s nothing—

“Now everything is easy—”

“Fuck me,” Shane gasps over it. “I’m going insane, I’m going insane, I’m going *fucking insane*—”

“—*Cause of you*,” Ilya sings on, and the house with him.



“—TEN—”

Shane looks around him. Hayden and Jackie have their arms around each other’s shoulders, grinning with party hats on, screaming the countdown into their glasses of champagne. J.J.’s somewhere around here too—probably already has his tongue down someone’s throat.

“—Nine—”

It's just Shane by himself in this corner. That's—well, that's fine, really. He didn't expect any different. He hadn't even wanted to come tonight, honestly—he would've much rather stayed home poring over Ilya's Russian notebook—and if it wasn't for Hayden forcing him here, that's exactly what he'd be doing right now. It's probably a miracle he's even still around.

Well—just a few more seconds, now. Then he can bid everyone goodnight.

“—*Eight*—”

His phone buzzes. *Mom calling. Mom calling. Mom calling.*

“—*Seven*—”

He silences it. Whatever, he can call his parents back later. How urgent could it be, right? It's not like Ilya can die twice.

“—*Six*—”

Shane thinks of Ilya. Well—he's always thinking of Ilya, but it's a bit hard not to right now when everyone's counting down to a new year and away from the last one in which he still existed.

2025. Shane's first year without him.

He exhales on a shuddered breath. *Keep it together, keep it together, keep it fucking together—*

“—*Five*—”

He wonders if it'll feel any different five seconds from now. If there's something about crossing into a year Ilya never got to live in that'll change how his grief works. If Shane's first breath on the other side of midnight might come free of him. No thought of him, no vision, no memory. A full night's sleep, for once, maybe?

Yeah. Maybe.

“—*Four*—”

He'll think of Ilya one last time then—just in case, just to be sure.

The feeling of his hand at the back of Shane's neck, for one.

“—*Three*—”

Or how he said Shane's name when he was nearly asleep, all the precision gone out of it. Just *Shane*, which in Ilya's mouth was never quite the same word as in anyone else's—Canadian vowels in Russian lips.

“—*Two*—”

Or the coldness of his nose against Shane's shoulder. Or, or—

“—*One*—”

Shane breathes, closes his eyes—

“—*Happy New Year!*”

Nothing for a second. Then—

Golden curls. A lopsided grin. An accented mouth. *Котенок. Малыш. Солнышко. Моя любовь*³⁹. *Hollander*—

His shoulders sag, relaxing at once. Shane opens his eyes.

Jackie and Hayden are grinning into each other’s lips, party hats half-off their heads. J.J. has stumbled back into the room, his tongue indeed down some blonde woman’s throat, laughing into her mouth. Everyone’s cheering, hugging, kissing, celebrating. But all Shane can hear is *любимый*⁴⁰, playing behind his eyes like a looped cassette.

There you are, he smiles. *Still got you*.

Happy new year, baby.



IT’S FIVE IN the morning and Shane can’t sleep.

³⁹ Kitten. Baby. Sunshine. My love.

⁴⁰ Beloved

He's tried everything: tried lying still, tried not lying still, tried counting backwards from one hundred, tried breathing in fours, tried unclenching his jaw, tried looking around the room and naming whatever things would hold still long enough. Window. Chair. Lamp. Glass. The shirt over the back of the couch that isn't Ilya's, not really, not anymore, not after laundry machines and conditioner and Shane's stupid habit of pressing fabric to his face until Ilya's smell is accidentally replaced with his own.

Eventually, he gives up and goes to the window. Ottawa's at the peak of winter, which is to say, very cold and deserted and pretty indifferent to him standing here in it—even if it's just for a mere few days over the New Years holidays. The city looks the same at five in the morning as it does at one, or six, he thinks. It doesn't shift like Montreal, or Boston, or other cities with nighttime personalities do. Ottawa at five in the morning is just Ottawa. Maybe quieter, definitely grayer, but the river still moves and still waits and still courses.

He thinks about Ilya, which isn't new—he's thought about Ilya his whole life. During games, during press conferences, during flights, during warm-ups while he was supposed to be listening to the anthem and was instead looking towards Boston's blue line, during his father's funeral back in 2017, which Shane didn't attend because Shane *couldn't* attend, obviously; because he and Ilya were, at that point, *everything they were at that point*, and it's not like he could've just explained that to anyone who might ask why Montreal's star center was standing graveside for his greatest rival's dead father a whole continent away.

Nobody knew to ask, either way. Nobody would've even *thought* to ask.

That was the arrangement they had back then, after all. Grief in separate rooms, joy in separate cities, every single emotion in separate fucking rooms except love, which was always kept within professional boundaries and careful choreography and always at least five feet away from where the closest camera was. So, yeah—all they were left with were their thoughts, so Shane would score a goal and think of Ilya, and Ilya would fight on the ice and think of Shane, probably, and Shane would win and think of Ilya, and Ilya would lose—because he was on the fucking Centaurs, and all he did was lose—and think of Shane, which Shane only knew because Ilya often made sure to remind him that Shane was at the center of every ugly thought he'd had during that horrible first season. They were ridiculous like that, though Shane doesn't really think *ridiculous* is the word he would've used back when they were younger, when everything had felt oh too serious to survive even just being named.

Now, everything has a name, and none of the names help, necessarily. *Husband* least of all, sometimes.

Shane wonders if by now he's had more conversations with the Ilya inside his own head than he ever had out loud with the real one. Ilya was the same, probably—awake in this Ottawa apartment that he never quite managed to make feel like his, staring at the ceiling in the same bed Shane *isn't* sleeping in just now, having

some furious argument with imaginary Shane about fear or the Centaurs or the closet or whatever it was they fought about back then. Ilya saying things to an imaginary Shane he'd never say out loud to the real one, because the imaginary Shane couldn't flinch, couldn't misunderstand, couldn't ask questions one degree too gentle or one degree too crude and make him feel cornered by either tenderness or pressure.

The real Shane could do all that. The real Shane *had* done all that. The real Shane had stood in a bathroom doorway with his heart trying to climb out of his throat and Ilya in the tub, pills down his throat, saying, *I'm so tired, мой любимый*⁴¹, *I'm so tired, мой любимый, I'm so tired*—

He closes his eyes, breathes through his nose.

Outside, Ottawa holds its breath, and Shane thinks it's not a city Ilya would've ever chosen. Except he did—for Shane, no less. Ilya had an apartment here that didn't mean all that much to him; had teammates he liked, and a coach who respected him, and a city that had learned to like him. He had a practice rink, and a favorite gym, and a coffee place around the corner where they already knew his order from memory, probably. He had a parking spot, a mail key, a couch he complained about constantly and never replaced. He had a life here, or a version of one he could stand—because, back in 2021, Montreal suddenly being close enough outweighed whatever cons there might've been to Ottawa.

⁴¹ My love

That was the whole miracle, wasn't it? Distance made manageable, a highway, a dark drive, a calendar cleared with enough lying. Shane, who could be reached in two hours by car instead of a whole flight and a whole border crossing and a whole MLH rivalry away. Shane, who Ilya couldn't call his. Shane, who the world believed he hated. And Ilya stayed, anyway—in a city he wouldn't have chosen himself, on a team that was anything *but* competitive enough to justify the move. He stayed, just so he could be within driving distance of Shane's life. Stayed in this furnished apartment and this foreign city, through the loneliness of having made a choice nobody else understood and which he wasn't allowed to explain. Stayed close enough that Shane could sometimes—not nearly enough times, really—finish practice, get in the car, drive through two hours of dark and snow and arrive at Ilya's house with his hands still cold from the steering wheel. Stayed so he could open the door and see Shane on the other side of it.

And yet, Ilya still ended up alone in Ottawa, somehow.

Well, not *alone*, alone. Shane knows the distinction matters. He knows Galina would make him say it out loud if he was sitting in her office instead of standing barefoot by Ilya's window at five in the morning. Ilya hadn't been *abandoned*. He was an adult man, in his own apartment, in a city where he had friends and a therapist and a husband who called him twice a day and meant to come sooner, meant to stay longer, meant to notice the bad thoughts before the bad thoughts became the *horribly worse* thoughts.

Shane thought he'd known how to read Ilya like an open book. Thought he knew every microscopic shift of mouth and shoulder and jaw that meant Ilya was angry, or tired, or jealous, or trying not to laugh; every version of, *I'm fine*, and, *I'm okay*, and, *really*, *Shane*, *I promise*. A whole secret lexicon out of what Ilya refused to say. Except, apparently, he could become fluent in all shifts of mouth and shoulder and jaw and still miss the sound of his husband planning to die.

Morning pales at the edges of the glass. Shane doesn't remember deciding to run—just the shoes, and the coat, and the keys, and the elevator too bright, and the lobby empty except for him, and then running along the canal, gray beside him.

The city remains asleep while breaths cloud in front of him, legs finding their old rhythm. The water hasn't yet lightened. The night hasn't yet become day. Ottawa opens itself up around him: bridge, path, streetlight, parked cars, bare trees, a blink of orange sunrise peeking through government buildings.

Shane thinks of the Irina Foundation—because Ottawa does that too, apparently, gives him one thought and then pulls another from underneath it like a wire. Thinks of Ilya at that first press conference, answering questions about his mother in his second language with his shoulders squared, while Shane stood beside him and tried to be just the right amount of supportive. Not too much, not too little. Hand not quite at Ilya's back. Eyes not too soft, smile not too intimate. Close enough to be there, but always far enough to be explained.

How absurd is it that they built a whole infrastructure just to be allowed in the same room, just so they could use it as a cover? That they named it after Ilya's dead mother even, just so no one would look too closely and doubt whether it was real? It sounds so fucking ridiculous it makes him want to laugh, now.

Shane wonders how Irina would react, hearing it. Irina, who he knows almost entirely through Ilya's unreliable archive: stories told too quickly, photographs with worn corners, recipes Ilya claimed to remember and then clearly improvised, a few Russian phrases Shane never pronounced correctly.

Would she have hated him for it? Would she have understood it? Would she have laughed at it? He hopes it's the latter. He hopes she would've found it funny, that enormously inconvenient thing her son had done to himself. Ilya once told him she laughed warmly at human folly, like she knew people couldn't help making their lives harder than they needed to be.

Shane has wanted, absurdly and for years, to hear that laugh directed at him. Has wanted a dead woman he never met to know the joke at the center of him: that for all his discipline, all his restraint, all the years of being praised for control, he'd loved her son with helpless stupidity like just about anyone else.

She would have loved you, he hears Ilya say, the words surfacing with terrible clarity. *Like I love you*.

Shane had believed him then. Ilya was alive, and love was still new enough between them to make impossible things seem possible, and the future had felt so real, so near, something they were already moving towards. Believing had been easy then, or, if not easy, *easier*. There'd been Ilya's hand on his wrist, Ilya's mouth near his ear, Ilya's certainty assuring him. Love itself was all the evidence he needed, and Shane, by being loved by Ilya, had already been acquitted in Irina's eyes, surely.

Now, though, Shane's less sure.

He doesn't think Ilya lied, necessarily. Ilya lied about plenty of things, stupid things, useful things—whether he'd eaten, whether he was tired, whether a bruise still hurt when Shane's hand found it in the sheets, whether he'd slept, whether he'd taken his medication, whether he was fine—but rarely about love when he was brave enough to name it. Shane knows that. He knows the sound Ilya's voice made around the truth. But grief has made him mean about himself, meaner than Ilya ever was. Suspicious, too, of every generous verdict, every hollow kindness, every memory that tries to place a hand on his shoulder and tells him he was better than he knows he was.

Shane runs while the canal lies black beside him, and he thinks: *maybe she wouldn't have liked me*. Maybe she would've looked at Shane and seen exactly what he fears there is to see—all that restraint, all that carefulness, all the ways he kept his hands clean at the cost of her son. Maybe there isn't much to like in a man who loved her

son with everything he had and still ended up with him dead in his arms.

He hates the thought as soon as it arrives, because it sounds self-pitying, and Galina would probably look at him with that head-tilt that makes Shane want to crawl out of his own skin, and his mom would probably say his name in a voice that would undo him completely. But—still. There's not much to love in someone who can make a whole life out of *almost*. *Almost* enough courage, *almost* enough patience, *almost* enough insistence, *almost* enough knocking on locked doors before assuming space is kindness and kindness is proof and proof is love.

Who knows. Maybe Ilya would still be alive if he'd never met Shane. Maybe he'd still be alive if Saskatchewan hadn't been Saskatchewan, and 2008 hadn't been 2008, and hockey hadn't been hockey. Maybe Ilya would've gone somewhere else, loved someone else, been someone else. Chosen another city, another team, another life with fewer locked doors and less careful distance.

Maybe there's a universe in which Ilya lives because Shane's not there to leave him all alone for years in fucking *Ottawa*.

"Fuck," he breathes out, the word coming out thin. He runs harder, breath tearing in his chest.

The thought should comfort him, shouldn't it? Ilya elsewhere, Ilya happier, Ilya untouched by the whole long disaster of Shane

Hollander. It should be a simple subtraction—take Shane out, leave Ilya whole—except Shane can never make it stay that simple. The moment he tries to picture his life without Ilya, the world starts cheating: details rearrange themselves, roads bend, rooms fill. Another city becomes another rink. Another home becomes another hotel lobby, another hotel hallway, another hotel room. Some stupid, random coincidence opens a door, and there Ilya is again, already turning towards him.

He can't really imagine any universe where he doesn't find Ilya somehow. Maybe in that other life, Ilya's still impossible and Shane's still looking, or Shane's impossible and Ilya's the one looking, whoever finds the other first. A carpenter in some cold northern village. A king with blood on his sleeve. A magician with smoke on his hands. A tired analyst in Manhattan. An actor in a bad play, a man on a train, a boy at the wrong rink in the wrong city looking up at exactly the wrong second.

Shane thinks they would know. No evidence, no faith, no desire to defend it—but he thinks they would know, and they would meet, and they would ruin each other a little, and they would love each other anyway, time and time again, across whatever cruel machinery the world put between them. Whatever lived between them had survived distance and rivalry and fear and secrecy and the closet and their own worst instincts. It had survived so much more than it probably deserved to survive, given how badly they'd managed it. It hadn't survived death, no, because nothing survives death and Shane's not stupid enough to pretend otherwise, but it *had* existed. It had, and that has to mean something.

The path curves. When he turns back, the sun is up and ruining the horizon. A church bell rings: seven a.m. sharp. Somewhere, a bus slows near a stop. Elsewhere, a cyclist glides past. Ordinary life, continuing like normal. Shane slows near the bridge with hands on his hips, head bowed, panting in ragged bursts.

He thinks of Irina again. The woman who gave Ilya his first joy and his first grief. A face reconstructed through photographs and longing, a laugh Shane never heard and still hopes, absurdly, it might've made room for him. That unbearable, unimaginable specter, silently haunting every corner of every room they'd once stood in. The face of the ghost story of Ilya's life.

He hopes she would've liked him.

He hopes she would've seen through the composure and the captain's posture and the careful management of everything, how Ilya said she saw through things. He hopes she would've understood that he wasn't enough, not even close, and liked him anyway. That he'd loved Ilya badly sometimes, and carefully, and silently, and he should've been braver sooner, should've made noise louder, should've noticed the quiet earlier, but he'd loved him wholly. God, he'd loved him wholly. With every stupid, little, disciplined and insufficient piece of himself.

He hopes she would've found the place where Shane is just a person, uncertain and trying and so in love with her son it makes him less impressive and more himself, standing in the cold city Ilya once chose for him, because love, for all its grandeur, is sometimes

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just that—a lease signed, a highway learned, a room endured, a winter survived, a life rearranged around the hope of being close enough.

He hopes, he hopes, he hopes.

He hopes she would've liked him very, very much.

Chapter Nineteen

SHANE GRABS HIS laptop and pulls up his browser. The time indicator on the top right corner blinks back at him—3:08 AM—and the mouse moves over the screen, before he tentatively starts typing into the search bar, fingers dragging over the keyboard.

Shane hollander ilya rozanov 911 call leaked

He clicks the first result, and the tape immediately auto-plays.

911, what's your emergency?

MY, MY—MY HUSBAND, HE—HE TOOK PILLS, I
THINK HE—I THINK HE'S DYING—PLEASE—

—Sir, is he awake?

HE'S FUCKING DYING, IT'S AN EMERGENCY—
PLEASE—PLEASE HURRY, PLEASE—

GOD NO, ILYA, PLEASE—GOD—

—Sir, what's the address—

—ILYA—STAY WITH ME—FUCKING STAY WITH—
NO—NO—ILYA—

—*Sir*—

Shane closes his eyes, listening to the rest play out. But there's not much to hear, really—it's just more screaming. More screaming and more sobbing and more wailing and more panting. He listens to his muffled voice through the track, hears how it cracks with frequency static, and can barely make out the shape of it. Just wheezing gasp after wailing cry, then these short, sad, highly-compressed moans of *Ilya*, followed by more wheezing gasps, more wailing cries. Then, how old was Ilya, was Ilya breathing, what had he taken, how many pills, how long ago. Their address too, the private code to the gate, everything recorded on this godforsaken call. The worst moment of his entire life, laid bare for the whole world to see.

He exhales on a shaky breath.

He wonders what people thought, listening to it. Did they find it unendurable? Did they squirm uncomfortably, having to listen to his unintelligible screaming, his deafening shrieks, him howling at the top of his lungs?

Could they hear his world ending? Could they tell he'd never know happiness again?



AROUND HIM, THERE'S a house with no roof.

Shane recognizes the cottage with each step he takes—the floorboards under his feet look unmistakably familiar, and the living room wall has collapsed, leaving the lake in full view—but there’s no roof. When he looks up, the sky looks like it’s hanging low, close enough to touch if he were *just* slightly taller, clouds passing through him and rain falling straight down, never actually landing. It stops just above the floor, suspended, like the world’s drawn in a breath and forgotten to exhale.

It’s cold enough to make Shane frown in confusion—they’ve only ever come here in the summer, really, so this feels wrong. It *all* feels wrong, but then again—life feels nothing *but* wrong, these days—and when he looks ahead, there’s snow everywhere, a deep blue-white, down the tree line and into the frozen lake, and right in the center of his line of vision stands Ilya. He’s by the kitchen table, wearing the same Centaurs hoodie Shane’s buried his face in so many times since May.

Shane takes a step forward, and then another, and it’s like the house is stretching with him, floorboards lengthening under his feet, the distance between him and Ilya unchanged. It must take him minutes to eventually cross over, but he doesn’t really remember or register it—Shane’s just here and then there, instantly, his hands on Ilya’s face, and they both flinch at the sudden contact. Warm skin. The little rough patch along his jaw where he missed shaving. The cut on the right cheek where he always nicked himself. The tremor under Shane’s thumb when Ilya swallows.

God, he's—he's going to fucking *cry*—he's missed this so, so much, and—fuck—he tries to resist the tears with as much force as he can, but instead the smallest of sounds leaves his mouth, a small pained whimper that makes Ilya's eyes soften immediately.

Ilya, Ilya, Ilya, Ilya. I am made of you, Shane wants to say. *You, you, you, you. Your warmth. Your material.*

Ilya lifts his hand like he's going to touch Shane back, then stops halfway.

