

Hayden Pike's Cape

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/75901811) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/75901811>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid , Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Heated Rivalry - All Media Types
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Hayden Pike/Jackie Pike
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander , J. J. Boiziau , Hayden Pike , Jackie Pike , Troy Barrett , Scott Hunter (Game Changers) , Leah Campbell , Yuna Hollander , Jade Pike , Ruby Pike , OC Rodion Tsetsov , OC Yannic Paquet , Farah Jalali , David Hollander , Roger Crowell
Additional Tags:	POV Hayden Pike , Canon Timeline , Hayden Changes History , Comedy , Fluff , Secret Relationship , Ilya is a sweetheart , Confused Shane Hollander , Male Friendship , Social Media , just a bit , Betaed , POV Outsider , Shane Hollander Speaks Russian , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Good Friend Hayden Pike , Protective Hayden Pike , POV Jackie Pike , Good Friend Jackie Pike , Jackie Pike & Ilya Rozanov Friendship , BAMF Jackie Pike , Lots of f-bombs sorry it's canon , Ilya Rozanov & Hayden Pike Friendship , Complete , No Smut , Coming Out , Outing , Good Parent Yuna Hollander , Protective Yuna Hollander , No AI Used , Fix-It
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Say Hello, Random Groove (The Rodion and Yannic Series)
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-17 Completed: 2026-01-16 Words: 23,638 Chapters: 8/8

Hayden Pike's Cape

by [GrendelsMother](#)

Summary

“I can’t just make some announcement, ‘hey everyone, Ilya babysat my kids, he’s a great guy!’”

Hayden threw his hands up in the air.

“I mean, actually you can, sweetie, but I was thinking something more gradual.”

... ..

The one where Hayden is actually the hero of the story, because Jackie talks him into rehabilitating Ilya’s asshole image by publicly defending him, several times. The reactions to the FanMail are different this time, because of Hayden.

Notes

(Spoiler warning for anyone not finished reading The Long Game)

Read as stand-alone Hayden fic, or as part of Yannic and Rodion’s story in “Say Hello, Random Groove” Series

Shoutout to the podfic produced by DontStopHerNow she did a fabulous job if you like audio versions <https://archiveofourown.org/works/86562401>

THANK YOU to everyone who has shared a link to this fic on their social media, I appreciate you helping interested people find it!

I lovelove to hear your reactions as you read - all comments are treasures to me!

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

Chapter 1: Origin Story

Chapter Summary

Hayden stopped, knife full of peanut butter poised above the bread.
“What.”

Chapter Notes

This scene absolutely *had* to be told. It would not leave my brain.

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

“Sweetie, we need to make a thank you of some kind for Shane and Ilya for watching the kids.” Jackie was still icing the sprained ankle she’d gotten stepping on Hayden’s toy car several days before. She was sitting on the couch with a cup of tea while Hayden was making lunch for them all. Halloween decorations scattered in the living room, waiting to be put up

“Yeah, we should. That was a helluva day. I know it turned out to be a sprain, but I was really frantic to get you to the doctor. I’m sure they had something important planned for that day and they dropped it for us.”

It’s okay Daddy,” Jade said from her perch on the stool at the counter next to her twin sister. “They did the most important thing while they were here, anyway.”

“I know honey, they painted your nails, it sounded like you had a lot of fun.”

“And they painted Aurther’s nails, too.” Jackie said, laughing.

“No *Daddy*,” Ruby said, as if he were an idiot. “Painting our nails was not the most important thing. They got married.”

Hayden stopped, knife full of peanut butter poised above the bread.

“What.”

He looked up, past the counter, at Jackie on the couch, hoping for wisdom, or at least clarity. She looked as confused as he felt.

Jackie sat up suddenly, wincing as her ankle moved. “What do you mean, honey?”

“We had a ceremony.” Jade said.

“They said they loved each other so we married them.” Ruby added.

“Arthur played the music from Moana. Ruby and me said the words.”

“We gave them rings *and they put them on.*” Ruby’s face was indicating, *as one does at a wedding.*

Jackie and Hayden looked at each other, eyes like saucers, mouths open.

“They said ‘I do’ and they kissed.” Jade continued, like this was the definitive test of importance.

“I was afraid we did it wrong because they looked like they were going to cry.” Ruby said, looking sad for a moment.

Jackie’s hand went to her heart and she closed her eyes, sucking in a deep breath.

“We didn’t do it wrong, Ruby.” Jade assured her.

“No, I know. They were happy later.” She was smiling again

”So you see, Daddy, they didn’t miss anything important. We took care of them.” Jade was triumphant, and Ruby nodded vigorously next to her.

Jackie opened her eyes to see Hayden leaning on the counter, the knife resting on the slice of bread, still mounded with peanut butter. His eyes huge. He shook his head and his mouth curled into a questioning half smile.

“Ruby, Jade, come over here to mommy for a minute.” Both girls got off their stools and came over to where Jackie was sitting. Arthur got up from his activity book in the armchair and came over, too.

“It is wonderful that you did that for them.” Jackie said, carefully. “And I need to make sure that you know it has to be a private wedding. Just for our family to know.”

“You mean a secret?” Jade asked.

“More than a secret, baby. It is really important for Shane and Ilya that this is something that only our family knows. It’s so special that we can’t say it in front of anyone else. Can you make sure we do that? I know they really love what you did, and they will love it most in private.”

“Not tell anyone at all?” Ruby asked.

“For a whole bunch of big reasons it is important that we keep this beautiful ceremony private and don’t tell anyone at all.” Jackie paused trying to figure out how to make the sensitivity of this understandable to the girls. “So the magic doesn’t break. We can talk about it ourselves, or when Shane and Ilya are here and nobody else is here - because that’s how special it is what you did. It’s like magic that won’t be as good if other people know.”

“Okay Mommy,” both girls said in unison, not seeming concerned.

“I’m so glad you told us, because we’re your parents, and it is always good to share with your parents. Nobody should tell you to keep a secret from your parents, you know that part, right?” all three kids nodded, seriously. “But inside our family, some things are private and we don’t share it with anyone outside of our family right here. And this is one of those. It will be a special private event just for us. Do you understand that we won’t say anything about it outside of our family?”

“Yes, Mommy,” Jade promised, nodding.

“Yes Mommy,” Ruby repeated. “Can we eat our sandwiches on the porch?”

Hayden handed over the now-finished sandwiches and opened the porch door for all three kids to carry out their lunches to the three-season porch, currently drenched in sunshine.

He closed the door and turned back to Jackie.

“Oh. My. God.”

He shook his head as if to dislodge the images he couldn’t process. “I have never before in my life wished I had a nanny cam until now. Why don’t we have that on video?”

“I’m laughing,” Jackie said, even though she wasn’t, “but Hayden, I’m also not. I can’t help but think about—Honey, what if they wished they had a video, too, but they couldn’t imagine it being saved safely? Videos can get out. What if they actually want to get married, but they can’t? How awful is that? Oh my god, I have never thought about this for them. What if they’re not married only because they can’t come out?”

“Well no, they can’t.” Hayden shook his head. “I mean, yes it’s awful, but... the idea of opposing captains—two huge rivals—the asshole Ilya reputation, no, it would not be okay. There’s too much history.”

“I mean,” Jackie said, thoughtfully, “they told us that was part of the plan with the foundation, to counteract that reputation, that story, and to pave the way for the public to take hold of the idea of thinking of them as friends. To tone down the rivalry.”

“Well, Ilya doesn’t help by being such a dick.” Hayden rolled his eyes.

“Is he, though?” Jackie asked. “Is he really *so much* of an actual dick that he shouldn’t be just left alone to date Shane if they want to? To marry? The guy who just dropped everything to watch our kids because I sprained my ankle is such a dick?”

“No. I mean... no.” Hayden admitted. “But they have this rivalry, he’s built this reputation...” He trailed off.

“Did he, though? Did he build it or did everyone build it for him? Is he really worse than Dallas Kent?”

“No, hell no!” Hayden declared.

“Worse than Troy Barrett?”

“No,” Hayden said, more quietly.

“Worse than Coach Theriault?” Jackie asked, eyebrows raised.

“Okay, no. But he’s a shit-stirrer...” He trailed off again.

“But what? Is any of it actually hateful?”

“No. Not really.” Hayden’s voice was low. Then he suddenly burst out, “But it’s fucking annoying!”

“Is ‘annoying’ enough to create this ‘you can’t be together’ level of animosity though? That, unlike Scott Hunter, they don’t get to kiss in public?” She looked down, thoughtfully, then raised her eyes again to look at Hayden. “Isn’t that what they’re hoping their charity will start to fix? A chance to show they’re on the same side and their friendship is normal? I mean, how are we not helping with this?”

“I can’t stop the media from taking sides,” Hayden pouted.

“So who does Ilya have on his side?” Jackie asked.

“Sha...”

“Besides Shane.”

Hayden opened his mouth and closed it again.

“Does he have you?”

Hayden opened his mouth again. And closed it again.

“*Could* he have you?”

“What are you saying, Jackie?” Hayden looked both terrified and offended.

“I’m saying that it occurs to me that the single best thing we could ever do for Shane Hollander is help rehabilitate Ilya’s reputation so that it matches the guy who dropped everything to watch our kids and paint their nails while we were at the hospital. Rehabilitate it in a way Shane can’t do alone, even though he’s trying with the foundation.”

The way her voice made that sound possible, and—okay, yes—deserved, hit Hayden with the force that it always did when he was confronted with her determined goodness. Hayden loved her for it. But a decade-long habit of thinking of Rozanov as the bad guy reared its head, and he reflexively recoiled from her version of Ilya.

“I can’t just make some announcement, ‘hey everyone, Ilya babysat my kids, he’s a great guy!’” He threw his hands up in the air.

“I mean, actually you can, sweetie, but I was thinking something more gradual. Like when someone says something, you can say ‘he’s not so bad.’ That you say, ‘well, he’s a hell of a player,’ or ‘I notice he’s never mean,’ or even, ‘he’s actually kind of funny.’ And when he comes to town for a game, you maybe take him out for a beer— before he heads over to Shane’s. So people can see that you like him. Trust him. So that you have reasons to counter the negative. Until one day it *is* easy to say, ‘he’s a friend of our family’ and ‘he plays with my kids.’ And on that day, maybe it wouldn’t be a disaster for Shane to be able to hold his boyfriend’s hand in public, like we do, every day.”

“Jackie...”

“I’m saying, imagine what it would do for Shane if he didn’t have to fight the rivalry story alone.”

“Jackie...”

“That would be an outstanding ‘thank you’ gift, I think.” She settled back into the couch, nodding her head with certainty, and picked up her book.

Hayden’s shoulders dropped and he let out a sigh. He stared at his wife, like she was the kindest, wisest person he’d ever met. She was.

He sighed again. “I’m on it. Operation Wholesome Rozanov.”

Chapter End Notes

Do you understand the assignment, Hayden?

... ..

Note: for those who live in warm climates— a “three-season porch” is a space that is typically unheated but has glass windows and is wind-proof. So it’s too cold in the deepest winter to use, but in spring and fall on a sunny day the solar warmth makes it a livable space, and in summer you open the windows.

Chapter 2: It's Not a Bitter Pill

Chapter Summary

Being nice to Rozanov really is a bitter pill. But Hayden can learn to cope, with Jackie's help

Chapter Notes

Publishing earlier than promised-- I had to do something extra in the post-episode 5 stupor.

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

Hayden had no idea. No idea *at all* how to say nice things about Rozanov.

No, that wasn't true. He could say nice things about the way he acted around the Pike kids. But that topic was not yet on the table—how would he ever explain *that*? If he was going to say something in public, he had to come up with something to say in advance, because he knew it would never come out right on the spur of the moment.

Okay. Deep breath. Jackie had made suggestions. He needed to just start with that. Got it. How to work that in. Wait. First, he had to figure out a plausible story for why he would know.

The foundation. He did see Rozanov at the foundation. They had been working together there for two years since it had been formed.

He remembered the first volunteer orientation lunch two summers ago, where they had been at the same table. It had started out annoying, and it had ended annoying, to be honest, but Rozanov had been actually kind of funny that day, trying to make the kid who was going to handle equipment less star-struck.

Hayden laughed, thinking about that day two and a half years ago. He remembered that he and J.J. had taken their lunches to one of the nearly empty large tables to join one of the young volunteers to make him feel more welcome.

They were just saying their hellos when Hayden and J.J. realized he was none other than the Russian AHL kid from the fall before, Roadie. He'd been called up to the Voyageurs for two months and now here he was, volunteering for the foundation. Hayden and Shane had noted

when he got traded to Calgary on their NHL roster and became a regular on that team. Shane seemed especially invested and updated Hayden on his stats sometimes.

Rozanov had shown up to the table right then, boisterously arriving and interrupting everyone, and the kid had gone completely star-struck, unable to say a word.

Hayden remembered being impressed with how gently Rozanov had introduced himself, and started asking the kid what he'd be doing with the camps. He hadn't expected Rozanov to be so effortless with that. In fact, Hayden had been ready to step in and make sure Roadie was eased in, since they had played together before. But Rozanov just seemed to get it and Hayden had watched with surprised admiration how he got the kid to talk about his job wrangling equipment and relaxed him enough with jokes and stories that he could finish his lunch without choking.

Of course, it had all become a shitshow when another volunteer showed up, the IT guy, and J.J. clocked him as Quebecois, and started talking to him in French. Rozanov gave J.J. a glare and started talking in Russian to Rodion, and glancing at J.J. like it was a competition of languages.

Hayden had become a spectator at this point. There was a rapid-fire French conversation going and an equally inscrutable Russian one diagonally across it, with Hayden in the center and everyone rudely forgetting that Hayden was even there and only spoke English.

To make it worse, then Shane had sat down and joined the French conversation between J.J. and the IT guy. He hadn't made any effort to stop the Russian conversation and even seemed to act like he was listening; smiling at Rozanov's Russian antics and inexplicably laughing when Rozanov and Roadie laughed. Hayden wanted to knock their heads together.

But—Hayden took a deep breath and he came back to the current situation—Rozanov's dickish behavior aside, what he did for the kid was really kind, and by the time lunch was over, Roadie had been laughing and saying he'd see everyone when summer came.

Okay, Hayden thought, planning his Wholesome Rozanov^(TM) comment for the next media opportunity. The story was two years old, but no one would know that. That could work. *He's not so bad. Look how he helps others.*

That was his plan to start, then. He'd say, "he's not so bad," and claim he decided that after having lunch at the foundation.

Hayden sighed. This was really exhausting to think through. And that was all the thinking about it he planned to do that day. It was time to go skate.

He didn't think about it again for almost a week, until the video coach showed some Pittsburgh tape in preparation for an upcoming game. In it, Pitt was playing against the Centaurs, and Rozanov scored twice for their win. Hayden winced at the realization that he had not been working on Project Wholesome Rozanov, and that Jackie probably knew that and was biting her tongue on reminding him of it. Hayden sighed, and made a note on his phone to stop for flowers when they got back from this road trip before heading home.

But the reminder was timely because the very next night, after the win in the North Carolina game, a reporter asked him what the Voyageurs thought of the Centaurs win and the performance of Rozanov in the ongoing points race.

Hayden pictured Jackie's face as he schooled his expression to look serious. It helped to think of her.

"He's a tough player, that's for sure. But our team has great chemistry and teamwork that supports the kind of effort Shane Hollander can deliver. We will continue to play our kind of game when we see them." Hayden was very pleased with himself.

