

Wherever I'm with you

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by [SatsumaSegments](#)

Summary

He drives to the airport with an unshakeable urge to pull over and turn around. He smokes four cigarettes in a row before he boards the plane, then chews an entire pack of gum on the flight to try and cover the worst of the smell.

He exits the airport half-hoping that Shane has chickened out of the whole thing. Then he spots him, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel in the most boring suburban dad car Ilya has ever had the misfortune of laying his eyes on, and he's so happy to see him that his legs feel unsteady beneath his weight.

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Or, the cottage, Ilya's version: an extended ep 6 featuring my take on what happened in the gaps we didn't see.

Notes

have you any idea how long it takes to write an episode retelling when you keep having to stop and spin in a circle bc the episode makes you feel things every time you go back to it to check a line. fuck me. enjoy

(also, cw for one use of the f-slur)

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

Ilya spends the entire flight telling himself that this is a terrible idea.

He'd felt so sure about it at first. Shane's invitation to the cottage hadn't left Ilya's head since the hospital visit, and it was the first thing on his mind when Scott Hunter beckoned his boyfriend onto the ice, and the decision was sealed with the kiss that followed. His phone was in his hand, the dial tone in his ear, before he'd had any time to process what was happening or what it meant. In the same way that his lungs need oxygen and his stomach needs food, his heart needed to make the cottage plan a reality, and his tongue needed to meet Shane's proposal with a firm and doubtless *yes*.

His conviction had stayed strong for a while. It was there when he booked a flight to Ottawa straight after he put the phone down. It was still there when he told Svetlana he was going to stay with *Jane* and quickly changed the subject so he wouldn't have to acknowledge the knowing smile she gave him afterwards. It was very much there the following morning, when he woke up hard and jerked off in the shower to the thought of fucking Shane on that beautiful dock overlooking the lake. He'd take him with the sun on his back, the breeze in his hair, and he'd be selfishly pleased about how Shane would definitely think about this next time he's out there doing his stupid yoga.

It's his own fault that the sureness begins to fade. He knows it's a bad idea to look at what the general public have to say about Scott Hunter, but he opens the stupid apps and scrolls through his feed anyway. Every outlet has something to say about Scott Hunter's coming out moment, whether it's to praise him for it or to froth at the mouth about 'agendas' and 'politics in sport'. And every post has endless pages of comments, a sea of people offering their boring opinions on Hunter and his boyfriend and how good or bad this is for hockey as a sport.

To be fair, some people are pleasantly supportive.

So brave, we love you Scott! Such a great role model!

I hope this is a sign that things are starting to change. Everyone should feel safe to love who they love.

Aww they're so cute together, good for them :)

Others are...not.

Who cares? Why did he have to make the win all about his sex life instead of letting his team enjoy the moment?

Hockey is over if they make it gay. There's nothing left for normal people to enjoy.

I don't care who he's fucking but he should've kept it private. Stick to playing hockey, Scott.

Ilya can handle comments like that. People are ignorant. Between his career and his family, he has a pretty thick skin.

It's not the words themselves that make Ilya wonder whether he's making a mistake. It's the thought of Shane – golden boy Shane, role model Shane, hockey's favourite perfect angel Shane – having to deal with being despised like this after a years-long career that's only ever brought him love and admiration.

It's a painful scene to imagine. Shane, left on the bench for major fixtures despite being the best player on the team, perhaps the best player in the whole fucking world. Shane, having his sponsorships pulled by advertisers who no longer see him as 'family friendly' or 'relatable'. Shane, unable to look away from the hateful vitriol spewed that worst of these bigots like to spew, brown eyes narrowed and full of angry tears.

Disgusting. People take their kids to these games. They should strip his name off the cup for promoting this degenerate shit.

No wonder Hunter's been useless all season. We need real men on our team, not this freak.

I feel sorry for his teammates, having to shower with a faggot. Don't drop the soap lol.

And it would be because of Ilya. Not directly, but enough that he'd feel responsible. Enough that a sick sense of guilt seeps into the idea of going to the cottage, tainting the excitement he's been enjoying for days.

Ilya likes risk. He likes trouble. It's exciting. But only when it's the good kind. And after days of overthinking, it's starting to feel very much like the bad kind of trouble.

He's twelve again, digging his fingernails into his palms inside his pockets while his father berates him. He misses his mother. He hopes to God that the detestable man won't say anything upsetting about her this time.

He's fifteen again, springing apart from Sasha just in time when his coach throws the door open. The close call makes him throw up over the side of the rink during practice. He tells his coach that he has cramp, and his coach calls him weak.

He's nineteen again, running into Yuna Hollander of all people while he's on his way up to the fourteenth floor to swallow her son's come.

Okay, that last one isn't quite comparable to the first two. But it illustrates how ridiculous this whole thing is, and has been from the start. How they came so close to getting caught before there was even anything to catch them for.

It was stupid when he was following the whims of his dick. It's worse now that he's following the whims of his heart.

He drives to the airport with an unshakeable urge to pull over and turn around. He smokes four cigarettes in a row before he boards the plane, then chews an entire pack of gum on the flight to try and cover the worst of the smell.

He exits the airport half-hoping that Shane has chickened out of the whole thing. Then he spots him, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel in the most boring suburban dad car

Ilya has ever had the misfortune of laying his eyes on, and he's so happy to see him that his legs feel unsteady beneath his weight.

Two weeks is a long time. This is something that only occurs to him when he slides into the passenger seat and the car starts moving. He's never even spent two days with Shane Hollander. Not like this. Their entire relationship has been made of bite-sized chunks: a quick fuck here, a phone call there, flirty teasing on the ice, an overnight stay that never actually came to fruition because Ilya couldn't keep Shane's name off his lips.

They're used to ripping each other's clothes off in doorways and on staircases. It's been years of hurrying, stealing kisses in the shadows, forgoing proper foreplay in favour of having time to fit in a shower before one of them is due back at their hotel for airport pickup in an hour.

They've never been able to just hang out together. They've never had time to savour each other properly.

Ilya has spent years thinking about laying Shane out in front of him and spending the entire day taking him apart. About coming together and falling onto the bed, exhausted, and knowing they can stay like that instead of one of them being left behind while the other makes a hasty retreat. About just existing with him, like a normal couple would, eating together and watching TV and chatting about stupid stuff that doesn't matter. And now that all of those things are a possibility, he's simultaneously ecstatic and terrified.

He chews his lip as the car wends its way along picturesque tree-lined roads. Shane's hands stay locked on the wheel in a sensible and driving instructor-approved ten and two position.

Shane is boring. And annoying. Maybe Ilya will be sick of him by day three.

And worse, Ilya is difficult. And standoffish. There's a sick churning feeling in the pit of his stomach that maybe, by day three, it'll be Shane who is sick of him.

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Ilya does not get sick of Shane.

It should be stressful. This whole trip should be stressful. Shane's parents could turn up at any moment. There could be some paparazzo hiding in the bushes with a telephoto lens pointed at the cottage and its floor-to-ceiling windows. Some middle aged man could get a drone for his birthday and fly it over the lake, then sell the footage to the tabloids when it catches hockey's greatest rivals sucking each other's dicks in Shane Hollander's hot tub.

None of that happens, obviously. The real news worth writing a headline about is that it's surprisingly easy to live with Shane Hollander. It's *fun* to live with Shane Hollander. Now that they're here in Shane's natural habitat, the personality that Ilya fell in love with through a series of rare, brief glimpses can shine through at full brightness.

