

Live Through This (And You Won't Look Back)

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Live Through This (And You Won't Look Back)

by [Snaptic](#)

Summary

Shane rolls onto his side and stares at the faint outline of the window. The darkness presses in, but it doesn't feel as suffocating as usual.

Before he can talk himself out of it, he reaches for his phone. The screen lights up the room, too bright. His thumb hovers for a second, then he opens the thread.

Shane: *I think we should tell Scott.*

OR:

Scott kissing a man on live television gives Shane and Ilya the courage to do more than just spend the summer together. What starts as coming out to one person suddenly snowballs into something much bigger. It changes everything, except how much they love each other.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Title from Your Ex-Lover Is Dead by Stars

Scott Hunter was kissing a man on TV.

The New York Admirals had just won the Cup, and Scott Hunter was standing at center ice kissing someone.

A man.

Not a quick, accidental brush. Not something that can be written off as adrenaline or celebration. Hunter cups the man's face with both hands like he's done it a thousand times before, like the entire world isn't watching, like this is the most natural thing in the universe.

Shane doesn't breathe.

The roar of the crowd comes through the TV speakers, distorted and enormous. His mom makes a soft sound beside him; something like, "Oh, wow," her voice pitched somewhere between surprise and wonder, but Shane doesn't answer. He doesn't even turn his head.

It feels like his brain has been unplugged. Like someone has yanked the cord clean out of the wall and left everything dark and humming uselessly.

Scott Hunter is *kissing a man* on live television.

The Cup is forgotten. The confetti. The commentators scrambling to keep up. All of it fades into static behind the single, impossible fact burning into Shane's vision.

For a second, maybe longer, there is nothing. No fear. No calculation. Just blankness.

Then his phone starts buzzing in his hand.

The vibration jolts him so hard his fingers twitch. His mind stutters back into motion, clumsy and disoriented.

He looks down.

Lily

The name on the screen feels wrong. Too sharp. Too loud. Shane's heart slams against his ribs as if it's trying to escape.

He's on his feet before he's fully decided to move. The motion is abrupt enough that it has to look suspicious, but he can't slow down. He can't think about being subtle. His entire thought process

has narrowed to a single, looping command.

Answer the phone. Scott Hunter kissing a man. Answer the phone.

He mumbles something, he has no idea what, as he turns the corner into the hallway. The walls feel too close, the air too thin. He slams the answer button and brings the phone to his ear, his grip tight enough that it aches.

“What the...” The words tumble out without a proper hello, breathless and half-formed.

“I’m coming to the cottage.”

Ilya’s voice cuts cleanly through the noise in Shane’s head. Decisive. Certain. Like he’s already packed, already booked the flight, already on his way.

Shane stops walking. The hallway blurs for a second.

“Uh...” His brain short-circuits again, sparks flying uselessly. He leans his shoulder against the wall, suddenly very aware of his heartbeat, loud and frantic. “I...what?”

“I saw it,” Ilya says. There’s something tight in his voice, something Shane can’t quite place. Not anger. Not fear. Something closer to awe. “I am coming to the cottage.”

Shane closes his eyes.

His chest feels like it’s about to explode.

He’d known. Even through the haze of painkillers in the hospital, when Ilya had said “*Maybe*,” Shane had heard the real answer underneath it: “*No. Not now. Not like this. Not with everything at risk.*”

He’d been waiting for it. For the moment when Ilya would finally say it out loud. He’d been dreading it, carrying the weight of it like a quiet, constant ache. Preparing himself for disappointment, for distance, for the slow, careful untangling of something Shane had never quite let himself name.

But now...

Now Scott Hunter is an MLH Champion, standing at center ice, kissing his boyfriend in front of millions of people.

Now the world hasn’t ended.

Now, for the first time in almost a decade, something cracks open inside Shane’s chest that he’d sealed shut so tightly he’d almost forgotten it was there.

Hope.

It’s small and terrifying and fragile, but it’s there all the same, fluttering weakly against his ribs like it doesn’t quite trust him yet.

“Ilya,” Shane says, his voice coming out rougher than he expects. He swallows. “Are you sure?”

There's a beat of silence on the line. Then...

"Yes."

No hesitation. No qualifiers. Just certainty.

Shane presses his forehead against the wall, the cool paint grounding him. On the TV in the other room, the celebration keeps going. The crowd keeps cheering. Somewhere, Scott Hunter is still being kissed, still being seen.

"Okay," Shane says quietly.

He doesn't know what comes next. He doesn't know how any of this works, or what it means, or how badly it might hurt.

But for the first time in years, the future doesn't feel like a locked door.

Later, after he goes back out to the living room and watches the last of the on-ice celebrations, after a completely normal dinner where his parents talk about the weather and the neighbour's dog and don't mention Scott Hunter even once, after the drive back to the cottage, Shane lies awake in the dark, staring at the ceiling.

Sleep doesn't even pretend to come.

The room is quiet except for the low hum of the air exchange and the distant sound of waves against the shore. Shane's phone rests on the nightstand, face down, like it might burn him if he looks at it too long.

His mind won't stop replaying it.

Those few minutes on the ice: Scott waving someone over from the stands, pulling him close, kissing him like there is no one else in the world. Like the cameras don't exist. Like this is just... his life.

Shane squeezes his eyes shut, but it doesn't help. The image is burned in, sharp and impossible.

He isn't even sure what he's feeling anymore. It's a mess, all tangled together: happiness, excitement, terror. A sharp, bitter edge of jealousy he immediately refuses to examine. Gratitude so intense it almost hurts.

Scott has changed things. Already. In ways he probably doesn't even know about.

That thought catches, sticks.

Scott doesn't know.

Doesn't know what it's cost him. Doesn't know how brave it was, how seismic. Doesn't know how many people are lying awake tonight because of him, staring at their ceilings and wondering if the

world might be bigger than they thought this morning.

Shane rolls onto his side and stares at the faint outline of the window. The darkness presses in, but it doesn't feel as suffocating as usual.

Before he can talk himself out of it, he reaches for his phone. The screen lights up the room, too bright. His thumb hovers for a second, then he opens the thread.

Lily

Shane:I think we should tell Scott.

The message sends with a soft swoosh that feels much louder than it should.

The reply comes almost immediately.

Lily

Shane:I think we should tell Scott.

Lily:About us?

Shane exhales slowly.

Lily

Shane:I think we should tell Scott.

Lily:About us?

Shane:No. Well... maybe. But I meant we should tell him about me, and about you.

There's a pause this time, long enough that his stomach knots, long enough that he starts to regret everything.

Then his phone starts ringing.

"Hey," Shane says quietly when he answers, his voice rough.

"Shane." Ilya sounds a little breathless, like he's been pacing. "You want to come out? To Scott Hunter?"

The words hang there between them.

"I..." Shane sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I guess? I don't know. I just... it would be nice to have someone else know. Someone who..." He falters, searching for the right word. "Someone who gets it."

The silence that follows stretches a beat too long.

Shane's chest tightens. Fear curls around his lungs, familiar and sharp.

"We don't have to," he says quickly. "I mean, I just thought..."

"No," Ilya cuts in. "No, is good idea."

Shane blinks. "Really?"

"Yes," Ilya says firmly. Then, with a huff of something like fond irritation, "Hunter is boring old man..."

Shane snorts despite himself, the sound escaping before he can stop it. Ilya's one-sided, years-long beef with Scott Hunter is as dependable as gravity.

"...but," Ilya continues, quieter now, "he is good man. Brave."

Shane swallows.

"I just..." He stares up at the ceiling again, tracing faint cracks in the paint. "I think it's important he knows what he did was..."

"Important," Ilya supplies. "Yes."

"I know you're probably surprised," Shane says, voice softening.

There's a gentle hum of agreement on the other end of the line.

Shane lets the quiet settle and, for the first time tonight, turns inward instead of away.

He thinks about the last few years. About how carefully he's lived them. How much he's hidden, edited himself down, lied by omission, smiled through conversations where the wrong pronouns slid under his skin like splinters.

He thinks about how exhausting it is. How lonely.

And how, even in their worst moments, he's always been so unbearably grateful that Ilya exists. That there is one person who knows. Who understands. Who makes the secret feel survivable.

"I'm still scared," Shane admits, the words barely louder than his own heartbeat. "But... I can't stop thinking about how he must feel. I know how scared I am. I can't even imagine how he's feeling. It... it must have been lonely. At least we have each other. Who has Hunter had?"

The thought settles heavy and sad in his chest.

"If I were him," Shane says quietly, "I would want to know I'm not alone."

There's a pause. Then Ilya's voice softens in a way it rarely does.

"Okay," he says. "We tell him."

Shane closes his eyes, a small, shaky smile tugging at his mouth.

The fear is still there. It hasn't gone anywhere.

But underneath it, steady and real, is something else.

Resolve.

Chapter 2

Scott is sprawled on his couch with his head in Kip's lap, one arm flung over his eyes. Something is playing on the TV at low volume, some afternoon sports talk show, but he isn't really watching it.

He's barely conscious enough to pretend.

Between winning the Cup and coming out, the last few days have been a blur of champagne, cameras, interviews, and adrenaline crashes. His head is pounding dully, the kind of hangover that feels more like emotional whiplash than too much alcohol.

Kip's fingers drag slowly through his hair, gentle and absent-minded, and Scott hums in response without opening his eyes.

His phone buzzes where it's resting on his stomach.

Scott almost groans.

He knew the response would be big. He just... hadn't realized *how* big. Messages from teammates, former teammates, coaches, reporters, people he barely remembers playing against once in juniors. Strangers. So many strangers.

Thankfully, mercifully, he handed control of his email and social media over to his manager two days ago and muted almost every notification on his phone.

Which means if something *does* get through, it's probably worth looking at.

He squints one eye open, fighting through the fog, and grabs the phone.

It's a text from an unfamiliar number.

Unknown Number

Unknown Number: Hey Scott, it's Shane Hollander. Got your number from Vaughn. Hope that's alright.

Scott blinks.

"Huh," he murmurs.

Kip hums questioningly, glancing down at him. "What?"

"Nothing," Scott says, already typing. "Just... hold on."

He's a little surprised Hollander didn't already have his number. They've been in the league long enough, crossed paths enough times that he kind of assumed.

Shane Hollander

Shane Hollander: Hey Scott, it's Shane Hollander. Got your number from Vaughn. Hope that's

alright.

Scott:Not a problem at all, man. What's up?

The reply comes quickly.

Shane Hollander

Shane Hollander:Hey Scott, it's Shane Hollander. Got your number from Vaughn. Hope that's alright.

Scott:Not a problem at all, man. What's up?

Shane Hollander:Congrats on the Cup! Definitely well earned. You're a legend in the league. Cool to see you get the win.

Scott smiles faintly despite himself.

Shane Hollander

Shane Hollander:Congrats on the Cup! Definitely well earned. You're a legend in the league. Cool to see you get the win.

Scott:Thanks. It's been a wild few days for sure.

Shane Hollander:I can only imagine.

There's a pause. Scott watches the typing bubble appear... disappear... reappear.

Shane Hollander

Scott:Thanks. It's been a wild few days for sure.

Shane Hollander:I can only imagine.

Shane Hollander: That's actually the other reason I wanted to reach out. I wanted to say thank you.

Scott frowns slightly, lowering the phone.

"Thank you?" he mutters.

Shane Hollander

Shane Hollander:I can only imagine.

Shane Hollander: That's actually the other reason I wanted to reach out. I wanted to say thank you.

Scott: Thank you?

The typing bubble pops up again, and this time it lingers. Long enough that Scott shifts, pushing himself more upright without fully realizing it. Kip makes a small noise of protest as Scott's head leaves his lap, but doesn't stop him.

The message finally comes through.

Shane Hollander

Scott: Thank you?

Shane Hollander: Thank you for what you did. For coming out. I can't even imagine how scary that must have been. But also... freeing. I imagine. I know you probably didn't do it for anyone but yourself, that you weren't trying or even wanting to be "the first", but I need you to know how important it is that you are. It... it means a lot.

Scott stares at the screen.

He tells himself not to read too much into it. Hollander's always been thoughtful. Intense, but thoughtful. This could just be... gratitude.

Another message comes in before he can decide what to say.

Shane Hollander

Scott: Thank you?

Shane Hollander: Thank you for what you did. For coming out. I can't even imagine how scary that must have been. But also... freeing. I imagine. I know you probably didn't do it for anyone but yourself, that you weren't trying or even wanting to be "the first", but I need you to know how important it is that you are. It... it means a lot.

Shane Hollander: What you did, it matters. It makes a difference. It's already made a difference. For me, at least.

Scott sits bolt upright.

"Jesus," Kip says, startled, his hand slipping off Scott's shoulder as Scott shifts suddenly. "You okay?"

Scott doesn't answer.

His stomach flips, sharp and acidic, as he reads the words again. "*For me, at least.*"

He can feel Kip's hand settle between his shoulder blades, firm and grounding.

Shane Hollander

Shane Hollander: Thank you for what you did. For coming out. I can't even imagine how scary that must have been. But also... freeing. I imagine. I know you probably didn't do it for anyone but yourself, that you weren't trying or even wanting to be "the first", but I need you to know how important it is that you are. It... it means a lot.

Shane Hollander: What you did, it matters. It makes a difference. It's already made a difference. For me, at least.

Scott: You're welcome.

It feels woefully inadequate, but it's the only honest thing he can manage.

Shane Hollander

Shane Hollander: What you did, it matters. It makes a difference. It's already made a difference. For me, at least.

Scott: You're welcome.

Shane Hollander: I knew logically there was no way it was just me, but... god. To actually know I'm not alone...

Scott swallows hard.

Shane Hollander

Scott: You're welcome.

Shane Hollander: I knew logically there was no way it was just me, but... god. To actually know I'm not alone...

Shane Hollander: So I wanted to make sure you knew, too. That you're not alone.

Scott exhales shakily.

Shane Hollander

Shane Hollander: I knew logically there was no way it was just me, but... god. To actually know I'm not alone...

Shane Hollander: So I wanted to make sure you knew, too. That you're not alone.

Scott: Christ, man. You're going to make me cry.

He isn't exaggerating. His eyes sting, vision blurring as tears gather faster than he can blink them away.

He stares at the phone, chest tight, heart thudding with something that feels a lot like awe.

He hadn't done it to be brave. Hadn't done it to be a symbol. He'd done it because he was tired of pretending Kip didn't exist. Because the idea of winning the Cup without being able to celebrate with the most important person to him felt unbearable.

But knowing that it helped someone? Even one person? Even if it was only ever Hollander?

That would be enough.

Shane Hollander

Scott: Christ, man. You're going to make me cry.

Shane Hollander: Anyway, I'll let you get back to celebrating. Just... yeah. Thanks.

Scott: Anytime. And hey, next season, we should grab dinner. I'll introduce you to Kip.

There's a pause before the reply.

Shane Hollander

Shane Hollander: Anyway, I'll let you get back to celebrating. Just... yeah. Thanks.

Scott: Anytime. And hey, next season, we should grab dinner. I'll introduce you to Kip.

Shane Hollander: That sounds really nice. And... feel free to tell him. About me. If you want.

Scott's throat tightens.

Shane Hollander

Scott: Anytime. And hey, next season, we should grab dinner. I'll introduce you to Kip.

Shane Hollander: That sounds really nice. And... feel free to tell him. About me. If you want.

Scott: Thanks for trusting me. And, if you ever want to talk about anything, you've got my number. Don't be afraid to call.

Shane Hollander: Thanks.

Scott locks his phone and lets it drop into his lap.

The tears come all at once.

Kip's arms wrap around his waist immediately, pulling him back until Scott's pressed against his chest.

"Hey," Kip murmurs, concern threading his voice. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Scott shakes his head, laughing weakly through the tears. He leans back into Kip's hold, gripping his forearm like an anchor.

"It's not just me," he whispers, the words breaking somewhere between awe and heartbreak.

Kip makes a soft, confused sound.

"It's not just..." Scott swallows hard, clears his throat. "It's not just me."

He turns in Kip's arms until they're side by side, Kip's arm snug around his waist, Scott tucked into his side.

"That was... Shane Hollander," Scott says. "He wanted to thank me... For coming out. Told me it made a difference. That I... helped."

Kip's grip tightens slightly.

"Shane *fucking* Hollander just came out to me..." Scott shakes his head again, disbelief still buzzing through him.

"It's not just you," Kip says quietly, understanding settling into his tone. He presses a kiss to Scott's temple, steady and sure.

Scott lets himself cry then, fully this time, face pressed into Kip's shoulder.

Kip just holds him.

Chapter 3

The party is boring.

They are always boring. Rooms full of too-bright lights and too-expensive suits, everyone pretending this is fun and not just another obligation wrapped in champagne and shiny trophies.

Ilya drains the last of his vodka and barely tastes it.

He would much rather be upstairs, in his ridiculous hotel room, having hot phone sex with Shane.

Instead, he's here. Because he has something to do.

It takes an agonizingly long time before the opportunity finally presents itself.

Scott Hunter is standing with a small group of his teammates, laughing at something one of them says. They're close to him, too close, maybe, and Ilya clocks the way they subtly shift when he approaches. Not hostile. Protective.

"Good," Ilya thinks. Good that he has that.

He sets his empty glass down on a passing server's tray and cuts in without hesitation.

"Hunter," he says, voice carrying easily over the hum of the room.

Scott looks over, face settling into something neutral. "Rozanov."

Ilya tips his head toward the balcony doors. "A word?"

There's confusion there, flickering, brief, but Hunter nods and excuses himself. He doesn't look back as he walks. Ilya follows.

The door slides shut behind them, muffling the noise of the party. Outside, the summer air is warm but mercifully cooler than inside. The city stretches below them, lights glittering.

Hunter leans back against the railing, folding his arms. Defensive. Waiting.

"Well?" he says.

"Congratulations," Ilya grins. "Didn't know they give MVP to senior citizens."

"Fuck off, Rozanov," Scott snaps automatically.

There it is. Familiar ground. Ilya's smirk comes easily.

"No, seriously," he says, waving a hand. "Is impressive."

"What do you want?" Scott asks.

The edge in his voice makes the smirk fall away. It isn't hostile. Just... guarded. Tired. Ilya realizes, belatedly, that he's probably the tenth person tonight to pull Scott aside like this. That not

all of them have been kind.

“I...” Ilya clears his throat. Tries again. “What you did. On ice.”

Scott stiffens.

“Was good,” Ilya keeps talking, words tumbling out faster. “Important.”

“Was it?” Scott’s eyes flicker, widening just a fraction.

“Yes,” Ilya says simply. “Was brave. Maybe a bit stupid. But... important.”

Scott studies him, expression unreadable.

“Being first,” Ilya continues. “Is big thing. Is risky. Lots to gain, yes. But lots to maybe lose.”

Scott doesn’t interrupt.

“So is good,” Ilya says, quieter now. “Good it was you. Not just for you. For everyone.”

“Oh,” Scott exhales, surprise softening his face. “Thank you.”

Ilya nods once. Then adds, without thinking it through, “Is good was someone like you. You have less to lose.”

The shift is immediate. Scott’s jaw tightens. His arms uncross.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he spits.

Ilya curses himself silently, hating how English always abandons him when he needs it most.

“You are Scott Hunter,” he says carefully. “Hockey legend. Worst case, you come out, hockey decides they hate you. You are old. You retire.”

Scott’s jaw twitches.

“You lose job. Maybe friends. This is awful. Unfair,” Ilya pushes on. “But you keep very handsome boyfriend. You keep fancy New York home. You take all your money and make new life.”

“So what?” Scott snaps. “It’s fine to be shunned because I’m rich?”

“No,” Ilya says immediately. “No.”

He looks away, out over the city.

“But is better,” he says, voice lower. “Better than some others.”

He swallows.

“Say you are not American,” Ilya continues. “Say your country is not so... friendly.”

When he risks a glance back, Scott’s expression has changed. The anger is gone, replaced by something slower. Something heavier.

“You come out,” Ilya says. “You lose everything Scott Hunter does. And then more.”

His voice wavers despite his best efforts.

“You also lose visa... get sent back to home country. You lose...” Ilya’s voice cracks, the words spilling out against his will. “... lose the man you have loved since you are teenager.”

“You lose... everything. Freedom,” he finishes. “Maybe even life...”

The silence between them stretches.

Scott looks pained now. Not defensive. Not angry. Just... aware.

“So,” Ilya says, forcing the words through tight teeth. “Is good what you did, Scott Hunter. You take risk other people cannot.”

“Rozanov...” Scott starts.

“Maybe now,” Ilya murmurs, “there is less risk.”

Scott steps closer, just a fraction. Not crowding. Not pushing.

“You shouldn’t have to carry that alone,” he says quietly.

Ilya freezes.

“If you ever need someone who understands what’s at stake,” Scott continues, voice steady, “I do. You don’t have to explain anything. My door’s open.”

Something inside Ilya lurches, sharp and disorienting. He stares at the city lights until they blur. He swallows thickly around the lump in his throat, scratches at the side of his nose with a sniff, trying to force the water at the corners of his eyes to stay put.

“Please,” he says finally, forcing a crooked grin. “Why would I want advice from world’s oldest, most boring hockey player?”

Scott huffs a quiet laugh. Ilya does too, but it’s thin, watery.

Scott lets him get away with it. Just nods, mouth tilting into a small, knowing smile.

“Goodnight, Rozanov.”

Ilya turns for the door before Scott can say anything else. Before he can risk saying too much.

Inside, the party swells back around him; noise, light, movement. Ilya heads straight for the elevators, phone in hand, dialing “*Jane*” before the doors even open.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

Shane sits on the bench and peels his jersey off over his head.

The locker room is loud around him; voices overlapping, skates clattering, the hiss of showers turning on, but it all feels distant, like he's hearing it through water. He bends forward to undo his skates, movements slow and automatic, muscle memory carrying him through the ritual.

The game had been a shit show.

The loss against Boston *should* feel humiliating. It probably will later. Right now, it barely registers. Shane knows the score because he was on the ice when the buzzer went, but emotionally, it's like watching a replay someone else queued up.

Which is part of the problem.

He hasn't really been there. His body shows up: skates, shoots, takes the hits, but his mind keeps slipping sideways, snagging on things that have nothing to do with hockey. Conversations he's rehearsing and never having. Words he swallows back before they even reach his tongue.

They're only a few weeks into the season, and it's the closest thing to a slump Shane's ever had. He keeps telling himself it's early. That it will pass. That he just needs to shake off the rust.

But he's never had rust before. Not like this.

And he knows why it's shown up now.

He just doesn't know if he's brave enough to do anything about it.

The thought sits heavy in his chest as he strips off his shoulder pads, sweat cooling too fast against his skin. He's already gotten more than he ever thought he would. A boyfriend. Parents who know and didn't turn away. Scott, unexpected and steady, who understands without needing to be told twice.

It feels greedy to want more.

Like tempting fate.

But he also doesn't know how much longer he can keep pretending he's fine.

Hayden's noticed. Shane catches his concerned looks more often than not, the way his eyes linger a beat too long after practice, like he's trying to decide whether to say something. J.J.'s noticed too, less subtle about it, asking if Shane's hurt, if something's wrong, if he needs to talk.

The whole team knows his hockey's off. They don't say it outright, but Shane hears it in the way the coaches shorten his shifts, in the way his name comes up during video review.

Ilya asks him what's wrong five times a day.

Shane thought clarifying things, naming them, even privately, would make it easier. That having a plan, a timeline, a way forward would take the edge off. That letting *someone* know would be enough.

Instead, it feels like the secret is burning him from the inside out.

Every day. Every conversation. Every shift.

He drags a towel over his face, pressing it into his eyes, breathing through the damp cotton. God. How did Scott Hunter do this for years?

The answer comes unbidden: the same way Shane has for nearly a decade.