"Are you worried about how Rozanov's ongoing rivalry with Hollander will impact that team play?" Another reporter asked. Hayden heroically kept the groan from his face. Why wouldn't they let him just leave it at nice sportsmanship?

"Not really." Hayden deployed his talking points, feeling smooth. "Rozanov is a good player, that's what we need to focus on overcoming. When he's on the ice, we need to neutralize his drives. When he's not out there, we need to deliver on our own game—that's the main focus. He's—I had lunch with him recently as part of my work on Shane's foundation. There's... he is not that bad. He's not saying anything that bothers us."

The reporter looked surprised, and momentarily speechless. And that gave time for Hayden to step away.

He walked back to the dressing room smiling, thinking about how Jackie would reward him for this. He started whistling.

"You're looking chipper for a guy who just left media," Comeau said, passing him as he hurried to change.

"Just thinking about Jackie," Hayden's smile was wide, his stride relaxed. He sauntered toward the dressing room with his whistling. He broke his stride suddenly and cringed when he realized he was happy because he'd spoken nicely about Rozanov, but he shook it off and started thinking again about how happy Jackie would be. He resumed his whistling.

Hayden's mood remained high. The Voyageurs had won in the end, and Hayden had scored a wife-point by talking nice in public about Rozanov after a Voyageurs win. Did he think about winning twice in that head conversation? Yes, yes he did. Winning made the nice comment easier to swallow. Hayden admitted that about himself.

"I got my chance to say something nice about Rozanov, babe," Hayden was barely inside the door before he reported on his good work. The flowers he had bought were glowing all yellow and pink as he handed them to Jackie. His smile was a kilometer wide in triumph, and he looked at her like she was a cool drink on a hot day, as if his mind was already anticipating her pleasure at his project report.

Jackie took the flowers from him and laid them on the table in front of the sofa where she was reading with her feet up, her ankle still wrapped but no longer needing ice, the kids already in bed. She couldn't help but catch his victorious mood, while smiling inside at his transparency. He wasn't happy that he'd been nice to Ilya; rather, he was happy he had pleased her. But she'd take it. Baby steps. She would use her powers for good. She grinned as he crossed the room to her and climbed onto the sofa. He was clearly distracted by his accomplishment.

"That's awesome sweetie," she crooned. "What happened?"

"Media tried to push the angle." Hayden shook his head as he carefully straddled her thighs on the sofa and leaned down to kiss her. "You kind of have a point that it is them bringing it up all the time. They wouldn't let me get away with just saying he's a strong player. Had to dig for a comment about him as a person. Assholes. Anyway, I said I had lunch with him at the foundation and there was nothing mean to talk about."

Jackie looked at him, impressed. Not just for saying something nice, but for noticing that the media was pushing the story line. She didn't say anything about that, though.

"C'mere," she said, looking up through her eyelashes, pulling him down for another kiss. Hayden's response was predictable and immediate. She smiled. He was so pleased with himself for doing something for her. She loved him for that. It was kind of hot. Add that to the list of ways Hayden was Mr. Wonderful.

"How's your ankle?" he asked, still hovering above her without putting any weight down.

"Not throbbing."

"That's good."

"Something else is throbbing, though," she added, coquettishly.

"Jesus, Jackie."

"Hayden?"

"Yeah?" He moaned, leaning down toward her mouth.

"Close the front door, Hayden."

Jackie's playful smile made it clear she'd been laughing at him for several minutes. Since he had come in and made a beeline to her.

"Fuck." He jumped off the sofa. Jackie laughed the whole time it took him to go to the door, pull his keys out of the door handle and close it.

"Now carry me to bed."

"Yes, ma'am."

The next day Jackie saw the recording of the post-game interview and could have hugged Hayden for his effort. There were still more opportunities for him, though, and she explained it when he came home from practice and wondered what he would do next in his mission.

“I saw the post-game, babe. That was awesome. I loved the pause from the reporter,” she laughed.

“You should have seen his face. He was thrown off completely. Fishing for snark and all he got was sportsmanship. It felt kind of good to play him like that.” Hayden seemed genuinely pleased at how that had worked.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do next though. Honestly, that was really hard to plan.” He looked at Jackie for help.

“Well, one thing you could do—you can start with calling it Shane and Ilya’s foundation instead of Shane’s next time. That’s part of the point of it. To show them working together. You can add to that. Or, I suppose, Shane’s and Rozanov’s, although that’s awkward sounding—stick with Shane and Ilya. Using his first name will show that you’re getting to know him. I bet Shane would notice and feel really good about that, so that’s a bonus. But it would help the media see them as working together. You know, a lot of people are claiming it’s just a publicity stunt that the league made them do. That’s where your voice can make a difference, since you are involved in the camps.” She eyed him closely to make sure he was on board with the message.

Hayden pondered that. “It’ll be hard saying ‘Ilya,’ I swear to god.”

“Hayden, he’s your best friend’s boyfriend. Surely you can call him by his first name.”

“Yeah, except no one knows that boyfriend part.”

“Fine, you see him enough at the foundation since you’re doing core team planning meetings during the winter. It will really give a different vibe to call him Ilya.” She eyed him encouragingly.

“Ilya. Augh. Fucking *Eeeel-yah*. ‘Shane and Ilya’s Foundation.’ Gah. That’s gonna take some practice.” He looked like he just sucked on a lemon, pursing his mouth and sticking out his tongue like he was trying to expel something sour. His whole body shivered.

“Shit, Hayden, you make it sound like a medication.” Jackie’s delightful laugh burst out. Hayden grinned and looked lovestruck, as he always did when she laughed. “Like, ‘I’ve got to take my Ilyastatin,’ or something.” She pretended to hold up a prescription bottle for an advertisement.

“Rozanoxican,” he countered. “It’s one of those big honking pills that tastes bitter, and you have to keep taking it for weeks, and it’s really hard to swallow, and you need, like, a liter of water to get it down every time,” Hayden deadpanned. Jackie laughed again. Hayden grinned.

“Fine. I can do it,” he relented.

November closed with a foundation lunch and Hayden was happy to find himself sitting with J.J., Roadie and the IT guy, Yannic, again. They had just started chatting as Shane and Ilya walked up to join their table.

“I hear you’re tearing it up in Calgary this year, Roadie, that’s awesome!” Hayden had been noticing Roadie’s stats over the last year or so that he’d been out there, almost all of it in NHL games. “How are you liking it out there?”

“I am very happy, almost one-point-five years out there now.” Roadie’s smile was bigger than Hayden had ever seen it in Montreal. “I got a one-way contract, and that made me very, very happy, and they renewed it this year. But since I got moved up to second line, I have even less to worry about—it has been a long time since I saw the minors team. It is good.”

“That’s great, Roadie,” Hayden was happy for him. “We knew you’d make it. You played well with us two years ago. We’ve been watching you out there.”

Ilya nodded. “Moving is a part of hockey, that is certain.” He looked over at the IT guy. “And how is our IT guy? Yannic, right? I haven’t seen you since summer camps. Are you still in Montreal?”

Yannic looked at Ilya for a moment before smiling. “I work mostly remote now, so I am able to be wherever I want, outside of project travel. I always have my place in Montreal, but I enjoy personal travel, too. I just make sure I’m orbiting Montreal for my dance classes and these foundation meetings.” He shrugged slightly, and Hayden thought that would be cool, to work remote and choose your destinations. Especially in winter.

Ilya nodded at Yannic. “That is convenient when you enjoy traveling. Glad to hear that.”

Then Ilya turned back to Roadie on the other side of Shane, and, speaking across Shane, said something in Russian to Roadie. Shane stiffened beside him and Hayden sucked in his breath at the deliberate dig against Shane, by using Russian to exclude him from the conversation.

“Ilya, English please, so we can all participate.” Shane admonished. Hayden was glad he was pushing back against Rozanov’s rudeness.

Ilya smirked. “Some things are not for your ears, Hollander.” Which, Hayden thought, double rude! Why was he such an asshole to Shane, who he supposedly loved? It got under Hayden’s skin. He was a hard guy to like, sometimes. Hayden was suspicious of Roadie’s half-grin, as well, even though Roadie tried to hide it. He was not sure what just happened there, but he didn’t like it.

Jackie had no idea how hard this was.

Read "Lingua Russia" fic if you want to know more about OCs Roadie and Yannic who make a cameo here, to know more about why Ilya is being so nice and why Shane is laughing. Not required for this fic, just some juicy background.

Chapter 3: The Barnacle and the Rock

Chapter Summary

Jackie dives deep in the ocean of understanding. Tosses Hayden a life jacket.

Chapter Notes

Takes place Dec 2020

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

After practice the next day, he was curled up with Jackie watching the new documentary about Shane and Roz—no, sorry, *Ilya*. He had to admit it was pretty good. He also had to admit the producers really pushed the asshole/rivalry angle pretty hard, even during events Hayden knew had not been very tense. He was about to say so to Jackie when the clip of Cliff Marlow checking Shane came on.

“Holy shit, I never watched Ilya’s face in this before,” she said, leaning forward in her seat. “I always watched Shane. Ilya looks panicked. Do you see this, Sweetie?”

“Yeah.” Hayden was staring. “There is a man whose best friend in the world—no, the love of his life— is blacked out. Fuck. How did I never see that before? He’s fucking frantic.”

“It’s easy to see our good Ilya there.” Jackie still had her eyes on the TV. “That’s what everyone needs to know. See? Even you didn’t watch and see that side of him.”

“But then he does some dick move, though!” Hayden’s exasperated shout changed the mood. “Like at the lunch last week. Do you remember that Russian kid who played for us before? He’s in Calgary now.”

“Well, that’s awesome! Good for him,” Jackie said. “He seemed nice.”

“Yeah, but at lunch, Rozanov just leans across Shane and starts talking in Russian to him. That was this week’s dick move. It just doesn’t stop. Rozanov was using him to be a dick to Shane on purpose. He knows Shane doesn’t speak Russian!”

“Well, as far as we know.”

“I cannot believe Shane went and learned Russian. But anyway, that’s why I have such a hard time thinking of nice things to say. When he does stuff like that to Shane. I try, I really try, I just hate how Rozanov is always ragging on Shane.”

Jackie looked at Hayden thoughtfully. “I don’t think Shane minds it.”

Hayden was aghast. “No way. How could he not?”

“Hayden, you are missing the forest for the trees. I don’t think Shane thinks of it as ragging on him.”

“What do you mean, how can you even be okay with it. He’s just constantly embarrassing him on purpose.”

“I know he teases Shane a lot,” Jackie mused, “But I keep watching how Shane reacts, and it’s kind of cute.”

“No, it’s not! It’s mean! He’s being an asshole.”

“I mean when I watch how Shane reacts; the situation is cute. He blushes, but you notice, he never moves away.”

Hayden looked at Jackie like she had betrayed Shane. “Are you saying that Shane is needy and will take any kind of attention, even when it’s bad? What the fuck?”

“No,” Jackie shook her head. “I mean the opposite. Sweetheart. Listen to me. Think about this. Ilya is the barnacle. Shane is the rock. And I truly think Shane lives this in his bones. Not consciously, but his reaction just screams that to me. Ilya attaches all over the surface, and to survive, he needs to be armored and prickly to the world, and he *needs* his rock. And Shane—Shane knows the barnacle’s scaly exterior will never really harm him, and he knows the barnacle needs to anchor on him. And he loves the barnacle. And he’s there for it, because he can do that for the barnacle without losing any part of himself.”

“That is the most fucked up analogy...”

“It’s a metaphor,” Jackie explained, patiently.

“Whatever. It doesn’t work.”

“Doesn’t it?” She faced him fully. “Shane is Ilya’s rock. And he is utterly comfortable with the certainty of it. That’s why he never gets actually mad, because he’s the one with all the power in this relationship. He is all Ilya has. Shane has family, long term friends, roots, citizenship in a country that won’t kill him for being gay. Ilya— left everything behind. He lost his mother to depression. His father and brother obviously gave him nothing emotionally. He even left Boston for Shane. Shane has *everything*, and Ilya has Shane. Shane is the rock in this relationship, for sure.”

Hayden just stared at his wife.

“If you asked him,” she went on, “he probably wouldn’t realize that. But Shane always reacts exactly like this is true.”

Hayden continued to stare. But his brain was churning.

“And the barnacle may have a rough exterior; it has to be a little cutty and stabby to other things in the ocean to stay alive, unlike the rock that just exists without uncertainty about its surroundings. But that barnacle is attached to that rock forever. And the rock is there for it.”

Hayden’s mouth hung open now. He remained speechless.

“And that’s why we’re doing this bit of barnacle rehabilitation so people can see he’s not all that bad, so that Shane can have him in public. And you will never say any of this to Ilya or I will cut you.”

Hayden snorted.

“I’m serious, this is not ammunition for you to be a dick, okay? Just—notice how much Shane loves him, please? And he’s really, really not a bad guy here, even to you. He gave up his one day with Shane to watch our kids just because you asked. They don’t have very many days together and he gave one up for you—cheerfully, no complaints, no teasing. And, even, remember back at the beginning, he had us over for dinner just because you mean a lot to Shane.”

Hayden finally found his voice. “And he was a dick at that dinner!”

Jackie smiled at him. “Sweetheart, *you* were a dick, too. So, he is—hear me out—as *wonderful a guy as you are.*”

She looked at him pointedly. “Am I right?”

Hayden dropped his head, then rolled it back up, sighing. “How did I score a woman as wise as you?”

“Same way Ilya scored Shane, sweetheart. Because you are a good man.”

“Fuck. I hate how right you are. It’s humiliating, almost.”

Jackie reached up and kissed him wetly. “You’ll survive the trauma.”

“What else can I even say, though? What do I even know about him, really?”

“Why don’t you ask your best friend to tell you something about his boyfriend? Something he likes about him. Have you ever asked about him? Does Shane ever get to talk about his boyfriend with you without having to defend him?”

Hayden’s shoulders slumped. “Fuck. Operation Wholesome *Ilya* is back on, my love.” He stressed the first name like a painful oath.

Hayden waited three days for his chance, when they were on the road again for a long west coast trip. After a win in San Jose, he thought the light mood would be a good opportunity. Shane declined to go out with the team, and Hayden went back to the hotel with him.

“Tell me about Rozanov. *Ilya*.”

“What?” Shane was startled from his phone.

“Ilya. Your boyfriend. Tell me something about him.”

Shane stared at him, blinking rapidly. Hayden could see the short-circuit sparking as his friend tried to process the question. He kind of hated himself in that moment, realizing that Jackie was right. In the two years since he’d found out, he had never once shown an interest in the guy his best friend called the love of his life.

“Can we—I’ve never asked you about him, Shane.” Hayden said, quietly. “Will you tell me something about him that makes you happy? You’re my best friend. I should find out what makes him, you know, the guy you love.”

Shane continued blinking, then turned his head away from where Hayden sat on the other bed. He shook it and turned back to look at Hayden.

“Um—”

“Like, what does he do that can make you laugh?”

Shane opened his mouth and then closed it again. Then smiled and chuffed a laugh.

“He’s got these two neighbor kids. Willa and Andrew. They’re young. Little kids. But they love him. They put out signs for him before games. He stops his car on the way to every game to get their ‘advice’ for the game that day. He tells me about their conversations, it’s really—sweet. I mean, picture him stopping his car to get advice from five-year-olds about the game, you know?”

Shane smiled in a way Hayden had never seen before. He sighed. God, his best friend really was in love with that barnacle.

