

Gavia stellata

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Gavia stellata

by [galehautstomb](#)

Summary

“This is just the version I use. Everyone has their preference, but I can send you the Amazon link for this book if you like,” Shane said, while Ilya flipped through the field guide. He stopped on the section on loons, where two different species were illustrated in wading water and mid-flight.

Ilya pointed at one of the illustrations. A sleek dark bird, with white and black checker-board wings and a stark red eye. “We saw this one today, yes?”

“Yep. The common loon. It’s aquatic, so you’ll always find them near water, usually a lake like we just saw. It’s the national bird of Canada, actually.”

“Common. You can find this bird all over?” Ilya asked.

“Around here, at least. It’s my favorite bird,” Shane admitted. “Pretty boring, I know.”

Shane’s shoulders were hunched up, like he was embarrassed to admit that he was the bird guy, who did in fact, like birds.

Well, that would not do. “Boring is good. I like boring,” Ilya insisted.

(Or, Ilya Rozanov, a newly arrived hockey agent in Ottawa, falls for a local birder).

Notes

HAPPY HEATED RIVALRY EPISODE 5 EVE!!! Y'all ready to have a crashout? ;)

I might be the ONLY person on earth interested in a birding AU. This is my special interest, and I only hope I did birding and the loons justice. I'll have some facts and notes at the end for anyone interested.

Un-betaed. Enjoy!

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

Ilya was an adventurous man. He would try literally anything once.

He's been cliff-jumping in Mexico. He crashed a jet ski one time in the Bahamas. He backpacked across South America at twenty-one, after graduating from Boston College. He'd been battle-worn, lonely, and full of wanderlust — so he flew to Panama on a whim, determined to prove his life wasn't over after his career-ending injury took him out of hockey forever. He nursed his knee back to functionality while braving thick jungles and soaring waterfalls in Venezuela. He hitchhiked along winding mountain roads in Argentina, with nothing but his charming smile to get him to the next town. Yes, he slept with the daughter of the hostel owner in Chile. Did the owner chase him half a mile down the road with a pitchfork in the middle of the night? Maybe, but it was worth it.

When he returned, he found a job through a friend of a friend assisting at a sports agency. After a shit-ton of hard work, and some consummate climbing of the corporate ladder, Ilya earned a reputation as one of the best up-and-coming agents in the NHL — particularly for Russian players transitioning to life in North America.

Even after his life stalled into an every-day corporate slog, Ilya was still known as the *wild* one.

Oh, yes, he's danced on bartops with hot girls in bikinis. He was the one who improvised an impromptu karaoke session with the company CFO at a fancy cocktail lounge. He even beat up a homophobe with nothing but a pair of bedazzled "Happy New Year" sunglasses at a club in downtown Boston.

Only, these days, it was less and less likely that Ilya *had* stories like this to tell. Ilya was... lonely in Ottawa.

Ilya didn't hate it here, but he definitely thought the city was boring. Compared to Boston's young, lively nightlife scene, this place seemed practically elderly. That hadn't stopped him from taking up Svetlana's job offer three months ago. She'd moved out of Boston years ago, to form her own Canadian based sports agency in Ottawa after too many years of being bogged down by sexist old men in the US. She was, to no one's surprise, wildly successful, and asked Ilya to co-head the department with her. Ilya was popular with the young European stars, who came over the North America starry-eyed but scared out of their minds to play hockey, as he'd once done.

Ilya had needed the change. Despite his love of partying, most of Ilya's college friends had moved out-of-state, moved out of hockey all together, or for a lucky few, moved onto the NHL. What was there for him in Boston anymore but memories? It wasn't like he was going back to Russia either. His father had been dead for years, he'd long blocked Andrei's number, and Ilya knew his mother would understand why he never returned home.

Ilya's thirty-fifth birthday loomed, a taunting shadow. Sure, it was only September, but he felt unmoored in his life. That was a sobering reality to face in a new city he knew nothing about. His age-old routine of picking up at Boston bars, hot girls, and hot guys didn't seem as appealing here. Svetlana liked to joke that he'd finally "grown-up". Oh, the certified Playboy

wanted something new, huh? Maybe having a partner to come home to wasn't such a bad dream nowadays. When even *was* Ilya's last hook-up? He had a hazy recollection of a hand-job in a bar-bathroom back in Boston. Not a promising prospect.

He came to Ottawa to pursue a new path in life, and yet, Ilya had become a hermit. He poured over player contracts in the office he could easily pass off to an assistant, and came home long past dark. All the bars in his neighborhood seemed to skew toward a younger "twenty-something" audience, and Ilya was *not* interested in marrying a baby-faced assistant fresh out of college.

Ilya, the party animal, the world-traveler, had bounded away into hibernation, bear-like, and dared not be disturbed. It was tragic.

Yet, Svetlana seemed more unhappy with his behavior than he was.

She especially didn't give a damn about his pissy mood this morning. When he lumbered out of his car, shades on, to meet her at the park entrance, all she did was smirk and shake a paper bag of pastries at him.

"I don't see why I had to wake up before *dawn* for this," Ilya grouched in Russian, making grabby hands for the delicious nutella stuffed croissants. She'd gotten coffee too, and he sighed as he drank it. He slept through three of his alarms and barely managed to make it here on time.

Svetlana sniffed. She had years of experience with his whining and bullshit, which is why the early days of their romance petered out once they left the bedroom. She had no tolerance for Ilya's silliness as a romantic partner, but was much more inclined to it as a friend. He was grateful to her beyond words, his oldest and, truthfully, his only friend in Ottawa.

"A little nature is good for the soul, Ilya. You'd know if you ever came out of that fancy high-rise. I can't imagine all that glass and concrete is nice to look at."

"You live downtown too!" he protested.

"Yes, but I leave my house."

He said nothing. It was an argument they had more times than he liked. It was easy for Ilya to fall into periods of depression and isolation. It was something he was actively working on curtailing. Therapy did wonders, once you were actually ready to go and listen. He wouldn't say he was actively depressed, but a spell didn't seem to be far behind.

His therapist never suggested he go bird-watching, though.

But no matter what he thought about "birding" (which was the proper name for this activity apparently) clearly the tours were popular. About twenty people milled around by the stone benches at the park entrance. Most of them were dressed head-to-toe in hiking gear, with a pair of binoculars around their necks. At least *half* of them were young attractive women in their late twenties, early thirties. That was a surprise. Ilya's idea of a birdwatcher was more

like the old woman to his right. She was wearing a ratty ballcap, and peering at a flock of pigeons across the street with binoculars.