Fear creeps in at the edges of his thoughts; unwelcome but familiar. He thinks about the backlash Scott's taken. The shit Shane's overheard muttered in the room since then. The comments online. The speculation on sports panels, the way people talk about it like it's a thought experiment instead of a life.

And suddenly, he understands Scott a little better. Not just the silence, but the strategy. The way Scott has always been everything hockey wants him to be. Kind. Professional. Impeccable. A perennial Lady Byng type: polite to refs, clean on the ice, even cleaner off it, never giving anyone a reason to look twice. The sort of guy they trot out for charity events, captaincy votes, and "this is what the league stands for" interviews.

Shane has done the same thing, almost without realizing. Shaped himself carefully, sanded down the rough edges. Made it easy for people to trust him, to like him.

If you're beyond reproach, no one questions you. If you're the model player, people protect the *idea* of you, even from the truth.

"Brutal one," J.J. says, flopping down beside him. "Guess you'll just have to drown your sorrows in some Boston Lily tonight, huh?"

The joke lands wrong.

Shane's stomach turns, sharp and immediate. He swallows hard, forces his face into something neutral.

"Yeah," he says after a beat, voice flat. "Something like that."

He feels Hayden's eyes on him from the next stall over. Concern, unmistakable. Shane doesn't look back.

Instead, he takes a deep breath.

In. Out.

He nods vaguely, letting the conversation move on without him, but something has already shifted. The thought settles in his chest, heavy but solid.

He can't do this anymore.

Not the pretending. Not the careful editing. Not the way every day feels like he's holding himself together with duct tape and habit.

It isn't bravery that fills him now.

It's exhaustion.

And the quiet knowledge that something has to give, whether he's ready or not.

Shane stands, towel slung over his shoulder, and for the first time in weeks, his mind feels quiet.

Decisive.

Ilya knows something is wrong.

Not just tonight, though tonight is bad, but for weeks now. Shane showed up to his place after the game looking like he'd left half of himself somewhere else. He sat through dinner with that faraway look in his eyes, barely reacted to Ilya's chirping, didn't even argue properly when Ilya accused him of missing three open nets.

It's worrying.

Shane has been pulling away ever since the season started again. Subtle at first. Fewer texts. Shorter answers. Long pauses where there used to be easy banter. Ilya thought, hoped, it was just the adjustment. The grind. He knows how hard the beginning of a season can be.

But now it's bleeding into hockey.

And that's not something Ilya can ignore.

They're tangled together in bed, sweat cooling between them, sheets twisted around their legs. Shane is quiet in that way Ilya has learned to recognize as dangerous; not withdrawn, exactly, but distant. Like he's already somewhere else, already rehearsing something Ilya hasn't been invited into yet.

Ilya shifts, lifts himself onto one elbow.

"Shane," he says, waiting until Shane hums in acknowledgment before continuing. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Shane says, with a shrug that fools absolutely no one.

Ilya sighs and pushes himself up fully, leaning over him. He tries again, voice firmer this time.

"Shane. What is wrong?"

Shane exhales, long and slow, and Ilya knows he's won.

It doesn't feel like winning.

Shane gently pushes him away and sits up, back against the headboard, knees pulled in slightly. Ilya mirrors him without thinking, settling close, reaching for Shane's hand, and folding it between his own. His thumb moves automatically, swiping over Shane's knuckles.

"I..." Shane starts, then stops. His voice wavers. Ilya tightens his grip. "I don't think I can do this."

The words land like a check from behind.

Ilya freezes.

His brain skids violently, panic flooding in so fast it steals his breath. *Do this... do what?* Them? This? Is this how it ends? Quietly, sideways, without warning?

"Sh..." his name catches in Ilya's throat. His heart is pounding so hard it hurts.

"Hey," Shane's voice cuts through the noise, sharp with urgency. "Ilya. Hey. No. That's not..." He shifts closer, cups Ilya's face, forcing eye contact. "That's not what I meant. I love you. So fucking much. I'm not going anywhere."

Ilya exhales hard, breath shuddering.

"Ok," he says, nodding too quickly. "Ok. Ok, then." He swallows. "What is it you cannot do?"

Shane scrubs a hand through his hair, fingers tugging at the ends like he's trying to pull the words free.

"The secrets," he says finally. "The hiding. The pretending. Sneaking off after games. Letting people think I'm meeting some girl named Lily..."

His mouth twists. Ilya's chest aches.

"Ok," Ilya murmurs, leaning in to press a kiss to Shane's knuckles. "Ok. What... what are you saying? You want to..."

"Tell people," Shane says.

Ilya blinks.

Once. Twice.

He isn't against it. God, he's not. The idea of telling the world about Shane lives in his chest like a caged animal; wanting, desperate, furious at being contained. But there are reasons he hasn't. Reasons he *can't*.

And still...

"You want to tell people?" he asks, dumbly.

"Yes," Shane says, and his voice is steadier than Ilya expects. "Not... not about us. I know we can't. The rivalry. Your safety. We can't risk that."

Ilya nods, the agreement bitter and familiar.

“But maybe,” Shane continues, shoulders lifting in a helpless little shrug, “I could tell people about me.”

Ilya stares at him.

“You want to come out?” he asks, slow, careful, like maybe he’s misheard. Like maybe English has failed him again.

“I do,” Shane says. He looks nervous, eyes searching Ilya’s face, but he doesn’t look uncertain.

“You are not afraid?” Ilya asks quietly.

Shane laughs once, sharp and humorless. “I’m terrified.” He exhales. “But... I’m tired.”

Something in Ilya’s chest loosens. He understands that. He feels it too. Scott Hunter had been right: this kind of secret eats at you. Slowly. Relentlessly.

But listening to Shane say it like this, spell it out, something else clicks into place.

Because this isn’t how it feels for Ilya. Not exactly.

“I wake up already thinking about it,” Shane says next, running a hand over his face. “About what I’m going to say and not say. Who I’m sitting next to. How I’m standing. What jokes I laugh at. I don’t even notice I’m doing it anymore, not until I’m exhausted and I don’t know why.”

Ilya doesn’t wake up like that.

He worries about being found out, yes. About politics and citizenship and the wrong person knowing the wrong thing. But not about every word out of his mouth. Not about the shape of his laughter, or who he sits beside on a bus.

“I’m tired of watching everything I say or do,” Shane continues. “Tired of replaying conversations in my head after the fact, wondering if I slipped. Tired of lying by omission and calling it survival. Tired of having to decide, every single day, whether it’s safer to correct someone or just let them be wrong.”

Something settles, heavy and sad, in Ilya’s chest.

This is the part he’s been spared. And maybe, Ilya realizes, this is why Shane has always been so afraid. Not just of the league, or the fans, or the fallout. But of himself.

Ilya’s secret is real, and dangerous, and heavy, but it doesn’t demand that he erase himself in every room. He keeps parts of himself hidden, yes. He exaggerates. Performs. Deflects.

But when the guys chirp him about women, he laughs because he does like women. When they assume, he doesn’t have to correct them, because the lie isn’t total.

Shane’s is. Every time.

“I’m tired of pretending Lily is just some girl I’ve talked to for years but won’t commit to, and...” Shane’s voice cracks, but he keeps going, like if he stops he won’t be able to start again. “... not the

only person I've ever loved. Tired of feeling like I'm cheating on you every time I don't say your name."

Ilya's chest tightens painfully at that.

He hates that he's been able to hide inside half-truths while Shane has been bleeding himself dry with whole ones.

Shane laughs again, softer this time, almost broken.

"This isn't me being brave," he says. "I don't feel brave, Ilya. I feel... worn down. Like if I don't stop lying, something in me is going to snap."

Ilya pulls him close without thinking, wraps his arms around him, presses Shane's head into his chest. He kisses the crown of his hair, holds him there.

"Alright," he murmurs. "So you tell people."

Shane stills.

"Yeah?" he asks softly.

"Yes," Ilya says. There's fear there, sharp and immediate, but it sits behind the certainty. "You want to tell public? Or...?"

"Kind of," Shane admits. "Maybe. Not right away. But... yeah. Eventually. I want to tell Hayden. And J.J. Then we'll see from there?"

Ilya swallows. His stomach tightens. There's a flare of something ugly and quiet in his chest; not anger, not resentment. Envy. Wanting. He knows he can't do the same. Not now. Not until he has a passport that isn't Russian.

"Shane, you know that I..." The words stick. He hates them. "I cannot. Tell public. Even if I want to."

"I know," Shane says immediately. "I don't want you to feel like you have to. This isn't about that. About us." He hesitates. "Well. It is. Kind of. But it's about *me*. I just... I'm tired. Of the lying. Of the pretending."

Ilya nods into Shane's hair. He hates that the world has made this so unfair. Hates that loving Shane means living in secret.

"I understand," Ilya says. "You want to be..." he falters over the word. English, stupid fucking language. "...more true."

"Authentic," Shane supplies.

"Yes," Ilya confirms. "More authentic."

"Exactly," Shane agrees. "I wish it didn't have to be some big thing, and I wish we could do it together, but..."

Ilya sighs, not sure what to say.

“Maybe,” Shane adds, voice gentler now, hopeful. “You could tell your friends? If you want.”

Ilya thinks of Scott Hunter. Of the way it felt to say it out loud, even without saying it. The way the air had felt lighter afterward.

“I...” He considers it carefully. “I would like to tell Marley,” he says finally. “He is good friend. The best. Trustworthy. Would not tell.”

“Then you should tell him,” Shane says without hesitation.

“But if I tell Marley, and you tell whole world...” Ilya hesitates. “I cannot guarantee he won’t figure it out.”

Shane stiffens for half a second, then relaxes.

“You trust him?” he asks.

“Yes,” Ilya says.

“Then tell him,” Shane says.

Ilya kisses him slowly this time, deliberate and grounding, one hand warm and steady on Shane’s waist; an unspoken promise: I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. Even if I can’t follow you all the way into the light yet.

Chapter End Notes

A little overwhelmed with all the love this has gotten so far. Man, this fandom goes hard ❤️

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

Cliff Marleau likes to think he's a good friend.

He remembers birthdays and favourite foods. He knows how far he can take a joke and when to rein it in. He gives good gifts; thoughtful ones, not last-minute bullshit. He helps people move. He gives rides to the airport. He shows up when it matters, even if he doesn't always know the right thing to say once he's there.

He may not be the smartest guy in the room, but he's kind. He cares. And he tries.

So yeah. Cliff thinks he's a decent friend.

Which is why, after practice, when Roz turns to him at his stall and asks what he's doing after, Cliff answers immediately.

"Nothing."

The mountain of laundry waiting back at his place can wait. The empty fridge, too. Because this is weird.

It's not that Roz asking him to hang out is strange. They're friends, probably best friends, if anyone bothered to label it. They get dinner together a couple of times a week. Text constantly. Chirp each other mercilessly.

But Roz has been... quiet.

And that's unsettling.

The guy doesn't know how to shut up. The fact that they've gotten all the way to post-practice strip-down, and these are the first words Cliff's heard from him that *aren't* about line combos or drills?

Yeah. Something's wrong.

"Dinner at the usual place?" Cliff asks, keeping his tone light.

"No." Roz shakes his head. Doesn't meet his eyes. "Come to my house."

He hesitates after saying it, like he's bracing for something. Like he might take it back.

That's worse than the quiet.

Cliff knows that *Ilya Rozanov*, cocksure playboy superstar, is... not exactly fake. But it's a performance. Louder, shinier, more confident than the man underneath. Armour, Cliff thinks. Built up carefully, piece by piece.

But Roz doesn't let people see under it. Not often. Not even Cliff.

So to catch that flicker of uncertainty now...

"Yeah," Cliff says immediately, nodding. "Sure."

He doesn't ask questions. Not here, with half the team within earshot. He won't get answers anyway.

They shower and change fast. Cliff follows Roz out to the parking lot, then across town to his place. The whole drive, Roz barely talks.

Inside, though, Roz seems to loosen a bit. Moves around the kitchen like it's second nature, pulling things out of the fridge, setting water to boil. Cliff perches at the island with a beer, watching him.

He has a thousand questions. A thousand worries.

He keeps his mouth shut.

Dinner passes. So does a second beer. They end up on the couch, legs stretched out, an Admirals-Centaurs game muted on the TV. It's almost normal enough to be cruel.

Finally, Roz leans forward and sets his beer down on the coffee table.

"Marley," he says. Then stops.

Cliff straightens a little, angling his body toward him. Gives a small nod. I'm listening.

"I wish to tell you something," Roz says.

Okay.

"It is... secret. Big secret."

Roz looks embarrassed. And terrified.

Cliff's chest tightens.

"Alright," he says carefully. "I can do secrets."

"You cannot tell anyone what I am about to tell you," Roz continues, voice low and serious in a way Cliff has never heard from him. "It... it would be... dangerous."

Dangerous?

Cliff's worry spikes hard. What the hell could Roz be sitting on that's *dangerous*?

Sure, the guy's private. No one even knew his dad had died until he was already back from Moscow. But underneath all the bravado, Roz is a good kid. He wouldn't... wouldn't get mixed up in something stupid.

Would he?

"Roz," Cliff says slowly, "are you in trouble?"

"No," Roz says quickly. "No trouble. Just... complicated."

That answers absolutely nothing.

“You know I have... reputation,” Roz continues, gesturing vaguely with his hands like he’s grasping for the right word. “As... man who sleeps with many women.”

“Playboy?” Cliff offers.

“*Da*. Yes,” Roz says, brows pinched in the way they always do when he’s cursing the English language.

“I know,” Cliff says.

He also knows that for all the tabloid photos of Roz leaving clubs with women on his arm, most nights he goes home alone. Cliff can’t even remember the last time he’d heard about Roz actually bringing someone back.

“You also know I have... regular partner,” Roz says. “In Montreal.”

Oh.

Holy shit.

Are they finally doing this? Actually talking about this?

The Montreal girl has been a locker room legend since Roz’s rookie year. It didn’t take Cliff long to clock that there was someone consistent there; the texts, the nervous excitement, the way Roz *blushed* when he got teased.

Cliff had tried to keep his questions about her light, not wanting to pry. But he can’t help being curious. He can tell, she’s someone special. Roz cares for her. Probably is even in love with her.

He’s tried to come up with all kinds of scenarios, but he can’t for the life of him understand why Roz hasn’t locked her down yet. Or maybe that’s what this is. Was Roz about to drop a secret marriage on him?

“Yeah,” Cliff nods. “Your Montreal girl.”

Roz’s face twists at the words, something sharp and painful. And oh...

“Ah, fuck,” Cliff mutters. “Did you guys split up?”

“No,” Roz says quickly. “No.”

“Okay,” Cliff says, trying to recalibrate. “You didn’t... knock her up, did you?” He’s only half-joking.

“No,” Roz says again, and this time there’s a hint of a smirk. Cliff lets out a breath he didn’t realise he was holding. But Roz sobers almost immediately.

“So,” Cliff says slowly, thinking out loud. “Something to do with your Montreal girl. A secret. A dangerous secret.”

Roz nods. Then shakes his head, muttering something in Russian that sounds frustrated as hell. When he looks back up, his eyes are scared.

Cliff's heart hurts for his friend.

"Hey," he says, knocking their shoulders together. "Whatever it is, you know I've got you, right?"

Roz inhales sharply.

"Is not girl," he blurts.

"What?" Cliff stammers.

Roz sighs, scratches the side of his nose, a nervous habit Cliff's seen maybe twice before, then meets Cliff's eyes.

"My Montreal girl," Roz says, voice rough. "Is not... is not a girl."

Cliff blinks.

Processes.

Oh.

"Oh, shit," he says softly.

And... yeah. It makes sense. It's obvious, really, once it's said out loud.

He's wondered, everyone's wondered, at one point or another, what exactly Roz was hiding her *for*. A celebrity? Plausible. But doesn't explain the need for secrecy, not for so long. An affair? Would explain the need for secrets. But Cliff knows Roz better than that.

But this?

This explains everything.

"Is... is problem?" Roz asks quietly.

The fear in his voice snaps Cliff back to the moment.

"Jesus, no," Cliff says immediately. "No. Not at all."

Roz's shoulders drop like he's just set down a hundred-pound weight.

"Come here," Cliff says, standing up.

Roz just stares at him for a second, stunned. Cliff rolls his eyes, grabs him by the shoulder, and pulls him into a hug. Roz gasps, then melts into it.

"I've got you, Rozy," Cliff says quietly. After a minute, they separate and sit back down.

"So," Cliff says lightly, bumping his knee against Roz's. "Your Montreal *guy*. Tell me about him."

"He is boring," Roz says instantly.

Cliff barks out a laugh because, of course, even Roz's boyfriend wouldn't be safe from his chirping.

"Smart. Driven. Dedicated," Roz adds, smile softening into something warm and unmistakable.

"He makes me better."

"Fuck, man," Cliff mutters. Then, because now he can: "You guys together? Like... he's your boyfriend?"

Roz lights up at the word.

"Yes," he says. "For long time, we weren't. But this summer... we decided."

"And you're happy? He treats you well?" Cliff asks, because that's all that really matters to him.

"He is very good to me," Roz says.

"Good." Cliff nods.

"I love him," Roz says quietly. "He is only person I have ever loved."

Cliff doesn't know whether to feel elated or heartbroken. He's happy for his friend, obviously. But god, to have to carry that alone, to keep it secret for...

"How long?" he asks.

"In love?" Roz shrugs. "Years."

"Oh, Roz," Cliff sighs. "I wish you didn't have to hide this."

"Me too," Roz says, his smile sad.

"Tell me more," Cliff pivots, trying to focus on the good. His friend was in love. This is good.

"What's his name? What does he do?"

Roz winces. "I cannot say. He is also... public figure. Is not just my secret."

Cliff is a bit disappointed, but he gets it. It makes sense. Probably the only way they've kept this under wraps for so long

"So he's not out either," Cliff confirms more than asks.

"No. But, soon... maybe," Roz says.

Cliff feels his brows lift in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes," Roz nods. "I wish... I wish I could do it with him, but... not until I have better citizenship."

"Fuck," Cliff swears. He hadn't even thought of that. Roz hums in agreement.

"He is being very brave..." Roz says, seemingly more to himself than to Cliff. "He does not see it that way, but is true. I am proud of him."

"You may figure it out," Roz adds with a smirk. "Once he comes out"

“Oh yeah?” Cliff snorts. “Would you admit it if I guessed?”

“Yes,” Roz says seriously. “If you guess right, I will not lie.”

They sit in the quiet for a moment.

“Enough,” Roz says finally, grabbing the remote. “Let us watch Ottawa lose to geriatric Scott Hunter.”

“Geriatric!” Cliff crows. “New vocabulary word!”

They grab their beers as the TV unmutes. Cliff knocks their shoulders together. Roz smiles.

Cliff wishes he could fix it. Make it easier. Take the sharp edges off the world for his friend.

But he can’t.

What he *can* do is stay. Sit here. Drink bad beer. Laugh at dumb chirps. Let Roz breathe. Let him exist without armour, just for tonight.

That feels like enough.

Ilya lies on his back in the dark.

The house is quiet now. Marley is gone. The game long over. The laughter still feels like it’s echoing faintly in the walls, like the place hasn’t quite settled yet.

He should be wired. He should be replaying everything he said, every word he almost said.

Instead, he feels... lighter. Strange. Like he’s taken off something heavy he forgot he was carrying.

He smiles without meaning to.

His phone in his hand dims. He taps it awake before it can go dark again. Ilya types slowly, thumbs clumsy, still careful even now.

Jane

Ilya:I told Marley

The reply comes almost immediately.

Jane

Ilya:I told Marley

Jane:Oh.

Jane:How did it go?

Ilya exhales, a long breath he didn't realise he was holding.

Jane

Jane:Oh.

Jane:How did it go?

Ilya:It went... good

Ilya:He was kind. Did not freak out. Hugged me. Very aggressively.

There's a pause. Then...

Jane

Ilya:He was kind. Did not freak out. Hugged me. Very aggressively.

Jane:I'm really glad.

Jane:I'm proud of you.

The words hit harder than Ilya expects. He rolls onto his side, presses the phone briefly to his chest.

Jane

Jane:I'm proud of you.

Ilya:I knew he would be okay, but... it was still scary.

Ilya:But it was ok. Better than ok

Another pause. He can picture Shane reading, overthinking, smiling anyway.

Jane

Ilya:I knew he would be okay, but... it was still scary.

Ilya:But it was ok. Better than ok

Jane:I'm so relieved.

Ilya stares at the ceiling, at the faint shadows cast by the streetlights.

Jane

Ilya:But it was ok. Better than ok

Jane:I'm so relieved.

Ilya:Me too.

He hesitates, then adds:

Jane

Jane:I'm so relieved.

Ilya:Me too.

Ilya:I love you

The typing dots appear. Disappear. Reappear.

Jane

Ilya:Me too.

Ilya:I love you

Jane:I'm love you too.

Ilya closes his eyes, the last of the tension finally draining out of him.

Tomorrow will still be complicated. Dangerous. Uncertain.

But tonight, he told the truth. Someone new knows. And the world didn't end.

Chapter End Notes

In the books, his name is spelled Marlow. But the show spells it Marleau.

I decided to use Marleau. Because... I just like it better 🙋

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

Shane sits on Hayden's couch and tries not to bounce his knee.

It's not working.

The cushion dips and rebounds under his leg, a soft, relentless tell he can't seem to shut off. He presses his heel flat to the floor, then immediately starts again, like his body has decided this is happening whether he wants it to or not.

Across the room, Hayden and J.J. are half-watching whatever game is on, some afternoon matchup Shane couldn't tell you anything about, and arguing back and forth about a blown defensive coverage as if it's a matter of personal offense.

"No, see, that's not on the D," J.J. insists, pointing at the screen. "That's the center drifting too high."

"That's not what drifting is," Hayden shoots back. "That's just bad positioning."

"Pike, I swear..."

God, he hates this. He hates that he made such a big deal, weeks ago, about wanting to come out; hates that he said it out loud to Ilya like that meant something definitive, like it flipped a switch. And then he did... nothing.

It feels like backsliding. Like he's gone back on his word.

But he hasn't. He knows that. He's just been careful.

Their schedule has been a mess; road trips stacked on road trips, hotel rooms and long flights, and cities that don't belong to them. None of that felt right. None of that felt safe.

Here does.

Hayden's living room. A day off. Just the three of them. No jerseys. No cameras. No one listening for what he does or doesn't say.

"This is it," Shane thinks. "This is literally it. If I don't do it now, I'm going to sit here for another hour and then go home and hate myself."

The thought lands with the dull certainty of something he's done too many times before.

Shane clears his throat.

Nothing.

They keep going.

“Hey,” he says, louder this time. “Guys?”

That does it. J.J. looks over first, then Hayden, the remote dangling loosely in his hand as he pauses the game.

“Yeah?” J.J. says. “What’s up, *Capitaine?*”

Shane opens his mouth. Closes it again.

His pulse is loud in his ears. He can feel it in his throat, his wrists, the base of his spine.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Shane says finally.

The tone must land, because both of them sit up a little. J.J. leans back against the arm of the couch, suddenly attentive. Hayden sets the remote down on the coffee table.

“Okay,” Hayden says carefully.

Shane inhales.

He’s rehearsed this. He hates that he’s rehearsed this. It makes it feel artificial, like a script, like he’s about to deliver lines instead of telling the truth.

“I’m gay,” he says. The words come out steadier than he feels.

Hayden blinks.

J.J. blinks.

“Oh,” Hayden says. Then, almost immediately, “No, okay. Sorry. I just...” Hayden rubs a hand over the back of his neck, eyes darting away, then back. “I mean. I didn’t... I would’ve known, right?”

That lands sharp. Harder than Shane expected.

The room feels very quiet all of a sudden. Not hostile. Not rejection. Just... disbelief. The silence stretches, not heavy, exactly, but uncertain. Shane lets it. He’s learned, over the years, that filling silence usually makes things worse.