"Ilya," Shane calls, and he hears the fear in his own voice, fear from before, fear from after, fear ricocheting everywhere through the roofless cottage. "Ilya, I—I *love you*."

Ilya just keeps looking back at him, amidst the rain and snow suspended all around them. His eyes start to fill, crinkling at the corners as he tries to resist it, and the wetness quickly overwhelms him. His hand covers Shane's own where it rests against his cheek, and, Jesus, the warmth of it, it's—*fuck*, it's all so familiar that Shane's eyes can't help closing on instinct. This feels like death, too, in its own way. The complete darkness behind his eyelids, the cottage—even if a broken, collapsed version of it, hollowed in the cold of winter—Ilya's hand over his, his breath against his neck, or—the ghost of a breath, really, and—*God*, Shane would live on that ghost if he could, he'd build a house inside that ghost and rot there happily for all eternity, useless but warm, finally.

Behind them, a clock starts.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Shane looks up, frowning. It's sitting on the table next to two empty mugs, and—*what the*—he's never seen that clock before. *What's it doing here?*

Ilya follows his gaze, and smiles sadly. "You should not look at that."

Make it stop, Shane wants to tell him. *Make it stop now*. But the sky's contracting now, and the darkness is getting worse—it feels deeper, like the shadows around them are getting more pronounced, gaining in contrast, and there's fewer stars flickering above them every second, going out one by one with every minute that passes, and then a breath leaves Ilya.

"Shane," he starts. "*Любимый*⁴². Let me go."

Shane's head snaps up. *What the fuck?*

He tries to search Ilya's face for something to argue with, some softness he can press on, some hesitation he can reach into, some reluctance he can pull wide, and finds nothing. Just Ilya, as he's always been, asking.

No. The real Ilya would never say this. Shane knows this. It's—it's—*no*—the real Ilya would resist this moronic bullshit, of course he would, he'd turn away, roll his eyes, make fun of the whole

⁴² Beloved

ridiculous idea of a fucking ultimatum. What's this, a cheesy Lifetime movie? Shane's expecting him to frown. *Any minute now*, he thinks—any minute now he's going to come out with something defensive, surely, something arrogant, something just an itty-bitty cruel that proves he still exists somewhere in there. *That's Ilya*. Not this—this—*no*.

Come on, Shane thinks. *Get irritated. Be unbearable. Say something really fucking inconvenient. Do something shitty. Make me laugh. Be impossible. Be really tender all of a sudden. Make me love you, make me remember you, make me feel you again.*

Be difficult, he wants to beg. *Be yourself*.

Shane wants the man who could hurt him, even, because the man who might hurt him is the same man who *had* existed—no matter how much it feels like being shot in the chest to think of Ilya in such ugly terms.

“No.” Shane’s hands tighten, and he shakes his head vehemently. “No fucking way.”

Ilya blinks at him, and goes still—the stillness of a deer at the edge of the road, headlights already in its eyes.

“O—kay,” Ilya says, slowly, and lowers his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Lowers them. *Lowers them*. Like—like a fucking *penitent*. Like a good little dead husband ready to be absolved and forgiven by the guy he left behind and received with swelling organ music by the

fucking angels. Shane feels—Jesus, what the fuck is this? He feels fucking *enraged*. How can—how can Ilya be this, this, this *butchered*? Whatever goes into the making of dreams has taken Ilya Rozanov—vain, funny, brave, *real*, cowardly in ways he could never bear to let others see, a man who could be cruel and tender in the same breath, but never heartless, no, never once—and remade him into some godly, trite saint, hacked him apart with kindness, made him stale—because Shane, apparently, is so fucking broken now even his dreams aren’t safe from laundering.

God, the rage, the humiliation, the cheapness of what his mind’s trying to do. What kind of punishment is that? What miserable part of his brain decided the best way to cope with Ilya’s death was to revise him, turn him into someone who’d stand still, be blamed without striking back, without vanishing into silence? A version of Ilya who wouldn’t make Shane work for the truth, who wouldn’t be combative, who wouldn’t say, *I don’t want to talk*, every time Shane tried to?

Fuck, he—he—he’s supposed to be the one responsible for preserving Ilya: the accent, the jokes, the smell of his skin, the crookedness, the tenderness. He’s supposed to keep him from being simplified by the people who hated him but didn’t know him, knew him but didn’t mourn him, mourned him but didn’t love him, loved him but not like Shane did. Who didn’t mourn him like Shane, know him like Shane, hate him like Shane. He’s supposed to be the custodian of Ilya’s exactness, a fact-checker against everyone who’d written about him, printed about him, used

him, forgave him, blamed him. And already Shane himself is starting to falsify the record. Already memory is lying.

“No,” Shane whispers. “Stop it.”

But it’s the truth, plain and simple. Not later, not years from now when photographs fade and friends say, *was he the one who*, not in old age when Shane might forget the color of Ilya’s eyes and deserve to be taken out back like Old Yeller and shot for it. Now. Months after. His own mind has already started to improve him, sand him, and it won’t stop there. Today, it’s making Ilya too gentle. Tomorrow, it might overcompensate and make him overly cruel, give him harsh edges in all the wrong places.

He lifts his head and looks back at Ilya. *Tell me something true*, he wants to beg, or cry. *I’m already losing you*.

No. No. The real mouth was crooked. *Remember that*. The real eyes didn’t forgive quickly. *Remember that*. He had a small line between his brows from squinting too hard. *Remember that*. His left shoulder sat slightly higher when he was tired. He used too much tape. He’d been bad at being loved on days when Shane most needed him to be good at it, and worse still at loving back. He’d been alive. He’d been alive. He’d been *alive*.

Remember that. Remember that. Remember that. Remember that.

And yet, some part of Shane wants to accept this lie, wants to climb into bed with this Ilya and put his hand on his chest and his head on his shoulder. He wants this gentler Ilya because this one

will let Shane suffer under him, surely, this one will let him go to trial, this one will answer him, will confess, will let Shane ask all the questions that have plagued him since his death. *Mr. Hollander, you are charged with criminal negligence, you are charged with failing to see, failing to stop, failing to save, failing to act, failing to love. Mr. Hollander, you have the right to remain silent. Mr. Hollander, do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God? Mr. Hollander, will you please rise?* Or, maybe, Shane as the prosecutor, Ilya as the defendant—*Mr. Rožanov, did you know what you were doing? Mr. Rožanov, did you know what you were taking from me, how you were destroying my life? Mr. Rožanov, did you think of me at all? Did you think I could survive it for even a second? Did you know I would've followed you anywhere if you'd let me, no matter how bad, no matter how awful, no matter how hard? Did I miss it? Was I there for you? Was I good? Was I not?*

Shane can feel the cottage shrinking, the walls starting to rupture at the base like they're about to collapse in on themselves at any moment, and the whole sky's pressing lower and lower, and—*fuck*, every inch of the cottage seems to draw breath around where Shane's hands are holding Ilya's face, and he's—he's asking—*fuck*—

“Shane,” Ilya repeats.

“No.” Shane's breath catches, and his voice breaks. “No, you—you fucking—” He shakes his head violently, his hands tightening around Ilya, genuinely horrified while simultaneously trying to bait

him into a real response. “No. Don’t ask me that again. Don’t *ever* fucking ask me that again, Ilya.”

Ilya stiffens, and he instantly draws his face back, away from Shane’s hands. Shane feels the absence immediately, cold creeping into his fingers as the warmth of Ilya’s skin dissipates.

I’ve hurt him, Shane thinks—which is ridiculous, because Ilya’s *dead*. But it seems that even here Shane’s capable of putting his hands on the person he loves and leaving a mark.

“I’m sorry,” Shane says, horrified. “I’m sorry, but I just—I *can’t*. Okay?”

He wants to say that Ilya doesn’t understand, doesn’t comprehend what he’s asking of Shane, doesn’t get how painful it is, that he could *never* understand, but, well—if anyone understands, it’s Ilya, surely. Ilya, who’s watched him his whole life, who knows him like the palm of his own hand.

Ilya breathes out, and the fight drops out of him.

“Don’t say you are sorry, *малыш*⁴³.” His thumb moves over Shane’s knuckles. “You can be upset with me.” A beat. “I know I hurt you. Is okay.”

⁴³ Baby

Shane leans forward, touching his forehead against Ilya's, and the clock keeps ticking—ticking and ticking and *ticking*—and it's getting darker now, and time's running out, and—

“—You are my *life*—” Shane tells him, and gasps. “—You're my heart, I—I don't know how to do this without you.” A sob leaves his mouth, cutting him off, and he sags his whole weight against Ilya's body. “I don't *want* to do this without you, Ilya, I—*fuck*—”

A few seconds pass while Shane tries to regulate his breathing—never mind that the clock keeps on ticking. *Inhale slowly for a count of four, hold the air in your lungs for a count of four, exhale smoothly for a count of four, pause and hold at empty for a count of four, repeat this five times, inhale slowly, hold the air, exhale smoothly, pause and hold, inhale slowly, hold the air, exhale smoothly—*

Eventually, his voice comes back, though as a mere whisper. “Ilya,” he breathes out again, right against Ilya's mouth. “You can't just... you can't *ask* me to—to—” He shakes his head again. “No—”

Ilya's mouth trembles. He looks almost upset with himself for the tears in his eyes, and that, more than anything, makes Shane want to cry even harder. Even here, even dead, even as a dream, Ilya can't be seen wanting gently.

“—Любимый⁴⁴,” Ilya whispers, and finally, *finally*, he looks like himself, looks like Shane’s Ilya, the real Ilya, his Ilya.

“*You* are my life.” He grabs Shane’s hand and places it over his chest. “Okay? *My* heart.” A beat. “Now let me go.”

Shane bends forward until his forehead rests against Ilya’s shoulder, and Ilya holds him.

Being loved by someone who’s dead and still being asked to live. It’s—God, it’s unbearable. Shane feels almost weightless right now, like the whole world’s been reduced to the hand at the back of his neck, to the mouth pressed into his hair, reduced to one single face—a face he can’t keep.

“I miss you.” Shane says into his shirt, the sound muffled, buried by the rising ticking of the clock. “I miss you so much.”

“I know.” Ilya’s hand tightens at his neck. “I know.”

Don’t fucking say that, he wants to say. Say anything else, anything. Tell me you love me. Tell me you miss me. Tell me you’ll be home from practice at six, that you want borscht for dinner, that there’s a new movie you want us to watch, that you need me to clear my schedule because you made us weekend plans. Anything, please, I’ll take anything.

The hand’s gone.

⁴⁴ Beloved

“No,” Shane gasps. “No, don’t go yet. This is—you’re all I have left, Ilya, please—”

He wants to ask, *how can I let you go when I still reach for you every night? How can I let you go when I think I still feel you at three in the morning, like you could be right there next to me?* But what he says is just *I love you*, again and again, like a mantra, a broken prayer—because it’s true, of course, the one feeling he doesn’t doubt for a single second, and also because sometimes, when you can’t say the right thing, you just keep saying the real thing and hope it’s enough.

“*Let me go*, Shane,” Ilya repeats, lips trembling. “Please. You have to let me go.”

The price he has to pay. Not the grief, which he’d known was coming, which any idiot could see was coming the moment he understood what loving Ilya Rozanov was actually going to require of him. The grief was always in the contract—you love someone mortal, you’re signing up for grief—that was never the surprise. The cost of loving Ilya has always been Ilya, and the price is this. Letting go. Choosing, in full consciousness, with full understanding of what it costs, to open his hands. To stop the white-knuckled holding. To say, *I won’t keep you stuck here just because I still need you*.

Shane can’t do it. He doesn’t—*fuck*. The version of himself who can do this gracefully, without it taking everything from him, is a version he hasn’t yet become, a version he might *never* become, but Ilya’s asking him to be that version *now*, in the snow, in the dark,

with the sky closing above them and the clock ticking and Ilya's hand over his and his warmth already fading, and he—he can't—

“Can you do that?” Ilya asks. “For me?”

Shane presses his forehead against Ilya's, and he nods once, crying. He nods because if he speaks, it'll probably turn into begging, and begging won't achieve anything, he knows. He nods because Ilya asked. Because Ilya feels warm and everything else cold. Because Ilya's gone. Because the clock's ticking, and the rain keeps falling, and love's the only thing he has left of Ilya. Because Ilya said *for me* and Shane has never, ever, in fifteen years, found a thing he couldn't do when Ilya said *for me*.

His hands drop from Ilya's face. Shane almost reaches back on instinct, but Ilya catches him by the wrists. They stay like that, hands hanging between them, watching the stars go out.

The darkness feels stronger now, and Anya—he's aware of Anya somewhere at the edges of it, her weight, her warm fur—she's always there, even in the dreams, always somewhere near—and above them, the sky, it's—it's dark, and the sky's contracted to almost nothing, just an aperture of pure darkness, a few remaining stars, everything else swallowed—the universe is folding itself up, and, and—it should frighten him, should be terrifying, but it doesn't, it isn't, somehow, and—and—the stars—and then—*darkness*.

Shane comes to with the dim light of early morning. For a second, he thinks the ceiling's still missing, that rain will start

pouring down and the lake's still visible where the wall should be. But it's just the bedroom. The duvet. Anya asleep at his feet. His wet pillow, the other side of the bed untouched, like always.

Shane lies there for a moment, completely still, not willing to let go yet. Of what exactly, he doesn't allow himself to dwell on. Whatever it was, already it was changing: Ilya with his skates—no, there'd been no skates, of course not, why would there be. Ilya with shoes—or barefoot? The ring on the left hand, unless it was the right, or—no, that was the last day, in the bathroom, in the dream he had no ring at all. Did he? The voice saying *I'm sorry*, if it'd even been a voice at all.

Too far from the start.

He breathes in. Everything holds still, like the world itself is also waiting to see if he can do this, if the version of himself that nodded in the snow and the dark is the same version who just woke up—and then, because there's nothing else he can do, because there's a price to be paid, because somewhere in the dark Ilya had asked and Shane had nodded, he breathes out.

Morning comes, and his hands stay closed.

NETTLES

Chapter Twenty

THE SUN IS warm, and something small runs past him. Brown hair, freshly clipped, catching the light as it goes, dark at the roots, gold at the edges, and there's laughter, bright, breathless, fearless. Promise, pregnant and waiting.

Shane turns, but the hair keeps going, laughing, laughing, laughing.

A constellation, scattered over a small nose, cheeks flushed pink from running. Dirt beneath fingernails, shoelaces undone, dragging through the grass. Shane crouches, and small hands reach for him, and the lake is silver, blue, gold—and the trees, they're—and behind him, a door opens, and the hair laughs, laughs, again—someone is calling—but the stars over the nose, scattered, endless, endless, endless.

Morning, maybe, or evening. Time is pointless. The dock stretching over the water, hands slapping against the boards. Feet in the water, flapping, laughing—a small voice calls from the shore—the sound of loons carrying over the lake—and somewhere, someone, a second voice laughing, rough, calling, calling, but Shane can't answer, won't—there's only the brown hair, clipped, dark and gold, freckles like stars, running—

“—Daddy?” the gold edges ask, “*Iiana*⁴⁵ is looking for you. Come—”

It runs past him again, through the grass, through the screen door, and Shane follows, turns his back to the cicadas calling, the sun shining golden, the lake behind him.

The house is sunlit, and laughter echoes around him.

“Shane?” love calls, a lighthouse beacon, and it sounds like beckoning, a finger curling in the sun. *Come here*, love’d always said, laughing, angry, asleep, reaching for him in the dark. *Come*. And Shane had, every time. He’d gone, and followed, and turned, until going was just another word for loving, until turning was less a choice and more second nature, the same as breath, as hunger.

He follows the laughter now, the running feet, love’s beckoning. Eurydice awaits, probably—Eurydice, or paradise, or maybe just his own demise, and—in front of him, a shy smile, a stubborn fire, a life bursting with everything he’s ever hoped for, dreamed for, prayed for—



PRESS SCRUM’S ALMOST over, thank fucking God.

⁴⁵ Papa

Montreal has officially just clinched a playoff spot, having destroyed Philadelphia earlier that night courtesy of a hat-trick from Shane and a Hail Mary block against a backhander—Philadelphia’s center put his whole weight behind that shot, so Shane has no idea how he even noticed it. He just threw himself in front of the net, left leg extended outwards in desperation, and prayed to anything that would hear him—Gods and Russian prodigies alike.

And then—the buzzer, the crowd screaming, his team crowding around him, Hayden gathering him into his arms.

It’s another in a series of back-to-back games where Shane’s played like a man possessed—which, who knows, maybe he is—pulling out new moves and techniques he’d never been known for before and leaving the commentators dumbfounded as they try to figure out what the fuck to do with him now that *Shane Hollander’s* come back a completely different player. *Turns out you can still teach an old dog new tricks*, he thinks—but, truth be told, he’s carrying the weight of it all over his fucking body. Every step makes him grimace, every lift of his arms makes him groan, every twist of his torso makes him want to bite his lips hard enough to draw blood. Really, he’s just waiting for the team’s official go-ahead that he’s free to drop for the night so he can go brush his teeth, crawl into his hotel bed and black the fuck out—ideally for the next full year, never mind that there’s a team bus meant to be picking him up tomorrow morning at seven a.m. so they can fly off to New York.

Admirals, you're fucking on.

It's a nice enough distraction, he supposes, while he sits here and answers predictable question after predictable question from journalists and pundits, all leaning forward, hands wrapped around their phones and their microphones and their recorders.

"Shane, can I ask—"

Shane looks. He knows this journalist, actually, or—well, he knows his *face*, at least, since Shane's never gone out of his way to deliberately learn his name. Farah mentioned him at one of their mid-season meetings, while they were reviewing media clippings from this season and the overall press coverage of his retirement announcement. His mother had insisted on it—*Shane, even if you're done, it's good to know what they're writing, honey, what they're saying—it affects your legacy, you know? How you'll be remembered.* Shane had wanted to scoff at that. How he'd be remembered? Please. Maybe that'd once been a priority for him, something vaguely on the forefront of his mind right alongside the distant concept of future generations of hockey fans having his face up on their bedroom walls, a poster of him right next to Ilya's, maybe, both of them wearing the exact same jersey. Little kids with their beds pushed up against the wall, going to sleep and waking up in the morning while looking up at the *Hollander-Rozanov* etched on both jerseys—but all of it seems so distant now. These days, there's so many other things that demand his focus, or pull his attention, and hockey's pretty far down the list beyond the constant echo of, *next*

one you win for me, yes? His attention's a spare currency these days, he knows, but—well.

There's just other priorities, is all. Making sure he can wake up tomorrow without having thrown himself off his hotel window, for one.