The tour started at 9:00 AM. By 9:05, Ilya was about ten seconds away from washing his hands of the whole thing, going home and sleeping in until noon, when Svetlana nudged him not-so-subtly in the ribs. Everyone in the group perked up. The old lady waved at a man jogging across the street. He was panting, his face flushed under the brim of a forest green hat. He lugged along a big, lumpy backpack and clutched a small white book in his hands with a bird on the cover.

“Hi, Greta. Very nice to see you again. So sorry I’m late,” he said to the old woman, who hid her smile behind an age-spotted hand. The man let her fuss over him for a minute. The whole iteration had an air of someone playing with a puppy who hadn’t quite grown into its paws yet. Ilya half expected her to pinch the man’s cheeks.

Their bird-guide, at least that’s who Ilya guessed he was, made his rounds. He greeted with each and every member of their group of twenty, even if for a brief moment. There was something very earnest about him. Dark, serious eyes in a handsome face.

There was a flicker of recognition when he caught sight of Svetlana and Ilya tucked away in the back.

“Oh, Svetlana! Hello. I’ll admit, I didn’t expect to see you again,” he said upon approaching, but he didn’t seem displeased. A smile played at his lips; pink and full. He had remarkably white teeth, and his whole face was *perfectly* proportioned. Ilya couldn’t stop staring at the smattering of freckles across his nose and high cheekbones. There was a barely-there nick of a scar on the top of his lip. Ilya really, really, wanted to kiss it.

Christ, it had been a while since Ilya got laid.

Svetlana waved her hand dismissively. “Shane, darling, you worry too much. My ruined shoes were my own doing.”

She popped out her foot, clad in a stylish black hiking sneaker Ilya knew was outrageously expensive. He was wearing some ratty old Nikes he’d been wearing since fucking high school.

“As you can see, today, I’m much better prepared — *and* I’ve brought a strong, handsome man to help me out,” Svetlana said. “This is Ilya.”

Shane shook Ilya’s hand. Was Shane blushing, or was the September chill getting to him? “Hi, I’m Shane.”

“Rozanov. Ilya Rozanov.” Ilya pointed at the pair of binoculars around Shane’s neck. “Do you have extra?”

“Yes, of course. I always pack extra in case people forget their own.” He pulled out two pairs from his backpack, handed one to Svetlana, and the second to Ilya. Ilya stretched his fingers

wide so that they touched. God, it was like lightning racing up his skin. It has been a long time since Ilya was *this* attracted to someone.

Shane looked ruffled. He opened his mouth, once, twice, as if to say something, then decided against it. The hand that Ilya touched was clenched into a fist at his side.

Ilya looked at his watch. Then, teasingly, said, “Is the tour starting?”

Shane was still staring at him. “Yes. Yes, it is.”

He shook himself, hiked his backpack higher on his shoulder, and walked away around to face the larger group.

“Okay, everyone! My name is Shane Hollander. If you’re new here, welcome. This is the Ottawa Birding Troop tour for the Mud Lake Conservation Area...”

While Shane made the larger introduction, Ilya hissed Svetlana’s ear. “You are *scheming*. It is not nice to trick me on a weekend.”

She cocked an eyebrow, unfazed. “Are you complaining?”

Just a short distance away, Shane Hollander, the most gorgeous man Ilya’s ever seen in his life, spoke animatedly with a small crowd of enraptured onlookers. He was wearing hiking pants made of a thin material that perfectly emphasized his ass.

“No, I am not,” Ilya said.

Ilya had never actively looked at birds for so long. There were clearly many different kinds he wasn’t aware of. Their group had snaked all the way from the entrance by the street into a thick patch of woodland waylaid with popular hiking trails. They’d stopped every so often to peer into the canopy, alit a fire-like orange in autumn, where Shane pointed out bright-colored warblers, small enough to fit in Ilya’s hand. They walked to the Ottawa River, where strange pointy-billed birds with long legs, sandpipers, picked out snails from the mud. There were ducks, cardinals, blackbirds, and starlings all within the confines of this one park. By the lakeshore, there were a few late September hummingbirds, feeding on clusters of orange flowers. Out on the water, a loon, which Shane had been particularly excited about, howled hauntingly. There were more birds than Ilya could remember, and probably would forget.

What he could *not* forget was Shane’s smile, small and pleased, for each new bird he spotted. He got even more excited when someone else found one. His enthusiasm for teaching, his love of the environment, and this small patch of green in a big-bustling city was contagious. Ilya signed up for his next tour on his phone before their outing even ended.

It had taken a long time for Shane to finish speaking with everyone who wished to say goodbye. Many of the young ladies on the tour took their sweet time thanking Shane for his expertise — batting their eyelashes, flipping their hair, and asking lots and lots of follow up questions. Either Shane was gay, or dense, because he responded rather neutrally to all of them. Ilya was hoping for the former.

“So, do all bird-watchers need a bird book?” Ilya asked once Shane was free. Svetlana smoked a cigarette not too far away next to an old statue, pretending not to listen to Ilya try his luck. Despite the chill, Shane was a little damp, sweat beading over his brow and dampening his already dark, silky hair. Ilya could stare at him for hours; he was absolutely delicious.

Shane held out the book in question for Ilya. They brushed their fingers together again, and it wasn't Ilya who initiated this time.

“This is just the version I use. Everyone has their preference, but I can send you the Amazon link for this book if you like,” Shane said, while Ilya flipped through the field guide. He stopped on the section on loons, where two different species were illustrated in wading water and mid-flight.

Ilya pointed at one of the illustrations. A dark sleek bird, with white and black checkerboarded wings, and a stark red eye. “We saw this one today, yes?”

“Yep. The common loon. It's aquatic, so you'll always find them near water, usually a lake like we just saw. It's the national bird of Canada, actually.”

“Common. You can find this bird all over?” Ilya asked.

“Around here, at least. It's my favorite bird,” Shane admitted. “Pretty boring, I know.”

Shane's shoulders were hunched up, like he was embarrassed to admit that he was the bird guy, who in fact, liked birds.

Well, that would not do. “Boring is good. I like boring,” Ilya insisted.

Shane was blushing. It made the freckles on his face stand out. “Oh. Well, thank you. And thank you for coming, not everyone enjoys hiking around the woods in the morning looking for birds you can barely see with the naked eye.”

Ilya removed the binoculars from his neck and held them out for Shane. “That is what these are for, yes? You will have to teach me more. I have a lot to learn.”