“How... uh,” Hayden says after a beat. “How long have you known?”

Thank God.

Questions, not feelings. Shane can do questions.

“Um. I mean... I’ve known I’m into men for years,” he says. “But it wasn’t until the last year or so that I really... accepted that it’s *just* men.”

Hayden’s brow furrows immediately, like he’s doing math in his head he doesn’t like the answer to.

“Wait,” J.J. says, eyebrows knitting together. “You’ve known for years?”

There it is. Not shock at the gay part. Something sharper underneath.

Shane nods. "Yeah."

J.J.'s jaw tightens. He looks away first this time, staring hard at the paused TV instead.

J.J. exhales, rubbing a hand over his mouth. "*Calisse...*"

The word isn't angry. But it is hurt.

And Shane feels it like a bruise being pressed.

"It's not that I didn't want to tell you," he says quickly, the words tumbling out now that he's started. "I did. I do. God, I wanted to. It's just... fuck, it's scary. And I didn't know how, or when, or what it would change. And then the longer it went, the harder it felt to bring up without it being this whole... thing."

"We tell each other everything," J.J. says quietly. Not accusing. Just stating a fact. One that hurts.

"I know," Shane says, just as quietly. "And I hate that this is the thing I didn't know how to say."

J.J. nods, but he doesn't look at Shane yet, like eye contact would make this too real.

Hayden shifts, restless. He doesn't look angry, just unsettled, like the ground under a familiar landmark has moved an inch to the left.

"Okay," Hayden says slowly. "Yeah. I mean... I get that."

"Does anyone else know?" J.J. asks. His voice is even, but there's an edge to it Shane recognizes. Measuring where he stands.

"My parents," Shane says. "Rose Landry. Scott Hunter."

Hayden lets out a low whistle. "Hell of a list."

"You told *Scott* before us?" J.J. asks, and this time the hurt is unmistakable.

Shane flinches.

"It wasn't like that," he says immediately. "It just... he gets it, okay? And I needed someone who would get it. That I didn't need to do... *this* with."

J.J. nods once, tight. Accepts the answer, but doesn't like it.

"And," Shane adds, quieter, "my boyfriend."

That lands.

J.J.'s head snaps up. Hayden's eyebrows disappear into his hairline.

"You have a..." J.J. starts. "Since when do you have a..."

"Hold on," Hayden cuts in. "A *boyfriend*? As in currently?"

Shane nods.

Hayden stares at him like Shane has just casually informed them he's been living under an alias.

"You've been dating someone," Hayden says slowly. "This *whole time*."

J.J. goes still. Not frozen, just suddenly very, very careful. Like he's slotted the last puzzle piece in place only to reveal a picture more broken than what he started with.

"You've been doing all this alone," he says, almost under his breath.

Hayden's disbelief flickers again, and even he goes quiet at that.

Something shifts, almost physically. The tension doesn't disappear, but it changes shape; less brittle, more familiar.

They immediately start clamoring, overlapping questions: *how long, who, is this serious, is this why you've been weird...* and Shane has to hold up both hands.

"Guys. Guys, stop," he tries to cut in. "I can't really say much."

J.J. stares at him for a second like he wants to argue, like he wants to say "*you don't trust me*" again, then he blows out a breath, hard.

"*Ben va donc chier*," he says, but it comes out rougher than a joke, like he's giving Shane permission to stop apologizing even without forgiving him instantly.

"Guys," Shane sighs.

"No," J.J. says, pointing at him. "You don't get to tell us you're gay and have a boyfriend and then not tell us anything about him."

"I would," Shane says quickly. "I swear, I would. But I can't. Not much, anyway. It's not safe for him to come out right now."

That sobers them both immediately. The silence stretches. Shane can feel both of them recalibrating, their mental picture of him shifting.

"Oh," Hayden says, the teasing gone. "Okay. Yeah. Got it."

There's a beat where none of them speak.

Then Hayden frowns. "Wait. What about Lily?"

"Who?" J.J. asks.

Shane's face goes hot.

"Boston Lily," Hayden says. "The girl Shane's been texting for, like, years. You know. Whenever we're in town."

J.J.'s eyes widen. "*Ben là...*"

"Is Lily the boyfriend?" Hayden asks, something like delight creeping into his voice despite himself.

“Uh,” Shane says. “Yeah.”

J.J. bursts out laughing. “*Esti d’calvaire.*”

“Shut up,” Shane groans, dropping his face into his hands. But even as he hides, he can feel it: his shoulders loosening, the knot in his chest easing just a little.

J.J. bumps his knee with Shane’s. Not gentle, not rough. Familiar.

They tease him lightly; nothing mean, nothing sharp. Just enough to knock the edge off the moment, to remind him that this is still *them*.

J.J. asks about Rose. Shane explains, awkwardly, how she helped him figure it out without really meaning to. How she was kind. How she didn’t make it weird.

Then the conversation shifts again.

“I’m planning to come out publicly,” Shane says.

Both of them freeze.

“Publicly?” Hayden repeats.

“Like... the team?” J.J. asks. “Or the *public* public?”

“Both,” Shane says. “Ideally, before Christmas. I want to tell the guys a bit earlier. Give them time.”

“That’s... big,” Hayden says, concern creeping into his voice. “You know some of the room’s not gonna be great about it.”

“I know,” Shane says. “This isn’t about making some statement. Or fixing the league. It’s just... I can’t keep hiding. I’m tired.”

They sit with that.

“Alright,” J.J. says finally. “We’ve got you, *Capitaine*. We’ll sort out the rest later.”

“Yeah,” Hayden agrees. “Whatever you need.”

The game on TV resumes, some awful turnover breaking the tension when Hayden groans loudly and J.J. laughs.

“Want another ginger ale?” Hayden asks Shane, standing up. “I’m grabbing beers.”

“Yeah,” Shane says. “Thanks.”

As Hayden disappears into the kitchen, Shane leans back into the couch. The cushions cradle him now instead of fighting him. His knee has finally stopped bouncing.

They’re still processing. He can feel it. The hurt hasn’t vanished; the questions aren’t all answered.

J.J. reaches out, gives Shane’s shoulder a quick, awkward squeeze, like he’s not used to doing this kind of thing without chirping it into a joke.

But they're still here.

Shane exhales, long and slow, letting it settle into his bones.

He's not losing them.

Chapter End Notes

Calisse = holy shit / fuck / goddamn (literally translates to chalice - referencing the Eucharistic Cup)

Ben va donc chier = oh, go fuck yourself (literally translates to "go shit, then", but used to tell someone to fuck off)

Ben là = well, then (sort of like a filler processing sound)

Esti d'calvaire = fucking hell (literally translates to "Christ of Cavalry", but used to express shock/disbelief/exasperation)

Chapter 7

Shane spots him in the neutral zone during warm-ups the way you spot a lighthouse: inevitable, a fixed point in the moving blur.

Scott Hunter is doing lazy circles just before the blue line, head up, stick loose in one hand. He moves like he's made of patience: no wasted edges, no panic. When he angles in toward Shane, it's casual enough that anyone watching would think it's just two captains saying hello.

Shane glides in to meet him anyway, because his brain is already running a dozen different scripts and none of them include pretending this isn't a big deal.

"Hey," Scott says, voice warm. His visor is pushed up. His smile is small, careful.

"Hey," Shane answers.

They drift to a stop at center ice, sticks planted lightly, blades rocking.

Scott tips his chin toward Shane's helmet. "You good?"

Shane huffs a quiet laugh. "Yeah. I'm good."

Scott's eyes flick down to Shane's hands. His posture. The parts of him he can't keep still.

"Sure," Scott says, like he doesn't believe him but isn't going to call him on it in the middle of warm-ups.

"I think I owe you a dinner after the game," Scott says next with a small laugh, taking mercy on him. "I seem to remember something about introducing you to the boyfriend?"

"Yeah," Shane says, nodding quickly. "Yeah, sure. I, uh... also wanted to pick your brain. About... stuff."

Scott's mouth quirks. "About stuff," he repeats, dry.

Shane can't help the faint smile that tugs at his mouth. "Yeah. Stuff."

Scott studies him for a beat that feels longer than it is. Then he nods once, decisive. "Alright. Dinner. I'll meet you after the game."

Scott pushes off first, gliding away like this wasn't anything at all. Like he didn't just reach through the noise in Shane's head and steady him, briefly, with one simple thing: We'll talk.

Shane watches him for half a second too long, then forces himself back into motion.

A game to play first. A job. The world's oldest distraction.

The game is tight, ugly in the way good games are. Every shift feels like it matters. New York presses, Montreal answers. The crowd is a roar he can feel through the glass and his own ribs.

Shane scores none, assists none, but his line holds. He wins battles. He keeps pucks alive. He does the small, grinding work that makes wins possible.

When the buzzer goes, Montreal has it by one.

They do the usual: handshakes, quick words, the ritual of being civil after trying to tear each other apart for sixty minutes. Scott's grip is firm and brief when their hands meet, his eyes on Shane's for half a heartbeat longer than required.

Later, in the hall outside the visitors' locker room, Scott is waiting like he said he would.

He's showered already, hair damp, wearing a dark Henley and a jacket, looking less like a captain and more like someone's extremely normal neighbour if that neighbour happened to have shoulders like a freight train.

"Still good?" Scott asks when Shane approaches.

"Yeah," Shane says. "Definitely."

"You, uh... still good with Kip coming?" Scott asks, almost hesitantly.

Shane blinks. Then, carefully: "Yes."

Scott watches his face. "I don't want to blindside you or make you uncomfortable, if there are things you want to talk about. But I'd like to introduce you, and he's... part of my life. I don't do the splitting-in-half thing anymore."

The words land somewhere tender and sore in Shane's chest.

"No," Shane says quickly. "No, it's fine. It's... good. I'm glad."

Scott's shoulders ease, like he'd been braced for a fight. "Okay. Cool. Want to hitch a ride with me there?"

"Sure," Shane says.

The restaurant Scott picks is quiet in that distinctly New York way: low lighting, close tables, the feeling of privacy even when you're not alone. It's not fancy, no white tablecloths, just nice. Warm. Wood and brick and muted jazz.

There's a back corner booth. Scott sits casually, one arm draped along the seat, looking like he belongs in it.

Shane slides in across from him and immediately feels the difference: no cameras, no locker room noise, no ice under his blades. Just a table. Just words.

"So," Shane says a bit awkwardly. "This place is... nice."

Scott shrugs. "It's quiet. That's the main thing."

A server appears. Shane orders a ginger ale out of reflex, because it's what he does when he needs his head clear. Scott doesn't comment, just orders two beers.

They make two minutes of small talk: travel, schedule, the game. It's fine. It's normal.

Then the booth shifts.

A man slides in beside Scott, shoulder brushing his like it's the most natural thing in the world. He's taller than Shane expected, broad but not bulky, with a kind face and eyes that take you in quickly, like he's learned how to read rooms.

He's even more handsome in person, which is actually impressive.

"Hey," the man says, smile immediate. "You must be Shane."

Shane blinks. "Yeah. Hi."

"Kip," he says, offering his hand across the table.

Shane shakes it. Kip's grip is warm, steady. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Kip says. He glances at Scott. "He didn't let you order me something weird, did he?"

Scott snorts. "I was going to."

Kip rolls his eyes and makes a face at Shane like, "*You see what I deal with.*"

Shane can't help the small laugh that escapes him. It's absurdly grounding, a partner ribbing Scott like he's just some guy and not Scott Hunter, captain and legend and lightning rod.

"Sorry," Scott says to Shane, like he needs to apologize for Kip existing in his space. Then he seems to think better of it. "Kip's... Kip."

Kip bumps Scott's shoulder with his. "I'm Kip."

"Yes," Scott says deadpan. "As established."

Shane watches the bump. The way Scott doesn't stiffen. The way Kip's hand lingers on Scott's forearm for a second, casual, unconscious. The way Scott's mouth softens just slightly, like it always wanted to be this shape and only now is allowed to be.

It makes something in Shane's chest burn. Envy, sharp and bright, like biting down on tinfoil.

He swallows it.

"So," Kip says, angling toward Shane, making space. "How's your season going?"

Shane shrugs. "It's going."

Kip's expression says he recognizes the dodge. "That's fair."

Scott takes a sip of his beer. "He's being polite."

Shane shoots him a look. "I'm being diplomatic."

"Mm." Scott looks unconvinced.

Kip laughs softly. "Is this where I'm supposed to pick a side?"

"Mine," Shane says automatically.

Scott snorts. "Wow."

Shane feels his face warm. "That was a joke."

"Sure," Scott says.

Kip's eyes flick between them, amused.

The food comes. Plates slide down. The table fills with the safe, normal distraction of eating.

Halfway through, Scott sets his fork down and looks directly at Shane.

"Alright," he says. "What's up?"

Shane's grip tightens around his glass. His ginger ale sweats cold against his palm.

He can feel Kip go quiet beside Scott; not nosy, just present, attentive.

Shane's mouth opens. Nothing comes out. Scott doesn't rush him. He just waits.

Shane exhales. "I... I want to come out."

The words are quiet. Barely more than air.

Scott stills, and his eyebrows lift, surprise flickering across his face before he smooths it away. He doesn't look shocked in a bad way, just... caught off guard.

Scott's expression shifts, immediate understanding, and something like sorrow tangled underneath it.

"Okay," Scott says carefully. "Publicly?"

"Yeah." Shane nods once, sharp.

"Wow," Kip says softly as he sets his fork down, too.

Shane laughs once, too tight to be humour. "Yeah."

Scott leans back, exhaling through his nose like he's trying to organize the world into something manageable.

"You've told..." Scott stops himself. "Who knows?"

Shane counts on his fingers under the table because it helps. "My parents. Rose. You. Hayden and J.J. now."

Scott's eyes soften at that. "You told Hayden and J.J.?"

"Yeah," Shane says. "A couple of days ago."

"How'd that go?" Kip asks softly. Despite clearly having no idea who these people are, he's picked up that they're important to Shane.

"Fine." Shane shrugs. "Not... as clean as I wanted. They weren't mad about me being gay, they were..." He grimaces. "They were hurt I didn't tell them sooner."

Scott nods like he understands exactly.

"Which is fair," Shane adds, staring at the table.

"It is," Kip says gently. "And it also doesn't mean you did anything wrong."

Shane's throat tightens. He looks up, too fast.

Kip holds his gaze. "You did what you had to do to get through. That's not a moral failing."

Something in Shane's chest pulls, strange and painful: being seen like this, without having to defend himself.

He swallows hard and looks away before his face gives him away.

"I need..." Shane forces the words out. "I need to know what it's going to be like."

Scott's mouth twitches, humourless. "You want the blueprint."

"I guess." Shane shrugs.

"Okay," Scott says. He glances at Kip, like he's seeking out reassurance. Kip nods with a soft smile. Scott turns back to Shane. "Ask me."

Shane's stomach flips. He's had these questions lined up in his head for weeks, like bullets in a magazine.

"How did the room change?" Shane asks first, voice steady because he has practiced steady. "Like... your team. When you told them."

Scott's jaw works once. "It got quieter," he says. "Not right away. Not the first hour. But over the next couple days, the joking... shifted. Guys who used to chirp about anything got careful."

"Careful good?" Shane asks.

Scott's mouth twists. "Careful like they didn't want to be the one who said the wrong thing. Which is... fine. It's better than the alternative."

Kip's hand slides to Scott's thigh under the table, just a brief squeeze.

Scott keeps going, voice even. "Some guys were great. Immediately. Like they'd been waiting for me to give them permission to be normal about it. Others..." He exhales. "Others weren't cruel, exactly. They were just... distant. Like I'd changed the rules of the world and they didn't like it."

Shane nods slowly.

“Who surprised you?” Shane asks. “In a good way.”

Scott’s eyes flick up, searching memory. “One of our rookies,” he says. “Kid barely talked to me all year. Came up after practice, stuttering, and told me his uncle’s gay, and he thinks it’s cool I was being brave enough to tell people. He looked like he was going to puke.”

“That’s cute,” Kip says.

“And in a bad way?” Shane asks because he needs that part too.

Scott’s face goes still. “A guy I thought was my friend,” he says simply. “Not on the team, but... yeah.”

Shane’s chest tightens. “What did he do?”

Scott’s eyes hold Shane’s for a beat, then drop to his beer. “He stopped talking to me,” he says. “Like I’d infected the air around me. He never said anything outright. Which almost made it worse. There was nothing to fight.”

Shane nods, throat tight.

“What about the league?” Shane asks, forcing himself forward. “Did they... did they actually do anything?”

“Define do anything,” Scott lets out with a short laugh.

“Scott.” Kip chastises gently.

“I’m not being cynical,” Scott says, though he absolutely is. “I’m being honest. The league did what it always does. Put out the shortest statement they could get away with. Quietly told my GM they’d ‘support me.’ Checked the PR boxes. Mostly, they left me alone.”

Shane frowns. “That’s... good, though, right?”

“It’s not nothing,” Scott admits. “But don’t expect them to protect you from fans. Or from the media. They’ll protect the brand first.”

Kip leans in a bit. “What Scott means is, you’re going to need your own support system. Because the league isn’t it.”

“Okay.” Shane’s chest tightens again.

“What was worse than you expected?” Shane asks.

Scott doesn’t answer right away.

Shane watches him. The way he breathes in. The way his eyes go distant.

“The noise,” Scott says finally. “The constant commentary. People who’ve never met me deciding they get an opinion on whether I deserve to exist in the sport. Reporters asking questions that are just... dressed-up prying.”

Shane's fingers curl around his glass.

Scott's voice stays steady. "And you'll think you're fine at first. You'll tell yourself it's just internet bullshit. But then you'll see a headline when you're half-asleep, and it'll hit you in the sternum. Or you'll hear someone say something in the hallway and your whole body will go hot."

Shane's stomach twists, because... yeah. He can already imagine it. Has imagined it, on repeat in his nightmares, for years.

Kip's thumb rubs a slow circle against Scott's leg. Scott exhales and keeps going.

"What was easier?" Shane asks, because he needs that, too. Something that isn't just pain.

Scott's eyes lift again. "Being honest," he says. "Not with everyone. Not with the world. But with myself."

Shane's throat tightens.

Scott leans forward slightly, like he's choosing every word. "I didn't realize how much energy it took to keep lying until I stopped. I sleep better. I don't flinch every time my phone buzzes. I don't... feel split in half all the time."

The words hit Shane in the exact place he keeps his exhaustion. He swallows thickly, just nods, not trusting his voice.

Scott's gaze is steady. "It's not that it's easy. It's that it's worth it."

Shane lets the sentence settle into him. He doesn't know if he believes it yet. But he wants to.

"What about... your relationship?" Shane asks, and he hates how small his voice gets. "With Kip. Did it... did it get..."

"Harder?" Scott guessed, smiling softly.

Shane nods.

"It got more real," Scott says. "Because there were no more compartments. No more pretending he wasn't part of my life. That helped. Even when everything else sucked."

Kip's voice is gentle when he adds, "It also helped that Scott stopped trying to handle it alone."

Scott huffs. "I still tried."

"You did," Kip agrees. "And then you didn't. Which is why you're sitting here right now instead of... imploding."

Scott gives him a look. Kip just smiles at him like he's not afraid of Scott's moods anymore.

Shane's chest aches, sharp and bright. Wanting. He balls his hands into fists to stop himself from rubbing at his sternum to ease the tightness.

By the time their plates are cleared, Shane's food is gone but his appetite has been replaced by something else: adrenaline, exhaustion, relief. The heavy, strange quiet of having said the thing out

loud and survived it.

The server asks about dessert.

“No,” Shane says immediately.

Kip raises his eyebrows. “No?”

“I don’t...” Shane starts.

“Of course you’re a ‘no dessert’ person,” Scott says, amused. Shane shoots him a look. Scott’s mouth quirks. “Get the dessert.”

“What?” Shane blinks.

“It’s good.” Scott shrugs. “And you look like you’re going to vibrate out of your skin. Sugar might help.”

Kip smiles. “I think that’s doctor’s orders.”

“Fine.” Shane huffs a laugh despite himself.

Scott orders something with chocolate. Kip orders a fruit cheesecake of some kind. Shane stares at both like he doesn’t understand how people make choices under pressure.

When the desserts arrive, Shane takes one bite and immediately regrets every time he has ever refused sugar on principle. It’s obscene. It’s perfect.

“Jesus,” he mutters around a mouthful.

“I told you so.” Scott points at him with his fork.

Shane swallows, cheeks warm. “Shut up.”

Kip laughs softly and leans back, content. He watches Scott and Shane for a moment like he’s watching a documentary about male bonding in the wild.

“So,” Kip says, after a beat, tone casual. “Is there anyone special?”

Shane chokes on his ginger ale. He coughs, eyes watering, trying not to die in a nice New York restaurant. Scott is laughing so hard his shoulders shake.

“Jesus, Kip,” Scott manages, still laughing. “Ease the kid into it.”

“Sorry.” Kip looks genuinely contrite and also absolutely delighted. “It just... You two were talking about coming out, and I realized I don’t actually know anything about you.”

Shane clears his throat, cheeks on fire.

“Yeah. Uh. Yes,” he stammers. Scott’s laughter does not help.

“Yeah?” Kip’s eyes go wide, immediately warm.

“Yeah,” Shane nods, wanting to melt into the floor, regretting ever agreeing to this dinner.

“This is the most I’ve seen him blush ever,” Scott stage whispers.

“Oh, fuck off, Hunter,” Shane mutters, but there’s no heat in it.

“Okay.” Kip’s grin turns softer. “Okay. You don’t have to... I’m just... I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks,” Shane says.

“Can I ask how long?” Kip says next.

Shane opens his mouth. Closes it again.

“How is that a complicated question?” Scott gapes, eyebrows rising dramatically.

Shane looks at him flatly. “You want the ‘officially dating’ answer or the ‘started hooking up’ answer?”

Kip laughs outright. Scott’s eyes widen like Shane has just admitted to a felony.

“Oh my god,” Scott says, delighted and scandalized.

Shane can’t help the laugh that spills out of him. It’s real. It feels like breathing.

“Or,” Shane adds, unable to stop himself now, “maybe the ‘definitely not just fuck buddies, but what the hell are we’ answer.”

Scott is full-on laughing now, shoulders shaking. Kip’s eyes are bright, like he’s been handed a gift. And, fuck, it feels good. To be able to do this. To joke and laugh about his relationship the way everyone else can.

“How about all three?” Kip says, pleading.

“We’ll just say...” Shane rubs a hand over his face, still smiling. “Years.”

Scott whistles low. “Years.”

“Don’t.” Shane points his fork at him.

Kip’s grin softens again. “That’s... really sweet,” he says, and he sounds like he means it.

Shane’s chest does that weird thing again; tight, warm, terrified.

“Yeah,” Shane says quietly. “It is.”

They pay the bill. Scott insists. Shane tries to argue for exactly five seconds before Scott gives him a look that says, *“Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”*

Outside, New York is cold and loud and alive. The streetlights turn the sidewalk into something gold.

Shane stands on the curb with them while his Uber inches closer on the app.

Scott pulls him into a hug like it’s nothing. Like he’s hugged teammates a thousand times and this is just... another version of it. It’s warm and solid.

“You’ll be okay,” Scott says into Shane’s shoulder, quiet enough that only Shane hears.

“Yeah,” Shane mutters back.

Kip steps in next. His hug is gentler, careful in the way of someone who knows what it costs to be seen.

“If you ever need...” Kip starts, then stops, like he doesn’t want to overstep. “You can text me too. If you want.”

Shane’s throat tightens again.

“Thanks,” he manages.

Kip smiles. “Anytime.”

Scott and Kip walk away hand in hand down the block, disappearing into the moving crowd like a normal couple. Like the world has always had space for them.

Shane watches them go and feels something settle in him; not reassurance, exactly. Scott didn’t sugarcoat it. He didn’t promise it wouldn’t hurt.