But back to this fucking guy—he's apparently written about Shane kindly enough in the last year, or so Farah tells him, which, like—*okay*. Is that meant to be a consolation to him, or a kindness, or some soft-hearted bullshit he's meant to take to heart? Should he smile sweetly at him, corner him after the scrum, drop to his knees in the janitor's office and offer to suck his dick, maybe promise him an in-depth tell-all as well? It just makes Shane dislike him even more, honestly, knowing he used to be one of the many journalists who'd once treated his marriage like a developing angle. *Stick to your script or fuck off.*

He can't complain too much, though—it's been a fine enough scrum so far, all in all. Tonight's game had been a home one for the Philadelphia guys, but it seems the vultures here aren't as blood-thirsty as the ones over in Montreal. They've asked him perfectly acceptable questions thus far—maybe tinged with a little bitterness at the home loss, but he'd expected that—and he's given them perfectly acceptable answers in turn. *The game was great. Yeah, the power play still needs a little work. We have to be cleaner through the neutral zone. Yes, I'm holding up okay, thanks for asking. Yes, one day at a time, but I'm just focused on winning, for now. A bit, yes, the road trip's a*

little difficult, but I'm doing my best to focus on the season. Yes, the rookies are adjusting, but there's a lot of talent there, for sure, I'm excited for the future of hockey. No, I'm not thinking about the Cup yet, it's too early for that, meanwhile all he's thinking about is the fucking Cup. He's said all of this in that monotone, slightly detached voice everyone's come to expect from him, the one that can turn thought into quote and quote into, well, nothing.

Shane nods at the journalist.

"Thanks, Shane. First of all, congrats on making the playoffs. Incredible game from you tonight," he starts. "I wanted to start by offering my deepest condolences to you and your family—obviously you've had a horribly difficult year, and—"

Here we go. Every fucking game, the same goddamn script. A few eyes lift, someone's recorder tilts closer.

"—Well, I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about how different you're finding this season, compared to the previous ones?"

Shane looks at him. "Different?"

Captain fucking obvious, he wants to say. *How different are you expecting me to find it?* Fucking idiots, all of them.

"Yeah," the journalist replies. "Just in terms of how you're playing. I mean, obviously there's been a lot of change in your

personal life this year. Do you think that's changed how you approach the sport?"

"Uh—" Shane shrugs. "Not really. I think I'm playing pretty much the same, honestly."

The journalist nods, glancing briefly at his notes. "I ask because some of the numbers are... pretty striking. You've taken more penalties this season alone than you have in your entire career. Your play's been noticeably more aggressive. There's been a lot more improvisation, too."

Shane says nothing.

"ESPN called it a complete change in your play style. There was that Sportsnet poll a while back where eighty-nine percent of fans voted that you'd become much more aggressive this season. And DAZN pointed out some similarities between how you're playing now and some of Roza—*Ilya's* old habits on the ice."

Montreal's PR guy by the wall, poor guy, immediately looks like he wants to sink into the floor.

"I mean," the journalist continues, "you've spent your whole career competing against him—that's most of your adult life. And on top of that, you two were together for a long time, *married*, even, and under pretty tenuous circumstances, all in all. So, well, given everything that's happened, maybe some of those habits have stuck with you." He pauses. "I was just wondering if you agree

with this general notion that you've picked some stuff up from him? That some of his influence is still there, maybe?"

What the fuck? Shane's jaw tightens. This is the guy Farah said was writing kindly about him? What's next, asking if every time he checks a player into the boards he's doing it to honor Ilya's fucking memory?

He shakes his head, gritting his teeth. "I'm still me. Still playing hockey."

The journalist's eyes dart back down to his computer, unsurprised by the non-answer.

"Right, of course. Uh—speaking of Ilya—" Some of the other journalists groan out loud, failing to hide their frustration at him getting to ask two separate questions back-to-back. "I wonder how you look back now at all those years together, given you've announced you're retiring after this season?" He looks straight at Shane. "I mean, your careers are so tied together—different teams, different cities, but always competing against each other, and for so many years, too. Did you two ever find it difficult? Maintaining a relationship while also building two careers in the same sport, with all the distance and the competition?"

Shane almost laughs. *Look at how polite all of you are now*, he wants to say. Long gone are the days of asking him to comment on the MLH's investigation into whether or not they'd been throwing games for each other, or on whether their teammates had expressed any discomfort in the locker rooms. It hasn't even been

a full year since Ilya's died, and Shane's already spent months having to listen to people talk about his marriage in the past tense with newly-found reverence, like Ilya's death gives them retroactive permission to have respected it all along, or some other bullshit. But, really—they're only respectful now because one half of them is dead. It's so obvious. They say *relationship* now with lowered voices, they say *husband* now with a hush, they don't say *spectacle* anymore, or *distraction*, or ask about *sportsmanship* and *fairness*. Now, they ask about the distance, about how hard it was, about how saint-like Ilya was, how Shane's on his merry fucking way to sainthood too. They ask what it was like, how it all felt, because they know the questions can't embarrass them anymore. There's no punchline anymore.

"The travel was part of it, sure," Shane says, instead of telling him to go straight to hell. "But you learn pretty early in this sport that distance is part of the job, no matter who you love. We both understood that. It was what we did. I think there was a lot of respect there, always, even before things changed between us publicly."

Things changed between us publicly. Jesus Christ. He hears himself saying it and wants to throw himself into the nearest ditch.

The journalist nods like Shane's said something thoughtful. *Huh.* Maybe he has.

The phones and recorders stay lifted, so he continues. "We both cared about winning a lot, that never went away. But I don't think

either of us saw the other one's success as something that took away from our own. That would've been a pretty hard way to live, I think."

There, here you go, Shane thinks. A perfectly acceptable answer. Professional, usable, a little generous, even. A few pens move, someone murmurs, *thanks*, and the PR guy relaxes. Shane leans back in his chair, looking down.

What he doesn't say is that the distance was the easiest part. Brutal sometimes, yes, but easy compared to having to stand in rooms where Ilya was three feet away and not being able to touch him, speak to him, look at him. Easy compared to standing in a tunnel after a game and having to stand still while Ilya passed because a camera operator was adjusting focus behind them. Easy compared to having Ilya across from him at the Foundation's charity events, at press conferences, at league functions, at award shows, the whole circus of hockey and celebrity, and being expected to hold his composure. The most sterile marriage the hockey world had ever seen, just as the league liked it.

Look—distance wasn't the same as loneliness, not how people imagined it. Not for Shane, at least, since he can't speak for Ilya, not anymore, but—he'd been lonely in rooms full of people *long* before Ilya. He'd been lonely on buses, locker rooms, family dinners with his parents. Lonely throughout his childhood, all throughout his teens. He'd been lonely in Montreal after losses, lonelier still after wins, lonely in hotel elevators, lonely during the anthem. But he'd never been lonely with his phone in his hand and

Ilya typing from a country away. That's not to say he never missed him—missing Ilya had a shape, had direction. There was a body on the other end of it, almost certainly awake too late, fucking up his sleep schedule and blaming the different time zones. But the journalists who ask him these kinds of questions are imagining some version of love that needs physical closeness to survive. Hey—he gets it—he used to think something like that too, probably, before he and Ilya eventually settled down. But then he finally understood that some things are just... structural. There whether you tend to them or not. Neglected, hidden, denied in public, fed in secret, bruised by pride, sometimes only just barely held together by spite and lust and whatever fucking law of chemistry had made them choose each other again and again despite every possible incentive not to, but *there*.

Being close to Ilya mattered, of course—he's not an idiot. He remembers just how relieved he'd feel with Ilya in the same room, his first touch after weeks apart. But distance itself never made him doubt what they had. If anything, distance clarified it, removed the noise, left only the fact.

Different teams, different cities, but always competing against each other, and for so many years, too.

Did you two ever find it difficult? Maintaining a relationship while also building two careers in the same sport, with all the distance and the competition?

It makes Shane want to laugh. *Competition*? The rivalry, certainly, yes, for sure, but—competition? Competition implies wanting what the other person has, and he's never once wanted what Ilya had—he's only ever wanted Ilya, really. Wanted his attention, wanted Ilya looking at him, wanted Ilya annoyed with him, wanted Ilya in the morning before he'd had his first cup of Colombian ground bean coffee, when his accent was thickest. Wanted him after games, sweaty and high on adrenaline, or on the bad nights, silent and disappearing and making cruel jokes, wanted the long hours coaxing him into talking and normalcy again. But Shane never once wanted his greatness. Ilya's greatness was never something he could possess, or—or even *envy* in any way, really. His hands, his vision, the beautiful passes he could set in motion. When Ilya scored, Shane just felt something he had no name for, not in any of the languages he spoke. Not in English, not in French, not in the very little Japanese he'd picked up from his grandparents, and definitely not in the butchered bursts of Russian he'd learned from Ilya.

Pride, certainly. Recognition too. Love, always—love for someone whose brilliance had existed entirely apart from him and always would. Inspiration, as well, which he only realized when he started noticing the small things more—stopping to hear how his skates sounded on fresh ice, how much the puck weighed against his stick after a pass—and at first, had thought it was age, maturity, an old dog's old sport, but eventually realized it was Ilya. It was all just Ilya. Learning from him how to be inside a moment, instead of already leaving it.

And Shane *always* watched. Oh, would Shane watch. He'd be in Montreal or on the road somewhere, too tired to shower, watching a Boston game or, eventually, a Centaurs game. Ilya would take a pass in overtime, and then he'd seemingly slow time altogether, and Shane would sit forward before the shot even came because he *knew*, he knew the puck would go in, he knew the arena would go ballistic, he knew Ilya would raise his arms, like a sudden release upwards, like the goal had been, fucking, *trapped* inside him, knew his teammates would come for him, knew the jerseys and the gloves and the helmets would all rush him. But there was always that one split second before they reached him where Ilya was alone on the ice, looking up.

Shane would watch it again and again on replay. Freezing the game right on that split second, right before contact. Ilya standing alone with the thing he'd just set in motion, the thing he'd just made. His face, frozen in the flash, the unabashed joy let through before it could be sealed back up.

Shane knows what that felt like. In his body, in his fucking chest, he knows *exactly* what that felt like. The rush before the bodies, the weightless instant when hockey's just answered you in kind.

And he knows what comes after as well. When the noise dies, and the interviews end, and the gear comes off, and you're back in your hotel room, and it's quiet, and what felt like everything two hours ago has already started to feel smaller, already started

shrinking into just another statistic, just another clip for social media, just another line on a scoresheet. When you sit on the edge of the bed, hair wet, body aching, fucking, *everywhere*, and your phone's in your hand, and you feel empty, and—well. Shane knows that too. How shameful it feels to want someone there.

Sometimes, after a game like that, when Ilya would score and seemingly set the world on fire, Shane would shoot him these quick texts, just to signal he was there. A blank message once, or maybe a single word—very early on in their careers, by accident, or exhaustion, or just cowardice, but, shit—he has plausible deniability either way. Later, when they'd become braver, bigger comforts like, *Good job*, messages he knew would mean nothing to anyone else if they came across their texts. Later still, after they were already married: *You did so great tonight, baby! Really really proud.*

Ilya would reply three minutes later, or three hours, or the next morning depending on his moods. *I know ;)*

Asshole, Shane would type, or not type, and send, or not send, depending on the year. Then, sometimes: *I wish I was there. Miss you.*

He looks down. *Too far from the start, too far from the start, too far from the start—*

The same journalist's asking him a follow-up question now. *Jesus Christ, buddy, take the fucking hint—*

“—Uh, sorry,” Shane says, realizing he's missed the entire first half of it. “Can you repeat that?”

The journalist smiles. “Just whether it was harder for you two after the relationship became public. All the scrutiny, the attention, being on opposite sides.”

Opposite sides. Opposite lines, opposite benches, opposite boxes, opposite cities, opposite cameras. Opposite sides of death now too, apparently, which is so fucking melodramatic he wants to laugh into the microphone.

He could say, *I spent years loving him from the other end of the ice and you people were blind to it, called it a rivalry the whole time.* He could say, *do you know what it feels like to stand in front of the love of your life and know that everyone thinks you hate each other?* He could say, *no, actually, the hardest part was being close enough to smell his fucking shampoo—which was my fucking shampoo—and still having to pass him in silence or with a nod because of what you fucking idiots would publish.*

Instead, he shrugs. “It was complicated.”

The journalist nods, visibly underwhelmed.

Shane adjusts the towel around his neck and looks towards the PR guy, who takes the hint. “Last one,” he tells the room.

There’s just one more question about the penalty accumulation, thank God. Shane answers it—says they need to be more disciplined, says *he* needs to be more disciplined. A few reporters write that down, and the scrum breaks apart, phones lowering, bodies shifting.

He stands up, walks the path back to the visiting locker room, and sits down by his stall.

Shower water, laughing voices, someone throwing a sock. Philadelphia waits patiently for him to step out into its air—post-game traffic, silent cab, black night sky, whatever miserable hotel room his team's booked him into for the night. His phone's in his bag, right next to Ilya's blue notebook, and he doesn't reach for it. There's no point. There's no message waiting from Ilya after his overtime goal, no delayed reply congratulating him on the hattrick, no teasing him for almost breaking his kneecap defending the center's backhand shot, no smug *I know*, no *asshole* blinking on the screen. The conversation has ended in one direction and continued, humiliatingly, in the other.

Maybe the easiest part was thinking distance had ever been the problem. Maybe the easiest part was all those years of blaming geography, schedules, flights, borders, of thinking their rivalry was the great big bad in their lives, the easy villain to assign blame to. All those years of saying they'd both retire eventually, assuming hockey didn't retire them first, so, *let's wait, it's better to just wait, Ilya, it's gonna be a fucking shitshow otherwise*. All those years of knowing the sport would go on without them, like it'd gone on long before them. All those years of thinking about retirement and feeling nothing about hockey and everything about the *after*, the long, open *after*, Ilya in it. Two men who'd given everything to a sport that would eventually discard them, lying in the dark, hands under each other's shirts, not talking about it. Everything they never said. How full the silence was.

All those years of blaming the distance, the league, the media, the vitriol, everything except the simple fact that even when two people love each other as much as they had, there are still rooms inside them no one else can enter. That even when the person you love most is two hours away, or two feet away, or asleep right next to you with their hand under your shirt, they can still be somewhere you can't follow, somewhere you'll never follow. Somewhere else, being someone else, living through something else entirely.

Who knows, Shane thinks, grabbing his bag, silenced phone stuffed into it. *Who the hell knows*.

NETTLES

Chapter Twenty-One

WHERE ARE THOSE spare batteries—

The TV remote's dead—*again*—and Shane's moving through the house, opening drawer after drawer, peering into the cupboard by the fridge, checking the basket next to the front door where they'd always kept their keys and any loose change, and—nothing. *Fucking great.*

He moves back to the kitchen, opening the drawer right next to the coffee machine. He scrummages through it: three dead lighters, an old pizza takeout menu, a screwdriver, two ballpoint pens, a pack of AAA batteries—*fuck yes*—peeking out from just under, uh, *what's that*—oh, yeah. One of Ilya's old calendars, right. Shane tries to get the pack of batteries out on its own, but they're stuck under the pages, so he grabs the calendar first. His eyes absentmindedly skim over it, and—*huh?*

Galina - Tuesday 2pm

Galina - Friday 9am

Galina - Monday 7pm

Galina - Tuesday 2:30pm (practice clash, ask Wiebe if he can move it)

Galina - Friday 9am

Galina - Monday 7pm

Galina - Tuesday 2pm

Galina—

Dozens and dozens of appointments. Some are circled, some underlined, others crossed out or moved to different days. A few have these small little asterisks beside them.

Shane grabs the calendar to look closer, and a corner of yellow paper sticks out from underneath one of the pages. He peels it back, and—

Reminders for every day:

- 1) *Eat*
- 2) *Take meds*
- 3) *Walk Anya*

He swallows dry, and his eyes move down the list.

- 4) *Tell Shane if feeling bad*
- 5) *Call Galina if feeling really bad*
- 6) *Try!!!*

Shane sits down on the floor, back against the cabinet door, and the sticky note drops to his lap.

There's... holy shit, there's *so* many appointments here. More than Shane had ever realized. He'd thought, he doesn't know—

that Ilya was seeing Galina once a week, maybe? Maybe less than that, even? But—fuck, three appointments every week, some in-person, some remote, but every single week, consistently enough for—months? Years? Dozens and dozens and dozens of reminders to pick up prescriptions, even moving hockey around his sessions—*practice clash, ask Wiebe if he can move it*. Tuesday afternoons, Friday mornings, squeezed around practices, moved when something came up and circled when it didn't. *Galina, Galina, Galina, Galina*—

And smack in the middle of it: *tell Shane if feeling bad*.

He grabs the sticky note again, holds it between his fingers. He doesn't—*fuck*, his throat's choked up, and his chest's hurting, and the handwriting's so fucking familiar, and—Jesus, suddenly, it's like Ilya's right in front of him, like Shane can just look up and see him right there, writing it all down on the kitchen table, all hunched over on the chair, frowning in concentration as he looks down at the yellow paper. The stupid exclamation marks, the ink under that last reminder close to smudged, probably from how hard he'd pressed the pen.

Try!!!

His mouth twists.

I know, he thinks, *I know, baby. I know you were trying*.

Shane runs his thumb over it, once, and he closes his eyes. Maybe if he presses the sticky note gently back onto the calendar, it'll be like it never left in the first place.

Maybe. Maybe if he's gentle enough about it.



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO you—”

A cake, in front of him.

“—happy birthday to you—”

Raspberry and chocolate, Shane hopes—Ilya's favorite. At least do him the dignity of not fucking up the cake.

“—happy birthday, dear Shane—”

Decorated like—a puck, it looks like? That's funny. He wonders who thought of it. Hayden, maybe? His mom?

“—happy birthday to you!”

He nods, looking around him. A polite enough smile, hopefully. *Now please get the fuck out of my house.*

“C'mon, make a wish!”

He purses his lips, ready to object, then thinks twice about it. He draws a large breath, closes his eyes shut.

Come back to me.

He blows out the candles, and smoke rises around him. If he squints, he can almost make out the faint remnants of last-ditch necromancy in the haze.



ILYA DIDN'T TELL him about his depression for a long time. It was the wrong decision, of course, but Shane thinks he understands it, looking back. Maybe Ilya knew it was the wrong decision even while he was making it, but made it anyway because he thought Shane already had enough to carry, or because Ilya had spent his whole life pretending he didn't need help from those around him, or maybe because the loneliness of being depressed inside a secret relationship while in a foreign city he'd chosen for someone who didn't know he was struggling was so fucking perfect in its irony, he didn't know where to start explaining it.

And Shane had let him.

That's the nice way of putting it, anyway; the version he can live with on the good days. He never pushed where Ilya didn't want to

be pushed, never pried doors open, never barged his way into conversations Ilya was clearly avoiding.

He'd thought, at the time, that this was patience, respect, mercy. *I'm here*, he thought he'd been saying, over and over again, in the only way he knew how. *I'm here when you're ready. I'm here when you need me. I'm here. I'm here. I'm here. I'm here.*

There were things Ilya never said to anyone, and maybe he kept expecting Shane to ask, but Shane didn't. Shane hadn't. He'd just... left the door open. Every time, without comment. And maybe Ilya stood in the doorway for years on end, waiting for Shane to make the leap, and he never had.

He never had.

It hurts to think about now: Shane giving space because he thought space was love, Ilya taking space because he thought space was the only thing that could protect their marriage. Both of them standing on either side of the same silence, blissful and unaware.

He looks back now, and the worst part is how completely he'd loved Ilya, and how little he'd known how to show it. There was no middle register. There never was.