From: s.hollader@ottbirdingtroop.com

To: ilya.rozanov@creativecanadianagency.com

Subject: Birding Guides

Hi Ilya,

It was nice meeting you, thanks again for joining our tour. As requested, I have a list of birding guides for you to look through. I have them listed below with the corresponding Amazon links. My personal favorite, which I had with me today, is the *Sibley Birds East*. This book covers bird populations throughout the entire eastern half of North America.

- The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America
- National Geographic Field Guide to Birds East
- Peterson Field Guide to Birds of North America

I see you've signed up for our tour at the Arboretum next week. I'll be leading the group that day. If you have any questions in the meantime, feel free to reach out.

All the best,

Shane Hollander | Director and CEO, Ottawa Birding Troop

~

From: ilya.rozanov@creativecanadianagency.com

To: s.hollader@ottbirdingtroop.com

Subject: Birding Guides

Thank you for sending such a nice list! I will only take your recommendation, and already purchased the Sibley. I plan to study, and next time I see you, I will be a bird expert. I can impress you with my knowledge.

I had a very nice time! You are very passionate, and very good at your job. I know for sure that everyone enjoyed themselves.

Ilya Rozanov (*he/him*)

Co-Head of Hockey, Creative Canadian Agency

Office: 343-241-1821, Cell: 613-909-2481

~

From: s.hollader@ottbirdingtroop.com

To: ilya.rozanov@creativecanadianagency.com

Subject: Birding Guides

Hi Ilya,

You're too kind, really. I didn't expect our tours to be so popular when I founded the Troop, but there seems to be a real demand. I think people get wrapped up in their corporate lives, and never get to see much green around here.

I couldn't help but notice the title in your signature. Are you a hockey agent?

Best,

Shane Hollander | Director and CEO, Ottawa Birding Troop

~

From: ilya.rozanov@creativecanadianagency.com

To: s.hollader@ottbirdingtroop.com

Subject: Birding Guides

Yes, I am!! I used to work at our office in Boston, but transferred to Ottawa six months ago. Here I am the Co-Head of the department. It is hard work, but I enjoy it. Most of my clients are Russian. They have trouble acclimating to life in Canada, and I want to make sure it is as easy as possible for them. Was not so easy for me.

Do you play hockey??

Ilya Rozanov (*he/him*)

Co-Head of Hockey, Creative Canadian Agency

Office: 343-241-1821, Cell: 613-909-2481

~

From: s.hollader@ottbirdingtroop.com

To: ilya.rozanov@creativecanadianagency.com

Subject: Birding Guides

Ilya,

I played as a teenager. I was pretty good, but my parents couldn't afford to pay for it beyond high school. I didn't mind. I love science so I went to college for biology and after a few years of working in the field I founded the Troop. Can't complain.

I admit, I may have Googled you a bit. Those BC clips are amazing. Your backhand is nuts. I wouldn't want to be on the other end of that. Hockey always stays with you, doesn't it? Even when you can't have it anymore.

Excited to see you on the tour.

Best,

Shane Hollander | Director and CEO, Ottawa Birding Troop

~

From: ilya.rozanov@creativecanadianagency.com

To: s.hollader@ottbirdingtroop.com

Subject: Birding Guides

Ah, it will take more than that to uncover my tragic backstory!

Feel free to text me at the cell number in my signature. Maybe I can tell you more over drinks? ;)

Ilya Rozanov (*he/him*)

Co-Head of Hockey, Creative Canadian Agency

Office: 343-241-1821, Cell: 613-909-2481

Wyatt sat on the corner of Ilya's desk. "Who's the girl?"

Ilya locked his phone screen. Ilya wasn't sexting at work (not yet, at least) but a strange protectiveness flared up in his gut, when it came to Shane. How was it that Ilya had become enamored so quickly? It was baffling.

Ilya pointed a finger at Wyatt. "Is a boy! You are homophobic! I am telling HR!"

Wyatt threw his hands up. "I've literally shown you pictures of my sister, and her *wife*."

"Still too nosy," Ilya grumbled.

"Aw, you like this one don't you, Roz? Come on, tell me about him."

Wyatt was nice to talk to. He was genuine, if a bit nerdy, and his office was right next to Ilya's which seemed to kind of make them friends. At the few work-outings Ilya had attended, Wyatt was usually Ilya's choice of conversation partner. Ilya liked his wife, Lisa, too. She was stunning, with short dark hair, and she was a kick-ass pediatrician to boot.

So, Ilya didn't mind sharing details about Shane with him. Truthfully, Ilya was so excited about this potential romance he had to tell somebody. (Svetlana was, of course, aware but she was being smug about it). Ilya felt like he was fourteen again, staring at his coach's son loitering outside the locker room, butterflies in his stomach and wondering why this was happening around a *boy*.

Ilya showed Wyatt a selfie he and Shane took on their recent date. It was different from any other date Ilya had ever had. Usually he went with something more...traditional. Nice dinner at some trendy restaurant, flirting over cut of expensive steak, a lingering kiss outside while they waited for the valet, and usually a hot frenzied fuck at his apartment before sending them off.

No, after a few days of texting, Shane invited Ilya out to a farmer's market. Ilya didn't dislike farmer's markets exactly, only up until two days ago he had no opinions on them. He'd never take the time to visit one before, and it never even crossed his mind as a date idea.

He had a great time. Shane had been waiting for him by the apple cider food-truck in a Centaurs beanie and black peacoat, his cheeks already flushed from the cold. Ilya could have spent the whole day just looking at him, but the farmer's market proved pretty fun. They'd meandered through the tents and stalls for about an hour, while Shane filled up a small bag with fresh produce. They'd stopped for lunch at a shawarma tent, and brought their food to a series of small stone tables doubling as chess boards, where they spent *another* hour just talking.

On their way out, they'd stopped at an artist's booth displaying brightly-colored stationery. While browsing, Shane had picked up a postcard with a small fluffy bird on the front, and above it in bubble-lettering read, "You're a real sweetheart!"

What was Ilya supposed to do but buy it for him? It earned Ilya a cheek-kiss, so he certainly wasn't complaining. He managed to convince Shane to take a selfie with the postcard right outside the booth. Wyatt was currently cooing over it.

"He's very cute. Too nice for you."

"I am very nice!"

Besides, Ilya thought smugly, Shane might be sweet, and his texting might be a tad more dry than Ilya was used to, but what he did at the end of their date wasn't exactly *nice*.

Ilya had walked Shane to his car, because no matter what people said he was a gentleman. He was pleasantly surprised when Shane grabbed his hand, tugged him around to the passenger side door, and under the scantily covered privacy of an oak tree kissed Ilya firmly, deeply, and with more tongue than was appropriate for a public parking lot.