But Shane feels... prepared. Like someone finally handed him a map instead of a motivational speech.

His Uber pulls up. Shane climbs into the back seat, the warmth hitting his face.

He pulls out his phone immediately, because of course he does.

A text is waiting.

Lily

Lily:Soooooo how was romantic candlelit dinner with Scott Hunter 🙄

Shane snorts, laughter surprising him again, soft and real.

He types back with his thumb.

Lily

Lily:Soooooo how was romantic candlelit dinner with Scott Hunter 🙄

Shane:It was NOT romantic.

Another text comes in before he can elaborate.

Lily

Lily:Soooooo how was romantic candlelit dinner with Scott Hunter 🙄

Shane:It was NOT romantic.

Lily:Call me when you get back to the hotel.

Shane's smile goes quieter. Softer. Something he doesn't have to fight for.

He looks out at the city sliding by and thinks:

This will hurt. But it won't destroy me.

Ilya is half-asleep when his phone rings.

Not the sharp buzz of an alarm or the harsh blare of the ringer he uses for team management; this is the softer, familiar sound he's trained himself to notice even through exhaustion. He blinks up at the dark ceiling, the glow of the city bleeding faintly through the hotel curtains, and reaches for the phone without checking the screen.

He already knows.

"*Solnyshko*," he murmurs, voice still rough with sleep. *Sunshine*.

There's a pause on the other end, then a breathy laugh. Relief, immediate and unguarded.

"Hey," Shane says. He sounds... lighter. Not unafraid. But steadier.

Ilya shifts onto his side, tucking the pillow closer, phone warm against his cheek.

"So," he says, already smiling. "How was dinner with Scott Hunter and his much younger, far too hot for him boyfriend?"

"Wow." Shane snorts. "No hello?"

"That was hello," Ilya says innocently. "Now tell me. Did he try to give you captain speeches? Did he cry? Did the boyfriend glare at him for being dramatic?"

"No crying," Shane says, amused. "Some speeches. Kip was... very nice. And yes, he's unfairly attractive. You'd hate him."

"Impossible," Ilya says. "I hate no one. Except Scott Hunter."

"Come on, he's a good guy," Shane chastises through a laugh.

They lapse into a brief, comfortable quiet. Ilya listens to the sound of Shane breathing on the other end of the line, the faint hum of traffic through the phone. He can picture him in the hotel room, jacket probably still on the chair, tie loosened, pacing less than he would have a month ago.

"Well?" Ilya prompts gently.

“It was good,” Shane says. Then, after a beat, like he wants to be precise, “Nice. Really nice.”

Something in Ilya’s chest loosens.

Shane tells him about it; not every word, not like a transcript, but the shape of it. Scott being honest. Not sugarcoating. The locker room getting quieter. The noise that never fully goes away. The way it still hurts sometimes. The way it’s still worth it.

“He said he sleeps better,” Shane says quietly. “That he doesn’t feel split in half anymore.”

Ilya closes his eyes.

“I am scared for you,” he admits. He doesn’t soften it, doesn’t pretend otherwise. “Of what people will say. Of what they will think they are allowed to take from you.”

“I know,” Shane says. No defensiveness. Just acknowledgement.

“And,” Ilya continues, voice lower now, “I am relieved. That you will not be carrying this secret anymore.”

There’s a small sound from Shane then; not quite a sigh, not quite a laugh. Something that lands somewhere between them.

“I’m scared too,” Shane says. “But it still feels like the right thing. Like... what I need to do.”

“Then I am with you,” Ilya says simply. No qualifiers. No conditions. “Always.”

The words feel solid in his mouth. True.

Shane hums softly, fond and tired and full in a way that makes Ilya’s chest ache.

“It was kind of wild,” he says after a moment. “Just... sitting there. Talking. Being normal. They knew. They didn’t care. Well, they cared, but only in the way people care about *you*. Not about what box you fit into.”

Ilya smiles into the pillow.

“Yes,” he says. “That is the good part.”

He thinks of dinners with Marley. Of laughing too loudly. Of not having to watch every pronoun, every deflection. Of how light it felt to just *exist* in the truth of himself, even partially.

“It is... easier,” Ilya says slowly. “Once someone knows. Even one person.”

“Yeah,” Shane says. “That. Exactly that.”

They sit in it for a few beats, the shared understanding stretching comfortably between them.

Then Ilya exhales, deliberately brightening his tone. “Alright. Enough feelings.”

“Oh no,” Shane says warily.

“Tell me about the game,” Ilya says, already grinning. “What was that disaster in the second period? I almost threw my phone.”

“Oh my *god*.” Shane groans, long and dramatic. “Don’t even get me started.”

Ilya laughs and settles deeper into the pillows, eyes closed, listening as Shane launches into a detailed rant about blown coverage and missed assignments and how it was *absolutely not* his fault, actually.

The world is still sharp. Still dangerous.

But tonight, at least, they are here. Talking. Breathing. Not alone.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

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

Scott lets himself have the small, ridiculous pleasure of holding Kip's hand as they walk.

It's cold enough that the city smells sharp, exhaust and winter and food carts, the sidewalk bright with reflected streetlight. Kip's fingers are warm in his, solid and familiar, their shoulders brushing as they fall into step. No one looks twice. No one cares. Scott lets that settle into him for a second, the quiet joy of it.

He hopes, suddenly but fiercely, that Hollander gets this someday.

Dinner had been good. Better than good. Hollander had looked wound tight when he sat down, like a guy bracing for impact, but he'd left looser. Laughing. Scott hadn't sugarcoated anything. He hadn't wanted to. Hollander deserved honesty, not comfort dressed up as reassurance.

Still. Scott thinks they'd done alright by him.

Beside him, Kip hums thoughtfully.

"I wonder who this secret boyfriend is," Kip says.

Scott makes a noncommittal sound. He is curious, but he's also not going to ask. Hollander had clearly not wanted to talk about him too much, and Scott respects that line more than most people would.

"He said it's been years," Scott says after a beat. "That's... I just..."

"Oh, come on," Kip snorts. "You cannot be surprised by that."

Scott glances sideways at him. Kip gestures between them, their linked hands, with a raised eyebrow.

"Okay, fair," Scott laughs under his breath.

He squeezes Kip's hand, thumb brushing the familiar ridge of knuckle. "Hollander's just so... good," he adds, thoughtful. "Polite. Controlled. It's weird to think of him lying. Or keeping something that big to himself."

Kip's expression softens. "People will do a lot they wouldn't normally do to keep themselves safe."

Scott hums in agreement. He's had that conversation before. In a different city. With a different player using secrecy for safety.

The thought spirals.

Man, what are the odds?

Two of the brightest stars of their generation. Both in love with men. Both, apparently, for years.

“...the man you have loved since you are teenager.”

Rozanov’s voice echoes in his head, accented and earnest, said months ago on a quiet balcony during an awards gala. Scott had clocked it as significant then, filed it away as one of those truths you don’t interrogate unless invited.

His brain, apparently, has decided tonight is invitation enough.

Images start surfacing, unhelpful and relentless.

Rozanov frozen in the neutral zone, face gone blank-white as Hollander is stretchered past him. The captainly visit to the hospital the next day that had felt... personal. More personal than protocol.

The instant chemistry at the All-Star Game Scott had chalked up to generational talent recognizing its mirror.

The quiet, unmistakably fond conversation he’d spotted between them at the hotel, bodies angled close despite the noise.

Years of quick glances. Of heated chirping that carried something soft underneath it. Of press conference deflections. Of rivalry that felt... curated. Performed, not lived.

“No,” Scott mutters to himself.

That’s insane.

He feels like a conspiracy theorist with a corkboard, red string stretching between unrelated photos. He shakes his head, tries to brush it off.

His brain does not comply.

Another memory surfaces, uninvited.

Hollander chirping him once about “showing up.” Scott shooting back that he was starting to sound like *him*. Scott had meant it as a joke, poking at the rivalry. Hollander had reacted like it hit somewhere else entirely.

A wide-eyed Rookie of the Year, an invite for shots, inquiring about “your boy Rozanov.” Hollander’s panicked, immediate: *We’re not friends*.

Things that mean nothing on their own.

But... stacked together? Compressed over years?

Scott stops walking.

Dead stop.

Kip stumbles a half-step, dragged to a halt with him. “Scott?”

Scott doesn’t answer.

Because it can't... They can't... They're not...

But... oh.

Oh, *fuck*.

It makes a terrifying amount of sense. If you think about it for more than two seconds.

Two kids under impossible pressure. The only ones who could even begin to understand what the other was carrying. Hollander's relentless discipline, his need for control. Rozanov's brightness, his relaxed charm, his permission to live loudly.

Hollander as the anchor.

Rozanov as the air.

And then, like the final piece clicking into place, Scott's brain dredges up an old, half-forgotten memory. A first All-Star Game. An across-the-bench conversation dismissed as trash talk.

A rushed, whispered string of numbers. A hotel room.

Scott laughs.

It bursts out of him, loud and startled and completely uncontrolled. He doubles over, dropping Kip's hand, bracing himself on his knees like he's taken a hard hit. He laughs until his sides hurt, until he has to drag in air in sharp, humiliating gasps.

He probably looks unhinged.

Kip is definitely looking at him like he's unhinged.

He feels unhinged.

It's not funny. Not really. It's heartbreaking.

He can only imagine how the world, hell, the league, will react to knowing the great rivals have been carrying on a years-long affair.

It means they probably won't get to walk hand-in-hand with their boyfriend after a nice dinner with a colleague. Not any time during their careers. And that makes a small, protective, empathetic part of Scott want to burn the world down for them.

But it's also hilarious. It's the most entertaining bit of gossip Scott has ever had the privilege of knowing.

"Oh my god," Scott wheezes. "Oh my *god*."

"Scott," Kip says carefully. "Babe?"

Scott lifts his head enough to look at him, still breathless, mind reeling with disbelief.

"I figured it out," he says.

"What?" Kip's eyebrows shoot up.

“The secret boyfriend,” Scott gasps. “I figured it out.”

Kip’s eyes widen comically. “And?”

Scott opens his mouth.

And snaps it shut.

Hollander had told him he could tell Kip. Rozanov hadn’t. And Scott is many things, but he is not a man who breaks trust just because the gossip is good.

“I can’t say,” he admits, genuinely apologetic.

Kip deflates a little, then softens immediately.

“Okay. Yeah,” he accepts, tone laced with understanding. “Fair.”

Scott straightens, takes Kip’s hand again, lifts it, and presses a kiss to his knuckles. Kip beams at him, open and unguarded in a way that still makes Scott’s chest ache sometimes.

They start walking again.

“God,” Scott mutters, shaking his head to himself. “Who’d have thought...”

Chapter End Notes

insert Charlie Day meme

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

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

Shane walks into the locker room and feels it scrape along his bones.

Not silence, exactly. The room is still full of noise: gear clattering onto the floor, someone laughing too loudly at a phone video, the low murmur of two guys talking about a power play, but it's like someone has turned the oxygen down. Like there's space where warmth used to be.

He gets it now, what Scott meant.

The room didn't turn hostile.

It emptied.

Shane keeps his face neutral as he crosses to his stall. He hangs his suit jacket with the same careful motion he always uses, as if routine can stitch this back together. As if muscle memory can pretend it doesn't notice the way conversations tilt away from him.

He can feel eyes on him and also feel the way they slip off the second he looks up.

He tells himself it's fine.

A few days. That's all it's been. People just need time.

His hands are already moving; tie loosened, shirt unbuttoned, cufflinks dropped into the little dish he keeps in his stall. The motions are familiar enough to be soothing, until they aren't.

His fingers snag on his belt. He yanks too hard. The buckle bites his palm.

He inhales through his nose and keeps going.

Across the room, someone says his name, and for half a second his body reacts like a dog hearing a whistle, sharp and hopeful...

But it isn't him they're talking about. It's the other Shane. Some guy on another team. A highlight clip. A joke.

He swallows.

His suit pants hit the bench with more force than necessary.

The shift in the room is small, but it's real. A microsecond of attention. A pause. Then the chatter resumes, a touch quieter, angled away.

He stares at his base layer shirt for a second too long, like he's forgotten how to put it on.

Hayden, two stalls down, glances over. His expression is careful in that way it's been careful since... since *that day*. Since Shane stood up and changed the air in this room with one sentence.

I'm fine.

Don't. Not now.

He drags the base layer over his head. The fabric clings to his damp skin; he can feel sweat cooling in places it shouldn't, like his body is reacting to a threat even though nothing is happening. Nothing overt. Nothing he can point to and report and make someone else fix.

He's halfway through dressing when memory hits him like a cross-check he didn't see coming.

He's standing here, right here, after practice, still sweating, hair damp. He can smell stale deodorant and wet gear and the faint, citrus tang of whatever they use to clean the floors. The room is loud, guys talking over each other, the kind of casual chaos Shane has built his whole career inside.

He clears his throat.

Once.

Twice.

"Hey," he says, louder. "Guys."

And the room shifts because a captain's voice does that. It pulls attention. It quiets people without asking.

Hayden's eyes meet his, steady. J.J. is watching the room like he's ready to throw punches for Shane if he has to.

Shane's mouth is dry.

He says it anyway.

"I'm gay."

He remembers the exact shape of the silence after.

Not stunned gasps. Not slurs. Not someone yelling. Not even someone making a joke to defuse it.

Just...

Nothing.

The air drains out like someone opened a door to winter.

He hears someone swallow. Someone's gear bag zippering shut. The squeak of a bench as a guy stands.

And then, after a beat that feels like a minute, someone says, "Okay," in a flat voice that means "*I don't know what to do with this*," and the room starts moving again like a machine that's been paused and restarted.

Shane blinks himself back into the present.

His socks are on the wrong feet. He peels them off, irritation sharp and immediate, and puts them back on with a bit too much force.

He focuses on the ground. On his stall. On the tidy arrangement of his gear.

On anything but the empty space between him and the team.

Guys filter in and out around him. A rookie, one of the new ones who still looks like he can't believe he's here, gives him a small nod and a "Hey, Cap," like this is normal.

Shane nods back. "Hey."

It lands in his chest like a small mercy.

A veteran passes behind him, close enough that Shane can smell his cologne, and doesn't even glance his way.

It shouldn't matter. It shouldn't. Shane has played through worse than being ignored.

He can survive not being liked.

He tells himself that and keeps dressing.

But there's a difference between being disliked and being... erased.

He's pulling on his socks when another memory punches through, this one quieter, colder.

Coach Theriault's office. The blinds half-closed. The smell of coffee and printer toner. The little name plaque on the desk angled toward the door like anyone needed the reminder. Coach had gestured for him to sit, then not sat himself. Had stayed standing, arms folded.

"Look," he'd said, carefully. Like he was choosing each word from a list someone handed him. "We can't tell you not to do what you're going to do."

Shane had felt his jaw tighten.

"But," Theriault continued, "there's responsibility here. There's... a room. There are distractions. There's media. There's..." He'd stopped, then started again. "You're the captain. You understand how this can affect... focus."

It hadn't been cruel. It was business. Brand. Team.

That almost made it worse.

The tidy little cage hockey always built around its stars, and how quickly that cage could become a weapon.

Shane's skate lace slips through his fingers. His hands are colder than they should be.

He yanks the lace hard.

Too hard.

The tongue bites down wrong, uneven, and he feels his foot start to throb even before he's finished.

“Fuck,” he mutters, low.

He stares at the skate. Stares at his own hands.

Then, abruptly furious, he rips the whole thing open and starts over from scratch, laces snapping, fingers moving too fast.

Hayden’s voice, quiet: “Shane.”

Shane doesn’t look at him. He just shakes his head again. No. Not now.

He can feel J.J.’s presence before he hears him. J.J. drifts close, all loose posture and casualness, and bumps Shane’s shoulder like an accident.

It isn’t.

It’s support. It’s “*I’m here.*” It’s “*You’re not alone in this.*”

Shane exhales, sharp, and forces his hands to slow.

Okay. Okay.

He ties the skate again. Looser. Correct. Ritual restored.

His phone had rung the next day. A number he had saved, because of course he did, but had never actually seen on screen before.

The GM’s voice had been smooth. Calm. Almost pleasant.

“We wanted to touch base,” he’d said.

Touch base. As if Shane was negotiating his contract and not telling something true about himself.

There had been a lot of words. Discretion. Timing. Team image. “We can’t tell you not to…” again, as if saying it absolved them of what came next.

“We just want to make sure,” the GM had said, “that we’re aligned in how we handle messaging.”

Messaging.

Shane’s stomach tightens now, the memory sour.

He stands abruptly, too fast. His elbow knocks his water bottle; it clatters against the floor and rolls.

A couple of guys glance over. Then look away.

Shane crouches, picks it up, places it back exactly where it was.

His hands are steady. His insides are not.

He forces himself to breathe. In. Out.

This is what you wanted. This is the cost. You knew there would be a cost. Knowing doesn’t make it hurt less.

He thinks of Scott's voice: "*It got quieter.*"

He thinks of Scott's eyes when he said, "*It's worth it.*"

Shane closes his eyes for a beat and tries to find that worth like a pulse.

Tonight, he'll play.

Tonight, he'll do his job.

He can handle cold. He can handle distance. He can handle politeness where there used to be warmth.

He *can*.

He pulls his jersey over his head. The captain's C sits on his chest like a brand.

When it's time, he stands.

The room isn't fully quiet; guys still shifting, still stretching, still fiddling with pads and helmets, but it is attentive in the way it always becomes when the captain speaks.

Shane clears his throat.

He gives the pregame speech he always gives: simple, clipped, focused. The kind that's about systems and effort and staying out of the box. The kind that doesn't ask anyone to feel anything they don't want to feel.

The response is almost normal. A few nods. A few murmured yeses. A couple of thumps on benches.

For one brief, stupid second, Shane thinks: Maybe it's fine. Maybe it's thawing. Maybe this is the worst of it.

The game is a fight right from the first puck drop. The kind where nothing comes easy, where every inch is earned, where the crowd feels like a living thing pressing on the glass. Dallas has been on a tear, and they don't seem to plan on stopping tonight.

Shane is good. Not flashy. Not dramatic. Just solid. Reliable. A pillar. He wins battles. He keeps pucks alive. He makes the smart plays. He does everything he's always done, like it might remind them what he is to this team.

Then, in the middle of the second period, it happens.

It's so small he almost misses it. But it's also so massive he never could.

A clean lane opens up. Shane drives into space on instinct, stick out, ready. He's wide open, open enough that it's automatic, that the pass should be there before he even fully registers the opening.

He glances to the left.

Sees the moment of decision.

And the puck goes *elsewhere*.

Not because the lane closed. Not because the defenseman got a stick in. Not because the play was smarter another way.

The puck goes to a worse option. A forced option. A choice that makes no hockey sense.

Shane's body keeps moving like the puck is coming anyway.

For a fraction of a second, his feet stutter. His balance slips, like his brain has tripped over reality.

He nearly eats ice.

The play dies. The other team clears.

Shane turns on a dime, tracking back, face blank because his body knows how to hide.

But his chest feels hollow.

He finishes the shift in a fog. His legs still work. His hands still work. He still does the job. Then he skates to the bench and sits hard. His heart is pounding, but not from exertion.

He looks up the bench.

Looks for Coach Theriault.

For the reaction that should come; the barked correction, the glare at the guy who made the wrong read, the clipped "what the fuck was that," something.

Anything.

Coach doesn't even look at him.

Doesn't curse. Doesn't gesture. Doesn't make a note.

Just watches the ice like nothing happened.

Like Shane didn't just become optional.

Something inside Shane splits open. Not dramatic. Not loud. Just a quiet fissure, cold air rushing in.

Because this... this isn't about not being liked. This isn't even about being frozen out.

This is about trust.

About whether they still believe he deserves the puck. Whether he deserves the play. Whether he deserves to be centered, to be relied on, to be *part of the machine*.

He sits there, staring at the ice through the glass like it's suddenly very far away.

Shane can survive being disliked.

He has survived worse.

But he can't survive not being trusted to play.

Chapter End Notes

Just again want to thank everyone for all the love in the comments. I truly love reading all of them 💖💖💖

Chapter 10

Shane moves through the post-game routine like a ghost.

He doesn't remember taking his gloves off. Doesn't remember unclipping his shoulder pads or peeling his jersey over his head. He remembers *pieces*: the sting of sweat in his eyes, the way his socks stuck to the bottom of his feet, the dull pressure in his skull like someone packed it with cotton and left it there.

He remembers the missed pass.

It's still playing behind his eyes, on a loop. The clean lane. The automatic read. The puck going somewhere worse for no reason that has anything to do with hockey.

He remembers sitting on the bench afterward with his mouth slightly open, like his body forgot how to close it. Remembering the shape of Coach Theriault's profile, fixed on the ice, not moving, not looking at him. Remembering that emptiness, the moment Shane understood that whatever this was, it wasn't going to be handled.

It was going to be *allowed*.

He remembers a reporter in the scrum afterward, leaning in like he'd been waiting for blood.

"That play in the second. Looked like you had a lane there. Any frustration not getting the pass?"

Shane remembers the microphone. The camera light. The too-bright, too-close face.

He remembers himself smiling.

He remembers hearing his own voice like it belonged to someone else.

"Yeah, I mean, there's a lot happening out there. I didn't have the full view of the ice. Maybe he saw something I didn't. We'll look at it, learn from it, move on."

He *did* have the full view of the ice. There *wasn't* a better play.

And he doesn't remember anything after that.

He doesn't remember getting dressed. He doesn't remember his teammates' eyes sliding away from him. He doesn't remember the drive home, the red lights, the turn signals, the exact moment he parked.

He doesn't remember walking up the stairs to his apartment, keys in the lock, the door closing behind him.

He doesn't remember pulling out his phone.

He only remembers the sound of it ringing... once, twice... and the moment Ilya answers.

"What the hell was that?" Ilya says immediately.

Not accusatory. Not angry.

Just... baffled. Disbelieving. Like he's trying to make the hockey make sense, and it won't.

And Shane stands in the middle of his living room with his coat still on, staring at the wall, and something inside him, something that has been holding itself together with duct tape and pride, finally gives.

His eyes burn, fast and humiliating, and he makes a sound; half laugh, half choke, that doesn't belong in his mouth.

"I don't know," he says. Then, because it's the only honest thing he has: "I do know. I *do*."

"Shane..."

"No." Shane cuts him off, too sharp. He starts moving without meaning to, pacing a tight loop around the coffee table. His boots thud on the hardwood. "No, Ilya, I..." He swallows hard. "I *saw it*. I saw it happen. I was *right there*. It wasn't, there wasn't a stick. There wasn't pressure. There wasn't a better option. I was..."

He stops, suddenly, hand fisted in his hair.

He forces air into his lungs. It feels like breathing through broken glass.

"I was wide open," he says, quieter now. "And he looked at me. He *looked* at me, and he chose not to."

On the other end, Ilya is silent for a beat.

Then, softly: "*Da*."

That one syllable, agreement, presence, does more than any reassurance would. It gives Shane permission to keep going.

And once he starts, he can't stop.

"I built them," Shane says, voice rising again, anger rushing in like a flood. "I built them a fucking dynasty. Do you know that? Do you..." He laughs again, ugly this time. "Of course, you know. Everyone knows."

He's still pacing. Faster now. Like if he stops moving, he'll fall apart completely.

"I gave them *everything*. All of me. Every injury I played through. Every fucking time I swallowed my pride and did what the coaches asked, even when it wasn't what I wanted. Every time I made the smart play instead of the flashy one. Every time I played the minutes no one else wanted to play because it was *my job* to *carry* the room."

His voice cracks on the last word.

He hates that it cracks.

He keeps going anyway.

“I bled for this team,” he says. “I bled for this organization. I have scars I can point to and tell you what game they came from. I have bones that never healed right because I didn’t have time to let them. Because the playoffs were coming. Because there was always one more game, one more series, one more push.”