SHANE'S OUT ON the balcony.

He's got both hands around an untouched glass of water, elbows resting on the railing while he stares down at the road. There's not much to see, really. A few apartment windows still lit, headlights slipping between the trees, the occasional car disappearing around the bend.

"Hey." The balcony door slides open behind him. "Can't sleep?"

Shane turns. Ilya's standing by the doorway, squinting into the darkness.

"Shit," Shane says, straightening. "Sorry. Did I wake you?"

Ilya shakes his head and steps outside. "Is okay." He pulls the door shut behind him. "What is bothering you?"

Shane looks back at the road. Jesus. *What isn't*, he thinks.

Whether Ilya's medication is working. Whether he's selfish for staying in Montreal when he could go join the Centaurs. Whether he should've left already. Whether Ilya resents him for not leaving by now. Whether their marriage can survive another how-many-years of playing in separate cities, always counting down to the next flight home. Whether they'll ever have children. Whether it's Shane's fault they don't yet. Whether all this time apart is the

reason Ilya's still so noncommittal about the topic. Whether refusing to leave Montreal means he's choosing hockey over the life they're supposed to be building together. Whether Ilya will ever get better. Whether Shane will ever stop waiting for the next bad thing to happen, the next shoe to drop, the carpet to get pulled under his feet. Whether any of it is fixable, solvable. Whether he's making it all worse. Whether—

“Nothing,” Shane replies.

Ilya watches him for a moment. “Nothing?”

Shane smiles faintly. “Just couldn’t sleep. You know?”

Ilya comes to stand beside him, and yawns. A car passes below, headlights washing briefly over the trees. Another follows, and they both watch it disappear.

“We should count.”

Shane looks over.

“The cars,” Ilya explains.

Shane snorts. “What, like we’re six years old?”

“Why not?” Ilya shrugs. “We play for points. First to one hundred wins, *da*⁴⁶?”

⁴⁶ Yes

“*One hundred*—Ilya, it’s the middle of the night!”

Ilya looks at him.

“In *Ottawa*,” Shane stresses. “In the fucking *suburbs*. How many cars are you expecting to pass?”

“So?” Ilya grins at him. “You got some place to be at four in the morning, Hollander?”

Shane ignores him, silent for a moment while he ponders it. “What does the winner get?”

“Uh—” Ilya looks around. “Nothing, I don’t fucking know. I just came up with this idea.

Does it matter?”

Shane laughs. “Wow, great game.”

Ilya raises his eyebrows, giving him a *come-on-are-we-doing-this-or-what* look. Shane stares at him for another second, then back at the road.

“Fine.” A pair of headlights appears at the far end of the street. “One.”

“Oh, sure, okay. Fucking cheater—” Ilya rolls his eyes. “Game had not even started yet.”

Shane grins at him. “You snooze, you lose. It’s—oh, *three!*”

Ilya laughs. “Holy shit, you actually *are* cheating!” He looks over the road. “That was just one car.”

“*Nope*,” Shane says, popping the *p*. “It was two cars. Look there.” He points in the distance. “See? Two pairs of headlights.” He grins. “*Three* points, like I said.”

Ilya shakes his head with a smile. *So fucking competitive*, Shane hears him mutter under his breath.

“What?” Shane laughs. “It’s true! Not my fault you don’t wear glasses.”

Ilya narrows his eyes at him—and just like that, they’re on. Another car approaches.

“*Five*,” Ilya says immediately.

“—*What the fuck!*” Shane frowns. “How is that two cars?”

Ilya smiles sweetly at him. “I am just following your rules, *малыш*⁴⁷.”

“Oh, fuck off.” He scoffs. “*One* point. Stop looking in the wrong direction and maybe you’ll actually score.”

“Scared of losing?” Ilya asks. “I am looking at the road.”

⁴⁷ Baby

“Yeah, yeah,” Shane mutters under his breath. “Looking at the fucking *moon*, is what.”

The cars come and go, and they keep adding new rules to the game: *grey cars don't count*, says Ilya, because it's the likeliest color and therefore too easy. *There won't be enough cars to count then, dumbass*, Shane rebuts. *Okay, forget the grey cars*, Ilya says, *but black cars should be worth more, no? You can't fucking see them in the night*. And Shane laughs—full-bellied, at that. *Okay, okay*, he tells Ilya. *Fair*. Or, *oh, and—cars with only one headlight count double*, Shane proposes, which Ilya just calls, *fucking stupid*.

“What?” Shane frowns. “It makes them look like motorcycles, dumbass.”

White cars, worth less. Taxis, worth more—*they basically just look like normal cars in the distance, so you really have to squint to notice it's a taxi*, Shane explains. Buses, worth less—*way too fucking easy*, Ilya says, *they look like fucking Transformers with how big they are*.

Eventually, Shane rubs his hands against his thighs and turns to Ilya. “Do you ever think about where they're going?”

“The cars?”

Shane nods, and Ilya looks back over the city.

“Hm. Not really.”

“Bullshit—c’mon.” Shane watches a pair of headlights move down the road. “Like, I think that guy’s going home. Probably works night shifts, or something.”

“Mhm, yes. Maybe he hates his job.”

“Uh, no—maybe he *loves* his job.” Shane frowns. “Imagine he’s a fucking doctor. Kinda shitty for us to say he hates his job.”

“Well, *he* might be a *she*. And I thought most doctors hated their jobs, honestly.”

Shane laughs at that, and another car approaches.

“*Black!*” they both yell out at the same time, and laugh.

Ilya looks over at him, sees the remnants of laughter still playing in Shane’s smile. “You look better. It’s fun, right?”

Shane looks over. “The game?”

Ilya shakes his head. “No, no. This.” He gestures vaguely around them. “Just—you and me. Us two.” A beat. “I like seeing you relax.”

“Oh.” Shane smiles and looks back at the city. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s fun.”

Another pair of headlights turns the corner, and he doesn’t count it this time—just watches it go. When they finally go to

sleep, sometime close to dawn, neither of them remembers who won.



SHANE'S SITTING ON the balcony, blanket around his shoulders. He glances down at his phone, sees the date blinking back at him.

May 23, 2025.

He scrunches his eyes closed, dropping his full weight against the railing and letting out a shuddered breath.

One year.

Another sleepless night, it looks like. Shane looks over the city.

One, he counts the passing car. *Two. Three. Four—*

The road keeps going, and he loses count.

In the far distance, a new pair of headlights comes around the bend. Shane sighs.

One—



IT MIGHT BE the smack-middle of the Stanley Cup Finals, and Shane's body might be battered and bruised all over, and his ribs might feel like they're on fucking fire, and he might want nothing more than to crawl into bed and wake up three years from now, but—he looks at the clock, and it strikes exactly midnight—*June 10th is still June 10th*. Stanley Cup or no Stanley Cup.

Theriault had kept them longer in the rink tonight, reviewing tape over and over again—it's looking like it's gonna be Colorado from the Western Conference, so they've all banded together to study their players and any weak spots, and—well. Shane thinks he's fucking got this.

He'd had to Uber the candles tonight, and—sure, the cake's pretty lopsided and kind of small, bought from some random franchised bakery here in Montreal that was miraculously still open tonight after he'd stepped out of Bell Centre when it was already fully night outside, but, well, he doesn't really care. It's still raspberry and chocolate. How hard can it be to fuck *that* up, right? Ilya would like it, he hopes.

Shane hadn't even had time to shower, much less question why the fuck his and Ilya's birthdays are so close together anyway.

Well—he can ponder over the universe's many interminable cruelties another day. Today's not about him.

He leans against the kitchen counter where two sets of plates are laid out, groaning softly as his hips make contact, and he leans forward to blow out the candles in front of him.

“Happy birthday.” He smiles. “Sorry for the no gift, but—”

His voice trails off. *You’ll have it soon enough.*



“THERE IS A place,” Ilya tells him, sometime in their years together, “my mother loved more than all others, I think.”

Shane looks over at him. “What place?”

“I don’t remember much.” Ilya frowns. “but Andrei, he—he remembers. He told me once.” He pauses. “It was in Finland, I think, this park called, ah—Koli. A hill close to the Russian border.”

Ilya closes his eyes, smiling. “Well, close-*ish*. It’s, like, two hours from the border, but—you know.” A beat. “He told me she used to say there was magic there.”

“She did?” Shane’s lips curl. “What else?”

“Well—” Ilya looks down, solemn. “That is the thing, I do not know much. Andrei—he is the one who remembers. Mama⁴⁸ never talked to me about it, maybe because our father was there more after I was born, or she was already sad, or—I don’t know.” He shakes his head, scatters the memory away, smiles weakly. “It does not matter now, I guess.”

“Hey—” Shane grabs his hand, laces his fingers through Ilya’s. “Tell me anyway.”

Ilya frowns. “Shane, that’s what I am saying. I don’t—”

“Whatever you want,” he clarifies. “Even if you don’t know. Even if you’re just making it up.” Shane pauses. “Tell me like if she’d told you.”

“Like if she told me? What—”

“—Like it’s her story.” Shane nods. “We’ll make it real.”

Ilya stops breathing, or moving altogether, and looks Shane dead in the eyes.

No one’s ever loved me this much, reflected off his eyes like the easy night sky.

And then Shane’s own answering thought, just as easily: *I do, I do, I do*.

⁴⁸ Mom

Ilya seems to ponder it for a moment, deep in thought. Then, he squeezes Shane's hand, once, tight, and exhales. He nods.

"In Finland, there is a park—"

In Finland, there is a park so beautiful, magic lives there. At the top of the hill sits the largest lake in the world, with water so blue artisans and traders ask to borrow its hue. It swallows the horizon until the forest runs all the way to the water, green upon green until the world is nothing but earth and lake and sky.

Irina went there, once, as a university student. Before she'd had Ilya, before she'd had Andrei, before she'd met Grigori. Camped there, for a whole week straight, over the white quartz in sight of the full lake, overlooking the horizon at the very top of the hill. She loved the height of it, loved standing up above everything. She'd stood in front of great paintings and felt nothing, yet had wept at the completely ordinary sunsets of Koli. So, she'd built a tiny hut made of wood and mud, grass and stone—room for two, and a hearth that would never know cold.

Sit with me, Ilyusha, she'd tell him later on, every time he'd hold still long enough for her to describe it to him, as often as she could, sometimes every day, telling him of its magic, its fauns and fairies, its poison mushrooms and floating kingdoms, seeing him fidget and wonder, seeing his eyes shine. *The world can wait another hour for you, darling.*

You will forget most of what I tell you, I know, she'd smile warmly, tap his nose, break the spell. *But not this.*

She's there sometimes, still. A woman in a red coat at the edge of the forest, hair caught by the wind, standing by that tiny hut made of mud and stone, looking over Lake Pielinen and thinking of Moscow, thinking of spring, thinking of all the people she'd once been and all the people she'll still become. She looks down at the little boy beside her, holding her hand, and sees him tall, large-knuckled, grown far beyond the fallible reach of her hands. Red cheeks and untied shoes. A new child to make in her image, the chance to start anew. Golden-edged hair, turning to curls of molten gold, like his two brothers before him. She spins him fairytales of a cruel king, a runaway queen, two clashing princes—one brittle, the other fierce—and *far away, in a little hut by a little lake, the golden child the queen raises to one day the kingdom claim.* And he laughs at the rhyme, claps, asks for *more, more, more.* He doesn't know any better. His hearth has never gone cold.

In Finland, there is a park where the dead go to live. At the top of the hill, your hair goes wild in the wind, your hand goes warm holding the fingers of one most dear. The lake is below you, blue as the open sky, and the forest breathes beneath your feet, and when you cry, you don't know why.

In Finland, there is a park where the world grows larger than you could think. Mountains and oceans and a long dirt road, and when the sun falls over the lake, the water turns to gold. The forest

goes dark around you, and something calls you home, and as your hand opens, only love remains to show.

An angle of light, a child through the trees, a hand against wind.
Look over the impossible blue, the witch of the hut sighs, the runaway queen cries, *and know that everything beautiful belongs to you, too.*

Shane looks at Ilya for a long moment.

“It sounds like a beautiful place,” he tells him. “I’d love to visit, someday.”

NETTLES

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE SUN IS warm, and something small runs past him. Brown hair, freshly clipped, catching the light as it goes, dark at the roots, gold at the edges, and there's laughter, bright, breathless, fearless. Promise, pregnant and waiting.

Shane turns, but the hair keeps going, laughing, laughing, laughing.

A constellation, scattered over a small nose, cheeks flushed pink from running. Dirt beneath fingernails, shoelaces undone, dragging through the grass. Shane crouches, and small hands reach for him, and the lake is silver, blue, gold—and the trees, they're—and behind him, a door opens, and the hair laughs, laughs, again—someone is calling—but the stars over the nose, scattered, endless, endless, endless.

Morning, maybe, or evening. Time is pointless. The dock stretching over the water, hands slapping against the boards. Feet in the water, flapping, laughing—a small voice calls from the shore—the sound of loons carrying over the lake—and somewhere, someone, a second voice laughing, rough, calling, calling, but Shane can't answer, won't—there's only the brown hair, clipped, dark and gold, freckles like stars, running—

“—Daddy?” the gold edges ask, “*Iana*⁴⁹ is looking for you. Come—”

It runs past him again, through the grass, through the screen door, and Shane follows, turns his back to the cicadas calling, the sun shining golden, the lake behind him.

The house is sunlit, and laughter echoes around him.

“Shane?” love calls, a lighthouse beacon, and it sounds like beckoning, a finger curling in the sun. *Come here*, love’d always said, laughing, angry, asleep, reaching for him in the dark. *Come*. And Shane had, every time. He’d gone, and followed, and turned, until going was just another word for loving, until turning was less a choice and more second nature, the same as breath, as hunger.

He follows the laughter now, the running feet, love’s beckoning. Eurydice awaits, probably—Eurydice, or paradise, or maybe just his own demise, and—in front of him, a shy smile, a stubborn fire, a life bursting with everything he’s ever hoped for, dreamed for, prayed for—

“No—” the cicadas tell him. “No, Shane, *любимый*⁵⁰. No—”

He frowns. Right there, right in front of him, sketched through time like threads of gold. A stubborn smile, a shy fire—dark roots and edges of gold—Eurydice, paradise, his own demise—

⁴⁹ Papa

⁵⁰ Beloved

“—No—” the lake begs. “No, you—you cannot—”

The trees swaying, the lake golden, the days sticky, summer his, theirs. Eurydice, paradise—his own demise—

“Turn away. Be happy—” the loons call. “Please, Shane, go be happy. That—that is what I want. Do not—I do not want you to be stuck here, please—”

Close off your heart, and Shane steels on, past the cicadas’ song, the lake’s begging, the loons’ call. *Close off your heart, close off your heart, close off your heart, close off your heart—*

Eurydice—paradise—his own demise—

“No,” Ilya cries. “No—no, the opposite—open your heart, Shane. *Open your heart.*”

He shakes his head—*almost—almost—*Eurydice—paradise—his own demise—

“Please—” The loons, the lake, the cicadas. “Please, Shane—that is my wish for you. *Любимый*⁵¹—”

Eurydice—paradise—his own demise—

—A shy smile—a stubborn fire—

⁵¹ Beloved

NETTLES

—Dark roots—edges of gold—

—A lighthouse beacon—love's beckon—

—Shane going, following, turning—same as breath, same as
hunger—

—A golden sun, still over a golden lake—

—*Iana*⁵²—

—*Daddy*—

The darkness comes, and he wakes with his hands clenched
empty on the sheets.



SHANE'S SITTING IN the penalty box.

Two minutes for interference. He knows the call's coming while
he's doing it—knows from the angle, from the ref's whistle being
blown before Colorado's winger has even finished hitting the glass,
from Hayden's head snapping towards him with that specific tilt
Shane's known since they were teenagers and mouthing him, *what
the fuck, man?!*

⁵² Papa

He knows. *He knows.*

Theriault's been trying to explain this to him all season long, unsuccessfully. That the penalties, the extra hits, all the unnecessary shit that's started to make the highlight reels in a different tone of voice—admiration from some, concern from others—are pretty at odds with what *Shane Hollander, Golden Retriever of Hockey* has come to be known for. He's kept pointing it out, the journalists have kept pointing it out, his teammates have kept pointing it out. Everybody's kept pointing it the fuck out. So, well—why should he have stopped before the Stanley Cup Final? Too strong of a habit to break, after all.

Don't ruin your legacy tomorrow, kid, Theriault had pulled him aside last night to say, hand on his shoulder.

Ruin my legacy? Shane had wanted to scoff at him. *I'm going to cement my fucking legacy tomorrow.*

But he'd just sat there quietly, nodding while Theriault kept his hand on his shoulder, telling Shane all about how *I know you're going through a rough time, and we're all here for you, but this isn't you, Hollander. I'm worried, the team's worried... You're an incredible player, and—*

Whatever. It doesn't fucking matter. Yeah, yeah, all the hockey pundits who'd spent fifteen years praising him for his non-violence now had the dark sequel in their hands—Grief, the Player, the widower as a more compelling angle. Turns out the cleanest body

in the league still has blood in it. Big fucking deal. He's going to win Montreal the Cup tonight, isn't he?

And Shane knows all that, either way—knows all about legacy and career and little kids with posters of his face up on their bedroom walls—and yet he still hears Ilya's voice, right in his ear: *some things you do because you can't not do them, Hollander.*

Well, right back at him. *Some Cups you win because you can't not win them, Rozanov.*

So the hit felt good. Sue him. Maybe that's a shitty thing to say, but it's not like he'd say it out loud to Theriault, or his parents, or even Hayden, who'd probably understand him all too well and then look at him with that god-awful concern Shane's come to loathe just as much as pity, since it's all anyone knows how to do now—look at him like they've just kicked his puppy. It felt good, like all the other checks and dirty hits this season have felt good, right in those two seconds before the penalty arrived. Shoulder through chest, body into boards, crowd up on their feet. Proof that Shane Hollander still had mass, still could move another body through space. That something in the world could still be made to react when he touched it, however hard.

Then the arm, and the whistle, and the penalty box.

The door shuts behind him, and Shane sits down. A number, bright on the board—two minutes. *Fair punishment*, he supposes.

Hockey, for all its rules and complex plays, has always been simple when it comes to understanding consequence, even when the rest of his life refuses to. You do the thing, the ref's arm lifts, the whistle goes, the door opens, you sit. Everyone knows what's been lost and for how long. Everyone knows when they're allowed back.

Across the ice, the other penalty box is empty. So it's just him, today.

Figures. No one else willing to get their hands bloody.

The crowd's still settling down, one half whistling in approval of the hit, the other outraged he wasn't outright kicked from the game. But, come on—who'd kick Shane Hollander from a Stanley Cup Final? Wilson leans over the boards, yelling something Shane can't hear. J.J. is talking to the ref with one hand on his hip, pretending to argue back, killing time. Hayden uses the opportunity to skate a circle near him, his eyes cutting towards the box, and Shane looks away before he can get whatever he thinks he sees.

The penalty clock starts.

2:00.

1:59.

1:58.

Time behaving itself. Smug bastard.