“It’s hard to imagine Rozanov being cute.”

Shane looked up, warily. Defensiveness sweeping across his face.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. I’m glad to picture it. I had—a gap, you know? That’s why I asked. I wanted to know that side of him.” Shane relaxed. Hayden pressed on. “Tell me something else.”

“You mean that?”

“Yeah. Tell me another one.”

“Well, um, well, he likes to wear my shirts.”

Hayden’s eyebrows shot to the ceiling.

“He says they smell like me, and they’re tight, so it’s like a hug all day. God, don’t tell him I told you that.”

Hayden couldn’t stop the warm feeling he had for his friend as he pictured that. A guy who wanted to wear your shirts when he was away from you because they smelled like you. And told you that. Who loved you like that. It was something Jackie would do.

“I won’t tell him. I was thinking that Jackie would totally do something like that. Well, except my shirts aren’t too tight for her.”

Shane laughed. “I bet she would. They are a lot alike, I think.”

“That is terrifying.” Hayden couldn’t help remembering Jackie’s comment about how both he and Ilya had won their hearts desire—by being good men.

“Thoughtful. A little mushy.”

“Wow.” Hayden marveled.

“When he says stuff to me in Russian, he’s using all these random nouns instead of, like, sweetheart or dear. He says ‘my tomato’ or ‘my lawnmower.’ Totally random stuff. I dunno, trying to increase my vocabulary maybe. But it’s funny.”

“You’re learning Russian?”

“Yeah,” Shane looked surprised that Hayden didn’t know. “I mean, for a while.”

“So-- at the luncheon, when he was talking to Roadie, you knew what he was saying? He wasn’t just talking across you?”

Shane paused for a moment. Hayden felt like he was censoring. But he kept his mouth shut about that and let Shane tell it how he wanted. “He was telling him that Calgary was a better city than Montreal, and he should be glad for his trade.”

“Well, shit.” Hayden said, into his own chest. “I thought he was ragging on you.”

“I mean, he does sometimes, but not then. Really, most of the time he’s actually just flirting, in secret. You know? And I call him an asshole and we both know we don’t mean it.”

“3-D fucking chess.”

Shane laughed. “Yeah, I guess.” Then he paused, thoughtful. “He’d beat me. At chess. He’s really smart, you know.”

Hayden looked at him.

Shane shrugged. “He is.”

“I believe you,” Hayden said, quietly. “He is. All right. On that note, I am brushing up for bed. This has been eye-opening. And overdue.”

Shane's smile looked grateful—and fond. Hayden clapped him on the shoulder as he went to the bathroom. Damn. Jackie was right *a-gain*. He put another note in his phone to bring her flowers.

But Hayden knew what he'd use. The story about the neighbor kids reminded him of all the times he'd seen Roza... *Ilya* with the kids at camp. He really was good with them. Better than Shane, Hayden had to admit. He *connected* with them. Then Hayden kicked himself mentally for *having to admit*. The fact was, Ilya was good with kids. He made them laugh; he made them try hard. He made them love hockey. Most of them would do anything for him.

In the morning, it was a short flight to their next game in LA, and the conversation turned to charity events at the card game tables where Hayden was playing with J.J. and two of the rookies. One of them complained about the charity events with kids and how it was hard. At first, Hayden wanted to tease him about being uncomfortable around kids when he was a kid himself. But then he realized his opportunity.

"Keep at it, kid. Give it the right attitude and you can be as good as Ilya Rozanov with the kids."

J.J. jerked his head around to look at Hayden like he was concussed. "What, now?"

"Oh, come on, you've seen him at the camps. Gotta give the guy credit for that. He connects with those kids faster than any of us. They'll do bag skates for him." Hayden hoped he wasn't over-selling it. But it felt like a good opportunity. And maybe if he got J.J. on board—without telling him why, of course—he could make even more impact.

"But seriously," Hayden decided to dial it back a bit. He'd made his point. He looked at the rookie again. "Think about when you were a kid and everything seemed so important. Having a star come and visit you in the hospital or helping out at your rink is fucking *everything* to these kids. Be that for them."

"Yeah, I guess," said the rookie. "I'll remember that."

"Good," Hayden said. "You'll be glad. And it'll get less awkward-feeling over time."

Hayden sent a DM to Jackie that evening. It was late in Montreal, but she'd get it in the morning.

HAYDEN: Project Barnacle progress- Talked about how Ilya is good with kids today on the plane in front of J.J. and two rooks. Just checking in to get project progress points.

The next morning, he saw her replies before getting on the plane for Vancouver

JACKIE: You are hilarious. No, really, you are. I mean it.

JACKIE: And thank you Sweetie <3 Good job

Time stamped an hour later, he saw,

JACKIE: Check out the Centaurs media page. Pretty cute Christmas stuff and hospital visit shots from earlier. Maybe you can use. Looking forward to you being home in 3 days! Call us before your nap this afternoon. Xoxoxo

Hayden checked the Centaurs page and saw the pictures at the hospital event as well as some goofy Santa hat pictures, including one with Troy Barrett (!?) and a dog that was actually pretty cute. He pulled up Ilya's Instagram. He saw one picture of him at the hospital event and clicked "like" on it. The rest of his Instagram was pretty random, so Hayden didn't interact with any of that.

They flew up to Vancouver early and had a day off there, with optional workouts at the hotel fitness center in the afternoon. Shane would be there for that, of course—no workout was optional in his book—so Hayden hung out with him for the day and joined him in the fitness center.

He was stretching after the treadmill when Shane finished and came to stretch near him.

"Holy Shit." Shane was staring at his phone.

"What?"

Shane kept staring.

"What?"

"Dallas Kent"

"Asshole," was Hayden's immediate reaction, no matter what the news said. "What did he do now?"

"I'm not sure but Ilya decked him for it."

"No shit? Good for him."

"Game Misconduct, though." Shane shook his head.

"Really? Why?"

"Probably because he hit him down, then lifted him back up off the ice to hit him a second time."

Hayden couldn't help but laugh. He could totally picture that mayhem. But he also knew it meant that Dallas had been the worst kind of prick, because Ilya's fights were not usually ragers. Still, he found himself grinning about Ilya. Then he realized he was starting to think of him as *Ilya*.

Jesus. Personal fucking discovery time.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you are enjoying Jackie and Hayden's project!

Yeah, sorry sweet beta reader. I published without removing all the double spaces. Sue me. 😏♥

Chapter 4: Laugh Back

Chapter Summary

A spoonful of sugar. And, does Hayden have a crush?

Chapter Notes

Takes place Jan-Feb 2021

After the too-short Christmas break, Montreal had another road trip. One evening, after the Voyageurs lost in OT at their Calgary matinee game, Hayden watched highlights in his hotel room from the Centaurs game that included some close-ups of Rozanov chirping hard on the center from Detroit. He shook his head in empathy with the Detroit player. Rozanov was a relentless chirper. (He noticed himself using ‘Rozanov’ instead of Ilya as he thought of him being annoying.) He honestly wasn’t sure whether he’d be able to withstand that at their next game and still stay on target for Project Wholesome Ilya. Shane was meeting with the coach for something, so he decided to ask Jackie during their video call.

“Okay, so I had complete success with the nice comments about Ilya last week. That worked out. But I’m watching the highlights of his game, Jackie, and how am I going to pull the nice card when he’s being a dick during a game? What’s the plan for *that*? He does it on purpose. I don’t have to stay all friendly during that, do I?”

“Oh, Sweetie, that’s the best time. But really, I think you might be surprised. When he chirps, just laugh—like he said something really funny. Like you’re laughing with him. Try it. I mean, you can laugh *at him* if you need to, but try laughing with him.”

“I have never once thought his comments were funny. But maybe if I force myself to laugh, I won’t be so pissed.” He paused. “Well, and, I suppose me laughing at him will throw him off, I guess. He’ll be surprised.”

“Since you’re trying to beat his team, win-win,” Jackie winked into the phone.

“Still, it’ll be hard getting in the mood to do that,” Hayden’s lip curled with skepticism.

“Picture in your head how he looked with that flower headband watching TV with Ruby and Jade when we came home that day,” Jackie suggested. “Imagine that he thinks he’s saying something funny to get a laugh—and give him one. See what happens. I’ll bet you a Loonie that he likes it and does less chirping on you.”

Hayden smiled, imagining it in the context of the highlights he'd just been watching, and also imagined a game without getting mad at Rozanov.

"But don't do it around Shane if you can help it;"

"What?" Hayden looked surprised. "Why not?"

"He'll get suspicious. It'll derail your project. Let him find out later."

"Wait, why. I thought I was supposed to be making Shane feel better about me liking Ilya?"

"Well, it needs to be subtle, a little. And—that's not one of your superpowers."

Well, *rude*, Hayden thought. Then shrugged. Also—true.

"Fine," he laughed. "I have four weeks to perfect this anyway, before we play again. We fly home after the game on Monday. See you then, honey. Love you and the kids so much."

"Love you, too, Sweetie. See you Monday"

Hayden spent the rest of the week's road trip spreading random acts of Ilya-boosting. A positive reply to media here, a social media "like" there, a mention of "Shane and Ilya's foundation" whenever he could.

At the end of their game in Washington, though, the news of the Centaurs' plane making an emergency landing shook up the team, especially Shane, which J.J. noticed.

J.J. took him some coffee in the morning because he was concerned, and Hayden didn't fight it—in order to maintain Shane's privacy. He asked how it went, though, when he saw J.J. come down to the lobby.

"Hey, how's Shane?" Hayden was itching to ask lots of questions, but intended to play it cool. Inside, he really wasn't cool at all. It must have been terrifying for the team and he couldn't stop thinking of bad scenarios—and what it would be like to have to tell Jackie and the kids that Uncle Ilya was gone. That thought had kept popping up in his head all night. It rattled him.

"He's doing okay now, I think."

"That must have hit him, now that he and Ilya are friends." Hayden realized that in his worry, *Ilya* had come out automatically instead of *Rozanov*.

J.J. sent him a cryptic look. "Yeah."

"Whoa, J.J. you didn't say anything bad about him, did you? He's really not a bad guy. And right now, that's Shane's friend—must have been pretty scary."

“I’m not an idiot, Hayden, I know.” J.J. paused. “You’ve been saying that a lot lately. *Tabernak*, you don’t have a crush on him too, do you?”

“*What?*” Hayden was frozen in worry. “What do you mean, *too?*”

“I, well, I think Shane has a crush on him. I know he does. And this plane thing has him all ramped up. I told him it was a bad idea to be crushing on a straight guy. We’ve got to find Shane a date. There are nice guys in Montreal.”

Hayden stared at J.J. “Oh. Um, oh,” he stammered.

“Stop worrying, I didn’t make it worse. I also said Rozanov is not an entirely bad guy. He was pretty upset.” J.J. peered at Hayden more closely. “But seriously—you sure you’re not crushing on Rosanov, too? You really have been his cheerleader this past month or so.”

“No. No, of course not. I just—well, Shane’s been trying to make these camps a success, and the media keeps on with this bullshit that it’s just a stunt, and I’m sick of it. For Shane, you know? So I’m trying to be a little more helpful to the foundation. Take down the asshole meme.”

“But he *is* an asshole, Hayd.” J.J. looked genuinely confused. Hayden had to laugh. He remembered Jackie’s argument about that.

“Is he, though?”

“Er, yes? Every single time he opens his mouth?”

“Nah, remember when he made that kid, Rodion feel welcome at the first camp? I mean, look. He’s not Dallas Kent asshole. He’s not Boudreau asshole. He’s not... Crowley asshole.”

J.J. looked offended. “Of course not!”

“Exactly. He’s a chirper. He’s chaos. But he’s not an actual asshole. And Shane wants this foundation to work. So that’s what I’m doing. Trying to correct the record a little bit so people’s feelings about Ilya don’t harm the really good work he’s trying to do. With Shane.”

“Good luck keeping those big ideals when we play them at the end of the month, *mon frère*. I’ll laugh when you crack.” J.J. laughed out loud.

Hayden smiled, wryly. “Jackie told me to laugh at him when he does that, like he told a funny joke. She bet me a dollar he’d laugh back.”

“Ooooooh, big spender! Pike, you need to give your wife more money.”

“Fuck off. I give her all the money. She gives me an allowance.”

“*Chalice*. Of course you do. Of course she does.” J.J. noted Hayden’s scowl. “I say this in the nicest way, *mon frère*, because your Jackie is a national treasure.” He leaned down and peered at Hayden’s eyes.

“But seriously, bro, no crush, right? Please reassure me. Because you’re all first-naming him out here.”

“Now who’s the asshole, huh? The foundation is named after his mother. So how does it honor her if we’re dicks to him? No crush. Dick. Get used to it, though. I like working for the camps, and so do you, and they are half sponsored by *Ilya*.”

J.J. hit him in the shoulder and laughed as he walked away.

In late January the Centaurs played Montreal again. Hayden had prepared for the game in his usual way— nap, light dinner, two-touch warm up, the works. And he was also warming up for his new reaction to the Rozanov chirps. He was kind of looking forward to it. It might be fun if Jackie was right, that Ilya would be amused if he laughed back. And it was absolutely certain he’d get a chance to try.

It was nine minutes into the first period, and the first line players were out for both teams.

Shane shoved Ilya hard against the glass, and Hayden stepped in as Ilya shoved him back. Something about Ilya’s grin triggered Hayden to know the moment had arrived.

“You still play hockey?” Ilya turned his head to Hayden as Troy arrived and grabbed Hayden’s arm.

Hayden’s bubbling laughter was genuine as his body reacted to the delight at how perfectly he had predicted this moment. Ilya looked completely startled with a surprised smile replacing his troublemaker’s smirk. Troy dropped his arm.

“Leave him alone, Rozanov,” Shane growled. “And back the fuck up.”

But Ilya was still looking at Hayden like he’d spoken in Russian, and Hayden just laughed harder and skated away.

“What was that?” He heard Troy ask Ilya.

He looked back when he got to the dot and got in position for the faceoff. He saw Ilya shaking his head, looking at him. Hayden grinned and stood in the winger spot, waiting for Troy, feeling like he won the round. Shane won the faceoff.

In the second period at a faceoff after a commercial break, Ilya chirped Shane about the All Star game coming up.

“Are you ready to lose to me in the skills competitions this year Shane?”

And Hayden laughed, loudly. Once again, it had come out spontaneously as he was amused at the predictability of it. The ref chose that moment to drop the puck and Ilya’s startled reaction to Hayden’s laughter caused him to take his eye off the puck and utterly lose the faceoff to Shane, who spit it off to his left wing, took a pass immediately back and took off down the ice to score the Voyageur’s third goal on a breakaway.

“What was that fucking magic, Pike?” J.J. clapped him on the back at the end of the celly. “Mon Dieu, you made him lose his shit by laughing. I’ve never seen him so late to react to a puck drop. I am now a believer!”

Hayden looked up worriedly to make sure Shane was not in earshot, but he was already done high-fiving at the bench and headed back to center ice for the next face off. He turned back to J.J.

“I’m telling you, Jackie was right! I’m kind of looking forward to my next chance now.”

“You still owe your wife a dollar, though.”

Hayden grinned. “Worth it.”

It was inevitable that there would be additional chirps, and Hayden couldn’t wait. This was addictive.

But the third period was more of a grind as the Centaurs tied the score and then got a go-ahead goal, bringing it to 4-3, and the play got scrappier.

When Rozanov caught Hayden with the puck coming up the side and ground him into the boards, Hayden succeeded in trapping it with his skate and drew a whistle.