He turns, jabs a finger at nothing.

“And now... *now* I tell them one thing about myself. One thing. Not even about them. Not even something that changes the way I play. And suddenly it’s like... like I’m glass. Like I’m dangerous. Like I’m...”

He can’t find the word.

His chest is heaving. His hands are shaking.

“Like I’m *damaged*,” he spits, finally.

“I am here,” Ilya says on the other end, voice low and anchoring. “I am listening.”

Shane closes his eyes so hard it hurts.

“I spent years,” Shane says, and the anger is still there, but now it’s threaded with something rawer: grief, betrayal, the sharp ache of being naive. “I spent *years* sacrificing myself so this wouldn’t happen.”

“Years being... perfect,” he says. “I did everything right. I did everything they tell you to do. Be professional. Be polite. Be the captain. Be the example. Be the guy they can point to and say, *this is what we stand for*.”

His laugh is small and broken.

“Isn’t that funny?”

He doesn’t wait for Ilya to answer.

“I thought if I was good enough, if I was... beyond reproach, or whatever bullshit, then it wouldn’t matter. I thought that even if they ended up hating me, they’d still see my value on the ice.”

He swallows.

“And they still throw me away like it’s nothing.”

There’s a soft sound on the other end, like Ilya shifting, like he’s sitting up in bed.

“I am so sorry,” Ilya says.

Shane presses the heel of his hand into his eye like he can physically force the tears back where they came from.

“I feel stupid,” he says, voice raw. “I feel... *so* fucking stupid.”

“You are not stupid,” Ilya says immediately, firm.

“I am.” Shane laughs, bitter. “I am, because I believed them. I believed all that talk about family, about brotherhood. I believed it because I wanted it to be true.”

He drags a hand down his face.

“I stood in their weddings,” Shane says suddenly, the words tumbling out like he didn’t know they were waiting. “I held their kids. I went to baby showers and birthday parties and stupid fucking barbecues where we all pretended we weren’t exhausted all the time.”

He turns in a slow circle, like the room might contain evidence.

“I had new guys crashing in my spare room because they were traded at the deadline, and we spend enough time in hotels already. Or rookies because they missed home. Or vets because they needed someone to talk to at three in the morning.”

His voice cracks, sharp and sudden. He can feel the tears streaking down his cheeks and hates that they’re there.

“I listened when their marriages were falling apart. When their family members died. When they were scared they weren’t good enough to be here. I *made space* for them.”

There’s a small, pained sound from Ilya on the other end of the line. He doesn’t interrupt.

“And now it’s like…” Shane swallows hard. “Like none of that mattered.”

He breathes out, shaky.

“I knew,” Shane says. “I knew it would change things. I *knew* it. Scott told me it would get quiet, and I thought, fine. Quiet, I can handle. Quiet isn’t hate.”

His voice rises again.

“But it’s not just quiet, is it? It’s *absence*. It’s the way you stop existing in the room. It’s the way people don’t look at you because then they’d have to admit they’re treating you differently.”

He’s back to pacing.

It’s a loop around the living room now, a track he’s wearing into the floor.

“And then in the game,” he says, breath catching. “In the game, they make it hockey. They make it *hockey*, so I can’t even… what am I supposed to do? Go to the coach and say, hey, I think he didn’t pass to me because I’m gay? What does that even sound like? I sound insane. I sound like I’m… making excuses.”

His voice drops, suddenly small.

“But I know what I saw.”

“I know,” Ilya says softly.

Another pause. A breath.

Then Ilya says, carefully, like he’s handling something fragile:

“Shane. *Lyubimyy*. You do not have to do the public coming out.” He hesitates. “You can give yourself time. You can... tackle this first. Get through this. You already did hard part.”

Shane stops pacing so abruptly that his knee twinges.

He stands still in the middle of his apartment, phone pressed hard to his ear, staring at the window where Montreal glows faintly beyond the glass.

“No.” His voice is flat when he answers.

A beat.

Ilya doesn't push. Just: “No?”

Shane's jaw tightens.

“I didn't do this,” he says, every word deliberate, “to stop halfway.”

He can hear his own breath. The thud of his heart.

“If I go back,” he says, voice shaking now with fury, “if I let them scare me back into the closet, then they win. Then this is just... proof that they were right to make me afraid.”

He swallows hard.

“And I can't...” His voice breaks. He clears his throat violently. “I can't do that. Not after everything.”

On the other end, Ilya exhales. Long. Controlled.

Then, quietly: “Okay.”

Shane's shoulders sag at that, like he needed Ilya to say *okay* so he could keep standing.

“I will support you,” Ilya says, voice steady. “No matter what.”

Shane closes his eyes.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

“But,” Ilya continues, and there's a shift, steel under the softness, “if you are doing this, then we revise plan.”

“What?” Shane frowns, eyes still closed.

“I am not letting you be alone in Montreal long-term,” Ilya says simply.

Shane opens his eyes.

“What are you talking about?” he questions.

“I am talking about you,” Ilya says, like it's obvious. “You will not stay in place that...” he searches for the word, then says it anyway, bluntly. “...that poisons you.”

“Ilya...” Shane’s throat tightens.

“No,” Ilya says, and he doesn’t raise his voice, but it’s firm in a way that makes Shane go still.

“You can be brave. You can be stubborn. You can do what you need to do. But you will not do it alone. You will not do it and go to work with team who do not respect you, and then come home to empty apartment and pretend you are fine.”

Shane swallows. His mouth opens. Nothing comes out.

Because the truth is: he has been doing exactly that for years, even if he hadn’t realized it.

“I can handle it,” Shane says automatically.

There’s a pause.

Then Ilya says, very softly: “Can you?”

The question isn’t a challenge.

It’s grief. It’s love. It’s Ilya seeing him too clearly, the way he always has.

Shane’s eyes burn again. He turns away from the window like he can’t stand the city looking back at him.

“I don’t know,” he admits.

“*Da.*” Ilya exhales. And Shane can hear it in that one syllable: *I knew.*

He presses his forehead to the wall.

“I don’t want to lose them,” Shane says, voice muffled. “I don’t want to...” He swallows. “I don’t want to lose what I built.”

“I know,” Ilya says. “But you are not losing because you are wrong. You are losing because they are stupid.”

That’s such an Ilya thing to say; sharp, blunt, true, that Shane almost laughs. It comes out as a broken sound instead.

“I hate them,” Shane says suddenly, rage flaring back to life. “I hate...” He pushes off the wall and starts pacing again because standing still feels like drowning. “I hate that they get to do this. I hate that they get to pretend it’s not about this. I hate that they get to keep their hands clean. They’re not calling me slurs. They’re not punching me in the face. They’re just... quietly taking things away.”

He gestures wildly with his free hand.

“And I can’t fight quiet,” he says, voice cracking. “How do you fight quiet? How do you fight someone not passing you the puck? How do you fight someone looking away? How do you fight nothing?”

“You do not,” Ilya says. “You survive it.”

Shane stops again, breathing hard.

“And then what?” Shane demands. “And then what, Ilya? I survive it, and it, what, makes them come back? Makes them see me again?”

On the other end, Ilya is quiet for a moment.

“No,” Ilya says. “Surviving does not make them better.”

Shane’s stomach twists.

“But,” Ilya continues, voice steady, “surviving means you still get to be you on the other side. It means they do not get to break you.”

Shane’s throat closes.

He swipes at his face, furious at the wetness there.

“I don’t want to be broken,” he whispers, a small sob escaping with the words.

“You are not,” Ilya says immediately. “You are hurt. You are angry. This is not broken. This is...” he pauses, searching, then says, softly, “...this is grief.”

Shane’s breath shudders.

He presses his hand to his sternum like he can hold himself together.

“I feel like,” he chokes on it. Tries again. “I feel like I gave them the best parts of me.”

Silence, for a few seconds, filled only by the sound of them breathing on opposite sides of the continent.

Then Ilya says, lighter, careful, not forcing it, but offering a handhold: “Tell me you are home.”

Shane swallows. “I’m home.”

“Good,” Ilya says.

Shane’s voice is hoarse. “I don’t remember getting here.”

“I know,” Ilya murmurs.

“And I...” Shane stops. Starts again. “I called you without thinking.”

“Yes.”

Shane huffs a broken laugh. “Of course I did.”

“Of course you did,” Ilya echoes, fondness bleeding into it.

Another pause.

Then Shane says, barely audible: “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Ilya asks immediately.

“For dumping this on you,” Shane says. “For being angry. For... ruining your night.”

“Shane,” Ilya says, and there’s steel again, protective. “Do not apologize for being hurt.”

Shane exhales, shaking.

“I don’t know what to do,” he admits.

“You do what you have been doing,” Ilya says. “You play. You breathe. You let it hurt. And you let people who love you help.”

“Okay,” Shane agrees quietly.

“I am still here,” Ilya says. “I am still yours.”

Shane’s breath catches.

He leans back against the wall, phone pressed to his ear like it’s the only solid thing in the room.

“Okay,” Shane says, voice shaking. “Okay.”

“Good,” Ilya murmurs. “Now...” A pause. A shift into something deliberately normal. “Let me tell you about game. You see Marley’s blown goal in third?”

Shane lets out a wet, incredulous laugh.

“Ilya.”

“What?” Ilya says, offended on principle. Shane can hear the smile. “I am allowed to be mad about hockey, too.”

Shane drags a hand down his face, wiping the last of the tears away.

“It wasn’t a blown goal,” he says, voice rough. “It was a botched coverage because the D decided to...”

“Ah,” Ilya says, delighted. “Here we go.”

Shane groans, but it’s quieter now. Less jagged.

And as he starts ranting about the play, about angles and assignments and missed reads, he can feel Ilya on the other end, humming and laughing in the right places, steady as a heartbeat.

Shane is still furious.

He is still hurt.

But he is not alone in it.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

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

Shane's kettle has been screaming for a full thirty seconds before he realizes it isn't going to stop on its own.

He blinks at it like it's an unfamiliar piece of equipment, like he's waiting for someone else to step in and handle the noise. Then he exhales and reaches across the stove to shut it off. The silence that follows is too sharp.

Behind him, at his kitchen island, his mom is folding a dish towel with the kind of precise, unhurried care that makes the whole room feel steadier by association. Yuna Hollander doesn't move like she's trying to fill space. She moves like she's allowed to be in it.

Shane grabs two mugs from the cupboard because his hands need a job.

"I'm not going to drink that," Yuna says without looking up, as if she can see him through the back of her skull.

"It's tea," Shane says.

"It's tea in bags," she corrects, finally glancing up. Her expression is dry. "It tastes like grass clippings."

Shane huffs something that isn't quite a laugh and sets one mug back. He pours the hot water anyway, drops a bag into his own cup, and stares at it while it steeps, like watching the color bleed will do something useful to his brain.

The tablet on the counter lights up.

Ilya.

Shane's stomach tightens in the familiar way it has tightened ever since that night on the phone, like his body hasn't entirely accepted that Ilya is always too far away.

Yuna's gaze lifts, quiet and assessing.

"Living room," she says, nodding toward it. "You look like you're about to pace a hole through the floor."

"I'm fine," Shane says reflexively.

Yuna's eyebrow rises a millimeter. Her expression says, *"Try that lie on someone else."*

Shane carries the tablet and his mug into the living room anyway, because it's easier to obey than argue. He sets the tablet on the coffee table, propping it against a stack of mail. The call connects on the second ring.

Ilya's face fills the screen; hair still damp like he showered recently, jaw shadowed, eyes too alert for someone who's supposed to be winding down. Behind him is a headboard and the warm glow of a lamp. He looks like he's in bed, but he doesn't look relaxed. He looks like a man braced to sprint.

"Shane," Ilya says, voice low. His eyes flick over Shane's face like he's taking inventory. "How are you?"

Shane opens his mouth and almost says fine out of habit.

He doesn't.

"Not great," he says instead, blunt. "But... functional."

Ilya's exhale is quiet, controlled. Then, softer: "Your mother is with you?"

Shane tips the tablet slightly as Yuna settles at the far end of the couch, graceful as ever, one leg folding under her.

"Hi, Ilya," she says, warm and simple.

Ilya's shoulders drop a fraction. "Hello, Yuna."

Yuna studies his face for a beat. "You look tired."

Ilya blinks, like he wasn't expecting that level of directness. Then he gives a small, rueful smile. "I am."

"Good," Yuna says, like that's an acceptable answer. "That means you're human."

Something tight in Shane's chest shifts. He looks down at his tea and pretends he's interested in it.

Yuna turns slightly, angling her body so she can see both Shane and the tablet without making either of them feel cornered.

"Alright," she says, practical as always. "You both said you needed to talk. So we're going to do this properly."

Shane's throat works.

"First: we name what changed," Yuna says, counting on her fingers. "Second: we name what you're worried about. Third: we build options. Not feelings. Options."

Ilya nods once, attentive.

"Yes, Mom," Shane mutters.

"Start at the beginning," she says. "What changed?"

Shane stares into his mug. The tea is lukewarm now. He doesn't drink it.

"Montreal changed," he says, and he hears his own voice go flat. "It's not... I mean, you've heard. Hell, you've seen. But it's worse now that it's happening on the ice."

Ilya's face goes still. The anger sits in his eyes like something sharp behind glass.

Yuna nods once, like she expected it.

"So the environment is hostile in the way institutions prefer," she says, tone even. "Polite enough to deny. Brutal enough to harm."

Shane's mouth twists. "Yeah."

"And Shane is miserable there," Ilya says, clipped.

"I'm not..." Shane starts.

"Don't," Yuna says, holding up a hand without even looking at him.

Shane shuts his mouth. His knee starts bouncing, and he hates that he can't stop it.

Yuna's gaze flicks to it, then back to his face. "Is it sustainable?" she asks, simply.

Shane's jaw tightens.

"No," he admits.

Ilya's shoulders ease like he's been braced for Shane to lie.

Yuna turns to the tablet again. "And you," she says to Ilya. "What about you?"

Ilya's jaw flexes. He searches for the word in English, then abandons it.

"Nothing has changed for me with hockey. But... I am scared for him," he says plainly. "And I am angry. But anger does not change anything."

"No," Yuna agrees. "It doesn't."

She takes a breath, then lifts a second finger. "Now we name concerns. Because if we don't, you'll spiral in circles and call it planning."

Shane makes a faint sound that might be agreement.

Yuna looks at Shane. "Concern one: you don't want to leave Montreal."

Shane's mouth opens, then closes. "I don't," he says quietly. "I built..." He stops. The word catches. "I built a life here."

Yuna nods. Her gaze shifts to Ilya. "Concern two: you will not let him stay in an environment that's harmful."

"No," Ilya says immediately. "I will not."

Yuna's eyes return to Shane. "Concern three: you're afraid that anything you do to protect yourself delays Ilya's legal safety."

"Yes." Shane's hands tighten around the mug.

Ilya's eyes flick down, then back up, that small nose-scratch tell, like Shane hit a bruise.

Yuna watches both of them, then says, gently but firmly, "Good. Now we can stop fighting shadows."

Shane huffs a humorless laugh. "So we need a new plan."

"Yes," Yuna says. "Now we talk options."

Ilya doesn't hesitate.

"Ottawa," he says.

Shane's head lifts. "What?"

"Ottawa," Ilya repeats, steady. "You request trade in off-season. You go there. They have reputation as friendly team. You are closer to your parents."

"But what about you?" Shane wants to ask. *"What would you have?"*

Shane stares at the tablet like the answer might rearrange itself into something less impossible.

"You know that means..." he starts.

"I know," Ilya says.

"It means you're stuck in Boston," Shane says, voice rising despite himself. "Because Ottawa isn't taking both of us in the same year. They can't afford it."

"Then I stay in Boston," Ilya says tightly.

Shane laughs, short and incredulous. "You say that like it's nothing."

"It is not nothing," Ilya says, voice sharpening. "But it is better than you staying somewhere that hurts you."

Yuna hums, thoughtful. "Ottawa makes sense geographically," she says. "Close enough to be in the same orbit. Different enough to reset the social environment. Harder to sell the friendship angle quickly, but the rivalry will fade on its own."

Shane drags a hand through his hair. "That still pushes everything back."

Yuna's gaze stays on him. "Yes."

"It pushes *Ilya* back," Shane says, and he hates how desperate it sounds.

Ilya's mouth tightens. "We can manage," he says carefully.

"No," Shane snaps, then reins it in on an exhale. "I'm sorry. I just..." He swallows. "Your papers. Your citizenship. The whole point of Ottawa was..."

"To get me safer," Ilya finishes quietly. Not defensive. Almost gentle.

Shane's throat closes.

Yuna's expression shifts into something regretful, rare enough to make Shane's stomach sink.

"If Shane needs to leave Montreal, Ottawa is the best option for both of you," she says. "But yes. It delays the timeline."

"By years," Shane whispers.

"By at least one," Yuna says, calm. "Probably two. Depending on contracts and how cooperative teams are."

"Shane," Ilya says, firmer now. "Listen to me."

Shane looks at the screen.

"I am fine," Ilya says, and Shane hates how practiced it sounds. "I can take short contract with Boston. Two years. Maybe three. They will not block me asking for a trade early."

"You don't know that," Shane says.

"Boston has been good to me," Ilya insists.

"Boston is good to you because you're Ilya Rozanov," Shane says, bitterness leaking in. "Because you sell jerseys and tickets and get them to the playoffs. They're good to you until you become inconvenient."

A beat of silence.

Yuna's eyes flick to Shane; approving, despite herself.

Ilya's gaze stays steady. "Yes," he admits. "This is true."

Shane's chest aches.

"But," Ilya continues, "I am not coming out publicly. I am not making myself inconvenient. Not in a way that endangers me."

Shane's jaw clenches. "And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

"It is supposed to be reality," Ilya says. No heat. Just facts. "We work with what is true."

Yuna nods slowly. "Ilya is right," she says. "The biggest danger to Ilya isn't rumors. It's instability. Losing the job. Losing the visa."

Shane looks away, jaw tight.

Yuna leans forward slightly. "Which brings us to the part you're both circling," she says. "Two tracks."

Shane blinks. "Two tracks?"

"Track one," Yuna says, holding up a finger, "is Shane's mental health and workplace safety. That's immediate."

Shane swallows.

“Track two,” she continues, “is Ilya’s long-term legal safety. That’s strategic. It can’t be rushed if rushing increases risk.”

Shane’s jaw tightens. “So we accept the delay.”

Yuna’s expression softens again, regretful. “We accept reality.”

“Shane, please,” Ilya’s voice is quiet.

Shane looks back at the tablet.

“I do not want you to destroy yourself for me,” Ilya says, and there’s something raw in it that makes Shane’s chest ache. “I do not want you to stay in Montreal just so I can have passport sooner.”

Shane’s throat tightens. “It’s not...”

“It is,” Ilya says gently. “At least part.”

Yuna’s hand lands on Shane’s knee, warm and grounding, stopping the bounce with gentle pressure.

“Okay,” she says, practical again. “So. Base plan.”

“A base plan I hate.” Shane exhales through his nose.

Yuna’s mouth twitches. “Noted.”

Her voice is steady as she speaks, the cadence familiar enough that Shane feels himself anchor to it.

“Shane finishes this season,” she says. “Keeps his value undeniable. Does not self-destruct.”

Shane makes a face.

Yuna doesn’t blink. “Near the end of the season, he makes it clear he will waive his no-trade for specific conditions. Ottawa as the primary target.”

“Can I even do that?” Shane asks.

“You can request,” Yuna says. “They may not honor it. But you can control your leverage and messaging.”

Ilya watches like this is the part he understands best: strategy.

“And Ilya signs the shortest contract he can,” Yuna continues. “Two years, if possible. Three if forced. And begins laying groundwork quietly. Not to the public. Not to the media. To the people who matter internally. ‘Personal reasons.’ ‘Family reasons.’ ‘Prefer Canadian market.’”

Ilya nods once.

Shane stares at them both. “And my coming out?”

Ilya’s face stills.

Yuna’s expression softens. “Shane,” she says carefully, “you already came out to the team.”

“I mean publicly,” Shane says. The words taste like metal.

Silence, brief. It shouldn’t sting, but it does, because Shane realizes he’s still waiting for permission to do a thing he already decided to do.

“Do you still want to?” Ilya asks first, carefully.

“Yes,” Shane says immediately, too fast. “I’m not stopping.”

Yuna nods. “Then the question is timing,” she says. “Not whether.”

“It feels insane to pile it on top of everything else,” Shane admits.

“You are already in it,” Ilya says quietly. “And public... maybe gives you different kind of protection. Makes it harder for them to erase you quietly.”

Shane’s stomach flips. He hates that it might be true.

“You don’t have to do it tomorrow,” Yuna says. “But you also shouldn’t let Montreal dictate your timeline out of spite.”

“It’s not spite,” Shane says, too sharp.

“It’s grief,” Yuna corrects, unflinching. “And rage. And pride. All valid. None of them get to drive the car.”

Shane looks away. His eyes burn.

On the tablet, Ilya shifts closer to the camera, like proximity could reach Shane through the glass.

“Shane,” he says, low. “I will support you. But you must also... protect yourself.”

“How?” Shane laughs without humor. “By leaving?”

“Maybe,” Ilya says simply.

Yuna’s hand squeezes Shane’s knee once. “Leaving is not losing,” she says. “Leaving is refusing to let them define the end of your story.”

Shane swallows hard.

“You already won,” Ilya says, voice quiet and almost fierce. “You told truth and you are still here.”

Shane stares at the tablet. His throat hurts.

“And what about Ilya’s mental health?” Shane asks, finally getting to voice his earlier worry. “I get to come out, move to a new team. But he’s, what? Stuck hiding even longer, so I can do that? That doesn’t feel fair. I’ll accept delaying his passport issue, but I won’t leave him alone.”

Yuna inhales.

“So let’s talk support systems,” she says. Then looks at Ilya. “You said something about telling people.”

“The team,” Ilya says, more seriously. “I think team would be okay if I told them. Not public. But... inside.”

Shane’s smile disappears instantly. “No.”

Ilya frowns. “Why no?”

“Because players gossip,” Shane says, sharp. “Because nothing stays inside a room. Because you tell one guy and suddenly someone’s cousin is hinting at it on a podcast.”

“Maybe,” Ilya says, gaze steady.

“Not maybe,” Shane snaps. “Definitely.”

Yuna cuts in, calm. “You’re both right.”

Both of them look at her.

Yuna folds her hands in her lap. “Safety isn’t only legal status,” she says. “It’s also mental health. It’s community. If Ilya is isolated in Boston while you’re isolated in Montreal, then you are both alone.”

Shane’s throat tightens. He hates how accurate it is.

Ilya’s eyes soften. “I already feel better,” he admits quietly. “Just... having one friend know.”

Yuna nods gently.

“Yes,” she says. “And there’s a middle ground between ‘public’ and ‘no one.’”

Shane’s jaw tightens. “Rumors...”

“Only become lethal if Ilya loses stability,” Yuna says, cutting cleanly through it. “The Russia safety issue is a problem if Ilya loses his job and his ability to stay in North America. If he remains employed and contracted, he maintains control.”

Shane blinks, trying to hold the pieces in his head.

“So unless Boston fires him for being bisexual...” Shane starts.

“They won’t,” Ilya says immediately.

“And if he never says anything official,” Yuna continues, “the legal risk remains largely the same. The emotional risk changes. The isolation changes.”

Shane exhales. Slow.

Then Yuna adds, “And there’s another strategic advantage.”

Shane and Ilya both look at her at once.

“It gives Ilya justification to request a trade later,” Yuna says. “A partner in Canada. A committed relationship. Personal reasons that are true without being fully explained.”

Ilya looks startled, like he can't believe he didn't think of that already.

Shane's stomach twists, because he hates how much of their life is becoming language games and plausible deniability.

"Alright," he sighs. "Alright..."

Yuna lifts her chin slightly. "So," she says. "We have our base plan. Now we talk contingencies."