Colorado sets up its power play, and Shane watches one of the players fake a left turn, *little shit*, watches their defenseman block a shot, watches the middle lane open and close and open again. That's where his mind should be. On the next shift, on the score, on whether that dumb hit was worth the two minutes or not, whether the league office will call because every goddamn person involved in hockey suddenly has so many opinions about *Shane Hollander's emotional state*. His mind should be inside the game, because that's the one mercy hockey can offer him now: *be here, do this, focus on this one thing at this time*.

But across the ice, the other penalty box isn't empty anymore. Ilya's sitting there.

Shane's first thought isn't fear. That will come later tonight, maybe, when he's alone in his room and has to decide whether seeing his dead husband in the middle of the Finals counts as a hallucination or a visitation or his brain finally succumbing to psychosis, or maybe just the accumulated stress of three months' worth of playoffs getting to him. Right now, though, his first thought is annoyance, immediate and so fucking fond it punches the breath from him, because *of course* Ilya would sit there like that. Of course he'd sit with one ankle crossed over the other, helmet off, hair pushed back from his forehead, mouth curved, looking less like a ghost and more like an actual player waiting out an actual penalty—one he fully intends to repeat as soon as he's back on the ice.

The glass in front of Shane fogs when his breath hits it. He blinks, and Ilya remains.

“What the *fuck*,” he whispers, or thinks, or breathes. He can’t tell which.

No, Shane tells himself. *This isn’t real*.

So he purposely doesn’t watch Ilya. He watches the game instead, or he tells himself that’s what he’s doing, anyway. Shane doesn’t watch Ilya, who’s on the other side of the rink, who is absolutely there, who Shane is absolutely watching because his eyes will naturally always find him in a room or a rink or a foreign fucking country by some goddamned mechanism he’s never been able to explain.

Then Ilya lifts his eyebrows, just slightly, and God, it’s such an Ilya Rozanov *expression*—*Shane’s* Ilya Rozanov—that his whole body turns to it, heart recognizing what it misses before grief can ruin it. *Fucking Christ*, that tiny flicker. The face he made when Shane tried to lie and couldn’t keep a straight face to save his life. The face he made across restaurant tables, across hotel lobbies, across benches, across couches, across airports, across anywhere Shane’d done something that could be mocked and loved in the same breath.

*A penalty? Very good, коменок*⁵³, Shane swears he hears, though Ilya's mouth doesn't move. *Finally, some personality.* He hears his voice so clearly, so fucking vividly, he has to close one hand around the edge of the bench.

On the ice, Montreal misses another shot. The puck clears.

1:21.

1:20.

He should be looking at the clock. Should be watching the game. Should be breathing through his nose, getting his heart rate down, considering the next shift, the next face-off, the next action. That's what Shane Hollander does. That's what Shane Hollander's always done. It's the great moral framework of his life, really—pressure arrives, and he reduces it to tasks. Tie the skate. Make the pass. Answer the question. Stand in front of the microphone. Don't flinch when other men call your husband something awful under their breath. Don't chase the ref after a bad call. Don't look at Ilya when he skates past during warm-ups. Do not, under any circumstances, let the world know where the softest part of you lives.

But the softest part of him is dead and sitting across the ice. So Shane looks.

⁵³ Kitten

Ilya leans back, or seems to. The distance is wrong, and Bell Centre's lightning flattens him a bit—which it never did with his actual body. Shane would prefer him to be fully translucent, honestly. He'd prefer some obvious sign of the supernatural, some pale outline, some horror-movie effect that proves this isn't really happening. Instead, Ilya looks... freakishly alive. Slightly blurry at the edges, sure, but his grief-addled mind can excuse that as just being a byproduct of the shitty lightning. Shane's mind just sees Ilya sweaty, irritated, beautiful, and thus alive. So alive it even tells Shane's body to rise in his direction.

"Hollander!" the penalty box attendant shouts. "You good?"

Shane looks at him too fast. The guy's maybe fifty, or sixty, talking into a headset, eyes darting between him and the ice. He's not looking at Shane like he's seen anything. He's too focused on the play, chewing gum and tucking it into his cheek.

"Yeah," Shane breathes out. His voice sounds normal enough, so the man nods and turns back to watch the game.

Across the ice, Ilya raises his eyebrows again.

Asshole, Shane thinks. *Fuck off*.

And for a second, everything seems so ordinary and normal between them, Shane's fully convinced he's lost his mind.

So be it. He sits back in the box and lets himself think about his first Stanley Cup final, since—well, it's not like he can really pick and choose what comes up in his memory when a crowd's this loud and the game's briefly happening without him and no one's focused on him for two whole minutes. 2015, it was. The season right after Ilya's Cup win—2014. Jesus, time's fucking *flown*—they were both such babies. So young. Ilya was, what, twenty-two at the time? Or—no, actually—twenty-three already. His birthday had fallen right in the middle of the Finals that year, like it does every year. Like it had this year.

Fuck, Ilya at twenty-three was... well, he was different. It's hard to name now. A sharper edge, maybe? Less certain of himself, which also made him convinced he was completely certain about life, if that even makes any sense—though Shane thinks it doesn't, not really. Some young resistance, an ancient loneliness everyone just mistook for arrogance.

Honestly, Shane had found this a little annoying. Even more so when Ilya was younger, at nineteen, just *Rozanov* to him. *Get over yourself*, he'd always wanted to tell him, scoff at him, call him a try-hard.

He finds it now, at thirty-four, a whole life with him after, the most... Fuck, he doesn't even have the words.

Maybe in Russian he would. Ilya always loved to say that Russian had words for everything, but especially for things that English could barely limp towards, called it a *half-assed version of*

talking. Ilya'd once told him there was a word for wanting something precisely because it was already gone, or would be gone. Said that, in Russian, love and mourning worked in tandem.

Shane can't remember the word now, as much as he tries. The conversation happened years ago, and his brain's probably all scrambled at this point after, well, *everything*. But he does remember how Ilya had described it, or how his memory recalls it now: love, shaped by absence. He'd learned it from his mother, apparently, who'd used it often enough.

Had she, really? Shane's not so sure whether Ilya managed to learn many things from his mother. Not to be crass, just—considering how old he was when she passed. It's not like Shane vividly remembers anything his parents told him before he was a teen, either, when his brain had developed further. It's much likelier she told Andrei instead, and *he* told Ilya later on, sometime in their teens—maybe sincerely, or maybe cruelly. Maybe even both. Who the hell knows. Not Shane, certainly.

Honestly, he doesn't know if there even *was* a word. Ilya lied about Russian constantly, in part because he enjoyed being untranslatable and also because English annoyed him on principle. Maybe the word was real. Maybe it wasn't. But him, Andrei, Irina—all of them *were* real. Isn't that what matters? Ilya, lying on the floor of the cottage, Anya's head on his stomach, one hand gesturing above him, explaining how English was too simple with time, too confident in separating *was* and *is* and *will be*, while

Russian, he said, *Russian knows better*. Shane, mindlessly listening while making coffee, amused and in love and probably missing the point because he'd thought there would be a thousand more chances to hear it again. A little constellation of chances, a pocket of infinity tucked inside each one.

Well—he'd heard it once, he's hearing it today, he'll hear it tomorrow. Ilya *was* right. Or, no—*is* right. No—*will* be right. Who's to say?

Too simple with time, he'd said. Shane wants to laugh. *You absolute fucking idiot*. Maybe linear time will malfunction if Shane wills it so, or maybe all the bullshit Ilya spied at him didn't account for memory, or hallucinations, or ghost visitations.

If Russian knows better, he'd answer Ilya now, if he could—*well, let me be Russian*.

Maybe he still can.

Across the ice, Ilya taps two fingers against the glass. *Shut the fuck up, Hollander*, written all over his face. *You are thinking too loud. Go win this fucking Cup*. Shane can't possibly hear it, either way—the arena's too loud, the boxes are too far apart, the game's too alive between them—but fuck if the sound doesn't land inside him like the ringing of city bells. Ilya used to do that when he wanted Shane's attention in public and couldn't call him outright. Two fingers against a table. Against glass. Against the back of Shane's wrist. *Look now. Look at me. Look, Hollander. Look, Shane. Look,*

κοιτηνοκ⁵⁴. *Look, look, look.* And look Shane had. He'd looked, and gazed, and stared, as much as he could, as much as he'd been allowed to.

Shane's mouth goes dry. He doesn't know what his face is doing—he hopes nothing, or—fuck, he hopes it's doing *something*. He wants Hayden to look over and see him seeing this, because if Hayden sees it too, then the world has changed irrevocably and every midnight prayer of his has come true. He wants the penalty box attendant to turn around and say, *bey, what the fuck, is that Ilya fucking Rozanov, is that your dead husband, Hollander* and he wants to put his fist through the glass before anyone alive says Ilya's name out loud before him.

The puck clears again, and the crowd roars.

0:44.

Ilya stands for some reason, rolls one shoulder like the penalty's boring him. The movement is casual and impatient, and Shane knows it. Knows every single curve of his body, the ache in the hip at night, the irritability in the neck in the mornings. Knows this performance all too well, the one-man-show of Ilya Rozanov—a man about to be released from consequence, and annoyed by all the time that's been taken from him.

⁵⁴ Kitten

Well, he wants to tell him. Get in line, asshole. Me fucking too. I want it all back too.

Suddenly, Shane's thrown backwards into another June, another game, another penalty box, Ilya alive behind the glass while Shane scored and refused to look at him while skating past, because looking had rules then. Everything had rules then. Rivalry had rules, love had rules, secrecy had rules, professionalism had rules, and Shane, obedient to a fault, had followed every last one. He'd skated past the box without turning his head.

He'd known Ilya was watching, though. Had felt it along the side of his face like heat.

How many times had he done that? Moved past love because the room required it, the rink required it? The team, the cameras, the league, the stupid fiction of *staying in control of the narrative*—how many times had Ilya looked and Shane not looked back, because there would be *later*, because there would always be *later*, because *later* was the whole ridiculous fucking foundation they'd built their entire lives on?

Across the ice, Ilya's hand rests on the penalty box door, and Shane's inadvertently does the same. The symmetry is so cruel he nearly laughs. Nearly cries.

0:35.

For the first time since the penalty started, the whistle blows. Players drift towards the faceoff circle. Hayden bends over at the

waist, flexes the leg he blocked a shot with. J.J. says something to another player. The stakes are too high for Shane to be this distracted, he knows. He should be using the time to talk to the team, to think, to prepare. Instead, he just continues to look across the ice at Ilya, and Ilya continues to look back at him, and the whole arena seems to have briefly transformed into an elaborate trap built solely to keep them apart.

Ilya mouths something at him. Shane thinks he catches the shape of it, and it's—no. *Fuck*. Of course he doesn't. The word dies against the glass before he can make sense of it. He can't read Ilya's lips from here, or anywhere, really—there's no *here* that gets him close enough to a dead man's mouth. Even as an impossible hallucination, or a ghost, or a grief vision, or whatever fucked-up category this belongs to, Ilya still can't make things easy for him.

His mouth moves again, slower this time, exaggerating just enough to be a little insulting, and Shane leans forward before he can stop himself.

The penalty-box attendant glances at him again. "Hollander."

No answer.

"*Shane*." He tries again. "You all right? You look like you're zoning out, man. You're on in thirty."

Shane doesn't reply. Doesn't even look at him. Just watches Ilya's mouth—four words, maybe? Or three. English or Russian, he can't tell. The distance ruins it, the glass ruins it, death ruins it.

Everything's been ruining the fucking message for a whole year now.

0:27.

Shane watches Ilya closer and, Jesus—his eyes are just so fucking familiar. So fucking—*knowing*. He's looking right back at Shane, like he would when Shane was being way too serious about something that didn't warrant that much seriousness, or when Ilya would say something awful and cruel to him and then immediately want Shane to forgive him for it. The look that always meant, *I know, любимый⁵⁵*. *I know. Come here.*

Shane's breath catches so hard he thinks a rib must be puncturing his fucking heart.

The whistle blows, and the puck drops.

0:21.

Ilya sits down again.

Shane almost says *no*. Out loud, maybe. He catches it behind his teeth, slams the word nears his tongue and orders it to stay there. *No. Don't sit. Don't vanish into the glass. Don't become something I can't*

⁵⁵ Beloved

reach again. Stay standing. Stay visible. Stay where I can see you. Stay, stay, stay.

0:17.

The crowd starts to rise again as his two minutes are nearly over, everyone in the building wanting to count *Shane Hollander* back into usefulness. *Come on, Hollander, go win us this fucking Cup*, someone yells out somewhere behind him. *For him, Hollander, come on!* screams another voice. *Hat-trick, hat-trick, hat-trick*, chants another.

He used to love this part, especially from inside the box. How these last few seconds counted down, how his body would lean forward on instinct before the door even opened, how time would narrow to the latch and ice and that first hard stride back into the game. The penalty box was punishment, yes, but also promise. Wait long enough, and the game lets you return. Wait long enough, and the door opens. Always. It's too bad grief has no door of its own.

0:14.

Ilya's watching him.

Shane wants him to say something. Wants the universe to finally commit to whatever cruelty it's doing to him. Haunt him properly or leave him alone. Give Ilya a voice or stop giving him a face. Don't make Shane sit here behind glass with ten seconds left of a

dead man and expect him to step back onto the ice as if two minutes could ever be enough. A *lifetime* could never be enough.

0:11.

Shane thinks about the cottage. About the dock at dusk, the lake black and blue and endless, Ilya stupidly beautiful in it. Thinks of him barefoot on the dock, lit cigarette in one hand, Anya's toy in the other. Thinks about Irina, whose face Shane only knows through photographs, because that's how Ilya mostly knew her too, and how fucking unbearable that seems now, the idea of a mother being reduced to just a few angles of black-and-white light while her son tried to build her back out of longing and a twelve-year-old's scattered memories.

I wish I remembered more of her. I should've remembered more of her.

Shane hadn't understood that properly when Ilya told him once, a long time ago—you were just a child, Ilya, you can't expect a child to, to, and then his voice had trailed off—but he thinks he understands it now. And it's worse, it all just makes him feel so much fucking *worse*, because understanding it also means understanding that one day, Shane might try to reach for Ilya and not be able to remember his body, or his voice, or how warm his fucking thighs felt when they were pressed against Shane's under the covers, and he'll have to start leaning on photographs, on clips, on interviews instead. It implies that one day, Shane might remember Ilya's mouth more easily from a magazine cover than from the dark of their bedroom, might hear the star player's voice infamously saying *is lie, liar told*

you that, I said fifty in a viral throwback best-of clip on social media instead of Ilya laughing into his throat at night, might lose the man and keep only the archive. The public record of a man who'd once been private in Shane's hands.

No. His hand tightens on the edge of the bench until his knuckles hurt. *No.*

Ten.

Shane thinks about the Russian word Ilya learned from his mother, the one he still can't find, still can't fucking remember, and he thinks that loving Ilya has taught him more about loss than anything else in his life and—*I wish I'd never met you, I wish I'd never met you, God, I wish I'd never fucking met you—*

Nine.

Hayden clears the puck again, and it slides across the ice. The bench yells, and the crowd starts counting down the timer. Shane understands, nauseatingly, that they're counting him back into the game and Ilya out of the world in the same breath.

He thinks he's going to be sick. And how fitting would that be—puking his guts out right in the middle of the Stanley Cup Final he'd once promised Ilya he'd win for him?

Eight.

Across from him, Ilya stands.

Seven.

Shane's hand tightens on his stick, and he gets up as well.

Six.

They're both just waiting for time to run out, for their doors to open.

And because grief is cruel, because his mind will take anything the world gives him and force meaning through it until meaning *screams*, Shane thinks that this is fair. Two boxes. Two doors. Two men behind glass on opposite ends of the ice, separated by the full width of the rink and every year of their lives and the impossible distance between breath and no breath, life and no life, death and no death, and still, somehow, waiting together. Ilya at the other side with his eyes on him. Shane at this side with his eyes on him. For one second, there's a geometry to it. A parallel. Two small boxes of mercy built into the arena, two men standing in them.

Five.

Ilya's hand is on the latch.

Shane sees his fingers, the tape-marked knuckles, the small scar near the thumb from some slash he'd complained about for a few days and insisted didn't hurt when Shane asked him about it. He sees him leaning forward, shifting, the impatience, the fucking performance, the one-man-fucking-show, his body preparing to

return. That old arrogance of being alive. Waiting for the door to open, because doors in hockey will always know their part.

Shane believes it. For a second, he really does. For a second, he believes the other door will open too, and Ilya will step out onto the ice, sweaty and beautiful and so alive under the Bell Centre lights, and they'll both re-enter the game from opposite sides, and the whole monstrous last year will fold in on itself as the faraway dream it once was, and it'll all be over. It'll all be over. His chest opens around the possibility before his mind can tell him to stop, because his body has never been very good at theology or physics or death. His body only knows *beloved* and *there* and *go* and *look now*.

Four.

Across the ice, Ilya's still there, and he's—fuck.

Ilya's *smiling*.

Not the show smile, not the camera smile, not the vicious smile, not the sad smile. Not the smirk, either. Softer. Older and younger at once, somehow, all his hard lines loosened. He looks tired, maybe, or—no, he looks past tired, like the fight's gone out of his body and finally left the person underneath it, that boy Shane met before either of them would come to learn what the world would take from them, the man Shane married after the world took plenty and still somehow not enough. And Shane—

Shane fucking hates it. *Hates* it.

Hates the softness, hates the lightness, hates the fact that it's his mind playing fucking magic tricks on him out of—what, mercy? Hates that Ilya gets to stand there looking at peace while Shane's still here with the bathroom tiles engraved in his fucking skull. Hates him for having the nerve to look absolved, because it reminds him of all those people who, for months, have tried to offer him peace when mentioning Ilya's death, and how he's hated them for it too, hated every soft-eyed stranger who thought Ilya's suicide could be made bearable if only they spoke gently enough about it. Hated every useless consolation people have kept giving him all year long: *oh, at least he's at peace now, Shane. Oh, at least he's not suffering now, Shane. Oh, at least he's with his mother now, Shane.*

What the fuck was the point of saying that? To make it nice? To make it a story? Ilya missed his mother so much he went to her—is that what they mean? Is that what they think will comfort him? He's with his mother now, like he caught a flight, like he packed a bag, like he kissed Shane goodbye at the door and promised to call when he landed?

Shane doesn't believe it. He doesn't believe any of that shit. He doesn't believe Ilya's watching over him, doesn't believe he's in a better place, doesn't believe he's in heaven with the angels and his mother making soup or laughing about old photographs or looking down at him or whatever fairy-winged bullshit people tell themselves so death doesn't look like death. He's wanted to grab them by the neck and say: *You don't know that. You don't fucking know that. You don't get to make his death nicer in front of my face. It's fucking offensive. He's dead.*

And now he wants to reach across the rink and put his hands on Ilya's face and punch the smile out of him. Rip it off. Make it change, make it angry, turn it into a snarl, a flinch, a Russian insult, anything but this holy, forgiving bullshit. He wants to drag him back into the worst of it by the collar, back into the bathroom, because at least there, Shane had still been touching him. He wants to march over, and—

And—

And nothing. Because there's no face to cross the ice for, no body to get his hands on. Because it's the middle of the Stanley Cup Final and twenty thousand people would be watching Shane Hollander lose his mind trying to punch the air in an empty box. Because it's Ilya, and there's no version of Shane that could get his hands on him and do anything but hold him.