Shane is soft and warm and loving. He wraps Ilya in blankets, and brings him cups of hot chocolate, and rests his hand on Ilya's thigh when they're sitting together. He's sharp and brilliant when they're playing a video game or watching some dumb quiz show, as

competitive off the ice as he is on it. He's silly when he lets himself be, splashing Ilya in the lake and challenging him to swimming races like they're two kids on their summer holiday. He's fucking sexy, too, dropping to his knees wearing nothing but his slutty little glasses and pointing out which bits of furniture he wants to be bent over and letting his hands wander when he's supposed to be rubbing sunscreen into Ilya's back.

And he makes Ilya laugh. God, he makes him laugh. Intentionally, with witty observations delivered in his usual deadpan tone, and unintentionally, when he's following recipes to the letter and pronouncing Russian words completely wrong and being so fucking unsubtle on the phone that Hayden Pike is probably scarred for life (although Ilya has to take at least a little credit for that one).

Of all the versions of Shane that exist – the picture-perfect media trained Shane that gives sensible answers in radio interviews, the fit and focused Shane that leads his team to glory in hockey games, the sweaty and disheveled Shane that moans so prettily in Ilya's bed – this one is Ilya's favourite. The secret, comfortable, *real* Shane that Ilya suspects has never been seen by anybody but him.

And maybe Shane gets to see the real Ilya in turn. Ilya feels lighter than he's felt in years. He's not watching his back. He's not walking on eggshells. He's not weighed down by expectations, or under a mountain of pressure to perform the role of Ilya Rozanov, asshole hockey player. For the first time in a long time, he can just be Ilya. Ilya, who likes swimming and sex and eating hot dogs on the deck.

Ilya likes lots of things, but mostly he likes Shane Hollander. After so many years of secrecy and lost time, it's blissful to be here doing things he's dreamed of for years. He can walk up behind Shane and wrap his arms around his waist when he's cooking, hold him while they watch a movie, crawl under the sheets in the morning to wake him up with a blowjob.

They can just *live*. Shane isn't skittish. Ilya isn't stonewalling. They don't have to push each other away. They don't have to hide.

It feels dangerously close to having a home.

The house that Ilya grew up in stopped feeling like a home as soon as his mother stopped living in it. The places he's lived as an adult – nice places, penthouses, worthy of a hockey star and the steady stream of women he brings back to them – have never felt properly *his*. He spends too much time on the road for them to feel any different to the series of hotel rooms he rotates through during the hockey season. Money can buy houses, but it can't buy homes.

Russia is supposed to be his home, but only in the sense that that's what's written on his official documents. Russia doesn't want him, not the way that he is, and Ilya has no love left for it or anybody who lives there. The USA welcomed him in with open arms, but its love has always been conditional. It's a transaction – *you can stay as long as you perform well* – and it's heavily laced with the unspoken threat that accompanies it.

Ilya's father had more in common with America than he could ever know.

But this could be a home. Here. Ottawa. This cottage, built from wood and steel and all the love that shines through when Shane talks about the significance of each architectural feature and Ilya gets lost in his smile.

Shane Hollander could be a home. He could be Ilya's home. This could be Ilya's life.

'Have you talked to your brother lately?' asks Shane, pulling Ilya out of his reverie.

It's such a Shane question. He loves talking about family. Of course he does, since he's the only child of two incredibly normal parents, situated neatly within what Ilya assumes is an incredibly normal extended family.

It used to make Ilya angry when Shane insisted on prying into Ilya's past, asking about Russia and his father and whether returning to Moscow every summer was what he really wanted. It felt like another kick in the ribs, a reminder of the gulf between their lives. *I'm spending the summer with my perfect family because they love me dearly and I enjoy their company. How about you, Ilya? Oh, thanks for asking, Shane, I'm off Russia to clench my teeth for two weeks while my father rambles about how much of a failure I am and my brother calls me slurs because I only sent him thirty thousand dollars this month.*

Now, years later, the questions don't hurt anymore. He can see them for what they are: a gentle bid for connection, borne of genuine concern and a foolish, optimistic hope that Ilya's family might have magically mended whatever is fundamentally wrong with it. It made him happy to hear about Shane's parents earlier in the week. It's nice that Shane wants to learn about his family in return.

And Ilya wants to be honest. He wants to open up about his life, share all the pain of his childhood with the only person who might care. But the cottage is too nice to be tainted with mentions of pieces of shit like Ilya's brother.

Ilya saw a quote once, years ago, about how everybody dies twice: once, when their heart stops beating, and then again, much later, when someone tells a story about them for the final time.

So instead, he talks about his mother.

He doubts Alexei ever talks about her. He hopes not, as Alexei never seemed to have anything nice to say. It's not surprising that he's always been their father's favourite. They're both unpleasant men, hard and cruel and quick to throw around words like *useless* and *idiot* and *whore*.

Ilya lies with his head in Shane's lap, and tells him everything that he remembers about Irina Rozanova. How she was beautiful, and how happy it made him as a child that they had the same curly hair. How he looked up towards the sky and shouted 'this is for you, Mama,' when he lifted the Cup for the first time, desperately wishing she could've been sitting in the stadium to cheer him on. How one of his earliest memories is of dancing with her in the garden behind their house, his little hands clasped in hers. He liked the way her skirt would flare out and twirl as she spun him around.

He leaves out the part where he heard his father screaming at her later, berating her for turning Ilya ‘soft’.

Shane’s hand never leaves Ilya’s hair, his nails scratching gently against Ilya’s scalp. They watch the bonfire, and he lets Ilya talk, and he doesn’t make a big deal out of it when Ilya starts to cry.

‘Do you wanna go inside?’ asks Shane.

‘No,’ says Ilya.

He feels safe like this, curled up against Shane. The heat from the bonfire caresses his skin. If he lets his eyes go out of focus, he can almost see his mother’s face in the flames.

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Ilya has never self harmed, but he has made unwise choices. He’s picked fights on the ice for the sheer adrenaline of a fist against his jaw, downed shots at afterparties until he threw up then headed straight back to the bar from the bathroom, fucked faceless strangers with dark hair and freckles and busied his mouth against their necks to stop himself from moaning the wrong name. There’s a scar etched into Ilya’s heart, and if he doesn’t re-carve it every now and again, he stops feeling tethered to the person that he is.

‘I could marry Svetlana,’ he announces into the silence, and it stings the same way.

They’re tucked up at either end of the couch after another wonderful day, enjoying a comfortable, companionable silence. Ilya feels at peace. His blanket is soft. He’s wearing Shane’s shirt. Their feet are touching, occasionally rubbing against each other, a gentle reminder that says *I’m still here, this is still real*.

It’s so nice that it’s painful. So Ilya hooks his thumbnail under the comfort of the evening and picks, the way you’re not supposed to pick at a scab.

‘She’s American. Would be easy citizenship,’ he continues, and pretends not to notice the way Shane goes tense on the other side of the couch. His voice is nonchalant, as if he’s suggesting that they could have eggs for breakfast tomorrow. He drags his finger across his phone screen, scrolling mindlessly up and down the browser tab he’s had open for the last fifteen minutes. *How to become a US citizen*.

He taps at the screen. He wonders if it’ll look like he’s texting her right now, popping the question via text while Shane’s toes are still resting against his own.

‘She would do it,’ he says, to really drive the point home. ‘Her father is goalie. Sergei Vetrov.’

‘Yeah, you’ve told me.’ Shane’s voice is flat.

‘She would help me.’

‘But is she...I don’t know, someone you want to marry?’ says Shane, as if it matters.

‘We are friends, it would be fine.’ It’s not an answer to the question that Shane asked. ‘And it would be for the passport.’