Ilya's expression softens. "We can make it better," he says. Then he hesitates, like he knows he's about to offer something Shane will hate even more. "Or... we try something more aggressive."

Shane's eyebrows lift. "What do you mean?"

Ilya looks almost sheepish.

"We both take pay cut," he says. "And see if Ottawa will take us both."

Shane stares at the tablet.

Yuna stills.

"What?" Shane says, like his brain didn't process the words.

"You go to Ottawa." Ilya shrugs, like he's proposing they try a new restaurant. "I go to Ottawa. We play together."

Shane's laugh comes out startled. "Do they need two centers?"

"I play wing," Ilya says, grin sudden and bright. "Like All-Star. It would be fun, no? To play on same line all the time."

For one small, dangerous second, Shane sees it, actually sees it. The two of them on the same bench. The same city. No flights. No hotel rooms. No careful planning around schedules. A normal life hiding inside an abnormal one.

His chest tightens painfully.

Yuna's voice breaks the moment, crisp. "Financially, a pay cut only matters if cap space is the primary obstacle," she says. "There are also trade assets, contract length, and management willingness."

"Yes," Ilya says, smile fading a notch. "I know."

Shane's throat tightens. "You'd do that?"

Ilya's eyes soften. "Yes."

"That's..." Shane starts.

"Stupid?" Ilya offers, deadpan.

Shane huffs a laugh despite himself. "Kind of."

“Everything we do together is stupid,” Ilya says, mouth quirking.

Yuna makes a small sound; thoughtful, like she’s already doing math. “Ottawa would want you,” she says slowly. “They would want Shane Hollander. They would want Ilya Rozanov. That’s not the question.”

Shane’s heart thuds.

“The question,” Yuna continues, “is how you make them a package deal without telling them you are a package deal.”

Shane’s stomach flips.

Ilya’s face goes intent, focused. “Can we do it?” he asks.

Yuna’s eyes narrow. “Possibly.”

“Mom,” Shane says, voice tight.

Yuna glances at him. “What?”

“This is insane,” Shane says. “It’s not just money. It’s optics. It’s... the league losing its mind if the two of us are suddenly on the same team.”

Yuna’s expression is unimpressed. “The league already loses its mind about both of you separately.”

Shane’s mouth opens. Closes.

Ilya’s eyes are bright. “Maybe we say hockey reasons,” he says. “Chemistry. Winning.”

“Sure,” Shane laughs, sharp. ““Chemistry.””

Yuna’s gaze flicks between them. Her expression softens, just slightly.

“You’re both tired,” she says. “You want the simplest version of your life. I understand that.”

Shane swallows.

“But nothing about this is simple,” Yuna continues, calm and firm. “So we treat it like what it is. A possibility. A contingency. We brainstorm. We gather information. We talk to teams. Quietly. Hypothetically.”

The word hypothetically helps. It makes it feel less like a cliff edge.

Shane exhales.

Ilya nods once.

“We prioritize getting Shane out of Montreal,” Yuna says, not pausing long enough to give Shane time to argue. “Then keeping you close. Then getting Ilya to Canada.”

“I start digging,” she continues, “see if there’s any configuration that would get Ottawa to take you both next season. If not, Shane goes to Ottawa, Ilya stays in Boston. Ilya starts laying groundwork

for leaving Boston; comes out to the team, carefully. Talks about a partner in Canada. Reasons he'd want to move north. Either way, Shane comes out publicly."

Yuna's smile drops, just a little. "I know it's slower than you both want. It's not fair. But it's what we have."

A beat of quiet settles over them.

Shane stares at the tablet, at Ilya's face framed by lamplight and distance.

"We're really doing this," he says quietly. Not a question.

Ilya's eyes soften. "Yes, moya lyubov," he says. "We are doing this."

Yuna's hand squeezes Shane's knee again. "Yes," she says. "You are. And you don't have to know every step tonight. You only have to keep moving."

Shane swallows hard. His eyes burn.

He hates that the solution is time. He hates that it's strategy and patience and compromise. He hates that loving someone can turn your whole life into contingency plans.

But...

He looks at Ilya, at the steadiness there, at the way Ilya's fear never stops him from showing up.

He looks at his mom, at the calm competence of her presence, at the way she's sitting here like this is normal, like her son being a queer NHL captain rearranging his life for survival is just another problem to solve.

And something in Shane's chest loosens, just slightly.

"Okay," Shane says, voice rough. "Okay. So... we start talking to teams."

"Tomorrow," Yuna says, decisive.

Ilya's smile is small and warm. "Tomorrow," he echoes.

Shane exhales, long and slow, and lets his head fall back against the couch.

He still hates it.

But he can feel it now: the net under him. Not perfect. Not clean. Not fair.

But there.

And for the first time in days, that feels like enough to breathe.

Yuna Hollander, the woman that you are

Chapter 12

The house is quiet in the way winter places get quiet.

Outside, snow falls in silently, blanketing everything in white. Inside, the only light comes from the Christmas tree in the corner of the living room, slightly crooked, ornaments mismatched and familiar, and the glow of the fireplace. It smells like pine and woodsmoke and whatever his mom had baked earlier and insisted no one was allowed to touch until tomorrow.

Shane and Ilya are curled together on the couch, legs tangled, Shane's socked feet tucked under Ilya's thigh for warmth. Ilya has one arm slung loose around Shane's shoulders, thumb absently tracing the seam of his sweatshirt like it's something he needs to keep track of.

Shane isn't really watching the movie on the TV. He hasn't been, not for the last twenty minutes.

His phone is warm in his hand.

The screen light is harshly bright, the draft open, short and deceptively simple. He's read it so many times that the words barely feel like language anymore. They feel like a door.

"I hate that it's so small," Shane says suddenly, quiet. "It feels like it should be... more."

Ilya hums, thoughtful. "Small is good," he says. "Small is clear."

"Yeah." Shane snorts softly. "Clear. That's what I'm going for. Radical clarity."

Ilya's chest moves under his cheek when he laughs, low and fond. "You are very radical."

"Terrifying, honestly."

Shane shifts, sits up a little, phone balanced on his knee now. The tree lights reflect off the screen, red and gold and blue flickering over the words that will, in a few minutes, belong to everyone.

He thinks, briefly, of the meeting with management earlier that week. The careful language. The nods. The tight smiles. The "*We support you*" that had come paired with "*Are you sure about the timing?*" and "*Have you considered waiting?*" and "*The season is already intense.*"

They hadn't told him no. They'd just hoped he'd flinch.

He hadn't.

"I'm doing it," Shane says, not really to Ilya, but he still needs to hear himself say it out loud.

Ilya's thumb stills against his shoulder. "I know."

Shane glances over at him. Ilya's expression is calm and open, but his eyes are sharp with attention, like he's braced to catch Shane if he wobbles.

"You don't have to," Ilya adds, gently. "Not tonight. Not because you feel like you should."

“I want to,” Shane says immediately. Then, after a beat, more quietly: “I don’t want them to have it. The waiting. The wondering. I don’t want to keep carrying it like it’s something fragile.”

Ilya nods once. “Then do it.”

Shane exhales, long and slow. He looks down at the phone again.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay.”

He hits post.

The screen changes, the words gone, replaced by the spinning refresh icon and then... there. Live. Public. Real.

For half a second, nothing happens.

Then the phone vibrates in his hand.

Once. Twice. Again. A cascade.

Shane doesn’t look. He just turns and holds the phone out to Ilya.

“Here,” he says. “Take it. Please.”

Ilya takes it without hesitation, fingers warm and steady. He taps quickly, practiced, muting notifications, locking down anything that isn’t a direct call or a message from someone already in Shane’s life. He sets the phone face-down on the coffee table like he’s putting something sharp safely away.

“There,” he says. “You’re done.”

Shane leans back into the couch, suddenly boneless. His heart is hammering, his hands buzzing like he’s just stepped off the ice after a long shift.

“I feel like I’m going to throw up,” he admits.

“Normal, I think,” Ilya says. He presses a kiss to Shane’s temple, lingering. “Very normal.”

Footsteps sound in the hallway, and Shane’s parents come in like this is any other night, like the world hasn’t just tilted on its axis.

David is carrying a bottle and two glasses. He sets one down in front of Ilya without ceremony. “Figured you might want this,” he says.

Ilya blinks, then smiles. “*Spasibo.*”

Yuna follows, a glass of wine in one hand, a ginger ale in the other, the condensation beading against her palm. She hands it to him, eyes warm and searching.

“Here,” she says simply.

Shane takes it, his throat tight. “Thanks, Mom.”

They settle in: David in the armchair, Yuna perched on the edge, arm draped around her husband's shoulders. The tree lights hum softly. The movie continues, forgotten.

No one asks anything.

No one rushes him.

Ilya's hand finds Shane's again, fingers lacing together, solid and sure.

For the first time all season, Shane lets himself breathe.

Whatever happens next, whatever noise comes crashing in, he's not facing it alone.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

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



Shane Hollander - 24
@ShaneHollanderOfficial

I want to share something personal: I'm gay.

I've carried this for a long time — balancing my love of hockey with the fear of what honesty might cost. Hockey has given me so much, but carrying this alone has been a heavy weight.

I'm ready to be honest about all of who I am.



9:14 PM · Dec 23, 2017



Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23
Replying to @ShaneHollanderOfficial

To my partner:

Nine years ago today, we met, and with a single handshake you turned my world upside down. I wouldn't be who I am — on or off the ice — without your patience, your strength, and your love. I love you.



Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23
Replying to @ShaneHollanderOfficial

To my parents:

I am endlessly grateful for your love and support — not just today, but always.

You gave me the space to become myself, and a soft place to land when I needed it. I love you both.



Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23
Replying to @ShaneHollanderOfficial

To @ScottHunterMLH:

Thank you for being brave enough to be first, and generous enough to make space for others after — and for showing me I wasn't alone.

You gave me someone to talk to when I didn't know how to say things out loud. I'll always be grateful for that.



Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23
Replying to @ShaneHollanderOfficial

To @ImRoseLandry:

You've met me where I was every time, without judgment. I'm lucky beyond words to call you my friend.

Thank you for your patience, your kindness, your grace, and your steady presence through all of this.



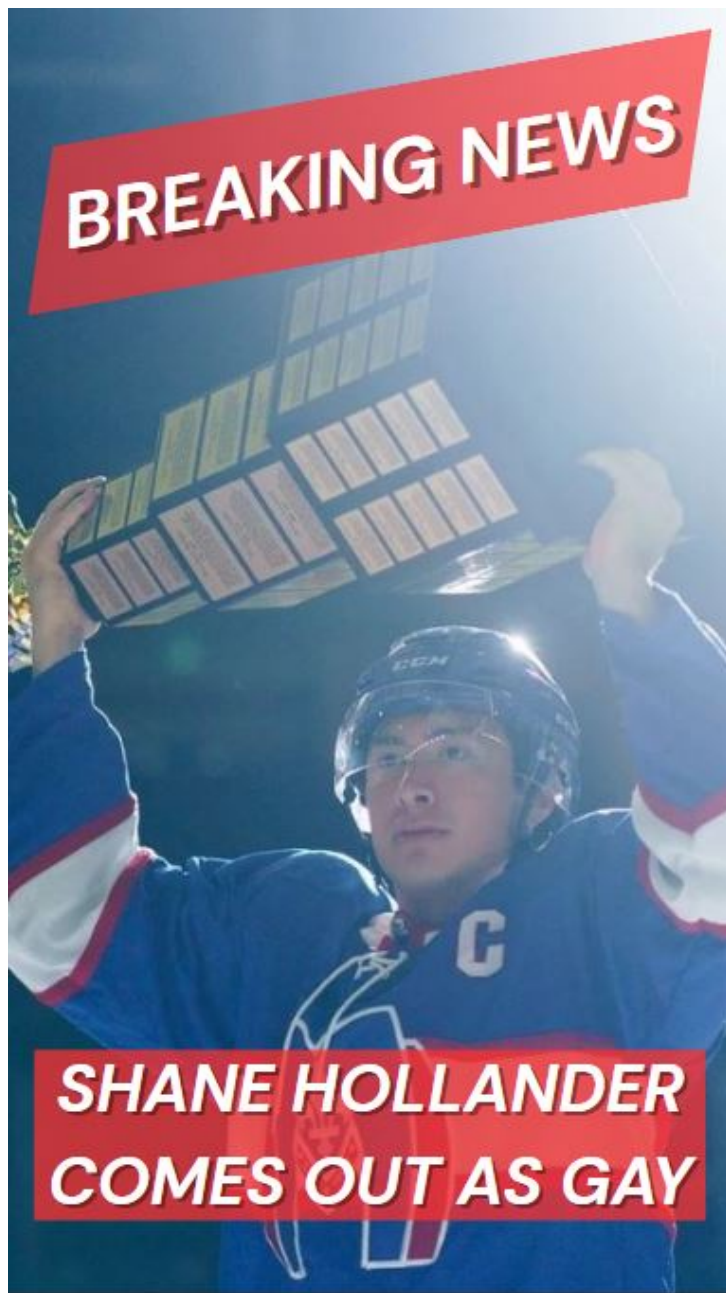
Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23
Replying to @ShaneHollanderOfficial

To @HaydenPikeOfficial and @JJPlaysHockey:
What started as work became friendship, and somewhere along the way, became family.
Thank you for the years of trust, support, and love. I'm grateful to have you beside me, on and off the ice.



ESPN
@espn

BREAKING: Montreal Metros star centre Shane Hollander comes out as gay.
Hollander, who has spent his entire MLH career in Montreal after being drafted in 2009, announced his sexuality in a statement posted on social media.
Read more: [espn.com/mlh/story/id/_1347...](https://www.espn.com/mlh/story/id/_1347...)



9:42 PM · Dec 23, 2017



John Richards @voyageursfan86 · Dec 23
Replying to @espn

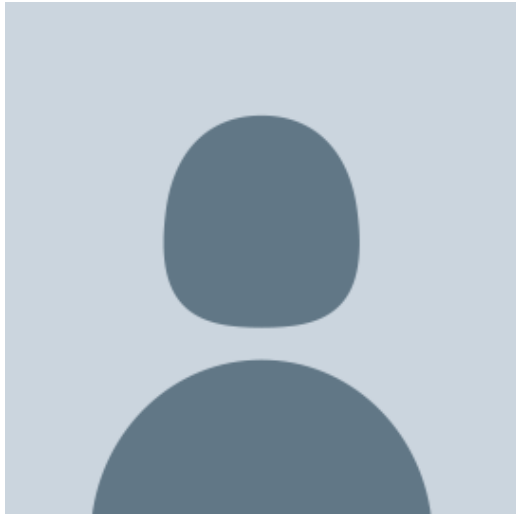
Wait—Shane Hollander? Did not have this on my bingo card tonight.



Matt @MattInMiami · Dec 23

Replying to @espn

Huge respect to Shane Hollander. Takes real courage to do this in the middle of a season. Wishing him nothing but support.



Rick Donalds @rickdonalds34 · Dec 23

Replying to @espn

Ugh what happened to just playing hockey? Why does everything have to be about sexuality now.



Sara @SaraWatchesHockey · Dec 23
Replying to @rickdonalds34

He is just playing hockey. You're the one making it weird..



Zac Attack @ZacAttackMontreal · Dec 23
Replying to @espn

SHANE HOLLANDER?? This is incredible. Hockey needed this. So proud of him 🏒🌈



Scott Hunter
@ScottHunterMLH

Proud of you, Shane.

I know the road here wasn't easy. Thank you for your courage, your honesty, and for trusting me with your story along the way. The more people who get to live openly, the better the game — and the world — becomes.

Always in your corner.



Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23

I want to share something personal: I'm gay.
I've carried this for a long time — balancing my love of hockey...

10:14 PM · Dec 23, 2017



Kip Grady
@KipGraddArt

So proud of you, Shane. Honoured you trusted me with your truth — and very glad to officially welcome you to the community. 🌈



Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23

I want to share something personal: I'm gay.
I've carried this for a long time — balancing my love of hockey...

10:15 PM · Dec 23, 2017



Hayden Pike
@HaydenPikeOfficial

Best friend is still my best friend. Always has been. Always will be. Love you, Shane. Proud of you. Today and every day.



Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23

I want to share something personal: I'm gay.
I've carried this for a long time — balancing my love of hockey...

8:03 AM · Dec 24, 2017



J.J. Boiziau
@JJPlaysHockey

Love you, Capitaine. Toujours là pour toi ❤️



Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23

I want to share something personal: I'm gay.
I've carried this for a long time — balancing my love of hockey...

8:07 AM · Dec 24, 2017



Cliff Marleau - Boston #7
@CliffMarleauHockey

Much respect to Shane Hollander. One of the best players I've ever shared the ice with — and an even better man off it. Takes real courage to be honest about who you are. Nothing but respect. You're making the game better in every way.



Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23

I want to share something personal: I'm gay.
I've carried this for a long time — balancing my love of hockey...

11:29 AM · Dec 24, 2017



Man In The Crease
@mitcpod

Shane Hollander becomes the second MLH player to publicly come out. Hollander announced the news via social media last night. As of now, neither the MLH nor the Montreal Metros have issued a statement.



12:06 PM · Dec 24, 2017



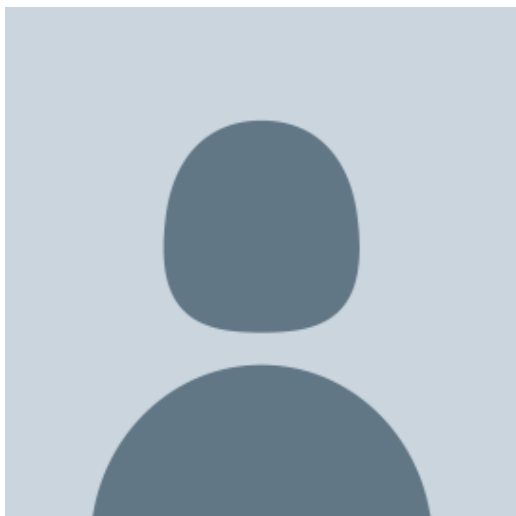
Jess - Sports Reporter @jesswrites · Dec 24
Replying to @mitcpod

Good for Hollander. All-around good player and good dude. Not shocking, but still disappointing that the league and team are silent so far.



Rach @rachelluisa · Dec 24
Replying to @mitcpod

Feels like the kind of moment where leadership should say something. Even a basic statement matters. This is bigger than one player. The fact the MLH hasn't responded yet says a lot.



Lucas James @lj1993 · Dec 24
Replying to @mitcpod

Hope this changes, but yeah... silence from Montreal is pretty on brand unfortunately



Rose Landry
@ImRoseLandry

I love you so much, my friend 💖 So proud of you for choosing honesty and joy. You deserve every bit of love coming your way. Thank you for trusting me, always 😊



Shane Hollander - 24 @ShaneHollanderOfficial · Dec 23

I want to share something personal: I'm gay.
I've carried this for a long time — balancing my love of hockey...

1:54 PM · Dec 24, 2017

Marley

Marley: Holy shit man, did you see about Hollander?

Marley: Wait...

Marley: Wait wait. Wait.

Marley: Roz...

Marley: Roz, don't tell me.

Ilya: Ok. I will not tell.

Marley: You said you wouldn't lie to me if I guessed!

Ilya: You have not guessed anything yet

Marley: Roz.

Marley: Rozy.

Marley: ROZ! 😂

Marley: ANSWER THE FUCKING PHONE, ROZANOV!

Ilya: 😈

Marley:...

Marley: 🙌

Marley: Love you, Roz. Even if your type is apparently "most batshit insane choice possible"

Ilya: You are good friend, Marley

Chapter End Notes

How long did I take formatting this chapter? Who knows... too long... I regret everything. It's fine. I didn't need sleep tonight anyways. 😂

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

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

The first game after Shane comes out publicly feels like stepping onto ice that's been resurfaced incorrectly: technically playable, but wrong underfoot.

The passes come back.

Not generously. Not instinctively. But they come.

The puck finds him when it should. The systems run. Breakouts are clean enough. Coach Theriault yells again, from the bench, from behind the glass, from muscle memory, and the sound of it lands in Shane's chest like something almost familiar.

The machine works.

That, more than anything, is the shock.

He should feel relief. He thinks, distantly, that this is what he wanted: for hockey to be hockey again. For the job to resume. For the ice to stay clean, and transactional, and safe.

Instead, there's a hollow, unsettled feeling in his gut, like something important has slipped past him while he wasn't looking.

No one freezes him out on the ice anymore. No one makes the mistake obvious enough to punish. The league's eyes, and more importantly, the fans' eyes, are on them now. The story is bigger than the room, and the room knows it. Whatever lines had been crossed before are quietly stepped back behind.

It turns out Ilya was right. Public scrutiny is its own kind of safety.

Shane hates that it took strangers to make his teammates do their jobs.

Off the ice, nothing warms.

The locker room hums the way it always has; showers running, tape tearing, skates clacking against the floor, but the shape of it has changed. Conversations taper off when Shane sits down. Jokes land and then die a beat early. People are polite in a way that feels practiced, like they're all reading from the same invisible memo.

Careful.

He tries not to take it personally. Tries to tell himself this is still an adjustment period. That time will thaw the chill.

But it's hard not to notice what's missing.

The easy swearing. The dumb rituals. The way guys used to drift into his space without asking. The quiet trust that lived in shared glances and half-finished sentences.

Hayden and J.J. stay where they've always been, anchoring the space around him without comment. A few of the younger guys relax, slowly, once they realize nothing bad happens when they treat him like a person. They joke again. They ask questions about the game. They stop flinching.

The veterans don't.

That hurts more than Shane expects it to.

These were the men he'd captained through Cup runs. The ones who'd told him things in the dark of long road trips. The ones who have worked side-by-side with him since he was drafted.

If anything, they're the ones who should be understanding, should be readjusting quicker, not the new guys who barely know him.

He realizes, somewhere between warm-ups and puck drop, that he can do his job again.

He also realizes he can't lead these people anymore.

The realization doesn't come all at once. It creeps in through small failures: the way his voice doesn't quite carry in the room, the way eyes slide away when he talks about accountability, the way his words still register as instructions, but no longer as belief.

He dresses for games now with the strange awareness that the "C" on his chest feels heavier, not lighter. He still wears it. Still earns it, technically. The team still lines up when he speaks. Still listens.

But they don't *follow*. Not the way they used to.

The next game is the same.

Shane plays better than he has all season; faster, sharper, decisive in a way that feels like oxygen after months of breathing through a straw. His body remembers itself. His instincts fire clean.

The chemistry is stiff, but functional. The goals come. The points follow.

The math works.

But the magic, that *thing* he used to believe in, that sense of collective inevitability that carried them to back-to-back Cups, has vanished so completely it's like it never existed.

And Shane can't tell if losing it hurts more because he loved it...

...or because he's starting to wonder if it was ever real to begin with.

It happens in the post-game scrum.

Shane's still damp with sweat, pulled away before he could shower, compression shirt tugged back into place as microphones crowd his space. The air smells like ice and deodorant and adrenaline. Cameras blink. Pens hover.

The questions are mostly hockey.

Breakouts. Adjustments. The power play clicking again. Someone asks about his minutes. Someone else mentions the win streak.

Shane answers cleanly. Automatically. He's done this for years; his body knows the rhythm even when his head is somewhere else.

And then one voice angles sideways. Not aggressive. Not hostile. Just curious enough to be dangerous.

"You seem to be playing better since the holidays," the reporter says, tone neutral, eyes sharp. "But the team chemistry still looks... different compared to previous seasons. Do you think that's been an adjustment for the room?"

There it is.

Not his coming out. Not directly. Just adjacent enough to make it his responsibility anyway.

Shane feels the old instinct rise automatically; the one that knows how to soften edges, how to make everyone comfortable, how to take blame without ever admitting fault. He opens his mouth, already halfway to a deflection.