Because Shane would give anything, *anything*, to touch that face again—to punch or slap or push or kiss or cup or hold.

Three.

Tears prickle at his eyes. He doesn't—Jesus, he doesn't want this. God help him, he doesn't fucking want this. *Not like this. Please, not like this. Not here, not now, not ever. Not while everyone's watching. Not while the whole world's fucking ending around me.* He wants the Ilya who still needs him, the Ilya who's still miserable, still unfinished, still in that bathroom so Shane can punish himself forever for stepping away. He wants the open wound, the necrosis,

because it's proof, because the horror is a place he can keep coming back to, because that way he can say *I'm here now, I'm here, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, baby, but I'm here now*, even though he wasn't, even though he stepped back, even though he let strangers take over and time went on to do whatever time does.

He's hated the idea of Ilya at peace, because peace feels like letting go of the only version of Ilya he has left—but then he's smiling back at him from the other penalty box, and Shane realizes that he also doesn't want him trapped there forever, either. In the bathroom, in May, in that last breath, that last night, that last terrible sequence of events which Shane has rearranged ten thousand times in his mind and never once survived differently, in the worst ten minutes of both their lives. He doesn't want Ilya held forever at the exact point of leaving just because Shane can't bear to be the one left behind.

And then the smile changes, and he instead sees Ilya at nineteen in a hotel room, naked across the bed, unbowed, unbent, unbroken; Ilya at the cottage, wet-haired and laughing on the dock, Anya trying to lick lake water off his knee; Ilya half-asleep right before the morning sun, pressing his cold nose into Shane's shoulder and muttering untranslated Russian.

Two.

For less than a second, less than a blink, less than mercy would allow if mercy had any authority in deciding who gets to live and who gets to die, Ilya's still there, still standing in the other penalty

box, head tilted, eyes on Shane like there's still time, like if Shane can just hold himself perfectly still, the universe might forget its own rules and leave them there.

Ilya's mouth moves, or maybe it's just that Shane wants it to. Maybe the dead are always speaking and the living are always just out of reach, too close and too far away, trapped behind glass, behind time, behind the roar of the crowd.

But—no. Shane understands it perfectly well. Words, arriving as memory, first wound, first challenge, first prophecy.

Will you disappoint them, Shane Hollander?

The boy in Saskatchewan with blood on his mouth and arrogance bright as a flare, asking the question that had followed Shane half his life without either of them knowing it was about grief this whole time. *Will you disappoint them?* The team. The league. The cameras. The fans. Ilya. Himself. The version of Shane who thinks following Ilya into the dark would be its own form of love, because living on without him feels too much like betrayal.

Ilya smiles wider. The dead don't come back whole, and maybe the living don't remember whole either, but for one second, he's finally not the bathroom anymore, or the tub, or the body going slack in his hands, or the silence after the paramedic's voice, or the chair after the policeman sat him down. He's every age he ever was and every age he never got to be, twelve and nineteen and thirty-four and eighty-six and every number in-between, all gathered into

one face across the ice, all burning through that one smile on the other side of the rink.

Ilya had been a boy once.

That's what comes to Shane then, stupidly enough. Not the star, not the rival, not the dead husband, not the specter. No—Ilya at eighteen with all that life in him, all that promise, all that beauty, standing like the world hadn't yet convinced him it was worth staying in and somehow staying anyway—for a while, for a second, for too long, for not long enough. For Shane, for hockey, for Anya, for the cottage, for their marriage, for every morning Shane now has to enter without him. Ilya had been a boy, and then he'd been a man, and then he'd been Shane's, and then he'd been tired, and then he'd been dead, and now he's a penalty box under arena lights while twenty thousand people scream Shane back into motion.

A soul becoming a body and then a memory and then a room and then nothing Shane can hold at all.

One.

The latch clicks beside him. Shane looks, and the far box is empty.

No light. No smoke. No vanishing. No dissolving. Just there and then gone, like how he'd been there and then gone in May, like how he'd been there and then gone all year—at the edge of the bed before Shane remembers, in the reflection of dark windows, in the doorway to the cottage when the wind moves wrong, in the

pause after a joke no one else knows how to finish. Love, shaped by absence. Love, shaped by rooms Shane keeps walking into with his heart already reaching for something that hasn't been there for a long, long time.

His hand slips once on his stick.

“Go,” the penalty box attendant tells him, some Russian softness tucked beneath the vowel. Or maybe he doesn't. Maybe Shane only hears it that way. Maybe it comes from further away than that, from the other end of the ice, from the empty box, from the voice Shane will spend his life hearing in wind and glass and those two seconds before sleep, close enough to answer, too distant to keep.

Go, любимый⁵⁶.

So Shane goes.

The door opens, and he stumbles back onto the ice. The cold hits him like it always does—which is completely, which is all at once, which is the only thing Shane Hollander has ever loved about the cold.



⁵⁶ Beloved

SHANE TAKING THE pass in overtime, leaning forward before the shot even came. Time slowing altogether.

The arena going ballistic, the deafening roar—

And there you have it folks, Montreal are your 2025 Stanley Cup champions—

Shane raising his arms, a sudden release upwards, like the goal had been trapped inside him.

His teammates coming for him, the jerseys and the gloves and the helmets all rushing him—

—and what an incredible moment for star center Shane Hollander, who has absolutely dominated this year—

That one split second before they could reach him—

—a historic comeback for the ages, after the tragedy that rocked the hockey world last year—

Shane alone on the ice, looking back at the other penalty box—

—an unbelievable performance from him in his final season, and what a storybook ending, after everything this man has accomplished, everything this man has been through—

That split second right before contact—the rush before the bodies—

—he has come back, he has fought his way through the impossible, and he's done it, Shane Hollander's done it—

—the thing he'd just set in motion, the thing he'd just made—

—and you have to wonder if he's thinking about Ilya Rozanov right now, if he's dedicating this win to him, somehow—

—his face, frozen in the flash—

—two of the best to ever do it, standing together at the top—

—the weightless instant—Shane standing by himself—

—what a career, what a player, and you could not write a better ending than this: Shane Hollander's done it, the Prince of Hockey has won his final Stanley Cup on home ice, and the crowd is losing their minds—

—hockey finally—*finally*—answering him in kind—

Next one you win for me, yes?

Shane falls to his knees, and he lets it all out.



NETTLES

WHAT SHANE KNOWS about hockey, he learned mostly from love.

Chapter Twenty-Three

SHANE'S SITTING AT the edge of the bed.

His phone's in his hand, the clip of his winning goal replaying on loop in front of him. Two hours ago, everything. Now, just a statistic, just a clip on social media, just another line on the scoresheet.

The bed's all damp under him—he'd sat down right after showering, not even bothering to dry himself off with the towel—and the discomfort's killing him, and his body aches, fucking, *everywhere*, and he feels kind of empty now, a little lightheaded, and his stomach's churning just slightly, but—*fuck*.

He did. He actually fucking did it. As promised.

Go win me a Cup, Shane Hollander, come on. Or are you admitting you cannot do it and I am better?

Shane smiles to himself. *Better my ass, Rožanov.*

He looks around him now. It's so quiet here in the apartment. There's no noise anymore, no interviews, no teammates, no games, no gear, no nothing. Or—no. Now, there's just nothing. The long, long nothing.

He exhales on a shuddered breath, and closes his eyes. He could call his parents, maybe. He *should* call his parents, given that they've already called him, like, half a dozen times and he hasn't picked up yet, and so has Hayden, and so has Rose, and he has a few unread messages from Svetlana, too. But he just—fuck. *Fuck*.

Okay. He presses the nail of his thumb into the skin of his index finger, feels the pain, the pressure, the sharpness, the bite. It grounds him a little. *Okay, okay, okay*.

He looks down at his phone again and swipes his finger, tapping the screen and opening the Messages app. He doesn't really know what he's doing right now—just that he's seeing his thumb click on a very familiar contact name before he can think better of it, and that he's scrolling through a huge swarm of green before he can remember how Galina would probably call it a terrible idea, and he's scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling—through hundreds of messages, through months and months of green *Delivered's*, through an entire year's worth of not a single blue *Read*—just scrolling, and scrolling, and *scrolling*, until—

2/19/2024 - 21:14

Ilya: *Good job! Beautiful goal*

Ilya: *Made me proud tonight* ❤️

Shane clutches the phone to his chest, and lets his head hang. The pressure in his chest eases just enough.

Okay. Okay, okay.



“CONGRATULATIONS ON WINNING the Cup.” Galina smiles at him. “The whole country is celebrating.”

Ha—if only she knew. Shane Hollander, freshly-retired, curled up in his bed and scrolling through his dead husband’s old messages for hours.

“Thanks.” The corner of his lip curls up. “I appreciate it.”

“I imagine the party in Montreal was quite something,” she tells him. “Home win, after all.”

“Yeah, it was crazy.” Shane nods. “I didn’t really want to do the parade yesterday, but, uh—management kind of forced me into it, with it being my final season.” His leg bounces a little. “Guess they wanted a proper send-off.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Galina looks at him. “Retirement, I mean. Now that it’s finally here.”

Shane hums. “Not a lot, honestly. Mostly, I just feel ready to close this chapter, I think. Hockey doesn’t—” He trails off, looking down at his hands folded in his lap. “It doesn’t really feel the same

without him. Not even just because I loved him, but, you know, that too. It's just—" He exhales through his nose. "*Hollander and Rozanov*, you know? It's not the same without him there."

A pause.

"I never realized—" The words hit a snag, and Shane frowns. "I love hockey, of course. I always have. But..." His voice trails off. "I don't know. I guess I never realized how much I only loved it because of him."

He'd thought hockey and Ilya were two separate posts in his life, two separate stanchions. Obviously, somewhat intertwined: hockey'd given him Ilya, after all, so he'd thought, you know—in a chicken or egg situation, if he was asked the age-old question of whichever came first—that hockey'd come first, that Ilya'd been naturally dependent on hockey existing. After all, well—would he have ever met Ilya without it? Would they have ever fallen in love without it? Would Shane have loved Ilya, or even just taken an interest to him, really, were he not his single equal, his match in every measure, and would Ilya have loved Shane back were he not the best, too, the only one to match his greatness every step of the way, like a phantom limb that'd been separated at birth from him on the other corner of the world? Would they have *kept* loving each other—through ordinary circumstances, through every-day normalcy, through average happenstance, through office jobs and blue-collar work and Ilya's countless mental struggles and Shane's dozen pesky quirks, or was the extraneous nature of hockey and the media circus and the public scrutiny the very reason why they'd

kept drifting towards each other ever so slightly, falling in love maybe as much by necessity and mutual understanding as anything else, the extraordinary circumstances that knotted them together also being the glue that kept them tied to each other's skins?

Would *anything* have happened, anything at all, if *not* for hockey?

What if after *what if* after *what if*. And now Ilya's dead, and hockey's still here, still going on, still happening, pucks still sliding across the ice and Cups still being won and face-offs still being lined up for, but the meaning it once had has completely changed overnight, and it's suddenly become as meaningful as cricket or water polo ever were to him—an everything bagel with a hollow center. Or, no, that's a little unfair, probably—he knows that's *at least* a little bullshit. But... who knows. Maybe there's something there. He just—he hadn't realized the depths of their entanglement, is all. Hadn't grasped just how many of hockey's roots had been wrapped around Ilya, not the other way around. And now, well—now he knows.

He can very well live without hockey. He can't live without Ilya.

"I understand that." Galina crosses her legs. "I will say—I'm a little surprised that you're back in Ottawa so quickly." She tilts her head. "I thought you would stay in Montreal for at least a few more days."

"Eh." Shane shifts in his chair, one shoulder lifting. "There's nothing there for me."

Galina watches him for a moment, but she doesn't ask what he means by that. Instead, she glances down at her notes, then looks outside. "Summer's here," she tells him.

Shane follows her gaze out the window. "Yeah," he says. It's late June now, and the days are finally stretching longer and brighter once again, the worst of the heat still mercifully a little way off. Nothing he hates quite like summer in the city. "I suppose it is." She gives him a small smile. "Are you going to the cottage?"

Shane nods. "I am, yeah. Can't wait, honestly. It's almost July, so..."

"That's when you usually go, right?"

"Yeah." He fidgets a little in his chair. "We always went in July, after the playoffs."

Galina pauses, probably noticing how he'd said *we* when the question was directed at Shane alone, but she also knows all too well what the cottage means by now—if not from him, then certainly from Ilya. She knows what summer means, what it represents, how it had—has—always been *their* season. The lake, the long evenings, the lazy mornings, the dock, the warm summer air that seemed to slow the whole world down. *Paradise on Earth*. He was used to spending all year waiting for these three months to arrive, and now he's going into them alone for the first time.

"That might be hard," she tells him. "Going there."

He considers that, rubbing his thumb slowly against the side of his index finger. “Probably, yeah. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. But there’s also nowhere else I’d rather be, so I figure I might as well go and—” He chuckles, shakes his head. “—face my demons, or whatever.”

She nods. Another silence settles between them, and Galina points at his chest. “That’s his, right?”

Shane glances down at his neckline. “Oh.” Ilya’s crucifix has slipped partly out from under his shirt, and he catches it between his fingers, pulling it fully into view. “Yeah, it is.”

She smiles. “It really is such a beautiful piece of jewelry.” She studies it for a moment. “I haven’t seen you wearing it before, have I?”

“Uh—no, no.” He turns the crucifix over in his hand, caressing it absentminded. “I couldn’t, before. Not when everything was still so fresh. It felt... wrong, you know? Like I was taking something from him. And he never even said I could have it, really, so it just felt weird.”

He lets the cross rest against the palm of his hand.

“But now...” He looks down at it. “I don’t know. I hope he wouldn’t mind. I feel closer to him, like this. I like having something that was his on me. And, well—” He breathes out a quiet laugh. “Better this than a corny tattoo, I guess.”

Galina laughs with him, and Shane tucks the crucifix back under his shirt.

“But, uh, what you were asking before—” He shifts slightly in his chair. “I’m not going to the cottage straight away.” A pause. “I’m going to Finland first, actually.”

Galina looks up. “Finland?” She writes something down in her notebook. “Wow, okay. That’s nice, Shane. Sightseeing?”

Shane shakes his head. “No. I’m—” He stops, swallowing. “It’s for Ilya.”

She pauses, then slowly looks up at him. “For Ilya?”

“There’s this place we talked about once.” He rubs his thumb over the seam of his pants. “I’d forgotten about it for a long time, actually. And then I randomly started thinking about it again, and I figured—well, I have nothing else to do, so...” He shrugs. “Why not go?”

Galina smiles gently. “Well, in any case, I’m glad. I think that’s good, Shane. Travel will be good for you. Getting out of here for a while, seeing somewhere new, meeting new faces. The distraction will do you good.”

“Yeah.” He fidgets in his chair. “Maybe.”

She keeps going. “Now that you’re away from hockey, you’re going to start being more enclosed. Going somewhere else, even

if it's just for a little while, will be good before you settle into this new routine." She pauses, smiling. "How long will you stay?"

"Oh, it's just a week. Not that many days." He raises one shoulder. "And you know, it's like a twelve-hour flight, plus the jet lag. It'll feel like much less."

She gives him an amused look. "No, no, none of that. A week is still a week." She sets her pen down. "Very good. I am glad." She pauses. "I had no idea you were even planning this. And I did not realize this place had that kind of significance for him, either."

Shane frowns. "I don't think it did, honestly. That's probably why it never came up with you two." He looks down. "I might've exaggerated a bit—I think it meant more to me than it did to him, really. It was just this... spur-of-the-moment thing, at the time, but—I don't know. It really stuck with me. And, well," he trails off. "Here we are."

Galina nods. "And you've already arranged everything?"

"Yeah, yeah, pretty much. Everything's sorted." He hesitates. "I also spoke to the funeral home."

Galina's eyebrows immediately rise, but Shane keeps going. "They, uh—they gave me all the documents I need, and there's a special urn that's approved for airlines, so..." His fingers touch the crucifix through his shirt again. "I'm taking him with me."

She's quiet for a few seconds. "You're taking his ashes? To Finland?"

"Yeah."

She studies him, then lets out a breath. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Shane makes a small face, and Galina catches it immediately.

"Don't get me wrong," she says, voice softening. "I understand why you want to do it. Especially if you're only doing the trip in his memory and not just to sightsee. But—" She sighs, not unkindly. "You are over a year into this now, Shane. At some point, part of grieving is letting yourself move forward, and I don't want you to feel like you have to keep carrying him everywhere just to prove that you haven't forgotten him."

"I know, I know. That's what I'm trying to do, actually." Shane lets his head hang, and he goes quiet. "He deserves to rest." His voice catches slightly. "I want him to—to be at peace. That's what the trip's for, I promise."

He feels like he's been living *ad interim* all year long—either waiting for better things to come, for the world to feel right again, or constantly repenting, constantly longing to have the past back again, all while looking at the present as something he has to put up with, as a transitory state he's forced to endure while it lasts; all while keeping Ilya stuck here.

No more.

Too far from the start, he reminds himself, as ever.

Galina looks at him for a long moment, before nodding once. “Alright. And then the cottage after?”

“Yeah.” He breathes out, tension leaving his shoulders. “Straight from the airport.”

“Okay. And how long do you think you’ll be staying there?”

“Oh—a while, I don’t know.” He thinks about it for a moment. “We usually stayed right until pre-season in September, but... maybe a little over a month? A month and a half, I guess. Sometime in August.”

Galina considers that. “That sounds good.” A beat. “When would you like our next session to be?”

He gives her a small shrug. “We could do it remotely while I’m over there, I guess. Or we could just wait until I’m back.”

She thinks about it for a moment, then she nods. “Actually, I think that might be good.”

Shane looks at her. “Yeah?”

“Mm-hmm. I would like to see how you’re doing after a longer period like that. You will have been away on your trip, then you

will have had all that time at the cottage, and I think it will be good to see what a few weeks of that does to you.”

He gives her a skeptical look. “You’re making it sound like an experiment.”

She laughs. “Everything with you is an experiment, Shane.”

Shane smiles, and Galina glances down at her notebook. “There is one thing I’d like you to do while you’re there, though.”

His smile slowly fades, eyes going wary.

“I want you to write Ilya a letter.”

For fuck’s sake.

He looks at her. “A letter?”

She nods.

Shane glances towards the sunlit window again, expression twisting slightly. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” He pauses. “I mean, I don’t even know what I’d say.”

“You don’t have to know yet,” she tells him. “I would just like you to take a piece of paper with you, grab a pen, and when you’re there and have some time alone, just write whatever comes to you.”

He almost smiles. *When you're there and have some time alone*—so the whole time he's there, basically.

She continues. "It doesn't have to be long, or coherent, or even this beautiful eulogy, or anything like that. You can write whatever you want. And you don't have to show it to me either, if you don't want to." She pauses. "You can tell him what you miss. Or what you are angry about. What you wish you could tell him. You can tell him about the Cup, if you want. You can tell him what happened while he was gone. Whatever you want, Shane. Just—write it, okay?"