‘Okay, but...’ Shane hesitates.

‘But what?’

‘But you like women, right?’ Shane says it the way he always does, with a sad shadow of envy that makes Ilya’s chest hurt. ‘You could find someone you’d want to marry for real and still get the passport.’

When Ilya tries to picture getting married for real, all he can see is sunlight on Shane’s cheeks. He shuts off his phone and drops it on his stomach.

‘Maybe, but...’ He trails off and sighs.

‘But what?’

‘I have this problem.’ *What a fucking understatement.*

‘What’s the problem?’

‘I like women, yes?’ *But not the way I like you. Never the way I like you. I’ve never liked anyone the way I like you.*

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘And everywhere I go, I’m surrounded by beautiful women.’ *Except here, in my new favourite place in the whole world.* ‘And they love me.’

Shane bristles. His gaze flicks away in annoyance. ‘Sounds rough.’

‘Yes, it is. Listen. These women...they’re so sexy and fun. But I am always thinking about this slow fucking hockey player with beautiful freckles.’

Shane smiles as the penny drops, his shoulders relaxing. He visibly melts, the same way he does after Ilya has teased him for ages, pushing him right to his breaking point then finally letting him come.

‘And a weak backhand,’ Ilya throws in for good measure.

‘A weak backhand?’

‘Yes. Very weak.’ *I’m very weak. I’m weak for you. I’d do anything for you.* ‘And he’s so boring and he drives this terrible car.’ *And he makes me so happy that I keep forgetting that none of this can last.*

‘It’s a normal car.’

‘I am always wishing that these women were him.’ *I wish everyone was him. I wish we were the only two people in the whole world.* ‘It’s a terrible problem, huh?’ *It hurts like a fucking stab wound.*

‘Do you want that problem to go away?’ Shane asks carefully. It’s a verbal offer of a hand.

Ilya takes it, letting himself be pulled back over the cliff edge. He shakes his head slowly. ‘I don’t ever want that problem to ever go away.’ *I don’t want you to go away. I don’t want this to ever go away.*

‘Don’t marry Svetlana,’ says Shane. Ilya holds his breath for a ‘*marry me instead*’ that is never going to come next.

Shane’s eyes are wet, shimmering in the lamplight. ‘Just don’t,’ he repeats. ‘I know it wouldn’t be for love or whatever. Just don’t.’

I won’t. I don’t want to. I don’t want to marry anyone but you.

‘We can figure something else out, okay?’ Shane offers.

No, we can’t. But I know you’ll try.

Ilya presses his lips together and wills himself not to cry. ‘Okay.’

He presses his foot against Shane’s, and Shane nods as if they’ve just sealed a valuable business deal, and then it’s quiet again.

—

‘I have another idea.’

Shane’s voice sounds far away. Tendrils of sleep cling to Ilya’s limbs as he wakes, reluctant to let him return to the surface.

‘What idea? What is happening?’ Ilya’s eyes sting at the sudden onslaught of light coming from the bedside lamp. It can’t be morning. The sky outside is inky black.

‘What if you played in Ottawa?’

Ilya shakes his head. ‘Ottawa is same division as Boston. We’re still rivals.’

(Later, with the benefit of hindsight and having been awake for more than five seconds, he’ll realise how obvious it was that Shane already knew that, and he’ll admire him for patiently continuing with the plan instead of rolling his eyes at Ilya’s Captain Obvious impression.)

‘Okay, but listen. First off, super close by. Second, Ottawa needs a star centre, and they’re nowhere near their cap, so they could definitely afford you.’ Shane’s hand is warm against Ilya’s shoulder. ‘And maybe we could start to change the narrative a bit.’

He fires the words off with quick precision. They land against Ilya's sluggish brain like spaghetti sticking to a wall.

'What? Hollander, I just woke up. What is "narrative?"'

'Boston and Montreal,' Shane continues, unfazed. 'That's intense. Everyone knows that. But Montreal and Ottawa?'

Ilya understands what he means. There's no rivalry there, no more than the standard one that exists between any two teams in the league.

'And look, lots of guys have friends on other teams.' Shane's voice shakes slightly. There's a pang of fondness in Ilya's chest. He wonders how long Shane spent rehearsing these points while Ilya was asleep, like a kid who has made a presentation on why his parents should let him get a puppy. 'We're not rookies anymore. There are younger guys coming in, frothing at the mouth. Let them hate each other.' *Let us love each other.*

Shane's hand spreads across Ilya's chest, fingertips brushing against the cross on his necklace. 'We don't need to keep this up until we retire, do we? We're not— we're not fucking wrestlers.'

And God, the word '*this*' is doing a lot of heavy lifting. It refers to the rivalry, yes, but also so much more. *We don't need to keep this up – the hiding, the loneliness, the way we fucking ache for each other – until we retire, do we?*

Ilya doesn't know the answer to that question.

Or worse, he does, but it's not an answer that he likes.

He's not even convinced he's got the right end of the stick. English doesn't come easy when he's this tired. The last thing he wants is a misunderstanding borne from Shane's midnight ambush of a poor, unsuspecting bilingual man.

'Hollander. Hollander, okay, it's very late, and this is so many words. What are you getting at?'

'Well. You'd play for Ottawa. I'd play for Montreal. Okay? We're— we're only two hours apart. And we start a charity. Something that, you know, we both care about.'

Something we both care about. Ilya's brain can only supply hockey, fucking, and Shane having constant and unlimited access to cold cans of ginger ale.

Maybe Shane should be in charge of the charity.

'And we come up with a story, like, I approached you—'

'Or I approached you.' Ilya interjects. He wants to be the main character in the story too. Maybe they can fight it out for protagonist rights later. Arm wrestle for it, or play rock paper scissors, or see who can make the other come first.

‘Fine, sure. And we tell the press and everyone that, by working on this cause that we both love, that we developed a mutual respect for one another, and, uh...’

Shane trails off, so Ilya steps in to help.

‘And we like sucking each other’s dicks. Any questions?’

Shane tips his head back against the headboard. ‘Fuck *off*. This is a good idea, Rozanov.’

Maybe it’s wishful thinking. Or maybe there’s genuinely an undercurrent of authority running below the words. *You know this would work. Don’t push me away. Don’t sabotage this. Just... just let me in.*

‘Okay,’ Ilya acquiesces. ‘Okay. It’s not bad. So. We start the charity.’

‘Yeah. And it wouldn’t be bullshit, either. We can really start a charity. Something cool that means a lot to both of us. And, you know, we still play hard against each other on the ice.’

Haha. Hard. Ilya giggles.

‘*Shut up,*’ Shane says, but he’s smiling. ‘And then, if people saw us out in public or whatever, it wouldn’t be so fucking crazy. And we’re only two hours apart, all year round. Apply for citizenship. Here in Canada.’

Ilya hears the plea underneath. *You don’t have to marry Svetlana. Please don’t marry Svetlana.*

‘And maybe, one day, when we both retire...we could be together. For real.’

Shane gently caresses Ilya’s jaw. Ilya looks up at him, and loves him, and loves him, and loves him.

‘You really think that far ahead, Hollander?’

‘I do. About this.’

‘And is that what you want? To be together?’ The word weighs heavily on Ilya’s tongue, cloying and sour all at once.

‘So much. So much it scares me.’

Ilya has to turn away. His eyes sting with tears. Looking at Shane feels like looking at the sun, bright and beautiful and far too much.

Shane reaches for him, his hands so gentle on Ilya’s face. ‘Hey.’ *Come back to me.* Ilya faces him again, and Shane pulls him into a soft, tender kiss, one that’s full of longing and reassurance and *hope*.