Ilya pushed once more and said, “You will not be at the All Star game, this year, though. They only send the top players!”

Hayden’s pause was only a fraction of a second before he deployed his planned laugh-back. “And aren’t you lucky to get to rub shoulders with the actual top player who is attending from my team!” He laughed again, genuinely, because he was getting in the mood for this.

Ilya looked at him for a moment as they broke apart. He was smiling in surprise. He seemed like he just seen the sunrise. Like he felt joy that Hayden had understood the assignment—finally. Ilya’s laugh was infectious, and they both grinned wholly uncharacteristically on the way to the blue line faceoff dot.

Ilya leaned over and looked at Shane. “When did Pike get a sense of humor, Hollander?” Shane looked bewildered, and Ilya won the faceoff.

Ilya skated past Hayden after Troy got the next goal. Extending Ottawa’s lead.

“You are a new Hayden today. This Hayden is funny. And you are not getting mad anymore. Who is this new Hayden Pike? He is funny instead of mad!” Ilya did not look mad at all. He looked—delighted. Hayden shook his head. Who knew.

“I just finally realized you’ve been trying to tell jokes all this time. Your jokes are terrible, but you get an A for effort. And that is entertaining me.” Hayden smirked and skated away.

“Hayden, when did you get a sense of humor? What happened?” Ilya had skated up behind him.

“I married a very, very wise woman.”

“She got you a sense of humor?”

“That’s how good she is.”

“Why did she wait so long?”

“She got tired of waiting for me to get my own, I guess.” Hayden skated toward Shane who looked confused.

“I am going to buy her a fruit basket!” Ilya shouted after him.

Hayden blew him a kiss. Ilya laughed a delighted giggle. Right on the ice. Hayden smiled, glowing in his new superpower. Shane looked even more bewildered, but won the next faceoff when Ilya looked over at Hayden.

The game ended 5-3, Ottawa’s ninth straight win. Hayden watched Shane hustle through his shower and head out quickly, saying he was going to meet up with his parents, while the rest of the team lamented losing the game and headed for the bus. The plane would take them straight home tonight—it was just a short hop. Shane wouldn’t be on board, saying he would drive home from his parents’ house the next day.

J.J. sat next to Hayden on the plane.

“Okay, now you must tell me about this magic voodoo you are performing against Rozanov. What is this?”

“If you just assume everything he says is a joke you’re supposed to laugh at,” Hayden replied, matter-of-factly, “you find that’s a correct assumption. He knows every chirp is an exaggeration, and he thinks you must know, too, and that you’ll laugh.” Hayden smiled and shrugged. “And if you assume that, you do laugh.”

“You’re serious about this be-nice campaign, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Hayden nodded. “I really am. Full disclosure, though, I had some fun getting under Ilya’s skin tonight by laughing and throwing him off balance. No fighting and an unexpected bonus! Not gonna lie, that was fun. But yeah. I want this to work for Shane. The foundation. And for the kids at the camp, too. I was going to try to find some social media stuff I could boost. Hit like, or share or something on Ilya’s posts. I don’t know. Sort of background effort, you know? This is kinda of hard to do alone. I guess I really feel for Shane and what he’s had to do to launch it these last two years.”

J.J. looked at him thoughtfully. Which, Hayden noted, was a very unusual look for J.J.

“Maybe I can help.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’ll help Shane. I will be subtle, though. Because I do not want Shane thinking Rozanov is somehow available to him romantically, because that is self-pain that I will not allow my friend to endure. I am still going to need your help in finding him men to date in Montreal.”

Hayden winced inside. That was a problem for another day. Maybe he needed to talk to Shane about that. Maybe Jackie would have an idea for that.

Hayden couldn’t wait to get home and report to Jackie on his efforts tonight. She’d probably be asleep, but he could tell her in the morning—they had a week off to enjoy it.

Getting J.J. on his side - without even having to explain all the reasons why, was a thrill that Hayden hadn’t considered. So he set out to convince more people to help. He texted Scott Hunter and asked him if he would boost the foundation by quietly making Rozanov less toxic. By mentioning the things that were good, by calling it “Shane and Ilya’s” foundation, by occasionally clicking like on Ilya’s posts.

Hunter understood, and surprised Hayden by saying he’d share it with some others who were on his chats. Hayden thanked him and got ready to close his phone.

HUNTER: I will still chirp him whenever possible though, just so you know

HAYDEN: Well yeah no one can walk away from that, LOL

Then Hayden approached one of his closer acquaintances who was a sports journalist and invited her to lunch. It was a big gamble, and he hoped he’d be able to pull it off—a “casual” lunch where Hayden could drop some topics. They met at a smaller deli cafe and Hayden arrived with a pretend script about how he wanted to know about her job to tell a cousin’s kid. Jackie would be proud of him for this one, he thought.

“Hey Gina, how are you doing?” He greeted her when she arrived and sat with her sandwich order.

“Good, Hayden. This was a nice surprise. You said you wanted to ask me some questions? That’s a switch up.”

He gave the story about his young relative being interested in sports journalism and wanted to know what advice she’d give to a 12-year-old thinking about it. She turned out to be surprisingly enthusiastic about the outreach and ended up making Hayden completely interested in his own fake storyline. Which—okay, it helped his acting quite a bit.

They were about halfway through with lunch when she sensed a break in his questions and turned the conversation to him, as he had hoped.

“How about you? What’s new in your world?”

He told her about the kids' latest developments, and then dove into his real intent for this whole invested lunch.

"Plus, I'm really enjoying the work we're doing on the foundation. I mean, working with the kids in the camps is awesome, and the work they're doing with the money is so important, you know? Boosting the resources for mental health care and community support. It's been pretty amazing. Probably the weirdest thing has been getting to know Ilya Rozanov. I always thought he was a major dick, I mean, the press always plays that up, you know? But watching him work with kids, and with the foundation, and, just—getting to know him. Sometimes I kind of wish the press would back off and not undermine the work he's trying to do. Turns out he's a pretty good guy who is trying to do some important work, you know?"

Hayden thought maybe that was laying it on too thick, so he quickly switched back to talking about himself to hide his intent.

"Anyway, the kids up there are amazing. It's been really awesome working with them. This has become a regular summer thing for me, and I've been involved with Shane and Ilya during the rest of the season in making sure the mental health support is happening, too. It's been really great."

Gina looked at her watch, maybe checking on an appointment, so Hayden took that opportunity to end the meeting.

"I gotta thank you for all the information for my relative. I really appreciate that. She'll be thrilled to hear about what you said. I'm really grateful for your time." He pushed back his cup and folded the wrappers from his sandwich.

"It was good to talk. I'm glad you texted. Let me know if she ever wants a one-on-one to learn more. I'd be happy to."

Hayden was impressed. "Yeah, I will," he said, smiling genuinely at her offer. "Thanks."

As they rose to leave Hayden tried to hide his satisfied smile so he wouldn't give himself away. He pretended to look at his phone screen as if that was the source of his grin.

"Take care," he called out as Gina walked away.

Hayden thought it would be down-time during the All-Star break for his project, with no other games and him not being around the action, but he was delighted to see J.J. living up to his promise and making small comments and likes on media about Ilya from the events. He showed them to Jackie and told her how he'd gotten J.J. to sign on, and then got Hunter to share with his network—with more social media engagement from additional players that Hunter knew. The look she gave him made him feel like a hero, and he knew he was on the right track for the plan.

"Isn't this your friend Gina?" Jackie asked, looking at an article on her tablet.

“Whatchu got,” he leaned over to her screen and skimmed through the first few paragraphs.

“Ilya Rozanov puts up good times but comes in second to his friend Shane Hollander in speed competition. Co-Founders of the Irina Foundation for Support of Mental Health Initiatives come in 1-2 in the event with Hollander finishing 0.13 seconds ahead of Rozanov,” Hayden read aloud.

“Hah! I had lunch with her! I told her I wished the media would back off and notice his charity work with Shane. Damn. That worked better than I thought it would.”

“You did that, sweetie?” Jackie looked very impressed. Hayden didn’t get that look often. Love? Yes, constantly. Adoration, even? Yes. But impressed? He preened.

“Yup. Operation Wholesome Ilya at work.”

“You fucking rock, Hayden,” she said, climbing onto his lap. “I am absolutely developing a superhero kink here.” She kissed him teasingly and he completely forgot about the All-Star game or any other hockey thing.

After the All-Star break it was back to the work of hockey and grinding toward playoff rankings. Hayden was amazed to see the Centaurs continue their march toward relevance. Though the game schedule and the consequences of each win or loss didn’t leave much time or energy to do work on the plan. Especially during a long road trip.

Just when Hayden was running out of ideas and trying to figure out his next move, Troy fucking Barrett, of all people, provided the opportunity. Hayden found himself in his hotel room after a game, reacting with thumbs-up or claps to all kinds of social media messages about Troy’s completely unexpected coming out and also the Centaur teams’ support of him. Including a picture of Troy and Ilya on the ice during warm-ups, looking up together at the flags and signs in the stands.

Captions like, “That’s what Ally-ship looks like!” caught his eye and he found that every one he went to mark with a like, already had Scott Hunter’s and J.J.’s names on them, as well as an increasing number of other NHL players. He put his phone down in his lap and realized his throat was tight and his eyes stung. He nodded. *That’s* also what ally-ship looks like, he thought.

Even Gina came out with another upbeat article, “It’s no surprise that the centaurs are backing Barrett, with Rozanov as captain. He’s been supporting people for years through his foundation.”

He sent Jackie a text to share them with her. Evidence of success in the project.

Chapter 5: Former Bad Boy

Chapter Summary

Does the twitterverse actually notice? Does the journalistic world notice? Are we crossing sports now?

Chapter Notes

Takes place late Feb and early March 2021

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

Jackie was the first one to notice the media change. It had started as a trickle, with Gina's friendly article in January about the All-Star game. Since then, she had seen more and more. With media comments by Scott Hunter, and J.J., then one from one of the Florida players, then from a San Jose player, then some more articles quoting Scott or Hayden or J.J.

It started to coalesce around the idea that Ilya was a good guy, whose on-ice chaos was a scrappy but non-asshole style of interaction.

She couldn't have been prouder of Hayden's work, and the success he had at changing the narrative in a positive way.

The Irina Foundation—where on-ice animosities melt away.

SportsNetRecap

You might have noticed a new trend on social media, where hockey teams that you thought of as rivals are coming together in surprisingly friendly ways. The friendship of Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander has launched more than a foundation. The summer camp cooperation between players from Toronto, Montreal, New York, Ottawa and more has started to spill over into comments, likes, and other forms of support even during the playing season. As more and more sports news outlets have reported on the outreach programs and the community service of these two friends, players around the league have started to show support for each other online, including the two former rivals."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Hayden slammed his tablet shut. "They make it sound like they're the ones who own this reputation change. Bastards. I did all the work here!"

Jackie laughed right out loud. “You were trying to be subtle, Hayden. I guess it worked!” She tapped over to a different tab on her laptop. “Twitter’s starting to notice too. Although... some of them might be drawing certain...alternative conclusions.”

“What does *that* mean?” Hayden asked, apprehensive, but he leaned over again to read the thread.

@HaydenStan6969: What is Hayden Pike doing in Ottawa on his day off? Having lunch with Ilya Rozanov, apparently. And having a grand old time. [picture: Pike and Rozanov carrying take-out and laughing]

@staytinynation4ever: Shane Hollander just woke up in a cold sweat and he doesn’t know why

@Shaneshanehockeypain: was Hayden like...spying on Ilya for him or smthn? make this make sense plz

@hollandersauce: Shane and Ilya have to at least get along for their foundation right? I think we’re all past the rivalry thing atp, Hayden clearly is

@Voyagersshmoyagers: Ottawa and Montreal fans everywhere struggling to set aside their differences and appreciate inter-team friendships

@Ilyasassenjoyer34: yeah i’d go against the bro code to hang out w my bestie’s rival if said rival was *Ilya effing Rozanov*

@yaoigoggles3000: the ass has a gravitational pull, Hayden just fell into it

@yurioniceseason2: why am i getting brocedes flashbacks rn

@landoscarPhDholder: no no shane and ilya are brocedes, hayden is vettel

@yurioniceseason2: omg ur so right

“Okay, that take-out food was 3 months ago. But I guess I’ll take it for positive press. We were getting food for Shane and Yuna when they stayed late after the foundation lunch and were going to miss dinner. And the reason why we’re laughing is because the ketchup dispenser was... never mind. Yes, we’re great buddies.” He rolled his eyes. “Not sure what they were talking about at the end there though. What the fuck is brocedes?”

Jackie squeezed him. “Don’t worry about that. You were actually having fun with the man. You can’t deny it.” Hayden rolled his head like he was forced to admit it was true.

More positive things came out as the week progressed.

“Check out this thread,” Hayden showed Jackie. “#RozanovPuppyDad. Nice work, Rozanov.”

@DrapeausBlocker: Did you see Sauer’s interview after the Jersey game against Ottawa? Fucking Rozanov called him a puppy during the game where the mic picked it up

@OntariosBestisOttawa: and the media couldn’t let it go

@StormCupNow: What the hell does Rozanov even know about puppies anyway? He probably kicks them

@CentaurStanmpede2950: He has a puppy, you know. (Picture of puppy) so cute #RozanovPuppyDad

@Ottawathisyear21: look at @Centaur’s - link to pic on Centaur’s website with Anya and Ilya - her name is Anya, is she the cutest??? #RozanovPuppyDad

“Hah!” Jackie hooted. “Nothing like a puppy to soften a man’s image!”

“I know, right? Now, if all he wanted to do was go to a park and get picked up by women, he’d be all set.”

Jackie looked at him with eyes that would have been rolling if they hadn’t stopped to pin him to his chair.

“What.”

Jackie just looked at him.

“I spend all spring polishing a fucking barnacle and I’m not allowed to have one joke at his expense? This is now the most smooth and soft and friendly barnacle in the sea. Come on, baby, toss me a bone here!”

Jackie couldn’t help but laugh at his wounded look.

“Okay, that was actually funny. You can have that one.” She couldn’t help but grin.

Hayden smiled like sunshine. Jackie melted. God, this man was funny—and lovable.

And the positive articles seemed to feed off of each other, Jackie was delighted to see, with Ilya showing up in more places as it seemed the sports writers wanted to get on the bandwagon

CUTEST PRO ATHLETE DOG DADS

US Magazine

Some of our favorite dogs have pro-athlete Dads. Come and meet some of the canine besties who help their dads wind down after a long workout or a tough competition:

1. Lewis Hamilton and Roscoe
2. LeBron James and Indigo Sky
3. Jessie Holmes and Polar, Hercules, plus 8 more on his sled
4. Lionel Messi and Hulk
5. Ilya Rozanov and Anya
6.more

scroll down for the rest of the top 20 as well as pictures and stories from their dads

Hayden got distracted for quite a while looking at the various dogs and their dad stories. But then when he switched back to Twitter and the next thing he saw made no sense to him.

“Wait, what’s this even mean?” Hayden turned his phone to Jackie.

@yurioniceseason2: wait... if hayden is vettel... and hollanov are brocedes... ARE SHANE AND ILYA BREAKING HOTEL BEDS WHILE “WRESTLING???”

@landoscarPhDholder: yes. keep up.

@neobloodednctizen: i don’t support rpf but they have that man pregnant on ao3, and yes, it’s Ilya’s

@Haydenstan6969: Wait, WHAT?? Did Hamilton and Rosberg break actual beds?