Ilya had allowed himself maybe a half a minute to kiss Shane back, his hands brushing up his back, drawing him in close by the shifting muscles at his shoulders. Shane was no NHL player, but he kept himself in shape, and his body was warm and fit beneath Ilya's hands — even through his clothing.

"A goodbye kiss, huh?" Ilya had said, when they parted, a little out of breath and eyeing Shane's red-bitten lips. Ilya couldn't help but lean in again for a peck he *barely* kept as just that.

"Goodbye for now, kiss," Shane had insisted. "Sorry... it's just been a really long time since I've had such a good date."

Oh, Ilya was gone. Fully gone in for this fool, who was sweet, and smart, and fiery beneath that reserved outer-shell.

"Anything for you, *tweetheart*," Ilya had told him, uncaring of the cheesiness. He got another kiss out of it. They'd been texting every day since, and Ilya would see him at the second bird tour he's signed up for tomorrow.

Of course, Ilya recounted all this to Wyatt, who looked appropriately scandalized.

“Okay, nevermind. I take it all back. You’re both freaks. You deserve each other,” he said.

Ilya sighed, and leaned back into the heavy leatherback of his chair, ignoring Wyatt’s exaggerated gagging sounds. There were two new notifications on his phone. Shane texted Ilya back a few minutes ago. A perfectly framed photo of the Ottawa River, with some ducks bobbing along the water. He was leading another birding tour this morning.

You deserve each other.

Ilya sure hoped so.

“Scarlet tanagers,” Shane said. On his tiny camera screen, two vibrantly red birds with triangle-shaped bills plucked insects off yellow flowers. Ilya scooped his chair closer for a better look. All around him, the local coffee shop bustled with a mid-day rush. In the small kitchen behind the counter, Ilya heard the cooks shouting out orders for sandwiches.

For today’s tour, Ilya’s third overall, Shane had led a smaller group of ten to the Hog’s Back trails, south of Ottawa’s urban city center. It was a more clean-cut park, and they’d ambled across large green lawns flecked to more secluded gravel footpaths snaking along the Gatineau River. They’d spent an hour gathered around a scraggly bramble of witch-hazel, where bees and flies congregated to sip nectar. (What the fuck was witch-hazel? A weird name for a tree, which Shane was happy to explain. Ilya felt like he was back in science class, but in a more fun, sexy way). The bugs that loved these flowers, in turn, attracted birds, and it was no small joy to watch Shane’s eyes alight with wonder as the tanagers swooped in and out of the branches, hunting.

Shane’s camerawork was clearly a point of pride for him. He kept his camera clean, packed it in an expensive-looking case, and his eye for photography was evident even to Ilya’s amateur eye.

"You should submit your photos to a contest. You will win," Ilya said, watching Shane click through the photos. He’d managed to capture even the smallest of birds; a warbler the size of Ilya’s finger dressed in smoky gray and yellow feathers.

"Eh, I’ve got enough work to do with the Troop, not sure it’s worth the time?" Shane said, but Ilya could tell he was pleased by the praise. His coffee, black, no cream, no sugar, sat untouched on the table. They’d been talking so much they’d barely had time to eat or drink anything they bought. Ilya couldn’t be bothered by it. He took a sip of his iced hazelnut latte, and wondered when was the last time he’d wanted to spend so much time with one person?

Shane flipped through a few more photos, then Ilya’s phone rang. It was an ominously loud and annoying ringtone Ilya particularly set for the Philadelphia GM, who was not only an asshole, but cheap, and refused to hire an interpreter for their new rookie, Kozlov.

"Do you need to get that?" Shane asked, looking alarmed.

"No." Ilya pressed decline with great joy. Fucking Philadelphia. Kozlov deserved better. That team was a shitshow. "Annoying GM, who won’t give my player the money he deserves. He

can wait."

"You're very good at your job," Shane said seriously.

Ilya shrugged and huffed. "I don't mind it. Keeps me in hockey. I was too stupid to do anything else. I barely finished my degree."

Shane reached across the table and grabbed Ilya's hands. "Don't say that. You're not stupid. You're amazing."

Every time they touched, Ilya's skin broke out into goosebumps. Would it be uncouth to make out with Shane in a coffee-shop? He's not seen this man naked, and that was a crime against humanity.

Ilya scooted his barstool closer so he could wrap his arm around Shane and tug him in close. Into his ear, Ilya said, "If I am amazing, then there are no words good enough for you. Maybe in Russian?"

Shane peered up at him, with dark hooded eyes. "Will you teach me? I know French. I have a good mouth for languages."

Ilya kissed him. A little bit with tongue. He was a a thirty-four year old man in coffee-shop, and he did *not* fucking care. Shane squeaked into his mouth, barely audible, and Ilya tucked that sound away for later — to be coaxed out and emboldened as soon as possible.

"Show off. Of course you speak French," Ilya said when they broke apart. "I will teach you Russian now. How much time do you have?"

Shane looked at his watch, then bit his lip, which wasn't helping the semi Ilya was sporting. "I have another tour in 3 hours. My apartment is twenty minutes from here?"

Ilya gathered his things. It was Saturday, thank god. No rush hour. He could work with this. "No worries. I am fast driver."

"Please."

Shane was very good at begging for it.

Ilya licked a long stripe up the hinge of Shane's thigh. They were on Shane's couch, and Ilya was still fully dressed. Shane had his shirt off, and his pants tugged down to his knees. Ilya couldn't wait one more moment to get his hands, and his mouth on him — so the clothes stayed. Shane hadn't complained, no he whined so beautifully with three of Ilya's thick fingers inside him. He bore down like he was made for it. Ilya's cock kicked in his pants, just thinking about fucking into that tight heat.

Another time. Ilya was too busy being a dedicated, dutiful teacher.

"Ah, no. Wrong. Say in Russian," he said, and crawled up to bite at Shane's earlobe. He kept his fingers pumping, just glancing off Shane's prostate.

“Fuck, fuck, I can’t—” Shane hiccuped, and tipped his head up, eyes closed, for a kiss. Ilya gave one to him, because he was so sweet, and the last time he’d tried repeating Ilya’s Russian, his pronunciation wasn’t half-bad.

“*Pro-shu*, ” Ilya said again, emphasizing the last syllable. He paired it with a hard firm stroke of his fingers, and angled himself so Shane could rub his cock against Ilya’s stomach. There would be a wet smear on Ilya’s shirt for sure. Shane’s cock was practically drooling.

“*Pro-shu*, ” Shane repeated, and yeah, he had an accent, but who the fuck cared when his lips pursed pink and tantalizing around the word.