Ilya needs him. Needs to touch him, taste him, subsume Shane’s body within his own until they merge together completely. He kisses back with urgency, pushing Shane against the

pillow and climbing on top of him so he can mouth at Shane's neck. Shane's pulse flutters against Ilya's lips.

Ilya can't keep the words in. 'Ya tebya lyublyu.' *I love you.* 'Ya tebya lyublyu.' *I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you.*

He needs to say it, say it *properly*, to release it into the space between them and let Shane breathe it in and feel its weight.

Ilya presses his forehead against Shane's, his reflection almost visible in the darkness of Shane's eyes.

'I love you,' he says, in English this time. His throat aches from holding back his tears.

'Holy shit.'

Oh. Oh, no. Oh, fuck. Damage control. 'I mean—'

'I love you too.' Shane says it with a confidence that borders on pride, and for a long moment, they simply hold each other's gaze. The words echo around the room. *I love you. I love you. I love you.*

Ilya collapses onto Shane's chest, as if he's been kept upright for years by the strain of unsaid words that have only just been allowed to escape his lips.

'Fuck, Hollander.'

'Oh my God, I love you so much.'

The relief is indescribable. Ilya lies in Shane's arms, his ear pressed against the soothing rhythm of Shane's heartbeat, and feels completely weightless. There are gentle fingers in his hair, soft lips against his forehead, warmth flowing through every single one of his veins.

'Does it...does it fucking kill you too?' Shane asks.

Fresh tears spill from Ilya's eyes, skimming his cheeks and dripping onto the bare skin of Shane's chest.

It did. He's died a thousand little deaths. It killed him when Shane left after that night in Vegas and he realised they hadn't even kissed, and when he couldn't convince him to stay after they said each other's names, and every time he scrolled past a picture of Rose Landry in a Hollander jersey. It killed him to have to skate back to his own bench when Shane was injured. To attempt to play hockey as if he didn't even give a shit, when all he could think about was the love of his life in the back of an ambulance, scared and in pain with nobody to hold his hand and tell him that he's going to be okay.

But now, here, Ilya can breathe for the first time in a decade.

'Not anymore,' he says, truthfully.

When their lips meet, it's long and languid, a far cry from the hurried clashes of teeth they've so often had to settle for. Maybe it's the sleepiness, or the dull, pleasant buzz of relief that's making Ilya feel slightly drunk, but neither of them are particularly desperate to escalate anything. They linger in the warmth, content to let the kisses deepen and drift at their own unhurried pace in between repeated *'I love you'*s and the gentle roam of hands across torsos.

The lamp is still on when Ilya wakes up. They must have fallen asleep like that, stomach to stomach on Shane's side of the bed. His mouth is dry, his face tacky with dried tear tracks. He's left a small puddle of drool on Shane's chest. He tries to wipe it discreetly with the edge of the blanket.

'I love you,' Shane whispers, his eyes still closed. His voice has a low, early-morning scrape to it that reverberates within Ilya's ribcage.

'I love you too.' Ilya reaches to stroke Shane's cheek with his thumb, dislodging some residual sleep from the corner of his eye.

'Good morning, by the way.'

'Good morning. Breakfast?'

'Sounds good.'

'In bed?' chances Ilya.

If Shane is put off by the prospect of crumbs in the bed, he doesn't let it show. 'Even better.'

Ilya doesn't bother to get dressed. He's still naked as he pads through to the kitchen and starts the coffee machine. As it whirs to life, he retrieves a tray from beside the fridge and gets to work plating up a couple of pastries and decanting blueberries into a bowl.

They eat in the centre of the bed, so close together that their hips are touching, propped comfortably against the vast array of pillows that Shane keeps on his bed.

'See? This is why it's nice to have lots of pillows,' he says when Ilya slides into bed next to him.

'For the one day every ten years you let yourself eat breakfast in bed?'

'No. For the one day in my life that I let myself eat breakfast in bed. I'm only doing this because I love you.'

When Ilya kisses him, taking extra care to avoid knocking over the blueberries, Shane's lips taste of coffee and a hint of icing sugar.

Ilya nibbles his pastry and gazes out of the window. The lake sparkles in the morning sun, the sky clear apart from a couple of pale fluffy clouds.

‘Thank you for inviting me. Is nice here.’

‘Yeah. It’s my favourite place,’ Shane replies. ‘Especially with my favourite person.’ His hand finds Ilya’s and squeezes gently.

‘I wish I could stay.’

‘You can. We’ve got a whole week left—‘

‘No, I mean after that.’

‘Like, you want to come back next year?’

‘Yes.’ Ilya pauses. ‘No. I want to be here next year. But because we stayed the whole time. I want to live here with you. Just us. We can swim, eat, fuck. I have so much fun with you.’

‘What about hockey and everything?’

Ilya frowns. He shrugs his shoulders. ‘I don’t know. I know we can’t. Is just nice to think about.’

They sit like that for a couple of minutes, holding hands and sipping coffee.

‘You can stay as long as you like,’ Shane says. ‘You don’t have to leave next week. Stay until whenever you need to be back in Boston, if you want.’

Ilya should say no. The silent retreat bullshit isn’t going to placate Shane’s parents for much longer. There’s a plant in his Boston apartment that will need watering soon.

‘Shane—’

‘I’m sorry, I’m coming on too strong. You don’t have to. You’ll have stuff to get back for—‘

‘Shane. Everything I have is here.’ Ilya swallows, his throat suddenly constricted. ‘If you still like me next week, maybe I will cancel my flight.’

Shane elbows him in the ribs, then rests his head on Ilya’s shoulder.

‘Do you ever wonder what it would be like if we’d met differently?’

‘What, like if I didn’t ask to do commercial with you? Or if you didn’t get hard in the shower?’

‘Fuck off. I mean, if we weren’t hockey players. If we were...I don’t know, normal people with normal jobs. Pilots, or...landscapers, or marine biologists—‘

‘Hollander, those are not normal jobs.’

‘Shut up. I’m trying to say, do you ever wonder what it would be like if we could just be together?’

‘No,’ Ilya says, truthfully. He presses a kiss to the top of Shane’s head. ‘If you were a pilot, or a landscaper, or a marine biologist, you would not be you.’

Shane doesn’t respond. His hand moves up to his face, and Ilya knows he is wiping away a tear.

‘I would like to just be together, but with you,’ Ilya says. ‘With Shane Hollander, the hockey player. I want to show you off, take you to events, tell everyone how special you are. Make everybody jealous of me. Leave hickeys on your neck to show that you are mine.’

‘Mm. I’d like that.’ Shane says, and Ilya mentally writes that down for later.

Shane’s voice is quieter when he goes on to say, ‘I want to be able to keep pictures of us on my phone. I want my mom to buy you gifts for your birthday. I want to hold your hand in public. I want to kiss you on the ice when Montreal wins the Cup.’

‘Hollander, you know we cannot do that.’ Ilya says seriously. ‘But you can kiss *me* on the ice when *Boston* wins the Cup.’

‘Shut *up*. I want to comment on your Instagram posts. Mainly to tell you off because you’re always posing with a fucking cigarette.’

‘I want to complain about you in dressing room like how my team complain about their wives.’

‘I want to take you to Hayden’s house and tell his kids they’re allowed to do your makeup.’

‘I want to leave pastry crumbs in your bed every single day. On all fifty of your pillows.’

‘I want to drop you off at practice in my boring sensible car.’

Ilya pretends to clutch his chest in mock outrage. ‘Would be better for me if you ran me over with it.’