@landoscarPhDholder: yes. keep up.

“That is proof that the NHL is not the only source of drama in the world. Do not worry about that, Hayden. Seriously, do not.” Jackie just shook her head slowly. She had peeked into that rabbit hole. It was an epic rabbit hole, and Hayden did not need it.

“Speaking of NHL drama, you will never guess who just got traded to us.” Hayden ended up distracting himself from the brocedes insanity, and Jackie didn’t have to. She was relieved.

“Traded?” She was surprised. “Wasn’t the deadline two weeks ago?”

“Naw, Friday.”

“So—who?”

“Remember Roadie? He’s back in Montreal. Two years out at Calgary and the Voyageurs finally see what he can do. But they have him with us now, not Laval. I’m glad to have him, he’s solid.”

“Well, that’s nice. He seemed like a good kid.”

Jackie clicked another link on her media search and smiled at the article.

Former Hockey Bad Boy Ilya Rozanov Heads into Playoff Season with New Reputation

The Athletica inDepth

Ilya Rozanov used to be renowned for his habit of trash-talk to his competitors. But nowadays he’s known more for his charity work supporting mental health efforts and his friendship with his once-rival, and now his friend, Shane Hollander. We caught up with former Olympian Leah Cambell who, with her husband Max, coaches at the Game Changers summer hockey camps for kids. We asked her about the change in Ilya Rozanov’s reputation.

“Anyone who has seen these two at practice together knows the rivalry may have been overstated; they are definitely friends. But as friendly as they are, still, the competitiveness is absolutely real—and relentless. I guess they show the difference between being fierce rivals versus fierce competitors. They are friends and competitors. Neither one of them will ever give up for the other. Ever. I’ll tell you; nothing gets the kids fired up for practice more than watching those two act like every drill demonstration is a Stanley Cup seventh game overtime play, and then argue at the end of it until they laugh.”

“Oooh, Hayden, you’ll love this one. They quoted Leah!”

“Let me see,” he leaned over. “Wow, that’s a good one.”

He paused and finished reading, then burst out laughing.

“Shit, she is so right, though. When those two go to demonstrate a skill, they *cannot* do it slow for the kids to learn. Every time, it’s like there’s a fucking trophy on the line. Every. Time. We finally had to ban them from demonstrating drills together, they’re only allowed to do it for exhibition after someone else actually teaches the kids.”

“I mean,” he continued, “Ilya can teach them with someone else, but Shane just doesn’t know how to turn it down from ten. Or eleven if it’s against Ilya.”

Jackie felt a growing sense of contentment and hope as she watched this unfold. It had begun to feel like a great deal of the danger was softening. There was still the issue with the league leadership, she sighed, but all of this public goodwill was sure to improve Shane and Ilya’s chances of surviving coming out—so that hopefully they would feel able to try.

Hayden appeared to think the same way, because when he came up behind her in the kitchen and pulled her back against his chest, he brought up what she was thinking.

“I feel like I have accomplished my mission, Sweetheart. I really didn’t think it was possible. I should not have doubted you. But look at the media. Look at the players. Everyone I tried to hit up with a nudge is out there talking nice about Ilya now. It’s all over the place. We really, really did it, Jack. And it was all your idea. We gave them some breathing room. I mean, we’ll never actually know, but—still it feels like it should help.”

Jackie turned in his arms. “No, we’ll never really know. We don’t even know if they’ll ever need it. But it feels safer having this take out there. You did all the work, Hayden. I am so impressed by you. You really did it.”

Hayden gave her a swoony puppy look. “Naw, that was you with a brilliant idea.” He bit his lip. “You’re the fucking best.” He kissed her in the way he’d never stopped doing since the day they met—like she was his every dream come true. Jackie loved this about him and surrendered all thought.

It really *was* going great, Operation Wholesome Ilya, Jackie thought, the next day.

She almost told Shane and Ilya, who were visiting and showing off Anya to the kids. But she decided to wait to see if there would be a little more media action on their behalf before spilling the beans.

They all enjoyed their day off together. The kids went bonkers over Anya, and even though Hayden had to step away to do one of his FanMails, causing her to impose on Ilya and Shane to rescue Chompy from the car, the house buzzed with friendly warmth.

Jackie loved this. Ilya and Shane were a wonderful couple. She loved how much more comfortable Hayden was with their relationship, too. She couldn’t wait to see the payoff of them eventually getting to come out in an environment that didn’t hate them for it. She smiled at Hayden as he came back out of the den, so glad she’d married him.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, the @landoscarPhDholder handle is probably already taken, and it’s probably Hudson Williams.

WARNING - NEXT CHAPTER HAS SPOILERS FOR THE LONG GAME (BOOK 6)

Chapter 6: No, You Are Not Fine

Chapter Summary

“What the hell, Pike?” was the shout that greeted Hayden when he answered.

“Good morning to you, too? I’m fine, thanks for asking.”

“No, you are fucking not fine, if you don’t know it yet!”

Hayden pulled his phone away from his ear and looked at the screen, like he was checking the caller’s number. Yup, J.J. He put it back to his ear.

... ..

What’s the point of all that effort if you’re the one who creates the emergency?

Hayden’s heart is in this throat.

Chapter Notes

SPOILERS FOR BOOK SIX: LONG GAME - be warned if you haven’t read it yet
I included a couple of lines from the book when Hayden is talking to Shane and Ilya, at Shane’s house on **that** morning, so you’ll recognize those. I’ve put them in italics.

Takes place in March 2021

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

Hayden’s phone rang at 8:30 in the morning. It was early, but life with young kids meant that they had already finished breakfast and the kids were settled at the table making things out of polymer clay, talking animatedly about their creations.

“What the hell, Pike?” was the shout that greeted Hayden when he answered.

“Good morning to you, too? I’m fine, thanks for asking.”

“No, you are fucking not fine, if you don’t know it yet!”

Hayden pulled his phone away from his ear and looked at the screen, like he was checking the caller’s number. Yup, J.J. He put it back to his ear.

“J.J. What’s the matter?”

“Oh my god, you really don’t know. Well let’s start with this. What *the fuck* did you just do to Shane? How about, how long have you known that Shane and Rozanov are hooking up without letting him know I’d be an ally? Is this why you’ve been doing all this PR work this

month? And then, why *the fuck* did you not tell me what was going on so I could help? But before that, what *the fuck* is going on? And then, yes, let's get back to why *the fuck* you did not tell me?"

"Whoa, whoa, J.J. Back up. What have you heard?"

"I didn't *hear* anything, Hayden. I *saw* them kissing like they were on the bow of the fucking Titanic."

"What the fuck? Where did you see that?"

"Where did I see it? That's what you're going with, Pike? How about telling me why you kept this from me when we were literally talking about Shane's apparently *not unrequited* crush on Rozanov? We are best of friends—me, Shane, you— but you didn't think I should know this? I get why he was afraid to tell more people on the team. But you couldn't have let him know I'd be fine?"

"No, J.J. seriously. Tell me. Where did you see this?"

"Oh, fuck you, Pike. I saw it on *your fucking FanMail*. Which is currently viewed by *half a million people* on twitter. Just, fuck you, Hayden. I need to be there for *my friend* right now, and that's Shane, in case you were confused about who I considered a friend when I saw this, because I am not certain you and I are on the same page here."

"What the—what?" Hayden stuttered

"Go fucking look it up, Pike, FanMail Kiss. You won't have any trouble finding it." and the phone call cut.

Hayden was shaking as he changed screens and stabbed at the letters to type in *FanMail kiss Hollander* in the search bar.

"Fuuuuck." Hayden whispered, as hundreds of hits came up on the search. Thousands.

He clicked one. Saw his own FanMail from yesterday reposted, and hit "play."

"Fucking Fuck." He got louder.

"Hayden, Shh Shhh, kids' ears! What's wrong?" Jackie came over from the kitchen, her face worried.

"Fuck. Oh fucking fuck fuck."

"Hayden, what. Use your words." Jackie could tell something was very wrong, but had no idea what since it was something he was looking at on his phone.

"Fuuuuuuck"

"Other words, Hayden, different words. More words. What."

He just handed her his phone. She looked at the screen.

“This is your FanMail. Is this from yesterday?”

Hayden nodded, his face ashen.

“Talk to me sweetie. I don’t understand.”

“Play it. Oh, fuck, fucking fuck. Play it.”

Jackie played it, she could not fathom what could possibly cause this reaction.

Until she saw Shane and Ilya come into the background, reflected in the mirror, and her heart knew exactly what was about to happen. And it did.

She looked up to the top of the screen. This was on twitter. It had 1.4 million views. 1.5 million. 1.6, notching up as she watched.

“Oh, fuuuuck,” she breathed.

She looked at Hayden. He was barely breathing. She grabbed his face and kissed him briefly. Then she got up and grabbed his keys and brought over his shoes.

“Go to them. Go now.”

“Should I call? I’m—. Oh, fuck. What have I done?”

“No, don’t spend time calling, they probably turned off their phones when they saw this. You need to talk to them now, in person. Go.” She reached down and started putting on one of his shoes.

“You didn’t do anything on purpose,” she went on. “The time now is to show them you are there for them. Make a plan. Be there for whatever they need.” Hayden was still paralyzed, so Jackie put on his other shoe. She pulled him up from the couch by his hand, handed him his keys, and pushed him to the door.

“Go. Go find out what they need from you. Be there. Oh god. Hug them for me, okay? And pay attention to your driving. Be safe. Go be their helper right now.”

Hayden stumbled out the door.

All the way to Shane’s house, Hayden’s mind kept playing tapes of what people would say, what they would do. From the press, to the team, to the commissioner, he looped through the worst cases of the consequences of his *stupid fucking best-friend’s career-ending* mistake.

He thought about all the work he had been doing to try to blunt the reactions if Shane and Ilya had eventually decided to come out, but couldn’t picture it even working now. He decided to keep all of that to himself. It probably wouldn’t even help, and talking about it

would be a stupid distraction for the genuine fears that must be ripping Shane and Ilya apart already.

Shane's house in Brossard was only a ten-minute drive from Hayden's, but it felt like an hour as he drove knowing his friend was reeling from this news.

So it was something of a surprise when he arrived to find Shane and Ilya utterly unaware of the explosion that had destroyed their privacy.

After Hayden told them, and saw their faces fall in shock, they fell silent. Hayden was so angry with himself as he watched them realize their world was going to fall apart.

"Please say something," Hayden said miserably. "I know you hate me. Just say it. I deserve it."

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it. He wanted to say something before Ilya said something worse.

"It is okay," Ilya said quietly.

Hayden couldn't believe it. He stared at Ilya. And even when Ilya said that it wasn't his fault, that he'd been a good friend, Hayden was still surprised by the seismic shift that was his understanding of who Ilya really was. That goddamn barnacle was a good, good man.

"Jesus Christ, what are we going to do? Fuck, what does J.J. think? Oh god." Shane's concern brought Hayden back to the immediate problem.

"Yeah, well, I can tell you he's not mad at you, anyway. But he's beyond pissed at me for knowing and failing to convince you to bring him on board." Hayden's shoulders slumped even further, if that was possible.

"What do you mean? I'm the one who— why would it be your fault I didn't tell him?"

"Because he understands how hard it would have been," Hayden put his hand on Shane's arm. Then took it off, and went back to clenching his fingers in impotent fear.

"We were, um, we were talking about how you two have been trying to promote the foundation and how—well, you know—how the public has been treating it like a stunt that you two couldn't be serious about.

"So, he called me this morning when he saw the video to say you would want his help—you should check your messages by the way, he's sent some—and to say that I'm the asshole for not telling you he'd be a full ally so you'd be comfortable telling him. I mean, he's not wrong. I should have done that. I let you down there. Too. Oh god, I suck. I am so sorry."

"You don't. Hayden." Shane gave him a reassuring hug. They were going to call their agent and see what might happen next. If they'd be allowed at practice, how the league would respond.

Hayden said he was sorry again. And again, until both Shane and Ilya shushed him and said they would be in touch for whatever was next.

“I’m here for anything you need,” Hayden said, on his way out. “Me and Jackie both. *Anything*. Just let us know, okay?”

Hayden and Jackie watched the news, and the league spokespeople, and social media for the rest of the morning.

There was a lot of hate, and shock. But there was also a lot of support. A lot of people saying, “wait and see.” A lot of people saying, “would that be a big surprise? They are two friends who built a foundation together that is built on caring.”

Hayden left for practice after lunch, dreading what the locker room would hold. And while there were a lot of guys grumbling, there were also a handful telling them to shut up. Hayden recognized the ones he’d been talking to, and dropping lines to, as the allies. Including the young rookie who’d been complaining about volunteering back on the plane. And surprisingly, Rodion, even though he had just come back to the team. Hayden smiled, hoping that would lessen the sting when Shane arrived.

It did, somewhat, but not enough to matter. Coach Theriault was still enraged. His roaring diatribe could be heard in the locker room. When Shane came out and got his coat there were still too many sneers and angry faces.

Hayden stood up and spoke to those teammates.

“I know that everyone is fucking weirded out right now, but try to remember who the fuck this is. Shane is our fucking captain. Our leader.”

“He is fucking a rival,” Comeau spat.

“We’re all somebody’s rival, Comeau. Does that make us all assholes that couldn’t be someone’s friend? Don’t be a fucking dick. Rozanov’s a rival, sure, but he’s not a monster. He and Shane have been trying to make a difference for people in crisis, and they’ve done a damn good job. *Together*.”

“Hayden,” Shane shook his head.

“It’s bullsh—“

“Don’t. Hayden. I’m prevented from coming to practice today, but we still have a season to finish.” He glared at Comeau. “I’ll be back.”

“Hollander,” the rookie, Ray, stood up. “I’ll see you when you get back.” His voice shook a little as he said it and he looked very nervous, but determined. Hayden smiled at him and nodded.

“U tebya zdes yest druzya. Ne zabud.” Roadie said. Hayden looked over at him, eyebrows up.

“You have friends here. Do not forget.” Roadie repeated in English. Hayden was so glad to have him back right now.

Olivier Gagnon, the right winger on the second line stood up, too. “Shut up Boudreau. And anyone else who is about to act like an asshole. You know Rozanov’s been working with Shane on really important shit. Any possible problem with them being gay is nothing next to the lives they’re saving. So fucking save it for never, asshole.”

Shane looked at those who had spoken for him. His shoulders relaxed just a bit.

“Thank you.” He nodded at each of them.

“I’ll call you,” J.J. said, loudly, glaring around the room. Comeau sneered at him.

Hayden’s eyes were wet. “I’ll call you tonight,” he said. Shane nodded again, and left.

Practice was a mess of players pissed off about the video and players pissed off about those who were pissed off about the video. Coach’s stormcloud anger put a damper on all discussion, but the vibe was decidedly not team-like.

Hayden left practice still not knowing if Shane would be permitted back for the next one. He was grateful for all those who had stood up in the locker room and voiced support. It was good to know there were some voices taking a stand for Shane.

It didn’t help Hayden feel better, though. The only reason it was even needed right now was because of *him*. He’d fucked up and outed his friend. None of his stupid project even mattered now, and he knew the media would be after him for a comment before he could even get to his car today. And he was right; they got him on the way out. He was so mad at them for making this a big deal. But he needed to speak, to help.

At home, after the kids were in bed, Hayden and Jackie read through the reactions happening in public. It was still a mix. They were grateful to see some of the larger publications and podcasters publishing pieces that pushed the NHL and their fans to use this moment to enter the future. To align better with society, as they put it; framing it like the NHL was the one lagging, that homosexuality was already normal and the NHL needed to catch the fuck up.