“Good. Very good, *moye solnyshko*.”

Ilya pulled his fingers out for a moment, and busied himself with pulling the rest of Shane’s clothes off, just so he could have those thick, soft thighs around his waist. Shane moaned, high in his throat, and threw his head back against a frilly throw pillow. He had a hand in Ilya’s hair and tugged Ilya to his chest, where Ilya nipped at Shane’s peaked nipples.

Ilya bit and sucked while Shane writhed beneath him, wordless. Ilya couldn’t get enough of him. He wanted Shane in his mouth every second, he didn’t want to waste a moment to *breathe*. Ilya was purposefully sloppy, so when he pulled back to blow a soft pointed breath of air across Shane’s nipples, they were shiny with saliva.

After running his slick fingers teasingly up across Shane’s ass, past pretty pale stretchmarks, and a mole Ilya *would* return to, until he tapped his fingertips against Shane’s rim.

“You will come now, yes? Very time efficient.”

“You could’ve made me come earlier!” Shane panted. He was pouting just a bit, something fiery in his eyes. Oh, Ilya was going to enjoy having Shane in his bed more than anyone he ever has before. He felt like a birthday gift.

“Some things are worth waiting for,” Ilya said, and returned to his work. He slipped his fingers in, and curled them repeatedly over Shane’s prostate until he choked out a moan and came hard, all over himself — even spurting a little on his chin. Ilya licked it off, while Shane caught his breath.

Ilya layered sweet barely-there kisses over Shane’s face for a minute, and catalogued his apartment.

It was neat. A throw blanket laid over an armchair. Big street-facing windows with sheer curtains. Most of the furniture was accented with dark wood. As for fabrics, Shane had an affinity for cool greens or blues. Over the electric fireplace, a watercolor painting of geese in flight. A small bookshelf in the corner with thick old-looking hardcovers. At the very top shelf sat a little flock of ceramic blue jays wearing baseball hats. Simple. Homey. Ilya’s apartment was furnished. He hasn’t added any paintings, any decorations, that didn’t come with it. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t added much in Boston either.

A hand on his cheek. “Hey,” Shane said.

He had the hazy look of a man riding high on the afterglow. Ilya wormed his hands beneath Shane's back just to tug him close, he was loose as a noodle, and his skin was perfectly warm to the touch. They made out lazily, locked into an easy slow grind, and Ilya was soon reminded of just how bad *he* needed to come.

"I want it," Shane whispered, unbuttoning Ilya's jeans with one hand. "You feel so good. Will you fuck me?"

"Now?" Ilya croaked. Shane had just come. Surely he was sensitive, but when Ilya rocked himself against Shane's ass he pushed into it.

"I like it after. Feels extra good. I can come again," Shane sighed.

Ilya moaned, and dropped his head into Shane's neck. If he *looked* at Shane he would come, if Shane *breathed* on him he would come. Where did he put the fucking lube—

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. One of their phones lit up on the coffee table.

"Shit. Is mine?" Ilya asked.

Shane frowned, and reached one long arm across to grab it. A clock popped up on the lockscreen. "No. Mine. Fuck, it's the alarm I set. I have to go now, or I'll miss the tour."

Ilya looked incredulously down at Shane, sex-rumpled and spit-covered. There was no prettier sight in all the world, but perhaps, not one meant for a public bird-watching tour. "You need a shower."

Shane's cute little nose wrinkled. "A quick one."

Ilya tapped him on the thigh, reassuringly, then stood. "Go. I will get our coats."

"I'm sorry," Shane blurted out suddenly, a hot flush across his cheekbones. He gestured vaguely at the tent in Ilya's pants. "We were so focused on me, I didn't get to you. I wanted to..."

Ilya shut him up with a kiss, hard and unfortunately brief. He kept Shane's gaze with a firm hand holding Shane's chin. "No apologies. You are too beautiful to be rushed, Shane Hollander. I wanted to see you come. I did. Next time, you can get on your knees for me."

Shane's eyes fluttered shut, and he licked at Ilya's thumb. "Promise?"

Oh, they would have to pry this man from Ilya's cold dead hands.

Ilya pushed that thumb against the plush swell of Shane's bottom lip, just to feel the give, and Shane's tiny pleased inhale. He would hoard Shane's desire, like an oyster did a pearl, until he could properly open it.

"Guarantee," Ilya said.

Ilya could curse the NHL and the day Roger Cromwell was born. He hadn't seen Shane in two weeks.

They made plans to meet up a week after their sexy rendezvous at Shane's apartment at an Italian place downtown, only for one of Ilya's players in Vancouver to be traded last minute to Minnesota. This whole debacle, of course, took all night for Ilya to de-escalate. Their romantic night out was put on hold.

He promised to re-schedule, with the hope of meeting Shane for a quick lunch on one of his less busy Wednesdays, only for his 11 AM management meeting to run a full two hours behind schedule. Ilya's text messages to Shane were full of apologies, rather than sexy dick pics. It was a true tragedy. As soon as that absolute bullshit meeting was over, Ilya locked himself in his office and signed up for Shane's next available bird tour that Saturday.

The day arrived at around three degree celsius, just above freezing for an early November outing — which in Ottawa, meant the weather hovered at a sleet-like freezing rain. Ilya zipped his raincoat up all the way to his neck, and stepped out of the car and into the storm. He'd read the Ottawa Birding Troop's cancellation policy this morning over breakfast, and as long as there wasn't lightning or thunder the tour always went on. He crossed the muddy parking lot, and prayed that the clouds hurried on their way.

Shane was where he said he'd be, standing protected under the roof of a large covered picnic area, covered head-to-toe in waterproof hiking gear. This park, Shirley's Bay, was as far out as Ilya's been to see birds. Between the sparse patches of trees in the distance, the Ottawa River roiled, pounded to a blue-gray sheen by the rain. There was a stack of orange kayaks tied with cables next to a shed, clearly meant for warmer weather. This would be no day for boats, maybe not even for birds.

"You came," Shane said, like he couldn't believe it. Even a little waterlogged he looked stunning. Silly, silly, man. Clearly Ilya hadn't been flirting enough with him.

Ilya leaned in for a kiss. "Of course. I missed you."

"No last minute trades today?"

"No. I will burn down all the arenas. No more hockey. Goodbye."

Shane snorted. "You're so dramatic."

The tour started at 11:00 AM, and they waited an extra ten minutes past but no one showed. Shane wasn't surprised, or particularly put off. He assured Ilya this wasn't uncommon for such a bad weather day, and no, Ilya didn't need to go beat some old lady named Gladys up for not thinking of sending an email cancellation.