They collapse into laughter and kisses and play fighting, the breakfast tray thankfully safely out of reach. Then they meet each other’s eyes, and everything turns a little sad.

‘One day. Maybe,’ offers Shane.

‘Yeah.’ *No. But it’s nice to pretend.*

‘And until then, we still have loads of time here. Just us. So...’

‘So.’

‘What do you want to do?’

Ilya wets his lower lip with his tongue. In a single quick movement, he has Shane pinned to the bed with Ilya’s thumbs tucked into the waistband of his boxers.

‘I can think of something.’ Ilya dips his head and presses the lightest of kisses to the fabric covering Shane’s half-hard cock, tightening his grip on Shane’s hips when he tries to rut upwards in search of more.

‘Fuck. Please, Ilya.’

Ilya pushes Shane’s boxers down past his hips, just far enough to give him access to Shane’s inner thighs. Shane can sort out the final stages of getting his underwear off his body and onto the bedroom floor. Ilya is too busy nipping at the soft skin with his teeth, laving over the bites with his tongue, watching Shane’s cock twitch as Ilya’s breath ghosts across his balls.

Forget living at the cottage, Ilya wants to live here specifically, down between Shane’s legs. He wants to map the entire surface of Shane’s body, mark out his territory, savour every inch of what he can’t believe he’s lucky enough to have. He peppers kisses up Shane’s legs, across the base of his stomach, down the shaft of his cock, and Shane writhes so beautifully against the bed, fully submitting to the strong hands holding him down. There’s no fighting, no begging, just pitchy breathing and moans of Ilya’s name as Ilya wraps his lips around the head of Shane’s cock. He bobs his head a couple of times to take him all the way to the back of his throat, then pulls off entirely to suck one of his balls into his mouth.

Shane tastes of salt and sweat and skin, his dick leaking wetness onto Ilya’s tongue. Ilya loves how wet he gets. He loves everything about Shane’s body, loves how familiar it is now after all these years, loves how the novelty of sex with him never wears off.

In all senses, Shane feels like home.

‘Please fuck me. I want to feel you.’

Ilya urges Shane onto his stomach and Shane goes willingly, pillowing his head on folded arms. His ass is raised, his back deliciously arched, and Ilya isn’t convinced Shane even knows he’s doing it – it’s pure reflex, borne out of desperation for Ilya’s cock, and that thought plus the sight of it all makes heat surge in Ilya’s stomach.

He’s possessed with a sudden urge to sink his teeth into the meat of Shane’s ass and take a bite. He wants to hear the noise that Shane would make – as much as Shane pretends otherwise, he likes it when Ilya is rough with him, when he makes it hurt a little. Ilya wants to see the bruise tomorrow, see the indent of his teeth preserved in shades of blue and green, press the heel of his palm against it when he playfully gropes Shane’s ass as he walks past him in the kitchen.

He doesn’t do that. He’ll do it another day. And not as a surprise. He settles instead for parting Shane’s ass cheeks and spitting directly on his hole, spreading the moisture around the rim with the pad of his thumb. Shane’s body practically seizes under Ilya’s touch.

‘Fuck, Ilya.’ His voice is muffled, as if his face is buried in one of his many pillows. He’s beautiful like this, all lean muscle and freckled skin, bathed in golden light from the morning sun.

Ilya can't help himself. He lowers his head and replaces his thumb with his tongue. Shane's thighs start shaking in response, his moans turning filthy. He grinds back against Ilya's mouth, choking out a steady stream of words like *God* and *fuck* and *please*. When Ilya finally lets himself take hold of his own cock, a wave of dizziness washes over him, as if he's suddenly five shots deep and struggling to walk in a straight line.

'Fuck.' He lifts his head and drags the back of his hand across his mouth, breaking the trail of spit lingering between them. 'I am drunk on you, Shane Hollander.'

'If you're not inside me in the next ten seconds I'm gonna die,' Shane whines, and he sounds so wrecked that Ilya believes him.

'Turn over. Let me see you. Let me show you how much I love you.'

Shane flips onto his back and spreads his thighs, his cock heavy and flushed against his stomach. Ilya pinches one of Shane's nipples as he slicks his own cock with lube, and Shane slaps his hand away.

'Can you concentrate on fucking me, please?'

You forgot the condom, idiot, says Ilya's brain. You can't fuck him like this. He has a whole thing about getting the bed dirty. He won't like the cleanup.

But neither of you are fucking other people, says Ilya's dick. Come inside him. Fill him up. He can shower after, whatever. Claim him as yours.

Ilya's dick makes an incredibly compelling argument.

He leans down to kiss Shane's neck, his cock sliding tantalisingly along the cleft of Shane's ass.

'Is okay with no condom?'

'Yes, anything, just *please*—'

Ilya lines himself up and pushes forward, sinking fully inside Shane in a single smooth movement. Shane's body gives way to him as if they were made for each other, moulded in each other's image, deliberately designed to slot together like two matching puzzle pieces.

'Fuck, Shane—'

'Ilya—'

'I love you. God, I love you.'

'I love you too, I love you so much—'

Ilya slowly begins to rock his hips, and Shane's head tips back against the pillow, exposing the long column of his neck. Shane is making an admirable effort to keep his eyes on Ilya's face, but they're vacant and heavy-lidded, his brain shrouded in a fog of pleasure. Ilya doubts

he looks any more composed himself – his hair is damp with sweat, his jaw slack, his breath coming in ragged gasps – but it doesn't matter. There's no performance to put on, no role to play, nothing to prove.

It is liberating beyond measure to fuck Shane Hollander, who loves him back. To have him here, in his bed, in his cottage.

Ilya has fucked more than his fair share of people. It's never been difficult for him to take part in casual sex. People are simple. They go to clubs, they get drunk, they dance. They want to fuck a hot guy with a big dick and tell their friends they bedded that famous fuckboy who plays hockey for Boston. It's quick and dirty, a physical release, a temporary comfort.

It's not like that with Shane. Ilya presses his lips against the spot just beneath Shane's ear and fucks him like it's an act of worship, each thrust a new declaration of love. When he's with Shane, he can relax, let their bodies work in tandem, do what feels right. They can be silly. Sex *is* silly, and it's fun, and it's a privilege to be so comfortable enough with one another that it doesn't matter when they bump noses and giggle between kisses, or Ilya needs a second to recover from a leg cramp, or Shane's so pent up for him that he comes before Ilya has even had a chance to get his shirt off.

Shane wraps his arms around Ilya's neck, fingernails digging into the flesh of his shoulders, holding him close. Ilya buries his face in Shane's neck, sucking at the skin below the hinge of his jaw. God, he wants to leave a mark. He wants to leave marks everywhere, sign his name all over Shane's body, thread himself into every fibre of Shane's being.

'Harder. Make it bruise. Make me yours,' breathes Shane.

Ilya nips at the curve of Shane's earlobe. 'Was going to anyway. My idea. I want the credit.'

'I said it first.'

'I said it during breakfast. Do you want your hickey or not?'

In an instant, Shane flips them, and Ilya finds himself on his back with Shane straddling his hips, his cock still buried to the hilt. It startles him for a second, then sends flames licking up his spine. Shane so rarely uses his strength during sex that it's easy to forget that he's just as athletic as Ilya is. It's a *very* fun surprise when Shane reminds him.

Shane takes both of Ilya's hands, interlacing their fingers and pressing them into the mattress above Ilya's head. He's gorgeous when he's on top, his chest flushed, his own neglected dick smacking against his stomach. The movement of his hips feels perfect, as if he was born for the sole purpose of riding Ilya's cock.