Chapter End Notes

It was a rough day. A really rough day. But there are allies.

Thank you so much for all of your kudos and comments! It is so fun hearing your thoughts and reactions—thank you!

Chapter 7: Unmasked

Chapter Summary

“Today’s objective is creating a continuity plan to bridge this event, establishing messaging, and detailing contingent actions. Our meeting agenda is going to be first to set out our vision, or end goal, then we’ll review contracts, media reactions, league reactions. We’ll list our concerns and potential actions and review to determine if we have any gaps.”

Chapter Notes

This one is for the nerds, with love.

There’s a lot of unmasking going on in this chapter. How many masks come off? More than one, certainly.

Takes place in March 2021

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

IRINA FOUNDATION LEADERSHIP MEETING— MONTREAL, QC

LATE AFTERNOON

“Okay, thanks everyone for making time. Let’s get started.”

Yuna stood at the front of the large meeting room. Around the table were Ilya and Shane, their agent Farah, the Irina Foundation’s PR consultant Hubert Bergeron, the data scientist volunteer Yannic Pequot, David, and herself.

“Today’s objective is creating a continuity plan to bridge this event, establishing messaging, and detailing contingent actions. Our meeting agenda is going to be first to set out our vision, or end goal, then we’ll review contracts, media reactions, league reactions. We’ll list our concerns and potential actions. Then we’ll revisit the vision statement to determine if we have any gaps in achieving it. Once we’ve reached consensus on that we will assign ownership and dates to our actions. Any changes to the objective or the agenda?”

Yuna looked around the table. Farah and Hubert were on board; they knew a thing or two about action plans. David was ready, he’d certainly been in meetings like this in the Treasury

Department. Ilya and Shane were shell-shocked. That was fine. They had her to help solve this. Yannic had been invited by Hubert, who was using him to analyze engagement data.

“Let’s dive in, then.” Yuna put up a slide from her laptop. “I propose the vision statement is ‘Shane and Ilya are accepted as the same hockey players they’ve always been and their relationship does not change that.’ It’s pretty broad, but we will refine it as we work through the supporting information we have and decide if it is workable as-is. Comments on that?”

“I’d substitute ‘treated as the same’ instead of ‘accepted.’ It just removes some subjectivity and allows us to act on facts more than opinions.” Hubert pointed at the screen with his pen before writing on his pad. He looked back up at Yuna to confirm her response.

“Got it,” Yuna changed the statement on the slide. “Good change. Anything else?” She looked around but everyone was indicating agreement.

“Okay, let’s hit the agenda then. Farah, what’s the news on the management and contracts front?”

“Hard stop on the league front, at least for now,” Farah ticked off the first note on her paper. “They don’t want any statement coming from us, and they asked for a meeting with Shane and Ilya tomorrow morning. With the Commissioner. I don’t expect a favorable attitude there, based on the aggressive language of the message about ‘dealing with the problem before acting publicly.’

“Centaurs management is open to talk. Frankly, they appear ready to either shrug it off as no one’s business or provide support.

“Montreal,” she looked sympathetically at Shane, “they said we’d ‘hear from them when the League had provided guidance.’ Again, not favorable. But I will say that I’ve heard from several other agents who are expressing support from and through their clients. They feel like the press could be open to supporting us, and we could potentially capitalize on that. Just feelings on this, at this point though.”

“Thanks,” Yuna nodded, making notes. “Any questions for Farah on contract relations?”

Heads shook ‘no’ around the table.

“Hubert,” Yuna looked at the PR consultant. “Public relations is where this is going to be predominantly influenced. I know you invited Yannic here because of the data you’ve been working on.”

She looked at Yannic, “Thank you for making time to come, I realize you’re a volunteer in our organization, so we’re very grateful that you could give us more time. I can’t stress enough how important it is to maintain confidentiality of these conversations.”

“I understand completely, Mrs. Hollander. My day job revolves around intellectual property protection. That won’t change here. And I am under NDA to the foundation already.” He nodded, seriously.

Yuna noticed him glance over at Ilya and give another, very tiny, nod. She followed his eyes and saw Ilya incline his head, as if thanking him. Well, that was a mystery— but one for another day.

“Call me Yuna, please,” she corrected Yannic, warmly, and he nodded in return. She turned back to the PR consultant. “Hubert? What have you got?”

“Well, Yannic’s put together some numbers on favorable articles and the recent trends. Yannic, can you share your screen?” A graph came up showing colored bars, with one set tall across the row marked in weeks, and the other set starting low but climbing in increasing jumps. “We’ve clocked a rise in favorable mentions—this is mining the data for certain positive words connected with Shane’s and Ilya’s names in both print and online articles. The blue is Shane and the orange is Ilya.”

“Ilya’s has been heading up?” David pointed at the graph.

“Yes, it started in articles around January.” Yannic highlighted the spot on the graph as Hubert spoke. “It looks like the inflection point happens after an article by Gina Houle in *Hooked on Hockey Magazine*. We start to see an increase in favorable mentions in several others after that, and it grows in the following weeks.”

“She called me, this morning,” Yuna cut in, sounding surprised. “Gina did. It was a strange call. I told her I had no comment, and she said that she wasn’t asking for a comment, she was giving one.” All eyes were on Yuna, surprise on everyone’s face.

“She said she wanted me to know that she was a supporter. That she’d had lunch with Hayden back in January—I guess they knew each other from before—and he’d mentioned the Irina Foundation, and how the press was harming it by only reporting negative things about Ilya. Anyway, she said she was calling to let me know that any article she wrote would be more of the supportive content as she’d written in January; that she didn’t have anything negative to say and wanted to make sure the foundation’s work was highlighted—and she wanted Shane and Ilya to know that.”

The room was silent for a heartbeat.

“That’s—” Farah drew in a breath. “That’s a pleasant surprise.”

Hubert nodded. “And while I won’t count on any of the other positive mentions in professional content staying positive, comparing Gina’s content to others’ gives us a place to watch for faster feedback, *and* it gives us places to make calls, and articles to point to, for public support examples during discussion with the league or owners.”

Farah reached down and pulled her phone from her pocket. After glancing at the screen she excused herself to the hall.

“What else have you got, Hubert?” Yuna directed the conversation back to the media data.

“Well, we also looked at social media, and while we were checking for reactions to the FanMail video, Yannic checked for historical trends there, too.” He paused and waved at

Yannic to speak.

“I did an exploratory factor analysis to identify latent factors in post reaction trends on Ilya’s and Shane’s and the foundation’s social media accounts, as well as any retweets or reblogs or shares. By that I mean, are there any core events or trends that explain a bunch of other trends. I saw an increase in favorable post reactions on Ilya’s social media from other hockey players over the last three months or so that resulted in increases in public reactions,” Yannic said, as he pulled up a new slide showing a graph of Ilya’s total media likes and the number that were from other NHL players. The NHL player reactions were getting larger quickly over the weeks on the chart, and with them a larger rise in total reactions.

“I know that’s a little inside-baseball, if you’ll pardon the cross-sport metaphor, but I think it’s important to you. It means we found that for every NHL player making a favorable reaction—a like or cheer or on-fire or something—the public reactions go up fifty times. Well, more than fifty times of course. Basically, they multiply by about 10% of whatever the size of the NHL player’s own fanbase is. And that number of NHL player reactions was noticeably up over the period reviewed.”

“J.J. called me.” Shane interrupted. His voice was still the shocked monotone he had arrived with, but his eyes were narrowed in thought.

“After practice this afternoon. He said he was 100% behind us. And he said he hoped his social ‘likes’ would help. I didn’t know what he meant, so he said he had been putting reactions on Ilya’s posts to help boost his favorables to help the Foundation.”

Eyebrows went up all around the table. Ilya turned his whole body toward Shane.

“J.J. did that?”

“He said—” Shane shook his head like he was trying to clear it. “He said Hayden told him to.” Then Shane huffed a wry laugh. “Even though he was still pissed at Hayden for not convincing me J.J. would be safe to tell. About us.” He shook his head again.

“*Hayden* did that?” Ilya looked flabbergasted.

“Well,” Yannic pulled up a new chart. “That partially solves a mystery that I was trying to understand. I stratified the data by player name and there is a very strong signal for the initial propagating event. I just can’t see a ‘why’ in the data itself. If Hayden is known to be behind J.J.’s spike in activity—you can see J.J.’s was the second increase, here in blue, while Hayden’s is the first one—it is possible he was also the cause of Scott Hunter’s in green, followed by the Panthers’ Aako Jokinen in solid red, and Calgary’s Antton Niskanen here in the hashed red. Plus these others later, that are just now starting to add to the numbers.”

Everyone looked up at a new chart that showed the social media reactions over time again, but this time labeled by player, and stacked like sand dunes. There were a lot of player names. Hayden’s color was by far the earliest, the largest and the most consistent.

“That starts in *November!*” David called out, his eyes wide. “He’s been doing this for *six months?*”

“Then the question becomes, what happened in November?” Yannic asked. “Or more probably late October?”

“Jackie?” Shane and Ilya spoke at the same time, looking at each other.

Hubert looked up from his phone.

“I just got a media alert about Hayden. Apparently, this afternoon, 30 minutes ago, he told the New England Sports Network, and I quote, ‘Ilya Rozanov is a great guy. He babysits my kids. You should try to get to know him.’ So, I guess he is still hard at work on whatever this is.”

Just then, Farah re-entered the room. She looked around at the silence and the shocked faces. Shane and Ilya staring open-mouthed at each other.

“Something happened—?” she looked from Hubert to Yuna for guidance.

“We seem to have uncovered a six-month personal plot by Hayden Pike to boost Ilya’s favorables. For unknown reasons— or, something to do with Jackie?” Yuna looked at Shane and Ilya for an answer.

They didn’t have one. They still looked at each other, their shoulders went up and palms went out in confusion.

“I mean, she sprained her ankle the last week in October. Right before Halloween. But—I don’t know why this would happen?” Shane looked confused.

“Well, regardless of why,” Farah cut in, “it may be related to the call I just got from the President of the Players Association. He says they have been barraged with calls from both fans and media telling them they’d better be supporting players who are running charities for mental health and if the Association doesn’t, there will be A) lots of negative press and B) lots of really angry fans not buying merch or tickets. Seems like everyone is currently hyperaware of the Foundation’s good work and fixated on what the league—and the player’s association— *didn’t do* about Dallas Kent. They collectively plan to use it as a cudgel to demand good behavior by the league and the Player’s Association. And the PA stated they will go with the public, not the Commissioner.”

“*And*,” she continued, “The commissioner’s office has just sent a message—you both should have this by now—that the meeting he demanded for tomorrow has been cancelled, and we are cleared to make our own statement. I mean, they couldn’t have actually stopped us, but now they are saying they don’t object.”

Ilya and Shane looked at their phones, and then at each other.

“Holy shit.” Shane breathed. It was the first sign of actual emotion Yuna had seen on his face yet that day.

“I’m not sure Montreal is completely on board with that,” Farah continued, “and the jury is still out on Crowell, but the public conversation is currently happening without them.” Farah

sat back down and scribbled more notes on her pad.

“Well, okay, this has changed things significantly from where I was expecting us to be. In a good way.” Yuna was typing as she talked. “I am thinking we regroup tomorrow morning to see where things stand with the Player’s Association and the team GMs.”

“Farah,” Hubert pointed at her with his pen, “Will you be drafting a statement for Shane and Ilya?”

“Guys? You want me to do that or would you like to write your own?” Farah asked them.

Ilya just shook his head, his eyes wide.

Shane recoiled, “You,” he looked at her, then Ilya, then back at Farah. “You.”

“Okay, I’ll get one ready to go. I’ll run it past you both and Hubert, then we’ll hold it for probable release tomorrow,” she replied.

“I’m going to—” Shane swallowed. “I’m going to go to Hayden’s house. I feel like there’s something we need to know here.”

“I’m going with you.” Ilya stood.

“Yeah, I think that would be good, Ilya.” Shane said. “We were not at practice today, thanks to Crowell. And Hayden will be home now. This needs to happen in person.”

Yuna was shaking her head. “I can’t believe Hayden did that.”

“He’s a good friend. I can believe it, I just don’t know why.” Shane said.

“Hayden did not do all of that, I am sure of it. Jackie did that.” Ilya said. He turned and looked at the graph again. “Or she made it happen. We will find out tonight.”

Yannic disconnected from the screen and closed his laptop as the others left. Shane and Ilya still stood by their chairs. He stepped up to Ilya on his way toward the door.

“If it’s okay, if it’s not private, would you—let me know what caused this? I feel like it will be unsettling if it’s a mystery my data can’t solve?” He ended with a question, looking hopeful.

Ilya laughed, loudly. “It is already mostly solved because of your data. But I will tell you what we learn so that you can finish this mystery, too.” He winked as he said ‘too,’ and clapped Yannic on the shoulder.

“I thought you were an IT guy?” Shane asked, looking sideways at Ilya’s apparent familiarity.

“I am a data scientist. The IT stuff for the foundation—the networks and the servers— is just volunteer-level help since we’re so small, and I ask my IT friends for advice. If we were bigger, we’d need real IT, but with just nine people I can do that. I’ve been around the block a few times with computer systems. Data science is my real job. Analyzing patterns.”

“Oh,” Shane put out his hand. “Thanks for this. You really helped. You’re a wizard with PowerPoint.”

Yannic took his hand. “Well, it’s Tableau... never mind. I’m glad to help. This is a shitshow of a day for you both. I hope what we found out today really mitigates any fallout. I’m available for anything you need. I’ll keep watching the data—it’s changing by the hour and might be useful for your agent. It means a lot to get this right.”

“Thanks, Yannic. Thank you.” Shane and Ilya left for their car and the drive to Hayden’s house.

As they pulled out of the parking garage, something kept tugging at Shane’s mind.

“What was that between you and Yannic? He looked like he was saying something at you in the meeting, and then at the end you talked about him solving this mystery, ‘too’? What was that all about?”

Ilya smiled secretively.

“He was acknowledging the secrets he was keeping. And the secret I have been keeping for him. He is the one who solved the mystery of Rodion Tsetsov’s Russian-speaking teammate on the Voyageurs.”

“What?” Shane was startled. *That* came out of nowhere.

“He is Rodion’s boyfriend. That is how we got him at the Foundation. No one knows this but me—and now you. Rodion is still not out. Of course.”

“He’s *what*? That’s Rodion’s boyfriend?”

“Yes. And it was his data that figured you out. I was amazed today seeing how he did it. Like watching a documentary. Very sexy. I can see why Rodion likes him.” Ilya grinned.

“Holy shit.”

“Do not tell.”

“Of course not. Holy—but how did you find out?”

“I ask Rodion how he knew.” Shane’s head jerked around to look at Ilya. “Back then. I have just kept Rodion’s secret since then, by keeping Yannic secret.”

Shane looked at this stranger in the passenger seat. He shook his head. Wow.

Ilya turned suddenly to Shane.

“But. This is more important. Hayden Pike is making me sound soft in the media.” His face looked angry.

“Are you seriously kidding me right now, Ilya?” Shane was appalled that Ilya had a single bad word to say about Hayden after the way the afternoon had played out. He did *not* need to spend energy defending his rather heroic, if you asked Shane, friend to his boyfriend in the middle of his worst nightmare.

Ilya continued to glare at him for a moment, and then his smile broke through and he laughed.