And then he doesn't.

"Chemistry's fine," he says instead. His voice is even. Calm. "We're doing our jobs."

The reporter nods, like he expected that answer.

He doesn't move on.

"Sure," he says. "But we've seen moments: missed reads earlier in the season, some hesitation. There was that play before Christmas..."

Shane feels something tighten behind his ribs.

"Start of the season can always be a bit rough," he says. "We've cleaned a lot of that up." Still controlled. Still giving the answer that keeps the peace.

"But would you say," the reporter continues, smoothly, "that personal developments like this can create distractions, even unintentionally? Especially in a room that's used to a certain..."

Shane stops listening to the phrasing.

Because suddenly, it's not subtle anymore. This isn't about systems. Or reads. Or timing.

It's about whether he's expected, again, to apologize for existing.

Something hot and sharp flares in his chest. Not rage. Not yet.

Just exhaustion.

He thinks, distantly, of how careful he's been. Of how perfectly he's always answered every question. Of how none of it protected him anyway.

"Some people have suggested the distraction..." The reporter's voice drifts in again.

Shane laughs. Once. Short. Sharp.

It cuts through the space like a skate blade.

"If who I take to bed is enough of a distraction that someone can't make a pass," he says, voice steady but edged now, "then that's not about me."

The room goes very quiet.

"That's about them, and maybe that's something they might want to think about."

The silence after lands hard. Not explosive. Not dramatic.

Just... weighted.

No one jumps in. No one follows up. Even the cameras seem to hesitate, like they're recalibrating.

Shane answers two more questions after that. Hockey questions. His tone is professional again, almost eerily so. He thanks the media, nods once, and walks away with the faint, unpleasant awareness that he's crossed an invisible line.

Not a league rule.

Just a social one.

Later, in the quiet of his hotel room, his phone buzzes.

Lily

Lily: You were rude to reporter

Lily: Look at you. Not boring for once.

Shane exhales and lets himself fall back onto the bed, staring at the ceiling. He hits the call button without thinking.

"I probably shouldn't have said it like that," he mutters the second the line connects.

"No," Ilya corrects immediately. "It was perfect."

"Ilya..." Shane closes his eyes, a smile tugging at his mouth despite himself.

"I mean it," Ilya continues, fond and smug. "You embarrassed a man on live television. I'm very proud."

Shane groans. "I'm hanging up."

"No..." Ilya whines dramatically. "You were so hot..."

Shane snorts, then laughs, the sound loosening something in his chest he didn't realize was locked.

Maybe he crossed a line.

Or maybe, for once, he stopped letting other people draw them.

After that, Shane stops sanding his words down.

Not everywhere. Not recklessly. He still knows how to be careful when it matters. Still knows how to keep things professional, how to keep the machine running.

But he stops pretending for the comfort of people who won't meet him halfway.

He mentions his boyfriend casually to Hayden and J.J. in the locker room one afternoon, while tugging old tape from his stick. It's nothing dramatic. Just a sentence dropped where a story about a bad road hotel or a missed connection used to be.

Hayden doesn't even look up. Just nods, like of course. J.J. makes a face and says long-distance is brutal, asks how they make it work.

That's it. No pause. No weight.

The younger guys clock it, too. They adjust. Some of them smile, easy and unguarded, like they've been waiting for permission to relax. One asks how long they've been together and nods at the answer like it's trivia. Another complains about travel schedules, about trying to keep anything steady when half your life is airports and hotel beds.

It feels... normal.

The veterans are still quiet. Quiet in a way that has shape to it. Quiet that closes ranks.

Not confused, not unsure. Deliberate and chosen. They don't ask questions. They don't make jokes. They don't say anything wrong, exactly.

They just stop saying anything at all.

That hurts. Deep and sharp.

These are men he thought were friends. Men he stood beside in the worst losses and the biggest wins. Men who knew his routines, his tells, the way he liked his stick tape, the nights he stayed late because he didn't want to go home to an empty apartment.

Men he would have sworn had his back.

The hurt doesn't knock the breath out of him the way it would have a month ago. It doesn't send him spiraling.

But it does settle. Heavy. Lingering.

On the ice, the game keeps working.

Shane keeps playing well. The team keeps winning enough. The systems hold. The points come.

No one can say he isn't doing his job.

Off the ice, he stops trying to earn something that's already been withheld.

He still gives speeches. Still answers questions. Still wears the "C" stitched onto his chest. But he feels it now for what it is: a title without trust.

It feels different than it used to be; not because of responsibility, but because of what it no longer means. He can lead drills. He can call plays. He can be listened to.

But leadership used to mean something else, too. It used to mean being believed in. Being chosen.

That part is gone.

And the grief of that comes in quiet moments: tying his skates. Sitting alone at his stall after a win. Catching himself about to make a joke that would've landed once, and letting it die in his throat instead.

And when the thought of leaving Montreal surfaces now, quiet, careful, no longer sharp with panic, it doesn't feel like running.

It feels like telling the truth about what this place has become. About what it can no longer give him.

The thought of leaving doesn't feel like failure. Not anymore.

It feels like choosing himself.

Chapter End Notes

Woke up this morning to my email inbox absolutely overflowing because of everyone's comments and love 🥹😍🥹

You're all wonderful, and I appreciate your support so much ❤️

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya's kitchen is too quiet.

Not silent; there's the steady tick of the clock over the doorway, the soft hiss of the burner, the occasional creak as the wood settles, but quiet in the way that makes you aware of your own breathing. Of the empty rooms beyond the light.

He sets a pan on the stove and turns the burner up a notch. Oil shimmers as it thins out over the surface. He chops an onion with more force than necessary, the knife thudding against the board in a rhythm that almost feels like control.

The tablet on the counter is propped against the toaster. Yuna Hollander fills the screen, framed by a lamp and the edge of a neat bookshelf. She looks like she always does: composed, hair perfect, posture straight as if the world is a meeting she intends to run efficiently.

"Hello," Ilya says, wiping his hands on a dish towel.

"Hi, Ilya," Yuna replies. Her smile comes easily, softening the sharp lines of her focus. Her tone is warm but not soft. Not performative. Just... direct. "Are you cooking?"

"I am making dinner," he says. "Am much better cook than your son."

"Doesn't take much," she replies with a soft chuckle.

He hums, eyes on the pan. He appreciates this about her, how she is both warm and practical. She never pretends the situation is anything other than what it is. She doesn't ask how he's feeling, like she expects poetry. She asks questions that have answers.

At the same time, she intimidates the hell out of him.

He throws the onions in. They sizzle hard, sound sharp enough to cut through his thoughts.

"So," he says, because if he doesn't say it first, he'll spend the whole call waiting for her to. "You said you were asking questions."

Yuna nods once. "Quietly."

"Quietly like...?" he presses, adding garlic. His fingers move automatically, practiced.

"Not to Ottawa directly," she says. "Not to anyone who would have to report that I asked. I've been talking to other agents. People who talk. People who don't mind talking when it's framed as hypotheticals."

That word again. Hypotheticals. The language of survival.

"And?" Ilya asks, trying to keep his voice neutral. His heart is not neutral. It keeps doing that stutter thing it does when a plan might become real.

“Ottawa is looking for a star center.” Yuna’s voice is steady. It’s comforting in a conversation with so much uncertainty. “They have a roster to fill. They have money. More importantly,” she lifts a finger slightly, like she’s underlining the line on a page, “they’re willing to *actually* spend it.”

The heat under the pan flares as if it shares his reaction.

Ilya’s chest loosens. He hadn’t realized how tightly he’d been holding himself.

“Good,” he says, too quickly. “So we do it. We start making it happen.”

Yuna pauses. It’s barely a beat, but Ilya feels it like a hand closing around the back of his neck.

“Yuna,” he says, carefully. “What?”

She inhales. “It’s not that simple.”

Of course it isn’t. Nothing is.

He stirs the contents of the pan too aggressively; they scrape against the pan with a dry sound.

“It needs to happen,” he says, and the edge in his voice surprises even him. He keeps it anyway. “Shane cannot stay there.”

Yuna’s expression doesn’t change, but something in her eyes softens. She nods once, slow and deliberate, understanding that sentence more than most people would.

“I know,” she says. “I’m not asking you to accept him staying in Montreal forever. I’m asking you to accept that timing is the complicated part.”

“How is timing complicated?” Ilya demands, and immediately regrets it. He doesn’t like the way it sounds, petulant and impatient. Like a child asking why he can’t have the thing right now.

But he can’t make his body stop thinking about Shane in that locker room. About that cold. About the way Shane’s voice sounded on the phone the night the pass didn’t come.

Yuna doesn’t flinch. She just answers.

“Because if Shane comes out publicly and then gets traded a few weeks later,” she says, “it looks bad. Really bad.”

“Even if Shane asked for trade?” he argues. “Why should we care about making Montreal look good? They are homophobes.”

Yuna’s mouth tightens slightly; not anger. Well, not at Ilya. Probably, definitely at Montreal.

“It won’t just look bad on Montreal,” she says. Her mouth tightens, and when she speaks again, Ilya can hear the anger under the control. “It will look bad on Shane.”

Ilya’s grip tightens on the wooden spoon.

“How?”

“Because, regardless of timing, people will decide there are only two narratives,” Yuna continues, calm as ever. “Either Shane asked for a trade because Montreal is hostile. Or Montreal pushed him out because his coming out disrupted team dynamics, and he deserved consequences.”

Ilya’s jaw clenches.

“And if it happens mid-season,” she adds, “that second narrative gets louder. It gets uglier. It becomes about ‘distraction.’ About ‘leadership.’ About whether a gay captain can ‘keep the room.’”

Ilya’s throat tightens.

He wants to say: *“Let them be ugly. Let them say it. Burn it all down.”* He wants to say: *“Who cares what they think?”*

But Shane cares. Shane has always cared. Not because he’s weak, but because hockey is not just a job for him. It’s his language. His home. The thing he built his whole identity around.

And Ilya, painfully, has built most of his life around Shane.

He exhales hard through his nose.

“Fine,” he says, the word bitter. “Okay. I defer to your PR brain.”

Yuna nods once, relieved. “Thank you.”

Ilya scrapes the onions away from the center of the pan and makes space for the chicken. The sizzle is immediate, loud. Alive. He watches it because it’s easier than looking at the part of the conversation he doesn’t want to have.

“So we wait,” he says, like it tastes terrible. “Until end of season. Then Shane goes to Ottawa.”

“Yes,” Yuna says. “Ottawa will take him in a heartbeat. That part is, comparatively, easy.”

Comparatively.

Ilya looks up sharply. “Comparatively to what?”

Yuna’s gaze is steady when she says, “Comparatively to you.” Then, before he can spiral too far, she adds gently, “Not because you’re the problem. Because you’re valuable.”

He feels the words land in his chest like a puck he didn’t brace for. He laughs once, reflexively. Not humor. Disbelief.

“Ah,” he says. “Of course. It is always me.”

He tries to make it a joke. It comes out too flat.

Yuna tilts her head. “It’s not a judgment.”

“It feels like one,” he admits, too honest, and hates himself immediately for saying it.

Yuna watches him for a beat longer than necessary, then continues, deliberately steady.

“Boston will want to re-sign you well before the end of the season,” she says. “They’ll want to control the story, control the numbers, control the market. They won’t want to let you go.”

“I know,” Ilya says tightly. His agent has been “checking in” more and more lately in that way that isn’t actually casual.

“And you can’t show too much interest in Ottawa early,” Yuna goes on, “because if Ottawa thinks they’ll have you in free agency, they might not trade for Shane.”

Ilya’s stomach twists.

“And you can’t keep Boston dangling indefinitely,” Yuna says, “because if you appear too hesitant, too noncommittal, they can decide you’re a risk, and they’ll protect themselves.”

“So,” Ilya says, voice flat, “we do nothing.”

“No,” Yuna’s disagreement is immediate. The single syllable lands like a snapped stick. Not cruel. Just absolute.

“We don’t do nothing,” she corrects, her voice softening. “We play the long game.”

Ilya stirs the pan, but he’s not really cooking anymore. His hands are moving to keep his body from showing how unsettled his mind is.

The long game. The thing he is good at on the ice: patience, timing, waiting for the lane to open. The thing he is *terrible* at in his personal life, because waiting is where hope lives. And hope means disappointment.

He can feel it in the back of his throat. That whisper he doesn’t want to name. That quiet, ugly thought: *“This plan doesn’t need you.”*

In some ways, that should be a relief. A safety. It means Shane can get out, whether Ilya can or not. Whether Boston cooperates or not. Whether the universe decides to be kind.

But in other ways...

He thinks about Shane moving to Ottawa. New apartment. New routines. New team. New people. People who will see Shane as a story. As the out captain. As the brave face.

And Ilya, still in Boston, still careful, still quiet, still watching his words like they’re live ammunition...

He swallows hard. He flips the chicken and watches it brown. Watches the edges crisp.

“Okay,” he says, because he refuses to let that whisper make him reckless. “So what do we do, then?”

Yuna’s expression eases slightly, like she’s been waiting for him to ask the right question.

“We control what we can,” she says. “We get you professional support that matches the stakes.”

Ilya frowns.

“My agent is already bugging me,” he admits. “About what I want from Boston. About term. About money. About...” he gestures vaguely with the spoon. “...everything.”

“I know,” Yuna says. She pauses, then says, like she’s offering a tool: “I think you need a new agent.”

Ilya stills.

The chicken sizzles. The kitchen clock keeps ticking. He stares at the tablet.

“A new agent,” he repeats.

“Yes,” Yuna says simply. “Someone with no ties to Russia. Someone with a reputation for discretion. Someone who understands you are negotiating more than money.”

Ilya’s current agent has done right by him in the narrow sense: good contracts, good endorsements, good positioning. But the man also smiles too widely, talks too loosely, and has a phone that rings at odd hours with numbers that make Ilya’s skin crawl.

The older Ilya gets, the less he wants people like that holding pieces of his life.

“I am not against it,” he says slowly. Then, because he can’t help himself, he adds, dry, “My agent is... how you say... a little bit of slime.”

Yuna’s mouth curves, barely. “That’s one way to put it.”

Ilya exhales. The knot in his chest loosens a fraction. This... this is action. This is movement. This is not waiting.

He wipes his hands on the towel again, more to steady himself than because they’re dirty.

“And who is this new agent?” he asks, trying to sound casual and failing. He’s come to know Yuna enough to understand she doesn’t propose things without already doing half the work.

Yuna looks at him for a beat, then her lips quirk into a small smile.

Then she says, “I have someone in mind.”

Ilya’s pulse ticks up. Of course she does.

He leans his hip against the counter, suddenly aware of how much he wanted her to say that. How much he wants to believe in the next step.

“Who?” he asks, voice low.

Yuna’s expression stays calm. And in that calm, Ilya feels it again, the steadiness of her. The ruthless efficiency. The quiet competence that can build them a bridge out of this mess, plank by plank, without ever once asking the world for permission.

“His name is John Landry,” she says.

Ilya blinks.

The name means nothing, and yet... Landry... He knows of one Landry. He looks at Yuna, suspicion, curiosity, and horror tangling.

Yuna's eyes stay on him.

"Rose Landry's brother," she confirms, anticipating him.

Ilya lets out a breath that might have been a laugh if it wasn't mostly disbelief.

"Why," he mutters.

"You need someone trustworthy." Yuna's expression is dry. "He's got a good reputation. Solid portfolio. I've been assured he shares his sister's... discretion."

Ilya looks back at the pan, at the dinner he's somehow still making while his entire life is being rearranged in careful sentences.

He nods, once.

"Okay," he says, and his voice is steadier than he feels. "Tell me what I do."

Yuna's gaze softens, just a fraction.

"Eat," she says first, because she's Yuna and she refuses to pretend basics don't matter. "Then I'll send you his contact. And we'll start making moves that don't leave a trail."

Ilya swallows dryly.

Moves that don't leave a trail. He can do that. He's been doing that his whole life.

He looks at Yuna on the screen, at her calm, at the way she's protecting them *both*. Building them *both* a future.

And underneath his nerves, underneath the whisper of fear, something else stirs.

Not certainty. But direction.

"*Spasibo*," he says quietly.

Yuna nods once. "You're welcome, Ilya."

He turns back to the stove. The chicken sizzles. The clock ticks.

And somewhere, in the space between all the things he can't say yet, and the fear he can't name, the long game begins.

When John Landry had opened the email three days ago, the subject line alone had made him snort.

Inquiry: New Representation

No.

He hadn't even opened it at first. He had a full client list, a decent work-life balance he was stubbornly trying to protect, and a wife who was eight months pregnant and increasingly unimpressed by late nights and "just one more call." He was not looking to add anything to his plate.

Then he saw the sender.

And that was how he ended up sitting in a modest conference room in his firm's Boston office, across from Ilya Rozanov.

The fastest new client acquisition of his career.

And, by far, the strangest.

Rozanov sat with his shoulders squared, hands folded loosely in front of him, posture careful in a way that read less like professionalism and more like vigilance. He was dressed simply: jeans, sweater, nothing flashy, and yet there was no mistaking who he was. You didn't spend years in sports management without learning how star players carried themselves.

Which made it all the more confusing that Ilya Rozanov sat across from him looking... scared.

John clears his throat, glancing down at the neatly organised folder he'd prepared. Sponsorship projections. Contract comparables. A preliminary negotiation strategy with Boston that would, under normal circumstances, have been the entire point of this meeting.

He had sent it all over to Rozanov before they'd even inked a contract; part of his standard acquisition process, a sample of what he could do for a client.

Rozanov hadn't looked at any of it.

He hadn't asked about salary ceilings. Or term. Or endorsements. He hadn't even blinked when John mentioned that Boston would likely want to move quickly, aggressively, to lock him down before free agency.

Instead, he'd insisted on meeting in person.

Had even offered, politely yet firmly, to fly John to Boston himself.

None of it made sense.

"So," John begins, folding his hands on the table, choosing his tone carefully. "Mr. Rozanov..."

"Ilya," the man cuts in immediately. Not sharp. Just certain. "Call me Ilya. Please."

John nods. "Alright. Ilya."

He studies him for a beat longer than was strictly polite, then asks the question that had been hovering over since that very first email.

"You've been with your agent since the beginning of your career," John says. "Why now?"

Ilya doesn't answer right away. He looks at John the way you look at a locked door when you're deciding whether you're willing to turn the handle. Measuring. Weighing.

"What I tell you stays private?" he finally asks, quietly. "Like lawyer?"

John blinks, then nods. "Yes. Attorney-client privilege is stricter, but agent confidentiality is still binding. And I take it seriously."

Another pause.

Then Ilya exhales, slow and controlled, like he was letting go of something physical.

"I need someone discreet," he says. "Someone with good reputation. Someone trustworthy. Not... Russian."

That alone raised a dozen questions.

"And that led you to me?" John asks, trying to keep his face neutral.

Ilya's brow lifted slightly. Challenging. Testing.

"You disagree?"

"No," John says honestly. "Just curious how you landed on me out of everyone else."

He wouldn't normally ask. You didn't interrogate a client who walked in the door asking to sign. But nothing about this situation was normal, and John had learned the hard way that ignoring his instincts was how things went sideways.

Ilya hesitates again. Then, visibly reluctant, he says, "Your sister."

John feels his eyebrows jump despite himself. Just how many pro hockey players does his little sister know? Rose Landry's social circle was... expansive, but this was still unexpected.

"My sister," John repeats carefully.

"She is not... friend," Ilya clarifies, wincing slightly, like the phrasing itself annoyed him. "But she is friend with someone important to me."

Something in the way he says *important* makes John's internal calculus shift.

"Okay," John says slowly. "So. Why the discretion? Why cut ties so completely?"

Ilya's fingers tighten together.

"I am bisexual," he says.

He pauses, watching John's face, like he was bracing for something specific. John blinks once. That was it.

"Alright," he acknowledges.

Ilya's shoulders loosen a fraction.

“I want to tell my team,” Ilya continues. “Boston. But I cannot be... out. Publicly. I cannot be visible like that.”

John nods. “Because of Russia.”

“Yes.”

“Well,” John says, settling back slightly, professional instincts kicking in, “as your agent, I won’t discourage you from coming out to your team if that’s what you want. All I’ll tell you is to be smart about who you tell, and how. But you know that room better than anyone. If you trust them, I don’t see why you shouldn’t.”

Ilya nods once, grateful but restrained.

“Alright,” John continues. “Let’s talk about what you want me to help you do. You’re a free agent in the spring. I assume Boston is eager to re-sign you.”

Ilya looks away. Not evasive. Almost... sheepish.

Then he straightens, meets John’s eyes, and says, very clearly, “I want to play for Ottawa.”

John is fairly certain he’s misheard.

“Ottawa?” he echoes.

“Yes.”

The decisiveness in his tone dared John to argue. John doesn’t. Instead, he leans back and folds his arms.

“Okay. Why?” he questions.

Ilya opens his mouth and snaps it shut again, like he’d been gearing up for a fight that never came.

“Look,” John says, holding up a hand before Ilya can launch into justification. “I could lecture you about Boston drafting you, about Cup odds, about Ottawa’s rebuild. But you already know all that. And you’re still sitting here asking me to help you get there.”

He lowers his hand.

“That tells me your reasons probably aren’t hockey. Or at least not just hockey.”

Ilya exhales sharply.

“My old agent would have had fit,” he admits. “If I told him this.”

John snorts softly. Most agents probably would have a fit if a Cup-winning captain walked into their office and asked to be moved to one of the worst teams in the league. But John tries to always remind himself that athletes are more than their careers.

“Career-wise? It’s an odd choice, sure,” John concedes. “But my job isn’t to tell you how to live. It’s to make sure you’re informed, and get you a contract you’re happy with.”

Ilya's shoulders drop about 4 inches, his jaw loosens a bit.

"One reason is... safety," he admits carefully. "I would like to not have Russian passport. I know I could become American citizen. But America is not so good for Russians right now. And Russia is not so good for Russians like me."

There's regret there. Quiet, and heavy, and grief-filled.

John swallows. "I can't imagine how hard that is."

"It is what it is." Ilya shrugs, but John can tell it's not that simple.

"What else?" John asks gently.

"Family," Ilya replies.

John pauses. He'd done his homework. Everything he knew said Rozanov's family was still in Russia.

"Family?" he prompts.

"I have... partner," Ilya says. "He is from Ottawa. His parents live there. I want to be close."

He looks at John then, earnest and wary, like he's expecting judgment. Expecting to be told he's being sentimental, or short-sighted, or that he's throwing away his career.

Something in John's chest tightens.

"Ilya," he said quietly, "those are perfectly good reasons to want to go to Ottawa."

Ilya blinks. "Even if I do not win Cup ever again?"

"Yes," John says without hesitation. "Of course."

Ilya looks away, blinking rapidly. John lets him, pretends not to see how glassy his eyes have gone.

"Alright," John says after a few long moments, already thinking ahead. "Ottawa needs a strong centre. They've got money. They've been sniffing around free agency. No one's mentioned your name yet; everyone assumes you'll re-sign in Boston. But if we tell them you're interested, I don't expect resistance."

"There may be... complication," Ilya says.

"What kind of complication?" John frowns.

"Ottawa may not want me next season," Ilya explains slowly. "There is a trade. They will be interested in that. It is important I do not ruin this by taking only centre spot."

John stares at him.

"You'd stay in Boston," he says, incredulous, "to make sure another deal goes through?"

"Yes," Ilya says quickly. "If I can also go to Ottawa, great. But if not, I stay. One year. Two."

John exhales sharply, not really sure what to say.

“Why are you this invested in another player’s contract?” he ends up asking.

Ilya doesn’t answer; he looks down at his lap, scratches at his nose.

When he looks back up, John doesn’t need the words.

“Oh,” John exhales softly. “Your partner is another player.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re certain Ottawa will take him?” John asks.