'Maybe I won't let you leave a mark now,' Shane threatens. 'Maybe you've missed your chance.'

'Maybe I'll do it anyway. Maybe you like it when I just take what I want.'

Shane moans, and the game is over. 'Yeah. Yeah, I do, just take me—'

Ilya breaks free of Shane's grasp and pulls him down by the back of his neck, one hand wrapping around Shane's waist while the other cradles the back of his head. He bends his knees and braces his feet flat against the bed, his mouth pressed against Shane's neck. Like this, he's got all the leverage he needs to hold Shane in place as he fucks up into him at a brutal pace. He threads strands of Shane's hair between his fingers and squeezes, relishing every cry that falls from Shane's lips. He can feel Shane's heart hammering against his own, blood rushing in his ears.

Shane tenses in his arms, then comes with a cry, his release spilling onto Ilya's chest and stomach in hot bursts. Ilya follows seconds later, hips stuttering against Shane's ass, lights bursting behind his eyelids.

They lie there unmoving, breathless and spent. Ilya strokes Shane's hair, unsticking it from his sweaty forehead, placing gentle kisses from his temple to his cheek.

'I love you,' he says again. He'll probably say it twenty more times today. He hopes Shane never gets sick of hearing it.

'I love you too,' Shane says. 'I never want to do this with anyone else.'

The suggestion of commitment that lies beneath the words should be scary, but it's the opposite. It's reassuring, a warm blanket around Ilya's shoulders, a promise that all of this is real and mutual and permanent.

Ilya strokes his fingertips down Shane's spine. 'Do you want to shower together?'

'Yes. But we have to actually shower, not just blow each other.'

'You're no fun.'

Shane presses a final kiss to Ilya's lips before he climbs off him, testing his balance on shaky legs like a sailor on his first day back on dry land. A dark red mark is blossoming across his throat, and Ilya admires it with a self-satisfied smile.

'Hey, Ilya?'

'Mm?'

'Last one in the shower is the one giving the blowjob.' Shane's in the en-suite before he even finishes the sentence, his voice echoing off the marble tiles.

Ilya definitely doesn't blush.

He swings his legs over the side of the bed and follows Shane into the bathroom.

—

There's a long list of things that Ilya enjoys about the cottage. The fact that they've gotten into the habit of having slow, lazy sex most mornings is near the top. It's hard to avoid it given that they keep waking up hard with their bodies tangled together in a pile of warm

limbs. They like to cuddle in the night, it turns out. Even if they're not touching when they fall asleep, they always make their way into each other's arms by the morning.

'I still can't believe you're here, sometimes,' Shane whispers as Ilya presses soft kisses to the back of his shoulder. He grinds back against Ilya's hips with no particular urgency. 'Actually, sometimes I still can't believe I let you into my hotel room after we filmed that ad.'

'Rude. It is early in the morning to be so mean to me, Hollander.'

'No, I mean...it was such a bad idea. I'm glad I did it, but I can't believe I didn't chicken out.'

'Me too. Thought you were going to pretend room was empty.'

'Do you want to know something stupid?'

'Of course.'

'You'll laugh at me.'

'Probably, yes. Tell me.'

'I put a fucking suit on.'

'What?'

'While I was waiting for you. I wanted to look...nice, I guess.'

'So you put a suit on?'

'And a tie.'

'Oh my fucking God, Hollander.' Ilya smiles so widely his cheeks hurt. Shane was right, it *is* stupid, and Ilya *is* laughing at him. It's so typical, so classically *Shane*, and Ilya is so fond of him that his chest feels tight.

'I changed back out of it. Obviously.'

'I can't believe you. A suit and tie? To meet up to fuck?'

'I hadn't done anything like that before!'

'All of this started because you got hard watching me in the shower!'

'Yeah, but I couldn't exactly open the door butt ass naked!'

'Mm, I wouldn't have minded.' Ilya lets his hands drift lazily across Shane's chest. 'Did I ever tell you I ran into your mom on my way to your room that night? In elevator to fourteenth floor.'

'*What?*'

‘Don’t worry. I did not tell her why I was going up.’

‘She might have actually killed you. She’s Montreal’s biggest fan.’

Ilya wiggles his eyebrows. ‘Imagine if she could see me now.’

‘Gross. Let’s stop talking about my mom while your dick is pressed up against my ass, please.’

‘Okay.’ Ilya nuzzles against Shane’s neck, kissing the freckles that scatter across his shoulders. His palms brush over Shane’s nipples, and Shane lets out a breathy sigh.

Shane looks over his shoulder, his pupils dark and wide, and runs a gentle hand through Ilya’s hair.

‘How did we let this happen?’ he murmurs.

It’s a question Ilya asks himself on a regular basis. The Ilya that had enough cocky overconfidence to start stroking his dick in the shower that day had no way of knowing that he would grow into an Ilya that loves Shane Hollander more than anything in the world.

‘We were both very stupid and irresponsible.’ Ilya rolls his hips against Shane’s ass. Shane’s body is relaxed, all loose and pliant, and Ilya’s cock is flushed and wet at the tip. The head of it catches on Shane’s rim without either of them really intending it, and they both let out a soft sigh.

‘This is real though, right?’

So real. The only real thing that I have. You are my anchor, my safety.

Ilya doesn’t say that. He nods and says ‘mm’ instead, never breaking eye contact as he grasps Shane’s hip and pulls him further onto his cock.

‘Please fuck me.’

Ilya never gets tired of hearing it. He presses his mouth to Shane’s chest and thrusts into him, enraptured by the way that Shane’s pretty pink lips part and give way to quiet gasps. When Shane grips a handful of Ilya’s curls and strokes the corner of Ilya’s mouth with his thumb, Ilya wraps his lips around it with a greedy moan, hollowing his cheeks and sucking like he would Shane’s cock. His mouth feels empty when Shane moves his hand away, and Ilya settles for lapping at his nipple instead, flicking at it with the tip of his tongue until it hardens to a point.

Neither of them lasts long. The angle lets every one of Ilya’s thrusts hit just right against Shane’s prostate, and the sight of him coming undone on Ilya’s cock is enough to tip Ilya over the edge himself.

He stares up at the ceiling while Shane goes to the bathroom. He feels slightly odd. Not bad, exactly, but...raw. Oversensitive, as if the top layer of his skin has been scraped off. And

perhaps it has, in a sense. Perhaps he's been flayed alive by soft sex and sweet words and sunbeams refracting through lake water.

The mattress dips slightly as Shane slides back into bed beside him.

'What was your mother's name?' he asks, as if Ilya didn't come inside him two minutes ago.

'Irina.' He runs his finger over the edge of his cross – *her* cross – without even realising he's doing it. 'Why?'

'I was thinking we could start a hockey school, like a summer camp for kids, and give the money away to mental health organisations. Like suicide prevention.'

Ilya's eyes sting. His vision blurs. He doesn't trust himself to speak.

'It was just an idea.'

Ilya loves Shane's ideas.

He means it, when he tells Shane his mother would've loved him. They'd have so much in common, both so funny and beautiful and soft despite having so many reasons not to be. It's bittersweet to think about them meeting each other, having all the love in his heart concentrated in one room. He wishes Shane could laugh at her jokes, taste her cooking, share a hug with her. The language barrier wouldn't matter. Kind people can recognise other kind people.