"Just us today, then," Shane said, leading him down the paved path to the water.

He slung an arm around Shane's shoulders, and tugged him close. "Lead the way, *moy popugay*."

“What is that one?” Shane asked. He’s gotten used to Ilya calling him all kinds of nonsensical things in Russian. He usually remembered the words afterward too. He had great language retention.

“Parrot, I think? A pretty bird, like you.”

Like Ilya expected, there were few birds to be found in the wooded areas. Shane explained that they were less active in a rain this cold, and more likely to stay huddled up in a dry spot until the weather passed. Water birds, however, were named so for a reason, and Ilya caught sight of about a dozen dark shapes bobbing in the water as they approached the shoreline.

“Wood ducks,” Shane whispered, and directed Ilya to a corner of the sand where they could observe the ducks without spooking them.

“There are five males, and three females. The males are the ones with the green plumage,” Shane said. He pointed at the duck nearest to them, with shimmery green head feathers, fanning out like a mullet.

“He has great hair, like me.” Ilya knocked shoulders with Shane, and relished in the responding chuckle.

They spent twenty minutes watching them feed, dabbling their spoon-shaped bills into the water chasing after algae. Shane offered a fact every now and then, their lifespan, their diet, and Ilya let the rumbled timbre of his voice wash over him. They were shoulder to shoulder by the time they moved on, Ilya with an arm around Shane’s shoulder, holding him close, even as their raincoats squeaked, rubbing together as they walked.

They reached a thin peninsula, stretching out along the water. Out by the river, the wind kicked up, and Ilya's face stung from the rain. Still, Shane preserved, he clasped their hands together and led Ilya farther and farther out until they reached the last bit of land, where the sand was brown from all the water.

There was a murky shape in the distance. Ilya would have thought it a log, or piece of debris, but Shane lifted his binoculars, and said, “Oh!”

“Something new?” Ilya asked. Personally, he couldn’t see anything. His binoculars were smudged beyond saving.

“A loon. Maybe a red-throated? They’re not very common, and I haven’t seen one this year ___”

The shadowy shape lifted its lean wings, as if to take flight, then in a flash dove into the water below. They watched for a long while, but it didn’t emerge.

“I couldn’t ID it,” Shane whispered.

Above them, distant, but rolling in from the west, threatened an imminent rumble of thunder.

Ilya offered Shane a packet of hand warmers. He always kept a few stocked in the middle console of his car. A trick he learned after his piece-of-junk Ford Explorer from college crapped out on him on the highway in Boston in January.

“I am sorry we missed the bird,” he offered. Shane had been quiet since they left, clearly disappointed by their lack of success. Ilya was too, but more so on Shane’s behalf. A warm tender feeling spread through his chest, as he watched Shane pat his hair dry with a napkin. So random, and somehow devastatingly intimate. Ilya had the absurd urge to take the waterlogged strands of Shane’s hair in his mouth and suck them clean, just to get a taste of him.

Shane folded the soiled napkin and tucked it into his pocket. He squeezed the handwarmer in his other hand. The tips of his fingers were pink.

“It’s alright,” he sighed, and looked out the rain pattered window. “The bird will probably stick around for a while. Red-throated loons don’t migrate out until January.”

Still, there was something sad and vulnerable in Shane’s face. “Is okay to be disappointed,” Ilya said softly.

“It’s not that—” He paused, shut his eyes, then seemed to make a decision. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“God, you barely know me. You’ll probably think I’m crazy—”

Ilya cupped Shane’s cheeks. He froze, eyes glossy and wide. Ilya dared to rub his thumb back and forth over the ridge of his cheekbone. Shane shivered.

“Shane. Ask. I do not think you are crazy,” Ilya assured him.

Shane took a deep breath. “Okay. My parents have this cottage about two hours outside of the city. It’s nothing fancy, but we mostly use it in the summer as a getaway. It’s on a lake in the woods, and one of our neighbors texted me the other day and said he saw a red-throated loon. I was going to go up there this weekend to look for it. Do you want to come with me?”

Ilya cocked his head, pretending to think it over, like he hadn’t decided that he would do anything Shane asked the moment they met.

Ilya sealed their lips together, a long close-mouthed kiss that lingered. When he pulled away Shane looked drugged, tipping his nose up like he wanted more. Ilya would give him *everything*.

“For many years, I have been lonely,” Ilya said. “I moved to Ottawa because Boston did not feel like a home. The truth is, I had no one, anywhere — but I wanted someone to follow. I did not know it then, but I think I came here to follow you.”

Because Shane was Shane — obsessive, single-minded, a secret sweetheart who Ilya guessed might just be as lonely as he was — Shane said, “Loons mate for life, you know.”

Ilya brushed his lips over Shane's forehead. "I have my suspicions."

Svetlana sat on the edge of Ilya's dresser, legs dangling, with one of Ilya's fine glass tumblers in hand. She'd already worked her way through half a bottle of his good vodka.

"Do I need to put an airtag on you?" she asked in Russian. They rarely spoke English to one another, they were each other's sole reminder of home in a far away place. A home neither of them were interested in returning to, but there was something to be said of hearing a mother-tongue in a place no one spoke it. Ilya wondered how long it would take Shane to be conversational in Russian. It took Ilya too damn long to learn English, but Shane was smarter, and more dedicated. He'd already downloaded a language app on his phone, and sent Ilya screenshots of his favorite animal words. *Kotik. Pavlin. Nerpa.*

Ilya threw a thick knitted sweater into his suitcase, then went to grab one more. Shane said the cottage was an old house, which meant creaky, drafty walls. Ilya could only pray that led to lots of skin-to-skin contact.

"What? No. I am going to a cottage in the woods, not halfway across the world," he told Svetlana, digging through a pile of unsorted laundry.

"A 'cottage in the woods' he says. This is less reassuring than you think."

Ilya threw his hands up. She was impossible. "You set me up with him!"

She toasted her tumbler in the air, as if congratulating herself. "Yes, I did, and I am very glad for the many glorious hours you have spent fucking him through the mattress. Only, it has barely been two months since you met. This is fast, no?"

Ilya gave her a look. "I have not had any serious relationship my entire life. I thought this was what you wanted for me?"

She drained the rest of her drink, then set it on a coaster with a loud thump. "Is this serious?"

Ilya shrugged, but he could not fool her. His heart galloped in his ears, just thinking about Shane and what he already meant to Ilya. In just eight hours time he would be here to pick Ilya up, and drive them to a house his *parents* owned. Shane's parents, who were okay with their son using this house for a long weekend just to look for a rare bird. Or, well, not *just* look for the bird, but Ilya would be surprised if Shane told his parents that.