He looks down at his hands. *A letter.*

How do you even reduce a person like that into words? The incomprehensible largeness of him. The fury, the tenderness, the thousand and one facets that could've come out on just a single morning depending on the weather, what he'd eaten for breakfast, if he'd slept well, if he'd seen a dog on the way home. How was Shane supposed to choose which pieces belonged on a page and which ones didn't, take someone who occupied so much space in his life—voice filling any room, socks always lost under the bed, half a dozen glasses of water constantly scattered everywhere in the house—and reduce him to five or so paragraphs in blue ballpoint ink?

Ilya, who loved so intensely it seemed to rupture him from the inside, like his body had never learned how to contain the sheer scale of pure feeling inside it. Ilya, who stood barefoot in their

living room at two in the morning some nights, eating huge spoonfuls of peanut butter straight from the jar or ordering Shane to come out of their bedroom so they could watch Jurassic Park again even though they'd watched it a hundred times already, or just the weekend before. Ilya, who pressed sleepy kisses against Shane's throat without even realizing he was doing it, who cried at orchestral John Williams scores and hungry stray dogs and those stupid fucking videos of soldiers coming back home to their families on his phone, face twisting up in sheepish embarrassment every single time Shane caught him at it.

Ilya, Ilya, Ilya.

Ilya, who loved ugly things tenderly. Burnt toast. Broken people. Himself least of all.

How was any of that supposed to fit inside a letter? How could Shane write, *Dear Ilya*, and pretend there were any words that could possibly follow it?

He nods once, but she can probably tell he's not too convinced. "I'll think about it."

Galina smiles. "That's all I'm asking."

A beat.

"Now—" She clasps her hands together, the soft clap reverberating through the room. "Tell me how the Foundation is doing."



“SO, WHAT’S UP?”

Shane looks over. He’s on the balcony, leaning forward with his hands against the railing, last rays of sunlight around him. It’s almost sunset, night fast approaching. Beside him, Ilya’s socked feet are resting against one of Shane’s flowerpots. Every time he stretches his ankles, it makes these little *clink* sounds against the vase.

“What do you mean, *what’s up?*” Shane smiles. “You already know what’s up.”

“Sure. But I want to hear it from you. You know, just talk.” Ilya bumps his shoulder against Shane’s. “Like we used to, yes?”

Shane’s lips curve, staring over the city. He doesn’t answer. Ottawa’s quite pleasant this time of year, but really—he can’t wait to go back to the cottage. *Soon*, he tells himself. *Very soon*. It’ll be a little later than usual this year, but—it’s for a good reason, Shane knows.

They should go more often in the year, he decides. Not just summer. Start going in the spring, too, maybe. Why spend all year waiting for July to come? It’s always July somewhere.

“We can, uh,” Ilya continues, noticing Shane’s silence. He looks around him. “What do the Americans call it? *Shoot the shit*.”

Shane snorts. “Don’t talk to me like you’re my fucking bro, Ilya. I’m not Marleau.” A beat. “But yes. I’d like that.”

Ilya looks over at him.

“To shoot the shit with you, I mean.”

“*Aw*.” Ilya grins. “My little *IIIeüt*⁵⁷. Gayest man in the MLH, talking like a straight man. I am so proud.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Shane laughs out loud, and a car passes below him. “That’s still Scott Hunter. And you’re gay for me, too, so—what does that make you?”

Ilya’s eyes crinkle, and he leans in close to Shane’s ear. “The *second* gayest man in the MLH.”

Shane laughs again. *Asshole*.

The silence settles around them for a few minutes, just the distant city noises and the rustling trees and the cars driving under them. And Ilya’s feet, of course, making those clinking noises against the flowerpots.

“This is nice,” Ilya suddenly says. “Right? It’s nice.”

⁵⁷ Shane

It is, Shane thinks, smiling. *It is nice.*

“You know, if my *мама*⁵⁸ could see us now, she’d say that we are *воркуют как голубки*.”

Shane frowns. “What’s that mean?”

“*Cooing like little doves.*” Ilya translates, then smiles. “It’s just a dumb Russian expression, I guess. For when two people love each other very much. But I always thought it was cute.”

Shane’s lips curl up. *Cute.*

“What’s that one you taught me a few years back?” He looks around, tries to search for it. “Something about ants?”

“*Ab.*” Ilya leans back, pleased. “*Мышки по коже.* Little ants on the skin. It’s not literally about love, though. It’s, like—how you make someone feel.” He smiles. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

He wants to scoff. *Of course I fucking remember it.*

“So, what,” Shane starts. “I’d say... *being with you is like having ants crawling around my skin?*” He frowns. “Isn’t that bad? It sounds bad.”

⁵⁸ Mom

“No, no. It’s good. It means I give you, like—chills. Goosebumps.”

“Oh, right. I remember now. Well—” Shane furrows his eyebrows, then nods. “Okay. Then, yes. You give me ants on the skin. *My—pau—ku.*” A beat, and Shane laughs. “Sorry if I just butchered that.”

“Never.” Ilya smiles, eyes twinkling as he looks back over the city. “My little student.”

A few more minutes pass. Shane’s content to just let the quiet settle, to exist in the moment, just be. *This is nice*, Ilya’d said, and it is, it *is* nice—

“—*Hollander.*” Ilya cuts off his thoughts, stressing the word. “You are boring me.” He stares at Shane intently. “Shooting the shit, remember?”

So much for quiet.

“Uh—I don’t know what I’m supposed to say,” Shane tells him. “Do you want me to just talk about my day, or something?”

Ilya raises his eyebrows, like he’s waiting for him to start already.

“Well...” Shane chuckles. “Today was okay, actually.”

Ilya looks over at him. He smiles, tentatively—a little hopeful, even. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Shane smiles back, nods. “Yeah, it was okay, I think.”

Ilya’s shoulders sag, full body relaxing, and he leans back against his chair, silent for a moment. “Good.” His voice is a little wobbly, and he blinks quickly. “I am—I am glad, *любимый*⁵⁹.”

Shane’s quiet for a few seconds. There’s so much he wants to say. So much he could say, so much he probably *should* say. He doesn’t know where to even start. He sighs.

“You know,” he starts. “I still can’t... I still can’t live without you, Ilya. And, like, I’m not okay without you, obviously, and I fucking miss you—so much, you know—but—”

He trails off, looking over the city and away from Ilya, like this next part could be seen as a betrayal.

“But I guess—yeah. I did okay today.”

Shane exhales.

“I mean—yesterday fucking sucked, and tomorrow might suck as well. And I’m going to the cottage soon, and that’s *definitely* going to suck. But—” He takes a moment. “I don’t know. Today was okay. You know, I—I ate, I slept the whole night, for once. I went over to Hayden’s. Anya came with me. I mean, it was... yeah, it was fun, I think. I laughed a little. I felt bad, but—”

⁵⁹ Beloved

He shakes his head. “Yeah, I don’t know. I felt normal, I guess. It was good to get out of the house. Hayden kept telling me I look a lot more normal now that the Finals are over, and—” He lets out a chuckle. “Yeah, I get it. You get it too, I guess. But, you know—we needed to win. *I* needed to win.”

Shane smiles, looking out into the city. “I made a promise, after all.”

Ilya’s silent beside him.

“But it was good for Anya, too, she—” He stops. “She was excited to get out of the house, and, you know—I’m gonna drop her off at my parents’ tomorrow morning, before my flight, so I’m glad she had some fun before I’m gone. And, yeah, it was—it was funny seeing Amber try to climb all over her. Those kids.” He smiles, shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

A beat, and Shane exhales.

“Ilya, I—you know, there’s no grand statement here, really. It’s just... I miss you. And I love you. And you’re still gone. And today was okay, I think. And I miss you. And—yeah. That’s, uh... that’s all I have, I guess.”

He laughs weakly. “That’s all the shit I have to shoot.”

No answer. He looks over, and—

There’s nothing there beside him. No one there.

Shane breathes out. He turns back to stare at the city, hands against the railing, and the cars drive under him, and the trees rustle around him, and his feet stretch on, clinking against the flowerpot.

Chapter Twenty-Four

SHANE LIES OVER a million grains of sand, feeling the waves crash softly against his feet.

I wish you were here, he thinks. *You'd like it.*

The wind begins to howl, viciously, like the incantation of a full moon, and Shane looks up. Slowly, the clouds start taking Ilya's form: curls of gold by the cliffside, crinkled eyes by Cassiopeia, grinning mouth by the Ursa Major.

A blue star, falling through the night. It lands on the beach, right there by the million grains of sand, the crashing waves, the howling wind, and it approaches him, clutching Shane's hand with its divine light. The star gives itself to him, and he follows it, right through illusion's skies. It takes him with it, tracking through foreign trails, gliding across avalanches of blinking stars. Shane's heart, breathless at once, slippery and lost, guided only by this clepsydra made of water that takes him wherever it wants to go. Time is his, his is time.

Suddenly, it stops. Floating over the waves, he sees where the star had taken him: a beautiful place, one he'd never seen, where love can be good, restorative, eternally his. And before it drops him into it, before it puts him down, it leans in close and whispers low, a song made of sound.

A lullaby for you, it tells him, destined for the star that you are. But, Shane—

—Your love's a star too, its voice breathless, and it sighs. Just let him shine from your eyes.

In a blink, Shane loses it from view. The star turns back to the skies, gone like a lightning cry.

Fear takes hold of him. *Is this real?* he wonders. *Real, or just another trick of the mind?* He follows his feet, takes himself back to that beach—all his unthought thoughts, his thousand crossed desires burning in his lungs. Imagination has wings of its own, he knows, and not everything's what it shows, but—*Ilya, you were always a star in my eyes. Surely, you must know.*

And you still are, in my eyes and in my heart, in my dreams and in my mind. You're the star I search for, the one star left for me to find. Of course—of course you are. My greatest joy, my greatest prize.

And in the reflection of your eyes, I see myself anywhere, you know? Anywhere you take us, I'll follow. I'll follow you to the north's breeze, the south's warmth. The east winds, the west skies.

Don't cry, baby, don't cry. All my compasses point to you.

You're my Three Wise Men, my Magi of Bethlehem—

—and I'll follow you always, my north star of blue.

NETTLES



THE TRAIL OPENS out into the forest, dirt and weeds and little stones all crushed beneath Shane's shoes, a glimmer of white quartz out in the far distance. Every few minutes, the trees thin just enough for him to glimpse small flashes of Lake Pielinen—just these long, wide stretches of blue, full of promise.

In Finland, there is a park so beautiful, magic lives there.

Shane smiles. Pielinen's not, as it turns out, the largest lake in the world, swallowing the horizon whole. Nor are there any fauns, any kingdoms floating beyond the tree lines, any poison mushrooms glowing under the pines, a little hut waiting somewhere at the top of the hill, smoke curling from a chimney, stone hearth still warm after all these years. It's just a forest. It's just rolling hills, and old-growth pines, and lush woodlands, rich with herbs, and colorful, blooming meadows. It's just hillsides, and groves, and peaks, and ridges, and islands scattered across a lake, and the horizon stretching. Ultimately unremarkable, as far as transcendent, high-fantasy, supernatural descriptions go, but maybe even more beautiful from how ordinary it is.

He'd read the informative plaque at the start of the trail: *the oldest soil you can walk on in continental Europe*. It feels that way, too. It's so quiet here, and the pines feel like they're older than his mind could ever grasp, and, well—maybe there *is* some form of magic here,

after all. Ilya hadn't really needed Koli to be magical, either way. He'd just needed it to be beautiful enough to tell Shane about.

Finland's felt slightly strange ever since he arrived here two days ago. It's not particularly foreign-looking or anything—trees are trees, roads are roads, airports are airports, cities are cities—though, to be fair, the Finnish on the signs means absolutely nothing to him, with all its soft vowels and strange doubled letters. But it's also felt somewhat familiar, too. He knows he'll never be able to travel to Russia, but his time in Finland thus far feels similar enough. *Close enough*, he reckons. Obviously, Shane's picked up a little Russian throughout the years—more than he's picked up any Finnish, really, especially since Svetlana's started spending an hour a week teaching him, every session inching him closer and closer to a language that'd once belonged entirely to Ilya—so it's not the *exact* same, but he's also pretty sure a grocery store clerk over in Moscow wouldn't appreciate him saying *привет, моя любовь*⁶⁰, or, *спасибо, котенок*⁶¹, at check-out. Either way, he feels as much a fish out of water here as he would over in Russia, and that's... comforting, in a way. Plus, it's like everything in Finland somehow has more room than it needs: the roads seem to go on forever between towns, lakes appear in the most random places, the silence feels interminable. Shane's spent most of his life surrounded by noise—here, he can walk for hours and hear nothing but his own footsteps, his own thoughts, his own memories. It reminds him a

⁶⁰ Hello, my love

⁶¹ Thank you, kitten

little of Ilya's scattered, rare descriptions of the Russian heartland. The long, long stretches of nothing he'd once described.

In Finland, there is a park where the dead go to live.

The funeral home had given him all the required documents in a neat plastic folder, along with the urn, and Shane had carried both through Ottawa, then Toronto, then Helsinki. He'd kept the folder under his passport in his bag, the urn wrapped in his clothes, and now it's tucked neatly under his coat while he makes his way up the trail. He's getting closer to the top of the hill—probably just another half-hour, or so.

He thinks of Irina standing here as a young woman, even though he's never actually seen her here, and never will. Thinks of her walking over this same quartz, believing there was still somewhere in the world she could become someone else. Shane would like to imagine he's walking through the same places she once walked through decades ago, looking out at the water and deciding this was the place she wanted to remember. The same places she'd never actually stood in, because it'd all just been a story, just a made-up fantasy, just a heightened, magical, otherworldly description of a place he'd traveled twelve hours and a whole continent over to see, one *she'd* never seen. One Ilya'd never seen, either. But—who knows. Maybe she really did stand here, and over there, and all around him, everywhere. Who's to say? Maybe that's what all the magic had really been: loving someone enough to make the world larger for them.

Maybe that's what the story had been for, after all: a kinder ending to something Ilya'd never been able to survive. Maybe he'd needed his mother to have come here so badly he turned her into someone who *had* come—this young woman with a red coat and a little hut in the woods, someone who'd stood at the top of this hill and looked out over the horizon, who'd loved this place so much she'd lived on long enough to tell her son about it. Someone who hadn't just disappeared from his life, abandoned him, left him and his brother behind, but had gone somewhere beautiful instead, somewhere she could become whoever she wanted to be. Somewhere she was still alive. Maybe he knew his own fate too, in the deep trenches of his heart—knew what it meant to be the one left behind, how badly you might need the person who left to have gone somewhere beautiful instead, knew the comfort he was giving Shane back, years in advance, knew he was writing his own eulogy, in a way.

Maybe the magic was just a son pretending like his mother had told him the world was bigger and stranger and grander than the one he knew. Irina, making a forest enchanted for him, making herself younger for him, giving herself another life, another child, another chance. Making herself leave, not disappear, placing herself elsewhere, not just gone overnight. Becoming the mother he'd needed her to be, turning herself into a story he could inherit, a story he could survive. Ilya, years later, doing the exact same for Shane.

NETTLES

Maybe that's all you can do for the people you love. Turn them into stories big enough to live on in.

A burst of wind comes down from the hill, catching against Shane's jacket, and he places his hand over the urn, before looking over at the sea of pine and the hint of blue behind it.

It's one heck of a view.

Look over the impossible blue, and know that everything beautiful belongs to you, too.

Shane had imagined this differently, before. He'd imagined bringing Ilya here at the end of summer, after the cottage, imagined surprising him at the airport, imagined the two of them at the edge of the forest Ilya'd once described, the hut, the golden child, the warm hearth. Imagined them here at dawn, watching the sun rising, not setting. Life beginning, not ending.

Now dusk takes the blue, takes Ilya, takes Shane, too.



THE LAST OF the light reaches the lake, and Ilya's already in the wind.

Shane's standing at the edge of the hill with the urn tucked beneath his arm, and he sees him in the lake, the trees. *There he is,*

Shane smiles. Little Ilya, here. Boston Ilya, there. Centaur Ilya, caught in the branches. KHL Ilya, swaying with the long grass. Married Ilya, bending with the wind. Anya's Ilya, Moscow's Ilya, his friends' Ilya, hockey's Ilya, Irina's Ilya. Shane's Ilya, lifting over the cliffside. Ilya's Ilya, too—just Ilya—in the ribbon of grey dissolving in front of him, like a phantom kite flown from somewhere near the water.

Ilya, everywhere. Everywhere, here.

The grey ash is rough between his fingers, gets stuck under his nails, and the wind takes all that he gives it. It carries Ilya over the white quartz, among the pines, or, further still, over the water, down the skyline where Shane can't follow. Back home to Moscow, to the bakery down Ilya's street, to his grandmother's old house, to the cardboard shelters he'd left standing as a child for the local stray cats, to Irina's stone gravesite, and he falls over it all, falls, falls, falls. Carries him over the Atlantic, back home to Ottawa, to the cottage, the dock, the lake, to Anya, to Shane. Over the Pacific, the Indian, the Arctic, to far-away places he'd never been, to strange distant lands he could once only dream of and were now being touched by him. The entire world, touched by the whole miraculous supernova that was Ilya Rozanov, forever changed. And doesn't Shane know it.

Ilya, once his and now everyone's. The stone hut, the warm hearth, the hint of golden hair through the pines. Carried everywhere now, like birdsong overhead.

The sun starts to slip behind the horizon, and Shane tips the urn until it all goes. The last few rays, bright for a moment, like how flames flare before they go.

I would do it all again, Shane thinks. Every humiliation, every late-night goodbye, every lie by omission to everyone in his life, every year of pretending, every careful word in public, every moment of performing not-in-love while the man he was in love with stood in front of him and also performed it, both of them so used to the performance they'd sometimes worried they'd hollowed the real thing out—God, he'd do it all over again. The secrecy, the distance, the fear, Ilya's body in his hands, the after, the pain, the heartbreak, the grief—he'd do it all again, no matter what came after, no matter the unbearable life that was to come. If the contract had been laid out at the beginning, the whole thing, every line of it—eighteen years old, the ice between them, if some god or devil or a Russian teenager with a foul mouth had said, *here's what this will cost you, here's every part of it, here's the bathroom floor at the end*, Shane would've signed it. He would've signed it until his wrist broke, or his hand gave out, or his heart stopped pumping. He would've signed it and he would've considered himself lucky, too—the greatest luck of his life—and he knows this with the same certainty with which he knows his own name.

Some things don't need to be examined, or considered. They're just true all the way down.

“Ilya,” Shane calls, one last time, because his name is the last thing he has left, and the truest, too. The one thing that doesn’t shrink, even when everything else does.

Let me go, he remembers. The price he’s yet to pay.