He imagines his mother looking down at him now. Maybe she's been watching over him while he's been here, smiling approvingly every time Shane strokes Ilya's hair or makes him laugh or kisses his forehead. (He hopes she politely averted her eyes during all the other stuff.) Maybe she saw him doing handstands in the water like when he was a little boy. Maybe she wished she could tuck him in under a towel when he fell asleep beside the lake with his sunglasses on, relaxing properly for the first time in God knows how long. Maybe she laughed too every time the stupid fucking wolf bird made Ilya jump out of his skin.

He holds Shane close, leaning into the touch when Shane lays his hand on Ilya's cheek, and lets his mind wander. In his head, his mother waves at them both before she turns to approach a bright light behind her. She floats weightlessly, her shoulders no longer weighed down by stress, her tired eyes welling with happy tears. His cross weighs warmly against his chest.

—

Ilya isn't expecting to meet David Hollander by accidentally locking eyes with him while he's got the man's son pressed up against the window, but that's how it happens.

His stomach drops. His burgeoning erection dies a swift and thorough death. It feels like everything stops for a moment, then restarts all at once, the way that the ground rushes up to slam against his body when he falls on the ice.

Then David is gone, and Shane is panicking, and the main thing that Ilya feels is an odd sense of pride.

He lets Shane pace back and forth and swear repeatedly about how much of a fucking nightmare this is. He stands in the centre of the room with his hands open, ready for Shane to take them when he's able to. And he glows at the sight, because this is *growth*.

The Shane who forced himself to date Rose Landry and couldn't even admit his sexuality to himself would've been drowning himself in the lake right now. Present-day Shane allows himself to freak out for a couple of minutes maximum, then melts into Ilya's touch and starts to make a plan.

'Fuck, I'm scared,' he murmurs against Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya's arms tighten around him. 'Yes, it's scary. But you're brave.' Shane *is* brave. Braver than he gives himself credit for. And he doesn't have to do anything alone, if he doesn't want to.

Ilya feels lighter when Shane accepts his offer of company. The prospect of sitting by himself and waiting for Shane to return from the battlefield makes him feel sick.

No, they're going to do this together. They're a team, just the two of them.

Ilya showers quickly, just enough to get the lake water out of his hair. He's not entirely sure what Shane would want him to wear. Maybe Shane has gone for the suit and tie look, as if he's getting ready for a first hookup.

Ilya did not bring a suit and tie, unless you count a swimsuit and a couple of things to tie Shane up with.

His choice of clean t-shirts is limited to a few different Raiders shirts, ones Shane has offered to let him borrow, and a ragged old one that Marleau bought him as a joke once. It says 'women want me, fish fear me'. His black Boston t-shirt definitely seems like the least worst option.

Shane doesn't appear to agree.

'That is not gonna help.'

'Oh, they don't know I play for Boston?'

With a weary sigh, Shane acquiesces, and they both get into the car.

Shane's anxiety is apparent by the way that he drives a whole three miles per hour over the speed limit on the way to his parents' house. He taps at the gearstick with twitching fingers until Ilya covers his hand with his own, squeezing gently. Ilya doesn't speak. His own nerves want to make a plan, set a story, grasp for some confirmation that Shane isn't going to just deny everything and pretend that Ilya— what, exactly? Appeared out of thin air? Blew in on the wind?

No, there's no plausible explanation other than the facts. And Shane is not a good liar. There is nothing along those lines for Ilya to worry about.

Ilya runs his fingers over his cross and wills himself to calm down. *He didn't wake you up in the middle of the night to present his ten-year plan just to cast you aside a few days later at the first sign of difficulty, Ilya.*

His own doubts are secondary, really. The real source of the sick feeling in his stomach is that he's worried for Shane. If it was anything else, he could fix it – solve the problem, or talk him down, or fuck the anxiety straight out of him. But not this time. Shane needs to take the lead in deciding how this goes.

And Ilya needs to remember that Shane's father is not Grigori Rozanov.

He wills himself to trust that Shane's parents will be kind.

—

Yuna and David Hollander's house, too, is built with love. Their adoration of Shane is baked into the very walls, which are adorned with framed Hollander jerseys and family photos. Various trophies and awards sit on the shelves and beside the television. On one wall, a picture of a pink-cheeked eight-year-old with no front teeth holding a crumpled MVP certificate is juxtaposed next to a professional shot of Shane lifting the Stanley Cup after his first win with Montreal.

For what it's worth, David is genuinely apologetic. He and Shane both flick their tongue against their lower lip when they're struggling for words, Ilya notices. He hopes he doesn't share any of the ticks his own father used to have.

He lets Shane do the talking, clasping his hands politely in front of him to resist the urge to reach out and rest his hand on the small of Shane's back. Shane's voice shakes slightly when he tells his parents that he's gay, and Ilya aches to pull him into his arms and whisper, 'See? I told you that you're brave.'

Shane introduces him as 'Ilya Rozanov', which is necessary because he is not at all famous, and even if he was, Shane's parents do not at all keep up with anything going on in major league hockey. They probably know hundreds of Ilyas. Ilya makes a mental note to tease him about it later if they come out of this alive.

Then Shane tells his parents that he loves Ilya, and it takes all of Ilya's efforts not to beam in delight.

—

He's grateful for the cup of tea, because it gives him something to do with his hands while he sits adjacent to the conversation, feeling more like an eavesdropper than a participant.

'Ilya,' he corrects, the first time he's referred to as 'Rozanov'. It's depersonalising somehow, this insistence on maintaining the rivalry even now they're sitting here at Shane's parents' dinner table. He isn't Rozanov here. He's not the captain of the team that the Hollanders have hated for over a decade. He's Ilya, and he loves their son.

Of course, it'll take them a while to adjust to that. Ilya tries not to bristle at the snide implications when David asks if there were no nice men in Montreal. There are plenty of nice men in Montreal. Ilya's favourite nice man lives there for most of the year.

The irritation crawling underneath his skin after that does not last long. David redeems himself when the round of drinks that Yuna fetches for the table turns out to be chilled vodka that tastes like award nights and a Las Vegas hotel penthouse.

'I try to buy the Russian stuff,' he explains, and Ilya hopes his awkward little thumbs up comes off as genuine and not sarcastic.

Then Yuna asks Shane if he ever let Ilya win, and instead of pointing out that that has never been necessary because he is more than capable of winning by virtue of being incredibly fucking good at hockey, he holds his tongue and gives Shane a knowing glance. *Look how uncharacteristically well-behaved I'm being, despite the fact that I wore my Boston shirt and called us lovers and dropped you in it by clarifying that we've been seeing each other since even before our rookie season. I'm great at this, if you're willing to be flexible with your definition of how you're supposed to act when your super secret relationship gets found out because somebody's dad refuses to upgrade to anything more recent than the iPhone 4.*

'I'm surprised, Ilya. You have such a reputation as a ladies' man,' David says. It's an echo of his earlier statement about nice men in Montreal, and Ilya concludes that this man is not malicious, he's simply a frequent enjoyer of putting his foot in his mouth.

Why are you with Ilya, when you could be with a nice man in Montreal? Why are you with Shane, when you could be with a woman?

Because we want to be with each other, David. That's why everybody is here, is it not?

Thankfully, there's no weird backlash to the news that he's bi, and no hesitation from Shane when he agrees that he's only been in love with one person. If the moment wasn't so charged, Ilya would reach for Shane's hand and thread their fingers together. Shane nudges Ilya's foot with his own under the table, and it's the next best thing.

—

He doesn't follow when Shane goes out to talk to his mom. He stays at the table with David, watching him tap his fingers against his glass the same way Shane tapped the gearstick all the way here.

'Thank you for the vodka. Most vodka in America and Canada is very bad,' he says, to break the silence that threatens to suffocate them both.