"I would like it to be serious," Ilya conceded. "We have only slept together once, besides."

"Now *that* is shocking."

"I have tried, trust me," he grumbled. "I would wait for him if he wanted, but he is eager too. Life has gotten in the way, as it does. Oh, the *sounds* he makes Sveta, when he is close to coming he makes this squeak—"

"Ok, ok! Just because I have seen your dick before, does not mean I want to hear about what it does any longer. Go to your cottage then, have fun. I just want to make sure you're safe."

She had apparently expressed her worries well enough. He loved her and she loved him. She was his best friend, and the only person left in the world who would sit here while he packed for a vacation and ask if he remembered his toothbrush and socks, or if he was feeling okay. There were times when she'd asked, and that answer had been no. Ilya was very glad that was no longer the case.

“Sveta. You never told me how you knew about these bird tours? I do not think you like them very much.”

She laughed. “Ah, I don’t. A client gave me tickets, and said, ‘Go on Hollander’s tour if you want some eyecandy.’ She was not lying was she? His groups fill up with *many* young ladies.”

He rolled his eyes and packed away his second chunky sweater. He kissed her cheek as he passed her by on his way to the kitchen, feeling sneaky and grateful. They were both in need of a refill.

Shane was far ahead on the trail, working his way down a gnarled deerpath riddled with roots as thick as Ilya’s calves. This was an old forest, with lots and lots of trees.

They’d been hiking for about 30 minutes along the lake, which Shane said took a full three hours to completely circle. Shane’s cottage sat on the shallow end, corralled into a boat launch alongside five or six other houses. Great for fun summer activities, less so for birding. The thick riverweeds and cattails the birds liked to hide in were on the other side of the lake — best to hike further in, and better their luck.

As an sports agent, Ilya almost always had to have his phone on him, but he’d left it back at the cottage with the spotty wifi. Svetlana offered to cover for him, and he believed her when she promised him a work-free weekend. Already he felt lighter, the air felt clearer, and he wasn’t thinking about work or his sad empty apartment he could barely tolerate.

Maybe this happiness was the absence of his phone, or maybe it was the towering trees and the open sky clear and blue as a marble above him. More likely it was the man in front of him, intensely focused on whacking aside the creeping tendrils of a shrub with his hiking pole.

There was a steep drop from the trail to the muddy edge of the lake. Shane offered Ilya a strong hand to balance on as he stepped down. Ilya couldn’t help but notice the calluses on Shane’s palms, from years of hard hiking climbs, or the beer hockey league Shane mentioned he joined on occasion. Shane was an exercise in contradictions, hardy and undeniably masculine, yet reserved and sweet. He had thick glossy hair Ilya knew women would kill for, and thick muscled thighs even Ilya envied. Ilya did not believe in God, certainly not after his mother passed, but he wondered if his mother, wherever she was, sent Shane at a time when Ilya needed him the most.

Shane was studying a map on his phone, where his neighbor pinned the loon’s coordinates just this morning. He bit his lower lip between his teeth, and a cute little scowl wrinkled the bridge of his nose.

Ilya tipped Shane's face up with a single finger, and kissed him. Commanding, yet soft, their lips clung together into a second kiss, and then a third. They couldn't help themselves.

"What was that for?" Shane asked when they finished.

Ilya chuckled him under the chin. "Because I can. Now, lead the way."

The walk wasn't far. They reached a boggy section of the shore, corralled at their left by a large cluster of reeds almost as tall as Ilya was. Shane's neighbor had spotted the loon in this spot at around dawn. Apparently it's been here for a few days. Shane would be disappointed if it had left, and it shocked Ilya just how desperately he wanted to see Shane's face alight with joy, and not disappointment.

They were lucky. After about five minutes of waiting, a long scratchy bird call echoed, and a loon paddled into view.

"*Gavia stellata*," Shane read from the book. "The red-throated loon is one of the world's least common *Gaviiformes*. Notice its smooth gray head, its dark back, and striking brick-red throat in full breeding plumage..."

The loon was not quite as "red-throated" as he expected. There was a patch of feathers there, small, but a distinct ruddy brown almost lost in the white wash of its neck. It bore a gently upturned silver bill, and its back was speckled in white, almost like it was losing feathers.

The bird squealed, a long high note.

"It's molting," Shane whispered with soft wonder. "Soon it'll have its winter coat. Like a completely new bird."

"Two in one," Ilya added. The loon glided across the water as if on glass. Perfectly smooth, just two thin trails of ripples in its wake. Ilya felt as if he was watching it ice-skate, and the phantom feeling of playing a game came over him. Rushing towards the net with the puck, his edgework sharp as his blades, throwing his knee up after he scored, and the crowd erupting around him.

There was none of that here. None of the glory, the rock bottoms, the crooked mess of his knee in the trainer's room and realizing he'd never play again. Just the loon, and Shane, who had turned his attention to Ilya, an intense look upon his face.

"Did you know that red-throated loons are the smallest in the world?" he said. "They're so lightweight, they can take off from water as small as a pond. Poof, they can just fly away. Wherever they want to go. They breed in the Arctic, and you can find them all over the world, even in Russia."

The bird sailed away, to feed, or maybe it was gone forever. Ilya didn't notice, and he doubted Shane did either. In a fog, Ilya bullied Shane under one of the stray pine trees creeping out past the tree line.

Ilya cornered him up against the truck. Ilya was so tall, and Shane so short, that all Ilya had to do was straighten to his full height and cage Shane in. He braced his forearms against the bark, so Shane had nowhere to go, and nowhere to look but up at him.

“Did you know this before? About *Russian* loons?” Ilya purred.

“I may have looked it up,” Shane admitted.

His eyes were glossy, and he looked up at Ilya through thick, inky lashes. He was so fucking beautiful.

“Kiss me,” Shane demanded.

“Ask nicely.”

“Fuck. Ilya, please.”

Ilya took what was his. He wrapped both hands around the back of Shane’s head, thumbs pressing against the soft skin behind his ears, and *held* him there. Shane let him. He let Ilya kiss his breath away, until they were hard and rutting against one another under a tree like animals — until Shane flipped Ilya around and went to his knees on a bed of damp pine needles.

With deft, sure fingers, he unzipped Ilya’s fly and pulled out his cock. Ilya was hard enough to pound stone, and the fact that they were outside did nothing to deter him. Not when Shane was rubbing his cheek along the shaft, and tipping his nose against Ilya’s groin for a sniff. Shane kitten-licked at the tip, a drooling, angry red, and Ilya had to thump his head against the tree to stop himself from coming.