“Yes, I am kidding you right now.” He grinned.

“Jesus fucking christ, Ilya. Now is not the time.”

“I am sorry,” Ilya did not look very sorry. But his huge grin faded to thoughtfulness. “I am nervous, and I am surprised by what Hayden did.” He paused. “Why do you think he did this thing? Well, I am sure Jackie is the mind behind this. But still, why?”

“I really don’t know. I don’t. But I do think he made a really big difference. I mean, Crowell cancelled our meeting? What was he going to say to us, and what does it mean that he isn’t, anymore? That was a complete surprise.” Shane concentrated on driving in the silence for a few minutes.

“Yes,” Ilya finally said. “I think that is Hayden’s result. That people are saying the foundation is more important than us sucking each other’s dicks. And they are telling Crowell to fuck off. And we don’t have to. That is a big surprise. I did not expect to have this—what do you call it, big, already moving? Pushing for us? Like a winning streak?”

“Momentum.”

“Yes, momentum behind us.”

They were silent again.

“But after, I will have to rebuild my image as the fierce Russian to protect my brand.” He grinned again, impishly.

“Jesus Christ,” Shane pushed out between gritted teeth. “You know you can just play really well and have that be your brand. You know that, right?”

Ilya leveled a hazel glare at him.

“Where is the fun in that?”

Shane groaned. “Not today, Ilya.” He kept his eyes on the road and squeezed the steering wheel. They'd be at Hayden's house soon.

Chapter End Notes

“I can’t just make some announcement, ‘hey everyone, Ilya babysat my kids, he’s a great guy!’” Hayden threw his hands up in the air.

“I mean, actually you can, sweetie, but I was thinking something more gradual.”

See, Hayden? That wasn't so hard, now, was it?

I love your reaction comments and kudos! It fills me with community!

Chapter 8: Here's Your Cape

Chapter Summary

Hayden's stomach had been clenched in fear for them all day, and it tightened further as he braced himself for the terrible news of what his best friend's day had included.

He opened the door to let them in, and before he could even ask how things were going, Ilya barreled through the door, pushing Hayden backwards with a hand on his chest. As Hayden panicked about the worst possible news and Ilya's obvious anger, he tripped over a stray sneaker in the entry, still being propelled backwards by Ilya.

Hayden had never felt so helpless in a fight.

Chapter Notes

This is much longer than other chapters, but wrapping up *needs* story!
Takes place March-August 2021

WAG = Wives and Girlfriends

HAB = Husbands and boyfriends

C-WAG = WAG of the captain

A-WAG = WAG of the Alternate Captain

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

The doorbell rang and Hayden saw Shane and Ilya's serious faces on his camera app. Jackie had taken the kids to her parent's house for a cousin's birthday party. She was due back soon after dropping them for the sleepover.

Hayden's stomach had been clenched in fear for them all day, and it tightened further as he braced himself for the terrible news of what his best friend's day had included.

He opened the door to let them in, and before he could even ask how things were going, Ilya barreled through the door, pushing Hayden backwards with a hand on his chest. As Hayden panicked about the worst possible news and Ilya's obvious anger, he tripped over a stray sneaker in the entry, still being propelled backwards by Ilya.

Instead of falling, he felt himself grabbed by Ilya and all 200-plus pounds of himself lifted up off his feet, continuing the backward trajectory. Nor did Ilya let go. Rather, he tightened the embrace, smashing Hayden's face against Ilya's pecs and pinning his arms against his sides.

Hayden had never felt so helpless in a fight. He couldn't even see Shane out of the one eye that wasn't crushed against Ilya's chest, until Ilya turned slightly, then he saw an amused eye-roll on Shane's face that just confused him further.

"You fucking *beautician!*" Ilya shouted. Shane was laughing. Hayden was so confused he felt out-of-body.

Ilya finally put him down, keeping hands on Hayden's shoulders until his feet were solid beneath him. Shane closed the front door behind them.

"Wha—?" Hayden stammered.

"You are amazing. What the fuck!" Ilya declared in his face, still holding his shoulders with both hands.

"I don't know what's going on right now. Shane?" Hayden looked helplessly toward his friend. But Ilya just kept talking— loudly.

"It was Jackie, wasn't it? I know you do not do this thing by yourself. Tell me it was Jackie."

"Ilya, put him down. Let him catch his breath." Shane was shaking his head. Ilya didn't let go; he pulled Hayden in for another crushing hug. Then he finally stepped back and Hayden stumbled as he regained his balance.

Hayden looked from one to the other, cataloguing the *not angry* expressions on their faces. Thoroughly and utterly confused. His mouth opened and closed several times while Ilya and Shane grinned at him.

"Where is your beer, Pike?" Ilya looked toward the kitchen. "We need a beer and then we sit down to ask you questions."

"Umm?"

"Let's just—yeah, we need to sit down. We have questions for you, Hayden." Shane said.

Hayden continued to just stand there. Ilya turned toward the kitchen and helped himself to two beers and a ginger ale from the refrigerator. Shane walked to the living room and sat down in the armchair. Hayden finally found his feet and followed Shane. He dropped hard into the couch and accepted one of his own beers from Ilya. His head was spinning and he honestly had no idea at all what was going on. His horrible mistake had ripped their world open and now they were—smiling? He took a long drink from his bottle, his eyes still ping-ponging between Shane and Ilya as Ilya joined him on the couch at the end near Shane.

"Can we, um, start at the beginning?" Hayden pleaded.

"That is what we are here to do!" Ilya declared, in a strangely upbeat way. Hayden's stomach was still in knots. Freefall knots, really, at this point.

"Yeah," Shane said, much more calmly. "We, um, we found out today that a bunch of people are out in the media emphasizing the work of the foundation, and saying nice things about

Ilya being a good guy after all—” Shane let the pause grow and he looked at Hayden.

Hayden’s first instinct was to look away, but he made the mistake of looking away toward Ilya, where he saw a knowing smile. He looked back to Shane,

“Uh…”

“And that at the root of each story is your name.” Shane paused again. Shane, who did not spend a lot of time making eye contact with anyone, was looking at him with piercing intensity. Hayden was unnerved by it.

“And it seems to start in November last year.” Ilya added. He held up his hand and made a small beckoning motion. Physically instructing Hayden to come clean.

Hayden was panicking. He didn’t think he had done anything wrong in his project, but the day was so fraught, he was terrified that he had piled one harm to his friend on top of another.

“Hayden, it’s okay. It is, *amazingly*, okay. They showed us data today that seems to show that it took the heat off of us, and put it on Crowell and the Player’s Association to respond better. What we don’t know is why you did it.”

Shane smiled warmly at him, and the behavior of the two of them since they arrived started to make some sense. Really? It *worked*? The whole Operation Wholesome Ilya had *worked*?!

“Holy shit.” He breathed. “It *worked*? She is a fucking *genius*,”

“Ha!” Ilya shouted. “I knew it! I knew it was Jackie!” He leapt up and pumped a fist in the air before crashing back to the couch.

“What happened, Hayden? Why? How did this—? *Why*?” Shane tapered off and shook his head.

Hayden involuntarily drew in a deep, deep breath and exhaled as his stomach unknotted for the first time that day.

“But it worked?” He needed reassurance that his friend was okay. His friends. Plural. “It is not a complete disaster today? Really? You guys are okay?”

“Is not perfect,” Ilya said, calmer now. “But is not crisis any more. Many people have made noise to change crisis to problem. Is still problem, but we will survive this, we think.”

“Now,” Ilya scowled. “Stop dodging. Why?”

Hayden opened his mouth, but nothing came out. For a while. He looked from Ilya to Shane and back and realized his mouth was still open.

Ilya’s eyebrows raised and his head inclined, staring, and Hayden could practically hear, *go on, speak!* from his face.

“It was,” Hayden took a deep breath. “It was supposed to be a ‘thank you’ gift for babysitting the kids. When Jackie sprained her ankle” He watched their faces for derision—or anger. But saw complete confusion instead. Ilya burst out laughing.

“Wait, you wanted to thank us for babysitting, so you started a six-month-long PR campaign in secret?” Ilya’s face looked incredulous. “I do not think babysitters are usually paid so much, Hayden. With all of the kids you have, you will go bankrupt, I think. I can call Player Assistance for you, to help with your financial problems, if you want. As a friend.”

“Ilya, shut the fuck up.” Shane groaned.

Hayden looked at Ilya and just started laughing. He couldn’t help it. Shane looked shocked. Ilya looked delighted.

“What. Is funny! See? Even Hayden thinks is funny! New Hayden. The one with sense of humor that his wife bought for him!”

“What?” Shane looked confounded.

Hayden looked again at Ilya and they both roared. God, this felt good, after today.

It took a while for the laughter to fade, especially since it was restarted every time one of them looked at Shane, whose face betrayed his see-saw between annoyance at being left out and utter joy that his two favorite people were laughing together. But finally they both stopped and Ilya slapped him on the shoulder.

“Okay, funny Hayden. Tell us more about this thank-you that you did.”

“Yeah,” Shane looked relieved that the uproar was over. “Seriously Hayd, what the fuck. This seems completely out of proportion.”

“Okay. Well. All right. It actually started when Jackie wanted to give you a thank you gift for stepping in that day. Then Ruby and Jade told us that we didn’t have to, because they had taken care of that by marrying you.”

He saw Ilya look at Shane and the complete, sappy, *adoration* reminded him why this was absolutely something he supported. Jesus. He shook his head and went on with his story.

“It was pretty fucking precious, actually. And when they said you almost cried, Jackie lost it. So then she decided that since you were trying to rehabilitate—her words, not mine—Ilya’s reputation through the Foundation, that the best thank-you gift we could give was to not make you do it alone. So that launched Operation Wholesome Ilya.”

Hayden shrugged.

Shane gaped.

Ilya howled. He whooped.

“That is epic, Hayden. Operation—operation what?”

“Operation Wholesome Ilya.” He felt a little embarrassed by the cloak and dagger name.

As Ilya continued to wheeze, Shane leaned in.

“So, wait, though. How did you do all this?”

“Well,” Hayden was glad to pivot away from the goofy name. “I mean, Jackie told me to start saying nice things in interviews. Say you weren’t a bad guy, say how important the Foundation was.”

They both looked at him with a sort of surprised gratitude.

“And to, you know, start calling him Ilya instead of Rozanov when I talked about the charity.” He paused. Then forged on.

“And to start liking your posts so people would see that other players thought you were not a dick.”

Ilya’s eyebrows raised.

“I mean, some of the hurdles are easier than others.” Hayden deadpanned. Ilya laughed.

“So then I tried to get some other people to help, without telling them why, exactly. Just saying it would help the foundation. J.J., Hunter, anyone who asked about the camps.”

“You spoke to a journalist.” Shane prompted.

“Yeah!” Hayden sat up straight. He was proud of that one. “That one was my idea. I told her I wanted to get information for my cousin’s kid who was interested in journalism, and while I took her to lunch, I dropped that the media was harming the charity work by always talking negatively about Ilya. That one worked great. Jackie was really proud of me.”

“Your cousin’s kid is four years old, Hayden. She plays with Jade and Ruby.” Shane skewered him with a stare.

“yeah, well, she didn’t need to know that.” Hayden was very proud of this one.

“And you laughing at my jokes, Pike? Your new sense of humor? Was that part of this plan, too?”

“Yeah, well, Jackie was trying to help me cope with—” He paused, and glared at Ilya. “*How fucking hard it is to be nice to you sometimes.*”

Ilya laughed. Hayden tried to stay serious. But he couldn’t help it. He laughed, too. Which made Ilya laugh harder.

“Fucking propaganda worked on myself,” He cringed.

Ilya roared. Even Shane laughed.

And it was at that exact moment that Jackie got back home and came in the door.

Just as Ilya repeated, “Operation fucking Wholesome Ilya!”

She stopped in the foyer, eyes bouncing between the three of them, obviously trying to gauge whether things were a disaster or under control and not expecting laughter in any scenario.

Hayden got up and went to her. Took her bag and placed it on the floor and took her in his arms. She peeked over his shoulder at Shane and Ilya.

“Cat’s out of the bag?” She asked, as Hayden released her.

Ilya jumped off the couch and strode over to her and pushed past Hayden, wrapping her in a tight hug.

“You are a fucking genius, Jackie. *Operation Wholesome Ilya*. I hope Hayden knows how lucky he is.”

“He does.” Hayden declared, from behind him.

Ilya let Jackie go and backed up into the living room, returning to his place on the couch. Jackie came in behind the empty armchair and leaned on the back of it.

“So, you all sound a lot better than I thought you would today. I am so, so incredibly sorry this has happened. You must be devastated. How are—how are things going today?”

“They are better than we hoped.” Shane said. “Hayden’s, and your, PR plan seems to have actually softened some people we thought would be unreachable. Honestly, we can’t thank you enough. This is—this really made a difference we think. In making this survivable.”

“I’m just so incredibly sorry you had to face it at all. We’re both just so, so sorry…” Her face was full of remorse and compassion.

“No,” Ilya interrupted. “No. Jackie, we had planned to come out this summer. All of this, every reaction, it would have happened then, too, yes? We knew it would be—“ he looked at Shane for help. “Big? Huge?”

“Seismic.”

Ilya raised his eyebrows, asking for a meaning.

“Like an earthquake.” Shane clarified.

“Yes,” He nodded, clearly liking that word. “We knew it would be *seismic*. And that is why we started the Charity. To try to help soften the reaction as you say. Because even if it was on our timeline, there was still going to be a reaction.

“But you,” Ilya’s face glowed as he looked from Jackie to Hayden and back. “You did in six months more than we could do in two years. And it was already done when this day happened.”

Shane nodded, looking at Ilya. Then turned to Jackie.

“The Players Association is behind us because social media is flooding them with demands to help us because of the popularity of the foundation’s work.” Shane explained. “And Crowell backed off today once that happened. We’re—we’re going to wait until tomorrow to see what else happens, and the Voyageurs might still be dicks, but it looks like the Centaurs won’t, and the PA won’t. So it feels.” He took a deep breath. “It feels like we might have some breathing room here.”

“Oh my god, really? Really? It worked?” Jackie came across the room and pulled Shane from his chair by both hands to wrap him into a crying hug.

“Best thank-you gift ever, Jackie. Unbelievable.” Shane managed to say.

Over the next two weeks as the playoffs approached and Montreal was slated to play against the Centaurs, Jackie continued to do her best in social media to quietly help.

Hayden and the others were pretty much offline at this point, preparing for the tremendous physical expectations of the series. But she was available and active in small and persistent ways.

She called Yuna to make sure she was aligned with whatever the Foundation recommended. She pulled every favor and contact she could muster to keep the pressure on for inclusion.

At this point, in many ways, it felt like the die was cast. Things that made a big difference before the video made less difference now in the maelstrom of the discussion about the video. But she still kept it going.

The Montreal WAGs chat was a delicate minefield of activism and team cohesion. Since Shane did not have a WAG, the conversation would come up, on the assumption that it was spoken without him knowing. She was not going to do anything to disrupt the team function in the days before the playoffs, she knew neither Hayden nor Shane would want that. But she was trying to include replies on Shane’s behalf that a WAG would do, and taking note of the ones who seemed comfortable, and those who did not. And, the surprising few who seemed to diverge from their HABs on the matter.

And there was division in the locker room. Not all. Not even most. But enough of the Voyageurs, including the head coach, were pissed that it was affecting team play. Hayden kept her up to date with that tension, and the WAG chat filled in the blanks.