'I'm not great at telling the difference,' David admits. 'Do you get back to Russia often?'

Ilya takes another sip in lieu of the grimace his face is about to insist on. 'Ah, no. Not often.'

'Oh. You must miss it.'

‘Sometimes. Not really.’ He pauses. ‘Russia is not so good, for me. For people like me and Shane.’

‘Oh.’ Ilya can see the moment of realisation on David’s face. ‘Oh. Of course. I’m sorry. Are your parents...supportive?’

‘No, they are dead.’

David’s face flushes pink. ‘Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.’

Ilya chews the inside of his cheek. This is the bit of meeting the parents that he would’ve struggled with even under better circumstances. It’s difficult to sit at a nice ordinary table with a nice ordinary family and have no nice ordinary information to offer about his own.

‘I’m glad that Shane has had...someone to talk to. For all these years.’ David says carefully. Ilya suppresses a smile. *We didn’t do much talking until relatively recently, actually.* ‘Me and Shane’s mom...we worried about him being lonely anyway. And to know he’s been dealing with this all that time...he hates keeping big secrets. It must have weighed on him.’

It’s still lonely, Ilya wants to say. It can’t ever be anything other than lonely. Being closeted as a hockey player is automatically lonely, even without the whole ‘in a relationship with your rival’ aspect.

But Shane makes Ilya less lonely. They’re two of the only people in the world who understand what the other is going through.

He hopes that he makes it easier for Shane.

‘I love him very much,’ Ilya says, more to his drink than to David.

His stomach rumbles obnoxiously loudly all of a sudden, and they both let out a quiet laugh.

David’s chair scrapes against the floor as he stands up. ‘I think now is a good time to make dinner. Do you like spaghetti?’

‘Of course. Everyone likes spaghetti.’

‘Great. Then spaghetti it is.’

—

By the time Ilya gets through his first few bites of pasta, David Hollander is his new favourite person. In truth, he’s been ready to eat since he got out of the lake a couple of hours ago, and the amount of pasta that David has cooked could comfortably feed a small town. It’s delicious.

Yuna’s dish goes mostly untouched. She’s too busy trying to strategise, reeling off stuff about sponsors and statements while she waves her wine glass back and forth. None of it properly registers in Ilya’s brain. He’s so hungry he can barely see, and his mind is entirely focused on the very important task of adding parmesan to his spaghetti.

David casts him a reassuring glance as he's putting the cheese back in the centre of the table. *She does this. Don't worry. You'll get used to it.*

It's quite fascinating, to listen to Yuna Hollander. She's very similar to Shane, in some regards. They both live for hockey. They both need to respond to things immediately. They both have eyes that light up when they talk about something they care a lot about. In fact, observing Shane's parents is like watching a documentary that explains about ninety percent of the mysteries of how Shane came to be the person that he is.

When they get on to the subject of Scott Hunter, Ilya doesn't even make a joke about him being old or terrible at hockey. He has a begrudging respect for him now. He made sure he was there to shake Hunter's hand after his speech at the awards ceremony. He kept his comments short and understated, half of him afraid that Hunter would read too much into them and realise their true meaning, and the other half afraid that he would think Ilya was being insincere and setting up some kind of homophobic jibe.

'What you did was brave. It will have helped lots of people.' *It helped me more than you will probably ever know.*

'Thanks, Rozanov,' Hunter had said, and if he'd clocked anything about Ilya, he'd had the decency to keep it to himself.

The discussion serves as something of an unfortunate and sobering reminder that the world exists outside of this room, this family, this meal. Shane pushes his pasta away and drops his head onto his forearm on the table. Ilya can hear his feet tapping against the floor.

'Shane?' Ilya rubs Shane's shoulder, placing his hand on the back of Shane's neck. He knows Shane likes it when he does that. He finds the weight comforting.

'I'm okay, I'm just freaking out. I'll be okay in a second.'

'Hey, hey. We're good here. Your family is here.' He squeezes the nape of Shane's neck reassuringly. He should've seen this coming. Shane was so ready for everything to go horribly wrong, and then it didn't. The adrenaline that flooded his veins has not been needed, and his body is beginning to crash.

'Your boyfriend is here,' Ilya adds. 'You're good here, okay?'

Shane lifts his head. 'My boyfriend?'

Shit. Did not mean to say that out loud. Should've had the label conversation before now.

Oh well. Today has been all about ripping off plasters.

'I mean. Yes. I think so. Probably.'

Shane nods slowly, and Ilya leans in to kiss him before his mouth can say something that walks it back. The kiss is chaste, a gentle press of pasta sauce flavoured lips, but it makes Ilya's heart flip in his chest.

He's kissing Shane, in front of other people, and it's okay. They're eating together like a family would. He can sit next to Shane without having to pretend he's not besotted with him.

Despite everything, it's been one of the best days that Ilya has ever had. Even though one of Shane's worst fear came to life, all it took to sort it out was a long chat and some hugs and a pot of hot food. It's such a fucking relief for somebody else to know, to play a small role in sharing the weight of the secret.

It'll be nice, getting to know Shane's parents properly. He wants to sit on their couch with his arm around Shane's shoulders. He wants to show them that he's not just an asshole who plays for Boston. He wants to pore over family photo albums while Shane grumbles and turns beet red on the other side of the room.

They arrange for David and Yuna to join them for dinner at Shane's cottage tomorrow. Shane and Ilya both offer to cook, but Yuna clearly does not have a lot of faith in them, because by the time they've walked the few steps to the car she's announced that she and David will bring the main and the salad and the drinks. It's fine. Ilya can use it as an opportunity to find out what kinds of desserts Shane likes, if such a concept is not too exciting for him. He prepares himself for the answer to be plain Greek yoghurt and nothing else.

They are under strict instructions not to turn up unannounced. Not tomorrow, not ever. There's a new group chat for the four of them, straightforwardly named 'The Hollanders and I'.

Yuna was very proud of coming up with it.

'Do you get it? It's discreet, in case anybody is looking, but it's got a hidden meaning of I for Ilya!'

'Yes, Mom. Very clever.'

'I like it,' says Ilya, and Yuna beams.

'Pay attention to your phones,' David says.

'Yes, pay attention to your phone, Shane,' Ilya smirks as they get into the car. He fully intends to honour Shane with the inaugural Ilya Rozanov Bravery Award as soon as they get back to the house – *our house*, he thinks with a smile – and he would very much prefer not to be interrupted.

Shane rolls his eyes at him, then starts the car and reverses out of the driveway.

Ilya reaches to stroke Shane's face once they've turned onto the road. He wishes there was a way for Shane to know how brave and strong he is, to feel Ilya's admiration for him within his own brain.

'That went well, I think?' Ilya says gently.

Shane nods, and squeezes his hand. He lets out a long, slow breath, and his face splits into a smile of relief.

‘Yeah. I think it did. I love you so much.’

‘I love you too.’

The afternoon sun is low in the sky. A pop song plays on the radio. Ilya feels more loved than he has in a long time.

He leans back against the headrest and closes his eyes, hoping that the drive home will last forever.

End Notes

anyway this is my longest fic ever i think. huge shout out to jacob tierney for writing most of it for me i love to Steal and Pilfer

thank you for reading i love you and i hope you loved this fic

find me on bsky @blitzcranks and tumblr @rozanovx

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update: okay wow this popped off and has quickly become my most popular fic ever?? thank you so so much to everyone who has commented/kudos'd/bookmarked/recommended this fic, i feel so loved and i'm so glad you guys like it. every single comment makes me so happy



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