"You are such a slut for it," Ilya said, voice thick. Soon his English would fail him, and all that was left of his brain would drool out of his ears.

"I want you to come down my throat," Shane said, before swallowing Ilya down. He didn't gag, he just moaned as Ilya fucked at the back of his throat. Ilya wanted to kill the man Shane learned to do this for. Or send him a nice bottle of wine.

Ilya sank his fingers into Shane's hair, murmuring praise under his breath, and fucked his sweet mouth, relishing in the sloppy sounds of Shane enjoying himself until his own orgasm surged and crested. He held Shane down to the root as he came, and thumbed at the tears leaking from his eyes. Shane didn't complain. He stayed there until Ilya slumped over, panting, and let him go.

Shane swallowed most of Ilya's come, except for a stray pearly smear clinging to his lower lip. Ilya hauled Shane up by the collar of his shirt and licked it clean; he licked his own taste out of Shane's mouth until there was nothing left.

Every last drop.

Ilya was on Shane as soon as they came in the door, hiking him up onto the old wooden dining table in the kitchen, and rubbing him to hardness with a warm dry hand. Shane liked it a little rough, friction on the edge of a frenzy. One day, Ilya would make love to him, slow and syrupy until he was incoherent, but today, no. Ilya had him stripped, and on his hands and knees on the mattress within minutes.

They fucked in the only bedroom of the house, with a large queen-sized bed, and a garishly plaid comforter. The whole cottage had an air of “minimalist Canadian lumberjack”, and Ilya wondered idly if that was Shane’s influence or his parents.

Either way, Shane only stopped Ilya once while he prepped Shane’s hole with three fingers, to run to the bathroom for a towel. Something about dirtying the sheets, and the feeling of a wet spot on his skin. Ilya was happy to comply.

Soon Ilya had the long smooth expanse of Shane’s back before him, curved into a perfect arc while Ilya hammered his cock home. There was nothing to hear or see but Shane. His hiccuping moans, the pleas that fell from his lips in a complete freefall. Shane wanted it bad, and he wanted it *now*. He reached one firm hand behind himself to grab at Ilya’s thigh and tug him closer, like Ilya wasn’t already as physically close as he could possibly be. Ilya grinded his hips against Shane’s ass in hard but shallow thrusts, until Shane fell to his elbows. There was a fine sheen of sweat at the nape of his neck, and Ilya kissed his way up the lovely knobs of that spine to lick it off. Shane tasted salty, absolutely heavenly, a feast spread across his skin sun-warmed by an open curtain-less window.

Ilya pushed Shane so far down they were almost flat, and there in that position Shane rubbed himself to completion against the towel, from nothing but that scratchy pressure and Ilya’s hard pounding against his prostate. He was a vision as he came, eyes squeezed shut, tendrils of fine hair curling over his temple. Ilya gnawed at the side of his neck and jackhammered in, chasing his pleasure. He couldn’t keep his eyes open. It was too much. He reared up on his knees and slammed home, mumbling Russian obscenities while Shane begged for his come, whispered how he wanted it bare and dripping out of him one day.

Later, when they’d tossed the towel to the hamper, and Ilya wiped Shane’s face and stomach clean with a washcloth, Shane said, “You know, technically, this is against policy.”

Ilya was ready for a nap. The hike, and the fucking, had worn him out. It had been a while since he’d come twice in under four hours. He was in a blissed-out half lidded state, absent mindedly petting through Shane’s hair. He rested half on top of Ilya, with his cheek pillowed on Ilya’s chest. The thermostat was on high, and Ilya could hear the old radiator clanging. No doubt they’d be overheated soon, but Ilya wouldn’t move Shane for the world. He was in the perfect spot, his legs splayed just enough for Ilya to see his cock soft and fat against his thigh, and the beginnings of a faint finger-shaped bruise about his hipbone.

“What? Laying in bed together? We have done lots of things that are against policy.” Ilya pressed his teeth against the side of Shane’s neck, threatening a bite.

Shane shivered and slipped his hand up the nape of Ilya’s neck. He had a fascination with Ilya’s hair. The feeling was mutual.

"I'm the director of the Ottawa Birding Troop. I shouldn't be...canoodling with a new birder."

"Ca-noo-dle-ing," Ilya said, sounding out each syllable. What a strange word. "Is this Canadian for 'in love' with?"

Honestly, Ilya didn't mean to say it. It just came out, and he stiffened instinctively. He'd known Shane for two whole months, and if any of Ilya's friends came to him and said 'I'm falling in love with a man I met on a birding tour. I barely know him, but I followed him to an isolated cottage in the woods two hours outside of Ottawa to fuck and cuddle and hike in the woods,' he'd have some *serious* concerns.

That didn't mean the "love" per se wasn't true, or at least, not far off the mark.

Shane, however, didn't look bothered. He plucked at a stringy curl over Ilya's forehead, smiling.

"Maybe it is. Maybe it could be," he whispered against Ilya's mouth. This was their secret was given breath and shape, and Ilya swallowed whatever Shane was going to say next in another kiss, thinking all the while, *I came to Ottawa for a reason. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it.*

End Notes

Boston College is one of the best collegiate hockey programs in the United States. The ever-RPF-popular Will Smith (of the San Jose Sharks) played there.

Sibley Birds East (and the rest of the guides on that list) are real, but like Shane, I advocate for Sibley and Sibley only if in need of a field guide.

I snagged that tagline from the bird postcard from [these cards](#) on Etsy. Pretty cute!

Witch hazel is one of the few trees in the northern hemisphere that flowers through winter. There is some debate/confusion as to how it flowers at all, considering most of the bugs that would pollinate it are long dead by December. One of life's mysteries!

"Gavia stellata" is, as mentioned, the scientific name for the red-throated loon. "Gavia immer" is the scientific name for the common loon, the bird Ilya has a tattoo of in canon.

Mud Lake, the Arboretum, and Shirley's Bay are all real birding spots in Ottawa. I've never been to any of them, but if anyone has been let me know! You can find a list of local Ottawa birding spots at this [link](#), and a list of local species can be found on eBird. Every bird I mentioned had been found in the region.

And now, for the Russian translations. If you are a Russian speaker, PLEASE correct me if I'm wrong! I tried my best with Reddit and some online dictionaries.

Proshu - please/I beg (this word seems to have a begging connotation)

moye solnyshko - my sunshine/little sun

moy popugay - my parrot

kotik - kitten

pavlin - peacock

nerpa - seal

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