With the playoffs only days away, she received a delivery of flowers and a turquoise box with the Tiffany’s logo. As she opened the package, she saw a note inside.

“Jackie, you have done an amazing thing. You gave me the most precious gift possible. A chance to survive coming out with Shane in a way that lets us be together without hiding. There is nothing that can equal the value of what you gave me. I hope when you wear this you will know that you made the world safe for us to love in. Thank you, with all my heart, Ilya.”

Inside was a beautiful necklace, long, with crystals sparkling in the chain every 5 centimeters, and three free-form heart pendants, one with crystals embedded. It was beautiful, and chic, and so, so sweet.

She put the flowers in a vase and tucked the necklace back in its box and put it away in her jewelry chest.

Then she got back to work.

Hayden noticed the flowers when he got home, and hugged her tightly when she read him the note and showed him the necklace.

“You deserve it, baby. You did do something amazing. That was nice of him.” He was asleep fifteen minutes later after shoveling down a high protein second dinner, racing through his night routine and falling into bed.

The playoff series was grinding. No one had really expected the Centaurs to take it as far as they did, but they made the Voyageurs work for every win, and agonize over each defeat.

Montreal’s 6-1 win in the fifth game felt like a portent for a series victory and the whomping that would demoralize Ottawa and lead to Montreal advancing after the sixth. But instead, Ottawa dug another one out on their home ice and it went into the seventh game at Centre Bell, tied at three games each.

When the game went into overtime, the WAGs box was howling with cheers and excitement, certain it would end in victory. Then Rozanov got a breakaway and they all held their breath as Hollander chased him down and reached out to poke the puck away.

And fell, sliding headlong.

They watched in horror as Rozanov jumped over Hollander’s outstretched stick, hanging onto the puck, deked right, then sank it with a backhand in the five-hole.

Centre Bell suffered a split second of utter silence as Shane Hollander’s prone body finally slid to a stop. And then the Ottawa Centaurs reacted to the buzzer, emptying their bench and tearing off their helmets and gloves to celebrate.

Jackie was stunned, along with everyone else, that their season had ended. She saw Shane drag himself up to a knee and watch, dejected, as the Centaurs celebrated.

Hayden skated up to him and put a hand on his shoulder. Shane got up and they went to the Montreal bench to wait out the celebration and eventually line up for the series-ending handshake.

She was vacillating between dejection at their loss, and concern for Shane's state of mind after tripping in a crucial play, when she heard Aurelie gasp, "did he trip on purpose?"

Jackie spun around and stared at the girlfriend of the third line defenseman.

"*Absolutely no fucking way in hell,*" Jackie ground out, quietly but with unmistakable anger. "He would *never*. You've only been with this team for two years, Aurelie. You don't know Shane Hollander or you would never say that. I've watched that man compete for 10 years now, and he would never, ever do anything other than give everything he's got. Ever. Don't you even suggest that." Jackie was *livid*.

Luckily, the goalie Patrice Drapeau's wife, Melody, leaned in before Jackie could say something irrevocable.

"Aurelie, no, don't. Come on, don't you remember that article where they interviewed one of the camp coaches? She said they couldn't even demonstrate a skill together without it being a death match. He wouldn't. Neither one of them would." Melody had her arm on Aurelie's shoulder to make sure she was listening.

Aurelie had the good sense to look down and appear contrite in front of the older woman. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. That was wrong. I'm sorry. I was just so upset at losing."

Jackie sucked in a breath.

"Don't even whisper that. It's not true and if people started saying something like that we'd never get the truth to be the answer again. Don't. That is so dangerous to say." She was barely holding her anger in check.

"I'm sorry. I get it. Please, don't tell anyone I said that."

"We won't Aurelie," Melody said. "But you need to make sure you never let something like that come out. Your boyfriend has a long career ahead of him, and if his girlfriend started a false rumor like that—it would affect his career. You need to know that."

"I do. Oh god, will he find out?"

"Not from us," Jackie was still speaking in undertones, but less angry than she had been "but you should plan to start saying the opposite. Talk about that article Melody mentioned instead. Don't tear apart a team. We build; we don't break. Make a plan for what you *can* say. And if you don't have a plan, keep it inside until you do. Okay?"

Aurelie nodded tearfully.

"And it sucks that we just lost." Jackie had her A-WAG hat on, especially since there was no C-WAG on the team. She raised her voice for the benefit of the whole box. "Our HABs are

going to need us tonight. This was a brutal series—seven games. Let's put on our support hats and go help them."

The others nodded and the whole group started collecting their things and corralling their kids for departure.

When Hayden finally got home, he was in a terrible funk. Worse than getting knocked out of the playoffs. Jackie had put the kids to bed already, and had a reheated meal and a beer waiting for him.

"What happened, baby? Something more is here than the loss." She pulled her chair right next to him and leaned in with support.

He looked at her, his eyes sad. Haunted almost.

"Oh, honey, what happened. It's bad?" She felt a knot in her gut. Echoes of what Aurelie had said. Had that happened in the locker room? Her eyes searched Hayden's.

"Fucking Drapes. He accused Shane of tripping."

Jackie's shoulders slumped and she leaned wordlessly into Hayden.

"He's been kind of a dick since the video, but this was so out of line. And Comeau backed him up. I just—"

She closed her eyes in defense against this feeling, then opened them again, seeing the hurt in Hayden's eyes. Hurt for his friend, and also hurt for his team.

"How did the room take it when he said that?"

"A bunch of people yelled at him for it, but not everybody. Drapes and Comeau are the loudest assholes, but there are a few others. And now that's out there. Shane was fucking gutted."

"Oh my god."

"Yeah, and Theriault didn't help." Hayden blew out a breath and looked across the room like the walls weren't even there. "Fuck. It wasn't the whole team. J.J., Olivier, Ray, about eight guys, maybe more, we all spoke up. It was probably only five guys even believing that, or willing to accuse him out loud. But a team can't have five guys thinking their captain cheated."

Hayden's head dropped like it weighed fifty kilos.

"Fuck. Shane was just gutted," he repeated.

“Should we—?” Jackie started.

“No, he’s with his parents. But we’ll call him tomorrow.”

“Yeah, good. Okay.” Jackie squeezed him. “Oh Hayden, I am so so sorry.”

Hayden shook his head.

“For what it’s worth, Melody doesn’t think that.”

Hayden looked up at her.

“I’ll let you know how the WAG chat sounds tomorrow, but in the box she was not thinking that.”

He grunted. “It’s gonna suck in that house tonight, then.”

Jackie nodded and hugged his side.

“Let’s get you to bed, if you can sleep.”

“I don’t even know.” Hayden groaned, but he looked exhausted, physically and emotionally.

“Let’s go try.”

In the following days, Jackie watched the team, the WAGs, the press and the social media settle into a pattern. Most fell into accepting the defeat as a loss and looked on to the rest of the playoffs and the Centaur’s games against the Admirals.

Some continued to talk about the “distraction” of the two captains dating as part of the game dynamic. They were met with lots of feedback about how it never showed up before and this was making a mountain out of a molehill.

And then there were the few who angrily blamed Shane for the loss. Jackie was careful in the WAG chat to add her comments in the best tone she could, to not fan the flames, but at the same time to keep Shane’s reputation remembered. She was relieved to hear no more from Aurelie. And her heart was warmed by seeing Melody Drapeau continue her defense of Shane, even though they all knew her husband Patrice did not.

The WAG chat at this time of year, just after elimination, was always muted and focused around supporting their husbands and boyfriends and helping them regain their home life for the off-season. But this year there was a little extra of helping each other through this rift. Jackie was glad to see that; she knew this rift was big. Really, really big. She wasn’t sure which way it would go, and how much it was affecting Shane.

So, it was not a huge surprise when Shane told them a month later that he was signing with Ottawa, and she was happy for him, she really was. But she knew it would change the Voyageurs in profound ways.

“Gonna miss him a lot, aren’t you?” She asked Hayden in July, as they got ready in their hotel room for Shane’s wedding. She was wearing a blue dress and Ilya’s necklace which sparkled beautifully at her sternum against the gem-colored fabric.

“Yeah. Huge. But I’m glad he picked Ottawa. He’ll be close. They’ll be close.”

“And he’ll be happy. I am so glad for them.”

The press had calmed down, the league had calmed down. The supportive actions from fans and journalists had dominated.

Jackie was happy to see some of the other Voyageurs at the wedding. Olivier, Rodion, the rookie Ray, and several others. And, to her surprise, Melody Drapeau—without Patrice.

“He’s still not in a good place,” she told Jackie, as they watched others dance. “But I am. I think he’s wrong, and he’s going to have to hear that from me for a while.”

Jackie hugged her. “I’ll be here for you. Your support means a lot to Shane.”

“He’s worth it,” she raised her glass, and they drank to Shane and Ilya, again.

Jackie was waiting for her long-time friend Jannette at Vin Mon Lapin for a summer evening of wine and snacks. They had caught up just last week, and this was a bonus impromptu get together to just relax.

She waved as she saw her arrive, marveling that Jannette still had the same swagger she’d had in high school. Jackie loved her bold self. They’d had a lot of adventures together. Including the many nights out clubbing, and the particular one that had resulted in meeting Hayden and the hookup that had led to a wonderful marriage and four amazing kids. Jannette was her ride-or-die bestie.

As she sat down, Jackie pushed the glass of wine she’d already ordered across the table. Janette’s eyes left the wine glass and landed on Jackie’s necklace, glittering on the burgundy shell she’d paired it with.

“Holy *fuck*, Jacks. You cheated on Hayden?”

“What? Where did that come from? No?”

“Then you caught him cheating on you?”

“Jannette, what? No, he would never! What the fuck?”

“Then who bought you a fucking Elsa Peretti Necklace? *That particular* Elsa Peretti Necklace?”

Jackie looked down and saw the hearts Ilya had given her and smiled. Trust Jannette to notice something Hayden would not have bought.

“It’s from a friend. It’s a thank-you for a favor I did.”

“That’s a huge fucking favor.”

Jackie smiled. She loved this necklace.

“It’s really pretty isn’t it. I love how the crystals are on the chain and how it’s long, so it’s more informal, you know?”

Jannette drilled her with a stare like she was an alien.

“No, Jackie.” She winced and shook her head at Jackie’s naïveté. “Those are not crystals, they are diamonds. That is not informal, it’s a *statement*. That is a \$30,000 necklace. People buy that for mistresses. Or to apologize for mistresses. Not for thank-yous.” She leaned closer. “Just so you know, I’ve been stalking that necklace for two years. But the shorter one with the smaller diamonds and only one heart. You know, \$3,500 instead of *thirty grand*.”

“Oh my god.” Jackie rolled her eyes as she realized that *of course* Ilya would do something over-the-top. “This is so on-brand for him. I should have known.”

“Does Hayden know?”

“No.” She sighed, rolling her eyes again. “I’d better tell him before some reporter does.”

Jannette’s eyes went wide. “He doesn’t know?”

“Well, he knows about the necklace, and who gave it to me, and why. He just doesn’t know it’s Elsa Peroni or whatever \$30,000 name is on it.”

“Elsa Peretti.”

“Yeah. I’d better tell him.” Jackie was laughing now. This was *so* Ilya. He would laugh his head off if some twitter person accused Hayden of cheating over a picture of it online.

“So—this friend,” Jannette leaned close. “Is he single?”

Jackie laughed loudly. “No, he is very, *very* famously *not* single.”

“Something is obviously on your mind, Pike. Talk.” Ilya closed Shane’s patio door and handed him a fresh beer that he had clearly grabbed with the intent of cornering Hayden to talk. They were packing up Shane’s house in preparation for his move to Ottawa.

Hayden sighed. Embarrassed that he wanted to talk, but definitely wanting to.

“I just—the necklace that you gave Jackie. That was very, very generous. Too generous.”

Ilya looked like he was about to chirp, and then changed his mind. His shoulders dropped and he smiled at Hayden.

“I hope she keeps it. And enjoys wearing it. I wanted to give her something that was even a tiny amount of what she gave me. What you both gave me.” Ilya turned fully toward Hayden. His voice took on a deep, coarse sound that Hayden had never heard before.

“Jackie started something that gave me *everything*, Hayden. Do you understand? Everything I value in this world. It was out of reach. We were trying, but it was so impossible. Everything was so risky, coming from us. Until Jackie understood, all on her own, and got you to start helping. We were terrified about coming out. You do not know. For so long. And then, when it happened, and all of the positive parts of it, all of the supporting people, they all connected to you. To her.”

His mouth quirked up in one corner and Hayden didn’t know if he was going to laugh or to cry.

“So you see, it was not too generous. She gave me *everything*, and I just give her something small so she can know who she is to me.”

“Shit. Ilya—” Hayden didn’t know what to say.

Ilya sucked in a breath, like he was embarrassed to say so much.

“You helped, too, Hayden. We will never forget it.” His mouth slipped into a grin for real now, and Hayden knew a chirp was coming. He rolled his eyes in advance.

“But I do not buy a necklace for you.” Ilya had a smirking smile; the kind Hayden saw too often on the ice.

“Yeah, I noticed!” Hayden decided to laugh in return. “Gifts for the general, and none for the soldier in the trenches doing all the hard work!”

Ilya’s chirping face turned into a fond one.

“What do I get for the guy who already has the greatest treasure?” He looked at Hayden for a long moment. Then he leaned closer, his eyes never breaking contact.

“You have Jackie.”

He put his hand on Hayden’s shoulder.

“Like I have Shane.”

Hayden couldn't help himself. He pulled him into a hug. He couldn't not do that. Ilya unexpectedly hugged back. They parted with a back-slap and a long pause.

“Yeah. Like you have Shane.”

“Thank you, Hayden. I mean that.”

Hayden smiled at him.

“Anytime, Ilya. And I mean that. Let's go back inside. I need to kiss my wife.”

“She is a fucking superhero. I am glad to be friends with her sidekick.” He winked “Maybe I buy you a tiny cape.”

“You asshole.”

Ilya grinned like sunshine. So did Hayden.

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The End (mmmm, no, The New Beginning)

Chapter End Notes

If you ever saw Connor Storrie's media tour videos, you know he can grin like sunshine.

Reader justhavefaith found a link to the necklace - thank you!

<https://www.tiffany.ca/jewelry/necklaces-pendants/elsa-peretti-open-heart-and-diamonds-by-the-yard-pendant-74245765/>

In case the link goes cold, the necklace I describe is an Elsa Peretti Diamonds by the Yard that also has three of her “open heart” pendants on it, one of which has diamonds. (laughing as I think to myself that Tiffany's is going to wonder why everyone is suddenly looking at this necklace, and get a cookie leading back to here...)

++++++ It is done! Hope you liked it! ++++++

Kudos and comments are my fuel for the next project. I love hearing what parts you liked and what parts hit the feels. And yeah, what parts you didn't like, too, so I can improve my prose. Thanks for reading. :)

End Notes

I made heroic efforts to stay on a canon-compliant timeline. Forgive me any slips.
Millions of gratitude to my beta reader—my sweet daughter. You can thank her for Brocedes and YuriOnIce

If you haven't met Rodion (Roadie) and Yannic yet, their story is in "Lingua Russia". They need to be here because this will play in their own sequel later, and my brain needs continuity.

Works inspired by this one

[\[podfic\] Hayden Pike's Cape \(by GrendelsMother\)](#) by [Podfic by \(DontStopHerNow\)](#)

[Restricted Work] by [Wraith_tries_art \(Wraith_and_Demjin\)](#)

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