Shane looks around him. Ilya’s face was always so very clear in the light—a face that was never quite as closed as it was trying to be, that kept giving itself away to him no matter what—and Shane closes his eyes, and he sees it, right in front of him. Ilya’s face, doing it again, doing it now, wide open, all the way, nothing held back—and Shane smiles, memorizes it for the ten-thousandth time, and he knows that he’ll keep memorizing it, keep finding it in dreams and in the dark, keep reaching for it. Knows that this isn’t the last time, that it could never be, that this isn’t a promise of completion, of okay, of resolution. That he’s just standing here for a moment in the last few seconds of daylight, remembering a man loved beyond words, missed beyond measure, and Ilya’s everywhere around him, and his hands are hanging open at his sides, empty, the price finally being paid.

The final ray of light goes. A bird passes through, somewhere above him, whistling some song. Dusk falls, and Shane breathes, and somewhere close, Ilya’s voice, just once, whispers his name.

NETTLES

Chapter Twenty-Five

ILYA TURNING HIS head to look at Shane. Words tumbling out of him.

What'd you say?

Hands finding each other.

I said that you're my utopia. A thousand dreams rolled into one. My only fantasy to ever come true.

Shane's face crumbling.

I mean it. Really. All of it.

A deep breath, a nod. Looking up towards the sky.

Ilya, breathed out. A life without you... It wouldn't be a life at all. Not one I'd want, anyway.

Hands finding faces, fingers resting on cheeks.

Their eyes, shining oh so brightly through the mist.



NETTLES

SHANE'S BEEN AT the cottage for a few weeks now.

He hadn't known what to expect, really, but the evening falls over the lake, and blue swallows gold swallows blue again, and everything feels the exact same and the exact opposite, at the same time. He'd thought coming back would be hard, and it is, of course, but it's just—fuck.

No one told him what the cottage would smell like. No one told him it'd smell of old wood, and cedar, and ground coffee, and musky earth odor drifting through the screen door, and garlic, and—Ilya.

It smells of Ilya.

Of course it does. How else would it smell, a mere year later? How else would it fucking smell?

It's everywhere. In the wood, the cupboards, the dish towel hanging from the oven handle, the faint sweetness of coffee grounds left in the grinder, albeit a little stale. The cottage is full of Ilya, everywhere around him, and Shane doesn't even have to particularly go out of his way to look for him—*there he is*, waiting in the grain of the wooden floorboards, *there he is*, in the cushions left exactly where they were two summers ago, *there he is*, in the smells that have somehow survived since their last visit. The cottage has been keeping Ilya here all along, preserving whatever it could, and—fuck, it feels like everything Shane tries to forget just inches him closer to becoming stuck in it, to giving it a permanent home inside his brain. He begs God—some God,

whatever God—to take the memories from him some nights, to loosen everything that’s clenched tight around his mind, but even the asking just brings Ilya back. To ask for a memory to be taken away, he has to find it first, has to look at it long enough to know what he’s asking the universe to erase, and trying to bury his memories of Ilya just means turning them over again and again, finding the same things waiting underneath them every time.

Even to forget, Shane has to remember first.

Galina keeps trying to tell him grief isn’t shameful, that it’s okay, that it’s normal, but—*fuck*, grief *feels* fucking shameful. It feels genuinely grotesque sometimes, or, or, *monstrous*, even. The sheer endlessness of it, the humiliating scale with which it dominates his life. How it reduces him, how it makes up ghosts of motion from the smallest things, how it follows him everywhere now. How persistent it is, how it fucking castrates him. God, Shane can’t even remember what the world felt like before everything just became uncanny, before everything he once found beautiful became unbearable instead.

And now all he sees is the letter she’d asked him to write, lying abandoned on the kitchen table next to Ilya’s chipped blue coffee mug, the one he’d brought with him from Ottawa, begging him to at least *try*.

He approaches the table slowly and carefully grabs it in his hand. The paper bends softly between his fingers where the crease has weakened it, worn pale from too many unfoldings, too many

days and nights spent holding the same blank page. He stares down at it once more.

How do you reduce a person into language? he remembers.

He still doesn't know. Still doesn't have the faintest idea how you're meant to reduce the whole unbearable sprawling enormity of a person. Still doesn't know how you sum up someone's flesh and blood and bone and nerve and history and longing and all the countless microscopic little joys and little griefs and little pains and little aches that make up a whole soul into just a few words on a single page.

Shane closes his eyes and sets the page down on the table. *I don't know.*

Maybe tomorrow he will. Maybe tomorrow, while it's still July.

He looks out the window. *Hub*, he frowns. *It's raining.*

Then again—has it ever stopped?



Hi, SHANE, ILYA'S voice crackles on the voicemail.

It's, uh. It's me. I know you are—you are probably very busy. But I just wanted to say hi, and, uh, tell you I miss you. The house feels very big without you here.

I can't wait for you to come home. But I know you are, uh, teaching the whole roster what happens when a puck goes into the net, yes? So, maybe next Montreal game, it won't be just you playing hockey out on the ice. Ha ha. Oh, wait—Anyu—Anyuua⁶²—shit, wait—

—Sorry. Anya keeps scratching my leg. She wants to go out, I think—yeah, Anyuua? You want to go for a walk? Oh, yes, you do, look at you, so gorgeous—yes—yes, you do—

—Okay, I need to take her. In a minute, okay, Anyuua? I am just talking to your nana⁶³, he—oh my God, Shane, did you hear her bark? Ha ha ha, I wish you could see her right now, she looks so fucking funny. Actually—uh, wait, I will take a video.

Anyway. Uh, call me when you can, okay? Just to talk, nothing, ah—nothing serious. Sorry if this is a bad time.

I love you. Very much, but—uh, you know that. Since the first day I met you, you know, I thought: Shit. This is going to be a problem. I'm fucked. Ha ha.

⁶² Anyusha

⁶³ Papa

NETTLES

I don't know why I am telling you this. I just wanted to hear your voice, I think, but, uh, obviously you cannot talk over voicemail, so it's a little stupid.

Okay, I am going to take her out now. But, call me when you can. And do not stay up too late, okay? You need your eight hours of beauty sleep.

Okay. That's it. I will, uh, I'll see you later, любимыи⁶⁴. Love you more.

Alright. The line crackles. Uh, bye.



SHANE STEPS ONTO the porch, and the door makes a sound. The cold air immediately hits him in the face, and he feels the dampness in his cheeks, the wetness in his lashes. He closes his eyes.

What if I'd never met Ilya? he wonders. What if there's a version of his life, somewhere out there, in which Ilya Rozanov never happened?

Shane's thought about it often enough throughout his life. Casually, back when he and Ilya were just hooking up; existentially, after they got married; despondently, after Ilya's death. More than he should, probably, though he's also not really sure what the right amount of *more* or *less* is, these days. It's not hard to imagine: a

⁶⁴ Beloved

different draft, a different trade, one decision made differently by someone in an office somewhere who didn't know and couldn't have known what they were setting in motion.

In that version, Shane's still successful. Still, probably, happy, like he was happy before, which was real, and steady, and good, but had a ceiling he couldn't see until he'd cleared it.

He tries not to think about that version for long. There's no point. It feels a little indecent to grieve a life that never happened when the one he *did* have has been so thoroughly and utterly gutted, after all. But sometimes, when memory turns cruel and gives him Ilya asleep next to him, Ilya across the ice, Ilya on the other end of the line, the phone ringing long enough for Shane's chest to tighten before Ilya's voice finally came through, he feels the weight of it again, the sheer statistical improbability of them. Two people, two careers, two countries, two continents, two bodies moving through the world with all the blind force of separate cannonballs, and somehow still ending up here. A thousand moments that had to go exactly as they went, a thousand anonymous hands opening doors neither of them knew they were walking through.

Shane isn't a superstitious man, has never believed in fate. But Ilya, well—Ilya he could never really explain. Ilya arrived and rewrote the whole damn equation, and Shane's been doing the math ever since, and still, it never comes out to anything except... *lucky*. Impossibly, undeservedly, whole-heartedly lucky.

Which is the worst of it, maybe. That he can know how it ends and still not wish it gone.

He'd been afraid of losing Ilya before, of course. Late at night, most often, with Ilya sound asleep next to him, when ordinary happiness felt so complete it'd start to scare him a little. Shane would look at him—the loose sprawl, his hair flattened on one side, his mouth gone soft—and understand that this, too, existed within time. Maybe they'd get years. Maybe they'd get decades. Maybe they'd get enough time to become one of those couples other people found annoying or unbearable, enough summers and grocery lists and bad movies and arguments over nothing, enough mornings where Ilya was exactly how Shane expected him to be—sprawled loose on the bed, the mouth soft, the hair flattened on that one side—until he'd catch Shane smiling and tell him to fuck off. Maybe they'd get old. Maybe they wouldn't. The point is, there were no guarantees. There was just Ilya asleep beside him, and Shane silently panicking over how much of his life had already rearranged itself around the sound of his breathing, and the fact that, someday, there'd have to be a final kiss, a final fight, a final ridiculous joke, a final morning neither of them realized was holy because it was just another morning. Everything had to end, one day, right?

And still. Even knowing now. Even with the knowledge sitting inside him like a second skeleton. Even with the *after* spreading endlessly in every direction, even with the days and weeks and summers and years Shane has no choice but to go on living without him. Even with the cruelty of hindsight laid out before him, every

missed sign glowing uselessly, like runway lights for a plane that's already gone down, Shane thinks: *even so*.

Even so.

The lake shifts, and a loon cries somewhere far out in the dark, and, God, the lake, the loon, Ilya's blue coffee mug back on the kitchen table, the entire fucking cottage around him—suddenly, Shane's twenty-nine again and swimming in summer water while Ilya laughs himself breathless on the dock, because Shane'd kept slipping trying to pull the canoe in. All long limbs and wet skin and sunlight through his hair. Ilya sprawled across the dock after with his head in Shane's lap, talking endlessly and lazily.

Do you think we would've always found each other?

You love me.

Shane's laughter.

Not as much as I do.

Fingers in sun-warmed hair.

I definitely love you more.

That smile.

If you say so, любимыи⁶⁵.

Shane presses the palm of his hand against his mouth. *Fuck.*

It's like the world just keeps offering him all these *almosts* now, again and again, and, and—who knows, maybe some part of him will go on expecting Ilya forever, in every summer after the last one, in every drop of lake water, in every creak of floorboards at the other end of the house.

Too far from the start, he tries to remember, tries to grasp for it—*too far, too far, too goddamn fucking far*—but instead feels only how hollow it rings. Love carved a hole too deep inside him, an Ilya-shaped cavity, a crater made of his profile, clear as day, and there's no *far* that could ever possibly be far enough. He can put years between himself and Ilya's death, can keep moving forward, can build an entire life after him, can travel to the next solar system, for all the world cares—a light year's distance would still fall short. And so every sound has to disappoint him: wind through the trees like breath, creatures of the night across the water, as if his voice, wood shifting like footsteps, a door against the frame, as if a hand was clutched loose around the handle. All of it becoming Ilya for just a single second and then not Ilya at all, all of it catching in Shane's chest before reason can get to it, before he can remind himself that houses settle, and storms move, and trees bend, and water ripples, and none of it has to mean footsteps, none of it has

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to mean Ilya, none of it has to mean *come here*, *любимый*⁶⁶, *I'm here*, *I'm here*.

Nothing comes. The world never answers his calls.

There's just the letter. Behind him, on the kitchen table, it sits next to Ilya's old chipped mug, like always—but no longer blank.

Shane had thought the pages needed to contain everything, before. Every grief, every joy, every version of Ilya that had ever existed inside him. The whole mess. He'd thought Galina was asking the impossible of him: to sum up an entire life into language without leaving anything behind, to find words that were broad enough to hold the full scale of Ilya's soul.

They never could. Everything's already been said, thought, felt. Lived.

So he doesn't try.

I love you more, it reads simply, finally. *I said so*.

He thinks of Ilya reading it, scoffing at him, narrowing his eyes. His chest warms, and Shane smiles down at the ground.

I love you more. He used to think it was nothing but this little game between them, something they'd toss to each other across pillows and docks and hotel beds because—well, they both liked winning,

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yes, but they liked letting the other think they'd won even more. Competition, entrenched into the very fabric of them, as if it could ever be any other way, really. *I love you more*, as in, *I was the first to feel it*. *More*, as in, *I love you louder*. *More*, as in *I feel it more*, *I feel you more*. *More*, as in, *your hand shakes because of me, your lips grin because of me, the vein on your neck throbs because of me*. *More*, as in, *I can carry this, I can carry you, let me bear your weight, let me be Sisyphus, let me carry you up the hill, let yourself roll back down, let me carry you once more*. *More*, as in—if everything that had hummed and buzzed and sizzled in the air between them could be measured, if it had some ontological weight, some metaphysical mass, if there was a secret equation known only to mathematics or scholars, some brute formula for just how much sheer feeling can fit inside two grown men's chests when they're this in love, then surely there'd be a number large enough to hold all their love inside it. A number large enough to make Ilya's fate revert itself, to make the universe and the cosmos and life and death itself cower in the face of it. Surely, surely, surely.

More.

And now Shane can't help but think of the smile that'd already be forming before it could be stopped, of Ilya's eyes rolling to the back of his head, of his mouth letting out the warmest of laughs, flashing the brightest of smiles, and—*goddamnit*, god *fucking* damnit, he knows exactly what Ilya would answer, what Ilya would *always* fucking answer—like Shane could ever have the last word in their age-old argument anyway—and he knows it in, in—in his *teeth*, in his body, in his, fucking, pinky finger, in the dog-like loyalty of his heart, in every single stretch of summer left to come and every

season left to endure and every room left for him to enter, expecting to be followed.

For a heartbeat—one tiny, unthinkable microcosm of a split second—Shane swears he hears it, a faint echo of Russian, so hauntingly familiar, drifting through the open screen door behind him and answering him back anyway.

Mm-hmm. If you say so, любимый⁶⁷.

And before he can stop himself, before thought can intervene, before he can remind himself that love can't bring the dead back to life and time itself can't bend backwards, there Shane goes, turning towards it by instinct, back towards the open door and the empty cottage and the faint voice and the phantom warmth of someone that's nowhere and everywhere and which he knows isn't there, can't be, of course, but—*maybe, just maybe, what if*—? Because of course he does, because some voices love will always answer, even after death, even after grief, even when they come from somewhere impossible and beloved and already gone.

“—Ilya?”

And the wind moves softly through the trees, and the lake folds endlessly into itself below, and the night stretches lonely across the water, and the world opens, and opens, and opens.

⁶⁷ Beloved

NETTLES

Epilogue:

Yuna

NETTLES

Epilogue

2028

@yunahollander.24



I have spent the last few months trying to understand how a mother is meant to keep breathing after burying her child.

I still don't know. What I do know is this: over the last few years, I have lost two sons, and lived through a kind of grief I didn't know a person could survive. The first was Ilya. The second was Shane.

The world is mourning Shane, and the world has every right to. He was extraordinary. He was brilliant and funny and stubborn and far more tender than most people ever got to see. He was my beautiful baby, the joy and pride of mine and David's life. But if I'm being honest, and I think honesty is the only thing left for any of us now, the son we knew had already disappeared on May 23, 2024. The day Ilya passed, Shane went with him.

We watched our son wither in front of us these last four years. We watched him become quieter, smaller, further away. Watched him smile less, sleep less, eat less. We watched him try, of course, because he loved us and he knew how much we loved him back, but a part of him was already gone.

I know Shane's death came as a shock to everyone. For many of you, this felt sudden, and unimaginable, and impossible, and we mourn with you. For us, it's still unimaginable and impossible and devastating, but in full truth, it wasn't sudden. David and I knew, one way or another, that this was always a possibility.

Shane wasn't weak. Really, he was one of the strongest people I ever knew. But the love he and Ilya had for each other was so rare, so enormous, that once half of it was torn away, the other

half was left trying to endure an amputation no one should have to endure.

People speak so casually about love. They use the word for everything and everyone, without a second thought. But what those two boys had was not casual, or ordinary, or simple, or even something that can be spoken of lightly. I've lived a long life and I've seen many kinds of love, and I can tell you that I've never seen two people love each other like Shane and Ilya did. They loved each other completely. Joyfully, when they were allowed joy. Silently, when they were not. Fiercely, when the world made them feel they had to take it in secret.

There has been so much said about them throughout their lives: what they meant, what they represented, what they were supposed to be or achieve. To me, they were just my boys. My boys, who should've had a lifetime. My boys, who were cheated out of one.

I loved Ilya very much. I want that said plainly. I loved him as I loved Shane, and he wasn't "like" a son to me. He *was* my son, and I miss him every day. I miss his sarcasm. I miss how he always stole food off everyone's plates after insisting he wasn't hungry. I miss how he pretended like affection was beneath him and then never really left Shane's side. I miss hearing them laugh upstairs. I miss seeing two pairs of shoes by the door. I miss the life they were meant to have, and that they were both robbed of.

Shane promised Ilya, a long time ago now, that he would win one more Cup for him, and that was the promise he carried after everything else was gone. In many ways, it was the only thing left keeping him tethered here. Hockey had once been bigger than both of them, and then, after Ilya died, it became the last place Shane could still reach for him. I know he poured every piece of himself into that last season, and the boy who came home with the Cup three years ago in his hands was already so tired, so exhausted, that I think, in his heart, he believed he'd finally done what he came here to do. And once he had, his purpose, what he'd assigned himself to do in order to survive, was complete.

After Shane died, David and I found a letter he left for us. That letter will obviously remain private, because it belongs to our son and to us, but there's one thing I feel I should share, because I don't want anyone twisting his death into something different than it was: Shane apologized to us. Over and over again, he apologized and apologized. He wrote about how much he loved us and how he wished he could keep going and that he was truly, truly sorry, but he just couldn't endure living on without Ilya. Not for a second longer than he already had, much less the rest of his life.

My baby. My beautiful, beautiful baby. You have nothing to apologize for. Not to me, not to your father, not now, not ever.

I understand. God help me, I understand.

Since we came back to the cottage, Anya has been sitting by the water every morning without fail. She waits. She watches. She listens. Maybe dogs understand grief better than we do. Shane asked us to take care of her for him, and we will. We'll take care of her for the rest of her life, just as they would've wanted.

In a way, that's what we're trying to do with everything now: take care, as best we can, of all that's left of them.

So we won't hide them in death like they had to in life. We'll say Shane and Ilya's names out loud. We'll keep their photographs up, and we'll tell their story properly to everyone who cares to hear, and we'll love them both until our own last breaths.

Ilya, sweetheart, we miss you as if you were born to us. I hope you know that. I hope you know how deeply you were loved in this family; how, in every way that mattered, you were as much a Hollander as any of us. I hope you know how proud I was to love you like a mother, to be there for you when your own could not, and how proud David was of you, of the man you grew to become, and how he too loved you like a son. I hope you're at peace, wherever you are. I hope you found your mother again, and you reunited with her, and you told her all about your beautiful life.

Please take care of my boy now. He has been looking for you for a very long time.

NETTLES

And Shane, my love. My beautiful son. There are no words big enough for this: not for losing you, and not for loving you. I don't know how to make sense of a world that still turns with you gone. Surely there are laws in the universe against parents burying both their sons. If so, they failed us completely.

But if there's any mercy in this world, or the next, then I pray you're finally where you always wanted to be: in his arms, watching the sunrise.

I will miss you both forever,

—Mom

DRKR2PNT0

NETTLES