**Bracing for a Hug**

The train hissed as it halted to a stop, brakes screeching like it wanted to hold onto something it couldn’t. Crowds spilled onto the platform, faces blurred by years. He stood near the yellow line, palms damp, his chest tight as if the years of silence had been stuffed into his ribcage.

And then he saw her.

She was taller than the last time, of course she was, but her walk carried that same uneven rhythm he remembered, one foot always a half-beat behind the other. She scanned the crowd, uncertain, clutching the strap of her backpack so tightly her knuckles had gone pale.

“Lena,” he called.

Her head turned sharply towards him, and for a moment she didn’t move. Just stared, the air between them heavy with the years he had missed. He opened his arms, foolishly wide, like the gesture alone could make up for everything. She took a step forward. Then another. Finally, she stood in front of him, eyes tearing.

“You look older,” she said.

He gave a broken laugh. “That happens when you wait too long to see someone you love.” Her lip trembled. She looked away, biting down the quiver in her chin. “Why now?” The question was soft, but it sliced. “Because I finally found the courage,” he whispered. “And because I never stopped wanting to.”

Silence hung. The noise of the station seemed far off, like another world. He braced himself for her to turn, to walk away, to leave him with the years he had already squandered. But instead, she dropped her backpack with a thud and pressed herself against him, arms clinging so tightly his breath caught.

“I hated you,” she murmured. “So much. But I missed you more.”

He closed his eyes, resting his chin on top of her hair, afraid if he spoke too quickly it would shatter. “I’ll take whatever you’ll give me. Anger. Forgiveness. Anything. Just… let me be here now.”

She pulled back, eyes glowing red. “Then don’t leave again.” “I won’t,” he said, steady this time, as though making a vow to the bones in his body.

And in the middle of a crowded station, years of absence collapsed into a single, trembling embrace.