“Yes,” Ilya replies immediately, tone certain. Decisive. Every bit the authoritative captain he is.

John runs a hand through his hair, processing.

“Okay,” he starts. “Then the easiest thing is for me to work with his agent. Coordinate so we don’t accidentally sabotage each other.”

“... Sabotage?” Ilya mutters with a frown. “What is this word? Sabotage?”

“Interfere,” John clarifies. “Mess things up accidentally.”

“Ah,” Ilya says. “Yes. This we avoid.”

“So,” John continues. “If you connect me with his agent...” He sees Ilya’s shoulders tense again, so he softens his tone a notch. “We can keep it vague. I don’t need details. I just need to know what moves they’re making, what they’re taking off the table for you.”

“It is fine,” Ilya replies carefully, like he’s deciding something. “Your reputation is good. They trust you. Is just...”

John waits.

“Yuna Hollander,” Ilya finishes. “His agent is Yuna Hollander.”

John blinks, feeling like his brain just forcibly restarted. John had thought this conversation was already as crazy as it was going to get, but apparently, he was wrong.

Yuna Hollander was a force of nature. John has never met her, hasn’t even spoken to her. But by reputation alone, he knows she could run a sports management empire if she wanted to.

But, as far as he knew, she only managed one athlete...

“Your partner...” he says slowly, “is Shane Hollander.”

“Yes.”

Well. Shit.

John lets out a harsh breath, then smiles despite himself. Yeah, strangest client acquisition indeed.

“Well,” he says, making eye contact with Ilya. “Looks like Mrs. Hollander and I have a lot of work to do.”

For the first time all afternoon, Ilya smiles.

The car hums under Ilya’s hands as he pulls out of his driveway, tires crunching softly over leftover salt. The city is still half-asleep, winter light thin and gray, everything washed flat and quiet.

He’s got the phone propped against the console, Shane’s name lit up on the screen.

“Hey,” Shane says when he answers. His voice sounds... steady. Which is new. Or maybe just practiced.

“Hey,” Ilya replies. He checks the mirror, signals, and merges into traffic. Muscle memory. “I am on my way to practice.”

“I figured,” Shane says.

Ilya hums. “I met new agent yesterday.”

There’s a pause on the line, the kind that means Shane is choosing his reaction carefully.

“And?” Shane asks.

“I think he is good,” Ilya says. He keeps his eyes on the road. “Smart. Calm. He listens. Does not think I am insane for what I want.”

“That’s... that’s good,” Shane says, and there’s genuine relief there. “I’m really glad.”

“I am too,” Ilya says. He means it. He feels lighter than he did yesterday, like something has finally been set down instead of just shifted from one shoulder to the other.

Another pause. Not awkward. Just... waiting.

“Ilya,” Shane says finally, softer now. “I’m sorry.”

Ilya’s fingers tighten briefly on the steering wheel.

“For what?”

“For asking you to...” Shane exhales. “For asking you to wait. To keep putting your life on hold. Coming out. Citizenship. All of it. I hate that this plan means you’re still... hiding.”

Ilya shakes his head, even though Shane can’t see it.

“I am not hiding,” he says automatically. Too quickly.

Shane is quiet for a beat.

“I know,” he says. “I just... I don’t want you to feel like you’re sacrificing everything for me.”

Ilya swallows.

“I am choosing,” he says. Carefully. “This is my choice. I am fine.”

He waits for Shane to argue. He doesn’t.

“Okay,” Shane says. “Okay.”

The road curves toward the rink, the familiar shape of it rising ahead. A couple of local sports radio vans are already parked out front, logos plastered across their sides.

“How are you?” Ilya asks, deliberately casual. “In Montreal.”

Another pause. Shorter this time.

“I’m fine,” Shane says. “Really. It’s... fine.”

Ilya hears everything in that answer. Wants to disagree with it.

“Okay,” Ilya says instead. Because this is the compromise they’ve reached lately. Accepting each other’s words even when they don’t quite believe them.

“They’re not warm,” Shane continues, like he knows Ilya’s listening between the lines. “But they’re not sabotaging me either. Hayden and J.J. kind of run interference. I get to do my job. I’m playing good hockey again.”

“That is good,” Ilya says.

“Yeah,” Shane agrees. “That’s what matters.”

Neither of them believes that’s the whole truth.

Neither of them says anything else.

A car honks behind Ilya as he slows to turn into the players’ lot. He signals, pulls in, cuts the engine. The sudden silence is loud.

“Listen,” Shane says, before either of them can hang up. “You tell me if this starts feeling like too much. Okay? If you feel stuck, or resentful, or... anything. I don’t want to be the reason you’re miserable.”

Ilya rests his forehead briefly against the steering wheel.

“You are not,” he says. He forces a lighter tone. “You are the reason I am doing any of this.”

Shane laughs softly. “You’re impossible.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees. “This is well-documented.”

They sit in the quiet for another second, neither quite ready to be the one to end the call.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Shane says.

“Later,” Ilya replies.

Ilya stays in the car for a moment longer, hands still on the wheel, watching the doors of the rink as players start to filter inside. Teammates. Friends. A room he thinks will be safe... but doesn't know yet.

He told Shane he was fine.

And he is.

Mostly.

Still, as he opens the door and steps out into the cold, that quiet thought trails him like exhaust in the winter air, unwanted and unspoken:

What if Shane moves on...

...and I'm still here, waiting for a plan that doesn't need me anymore?

Ilya shakes his head once, sharp, like he can dislodge it. He slings his bag over his shoulder and heads inside.

One step at a time.

The opportunity for the first step comes that night.

They've just finished a tight game, the kind that leaves Ilya buzzing even after the final horn. His shirt is still damp, hair half-dry from the rush of the locker room, when he's pulled into the post-game scrum. Microphones cluster. Cameras blink. The questions are routine enough that his brain answers them on autopilot.

Good win. Tough opponent. Power play adjustment worked.

Then someone asks, casually, “You've seemed more settled this year. Anything change in your routine this season?”

It's the kind of question that usually means nothing. A setup for a platitude about experience, or maturity, or getting older.

Ilya thinks of the email he got that afternoon from Yuna, John copied, neat bullet points, already three steps ahead of him.

Float ties to Canada.

Keep it vague.

Family.

Stability.

Settling down.

Seriously, that woman is terrifying.

He looks up at the reporter and, instead of deflecting, lets himself lean into it.

“I think,” he says slowly, choosing his words more carefully than he usually does in situations like this, “I am just... in good place. Is nice, knowing there is support. Someone who makes you feel... home.”

The microphones tilt closer.

He keeps his expression mild. Neutral. Captainly.

“It helps,” he adds. “Having someone off-ice.”

The silence afterward is delicious. Not hostile. Not even shocked. Just... recalibrating.

Ilya thanks them, ducks out of the scrum, and doesn't let himself smile until the locker room door closes behind him.

Marley catches his eye from across the room, eyebrow lifting. A look passes between them; quick, knowing, amused.

“What?” Ilya asks, playing dumb.

“Someone finally tamed Rozanov,” another guy calls out. “Didn't think I'd live to see the day.”

A chorus of laughter follows. Questions pile on.

Who is she? When are we meeting her? Wait, did you finally lock down your Montreal girl? Is she real or is this like your ‘diet’ phase?

The assumptions sting. Little pinpricks. Each *she* lands like a reminder of what he still can't say.

But it's brief. And for the first time, it doesn't outweigh the relief.

Because he said *someone*. Because he didn't erase them entirely.

The second step happens a few days later in Ottawa. Ilya's taped for a pre-game interview, the rink buzzing behind him. The reporter smiles, friendly.

“You always seem to play well here,” she says. “What do you think of Ottawa as a city?”

Ilya doesn't even have to think.

“It is good city,” he says easily. “Fans are great. Even when they do not like Boston very much. And is always nice to feel so comfortable not at home.”

She laughs. “Care to elaborate?”

He shrugs, the gesture loose, as he thinks of what to say. But he knows what to say, thinking immediately of Yuna and David, somewhere in the city, probably settling onto the couch to watch his game. Thinks of the blazing warmth he'd felt in his chest when they'd admitted they watch his games now too.

“It is nice,” he says, “to play in a place where you feel cared for. Even if you are away from home.”

“Cared for?” Her head tilts.

“Yes,” Ilya says, and this time the words come warmer, his smile genuine. “It is always good to know there are loved ones cheering for you. Even if they are across the city, watching from their living room, not in rink.”

The murmur afterward is immediate.

Cared for? Loved ones? Across the city?

Ilya keeps his face blank through it all, but inside, he’s grinning like an idiot.

He loves this part more than he should, not just talking about Shane, even vaguely, but watching the media stumble. He’s always loved a little chaos.

The next step comes two days later, in Winnipeg, and this one is entirely accidental.

They lose badly. The kind of loss that makes the locker room silent and ugly. Ilya answers questions because that’s the job, because captains do what captains must, even though he wants nothing more than to go back to the hotel and face-plant onto his bed.

Someone asks about his off-season training. Something to do with “longevity” and “lasting through the season.”

“Was same as always,” Ilya replies tiredly. “Nothing special.”

Then, without thinking...

“I mean, was in Canada this summer. Not Russia. But training was the same.”

“Canada?” The reporter blinks.

“Yes,” Ilya says, not even registering what he’d just admitted.

It doesn’t hit him until later. Until he’s curled up in bed, phone warm in his hand, Shane’s voice low and amused in his ear.

“Ilya,” Shane says, trying and failing not to laugh. “The internet is... having a moment.”

Ilya smiles into the pillow. “Is it?”

“They’re connecting dots that do not exist,” Shane says. “You’ve apparently been secretly Canadian for years.”

“They are bad detectives.” Ilya chuckles, soft and sleepy.

“You implied you have loved ones in Ottawa,” Shane says. “And that you spent the whole summer in Canada. People are... curious.”

“I do. And I did,” Ilya answers easily.

“Ilya...” Shane answers, but it’s too fond to be the reprimand it’s intended to be.

“Let them be,” Ilya murmurs. “I like that they are curious.”

“You’re enjoying this way too much,” Shane huffs, but Ilya can hear the smile.

“Maybe,” Ilya admits. “But it is nice. To say something true. Even if it is not everything.”

There’s a quiet beat.

“I love you,” Shane says.

“*I ya tebya lyublyu,*” Ilya replies automatically, Russian slipping out. He yawns, exhaustion finally catching up. “Stay,” he adds, half-asleep. “Just... stay on line little longer.”

Shane doesn’t argue.

And as Ilya drifts off, phone pressed to his ear, he feels it; small, steady, real.

Not certainty. But motion.

Not being left behind. Moving forward.

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, since I am not independently wealthy, I have gone back to work post-holiday break 😞

So, daily updates, and especially multiple-a-day updates, are very unlikely to be the norm moving forward

Rest assured, though, this still consumes all of my free brain space lol

Chapter 16

Days keep ticking by.

Ilya keeps moving. Because that's what you do. Because motion is safer than stillness. Because if he stops, he might notice what it costs him.

He drops another hint to the media after a win; something about routine, about stability, about liking the quiet. He watches reporters blink and tilt their heads like confused puppies. He pretends he doesn't enjoy it. He enjoys it.

They win more games. Boston is good this year. Loud and fast, mean in the right ways. The power play clicks. The points rack up. The room is... *good*, in the way that makes you believe in it when you're inside it. Guys chirp him about "settling down" every time he says anything even slightly domestic, like having a favorite grocery store is a ring on his finger.

There are dinners with Marley where he doesn't have to censor himself as tightly. Not *everything*. Never everything. But enough that his lungs don't feel like they're always working against a band around his ribs.

There are emails from John and Yuna, too; bullet points, timelines, suggested language. The kind of neat, ruthless competence that makes Ilya feel like he's holding something solid even when the rest of his life is smoke.

Things are good.

He can list it all out in order. He can tell himself the plan is moving. He can see the life they're building.

So why does his chest keep sinking when the world goes quiet?

It shows up in the small moments, the ones that don't belong to anyone else.

When he's the last one to step off the ice after practice, skating slow laps because leaving means going back to his empty house.

When he closes the door behind him, the sound is too final, too clean. When the air inside doesn't shift with someone else's presence. When there's no second set of keys on the counter, no jacket thrown on the back of a chair, no voice from another room calling something ridiculous in French just to make him laugh.

When he sits in traffic with the radio too loud and still feels like he's drowning.

He tries to tell himself it's normal. It's just stress. It's just the season. It's just winter. It's just... *everything*.

But he knows stress, and stress doesn't feel like this.

This feels like someone took a shovel and hollowed him out, and he's walking around pretending there's still something inside.

After a win on a Thursday, the team goes out. Not because anyone is wild about it, not really, but because it's what you do. Because the schedule gave them a rare night without travel. Because the guys have energy and nowhere to put it.

They squeeze into a bar near the arena with too-bright lights and music that doesn't fit the crowd. Booths packed with bodies, laughter bouncing off wood and glass.

Ilya sits in a booth with Marley, two defensemen, their goalie, and a rookie who still looks like he can't believe he's here.

Someone raises a glass. Someone else orders wings. Someone starts telling the story of a hit from the second period like they're narrating a war movie.

Ilya smiles in the right places. He laughs when Marley elbows him. He leans in, says the right thing, and lets the noise wash over him.

For a while, it almost works.

Then the rookie says something to their goalie about moving in with their girlfriend; something stupid and sweet about how it must be nice to have someone waiting at home for you. And someone else laughs and goes, "Yeah, Oregon is domesticated now," and Marley makes a face and says, "Don't say that like it's a disease," and everyone laughs again.

And Ilya laughs too, because he's supposed to, because it's friendly, because it's *safe*.

And then, like a door swinging open inside his chest, he realizes the truth so sharply it steals his breath:

He is lonely.

Not lonely like *sad sometimes*. Not lonely like *miss you*. Not lonely like *call you later*.

Lonely like bone-deep, aching, stupid, animal loneliness.

Lonely like his hands still do the small reaching motion to the other side of the bed in the dark before he remembers there's no one there.

Lonely like being surrounded by people who like him, that he likes back, and still feeling completely out of reach of the thing he wants most.

He stares down at his beer and watches the foam settle. His throat tightens.

He thinks of Shane's laugh, the real one, the one that starts in his chest and spills out like he can't help it. He thinks of Shane's weight against him on a couch. Shane half-asleep, head on Ilya's shoulder, the TV making everything blue and quiet. Shane's fingers tracing patterns on his forearm without thinking.

He thinks of the cottage. Of Ottawa. Of waking up and hearing someone else breathe.

He misses it. Shane, the cottage, existing somewhere where he can just be Ilya. Not *Ilya Rozanov*, hockey superstar. Just Ilya, the boy hopelessly in love with another boy.

His chest hurts. He swallows hard and takes a drink too fast. The beer is bitter and cold; it's not enough.

His mind, traitorous, reaches for Russia.

He hates it. He hates that it still happens. Hates that his mind can't let it be.

He misses the old buildings, the way the streets smelled after snow. He misses the tomcat that lived near his apartment and acted like he owned the entire block, demanding attention like it was a tax. He misses his father's eyes, harsh and judgmental, but steady and certain... until illness stole that certainty away.

And sometimes, in the weird hours between late night and early morning, he even misses his brother.

And his mother...

His eyes sting.

He squeezes them shut, hard, forces that thought away before it can become something wet and humiliating in the middle of a booth full of teammates.

He opens them again and blinks until the burn fades.

Marley is talking. The others are laughing. No one notices Ilya is gone somewhere else.

He hates how easy it is to disappear.

The next day after practice, Ilya doesn't go home. He stays and works out longer than is probably wise. And then he still doesn't go home.

He stands in the hallway outside the locker room with his gear bag slung over one shoulder, staring at his phone like it might decide things for him.

He wants to call Shane. His thumb hovers over Shane's number.

But if he calls Shane, Shane will hear it. He'll hear the hollow. The drift. The ugly loneliness that doesn't make sense on paper.

And Shane already feels guilty. Shane is already carrying too much. Shane is already doing math with his own life to keep Ilya safe.

Ilya can't put this on him, too.

His thumb moves to Marley instead. Marley picks up on the second ring.

"Yo," Marley says. "What's up? I just saw you like two hours ago."

“Marley,” Ilya starts, not sure how to finish.

“You okay?” Marley asks immediately.

Ilya hates how quick Marley is. Hates how he can hear things through nothing but a greeting.

“I am fine,” Ilya says automatically.

There’s a pause.

Marley doesn’t call him on the lie directly; he never does. He just says, gentler, “Okay. You wanna come over? We can... I don’t know. Eat something. Watch something dumb.”

Ilya’s throat tightens.

“Yes,” he says, too fast. “*Da*. Yes. Please.”

“Yeah,” Marley says, like it’s the easiest thing in the world. “Come over whenever.”

Marley’s apartment smells like coffee and the lavender cleaner his house cleaner uses. It’s warm. Lived-in. There are shoes by the door that aren’t lined up neatly. There’s a stack of mail on the counter. A throw blanket tossed like someone grabbed it and didn’t care where it landed.

It looks like a life.

Ilya steps inside, and the door clicks shut behind him.

And that’s it.

It’s like the quiet finally catches up with him, like his body has been holding its breath for days, and the second it realizes it’s safe, it lets go.

His eyes fill with tears so fast it makes him angry.

“Fuck,” he mutters, swallowing hard.

Marley turns, halfway to the kitchen already, and freezes.

“Holy shit. Roz?” Marley says, panic flaring instantly across his face. “Hey. Hey, hey...”

“I am sorry,” Ilya says at the same time, voice rough. He scrubs at his face with the heel of his hand like he can erase it. “Is stupid. Is...”

“Don’t apologize,” Marley says quickly, moving toward him like he’s approaching a skittish animal. “It’s fine. You’re fine. Just...”

“I am not fine,” Ilya says roughly.

The honesty surprises them both.

Marley goes still.

Ilya closes his eyes. Breathes in. Breathes out.

“I am sorry,” he says again, quieter. “I did not... I did not mean to... do this.”

“Dude,” Marley lets out a shaky laugh. “You’re allowed to have feelings. Come on, sit down.”

“I do not...” Ilya starts, because his body is still trying to refuse the vulnerability, still trying to stand up straight through it.

“Sit. Now.” Marley points at the couch like a referee making a call. “Before you pass out or something, and I have to explain to the team I killed you.”

Ilya huffs a broken sound that might be a laugh if it wasn’t mostly pain. He lets Marley steer him toward the couch. Marley drops onto the other end, not too close, leaving space. The kind of space that says “*I’m here*” without saying “*You’re trapped*.”

For a minute, neither of them speaks. Ilya stares at his own hands. They’re shaking. He hates it.

Marley clears his throat.

“Okay,” he says, careful. “Talk to me.”

“I do not know how,” Ilya admits, voice barely above a whisper.

“Start anywhere,” Marley says. “Literally anywhere.”

Ilya swallows.

“It is... everything,” he says finally, and then shakes his head because it sounds dramatic and he hates drama when it’s his. “No. It is...” He searches, fails, tries again. “Things are good. We are winning. Plan is moving. Yuna is... terrifying. Agent is good. Shane is... Shane is doing better. Montreal are still assholes, but Shane is okay.”

Marley nods like he understands every piece of that, even the parts he probably doesn’t.

“And?” Marley prompts, softly.

Ilya’s throat closes.

“And I am sad,” he says, like he’s confessing a crime.

Marley’s face shifts; sympathy, recognition, something like helplessness.

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “Okay.”

“I miss him,” Ilya says, and his voice cracks on the word like his body couldn’t hold it in anymore. “I miss Shane. I miss...” He swallows hard. “I miss waking up, and there is someone. I miss being held. I miss...” He gestures vaguely, helpless. “Home.”

Marley doesn’t interrupt. Doesn’t fix it. Just listens.

“I have friends,” Ilya says, bitter because it’s true and also not enough. “I have you. I have team. I have people who like me. But when I go home, it is only me. And I...” His breath catches. “I feel like ghost.”

Marley's expression pinches. "That sucks," he says, simple and honest. "That really sucks."

Ilya laughs sharply. "Yes. Thank you. Very insightful."

Marley snorts, grateful for the joke, then sobers again.

Ilya stares at the carpet.

"I cannot tell Shane," he says quietly. "He already feels guilty. He will... he will try to fix it. He will hurt himself to fix it."

Marley's eyes soften.

"And I am scared," Ilya says next, voice small. Less controlled. "That he will leave Montreal, and he will be okay. And I will still be here. And I will still be... hiding. And then what if..." He stops. Swallows. Forces the thought back down before it can become a sentence.

Marley leans forward slightly. "What if what?"

Ilya shakes his head. "Nothing. Is stupid."

"It's not stupid," Marley says immediately.

Ilya's eyes burn again, and this time the tears actually fall.

Marley's voice gentles, like he's walking on ice that might crack. "You can say it."

Ilya takes a breath. Another.

"What if he does not need me anymore?" Ilya whispers.

The room goes very still.

Marley's face does something complicated: surprise first, then something like pain, then understanding that settles deep.

"Oh," Marley says softly. "Roz..."

Ilya laughs, miserable. "See? Stupid."

"No. No, not stupid," Marley says, firmer now. "Not even a little."

Ilya blinks hard. His throat aches. Ilya rubs his face again.

"Also," he says, quieter, because if he doesn't say it now, he might never. "We may move. To Ottawa. Both of us. Or maybe only Shane first. But... Ottawa."

Marley stares at him.

"Wait," Marley says. "You're... leaving Boston?"

Ilya flinches automatically. Like he's done something wrong.

“I do not want to,” he says quickly. “Not because of team. Team is good. But...” He spreads his hands helplessly. “Life. Safety. Shane. Future.”

“Jesus,” Marley mutters. He leans back, scrubs a hand over his face. “Okay. Okay. That’s... wow.”

Ilya watches him carefully, braced for judgment.

Marley drops his hand and looks back at Ilya, eyes serious. “I hate it,” he says bluntly. “For me. For the team. I hate it because you’re... you’re *you*. And because you’re my friend, and I’ll miss you.”

Ilya’s throat tightens.

“But,” Marley continues, “I get it. If it’s about being with someone you love? I get it.”

Ilya doesn’t say anything, because he’s not sure what to say.

“Okay,” Marley says eventually, exhaling. “So. You’re lonely. You miss him. You’re scared. You’re tired. And you’re carrying a lot of this by yourself.”

Ilya nods, because that’s the truth, stripped down to bone.

“Roz...” Marley says, and then hesitates. “Tell me to fuck off if this is dumb, but... could you come out to the team?”

“I would like to,” Ilya says quietly. “But...”

“But, what?” Marley prods gently.

“I am scared,” Ilya admits. “Not because I am ashamed.” The words come fast, defensive. He needs Marley to understand this part. Needs it like air. “I am not ashamed. I just...” He exhales. “I do not know if they will still look at me same way.”

Marley nods slowly.

“They’ve never been...” Ilya starts, then stops. “No slurs. No hate. But...” He grimaces. “Jokes. Things people say without thinking. And I know they do not mean it. But sometimes people do not know what they mean until it is in front of them.”

Marley’s jaw works. “Yeah,” he says. “That’s fair.”

They sit there for a while, both pretending Ilya’s cheeks aren’t wet.

“Alright,” Marley declares eventually, standing. “I’m gonna make food. Then we’re gonna watch something so stupid it kills brain cells. And you can sit here and be sad without apologizing for it. Deal?”

Ilya’s chest tightens. His eyes burn again.

“Deal,” he manages.

Marley takes a few steps, pauses, then looks back at him. “And, Roz?”

“Yes?”

“You can always lean on me like this,” Marley says. “Okay?”

Ilya swallows.

“Okay,” he whispers.

Marley nods, like that’s settled, and disappears into the kitchen with the confidence of someone who doesn’t know how to fix feelings but knows how to stay.

Ilya leans back into the couch. The apartment hums around him; warm, lived-in, human.

He’s still sad.

But the loneliness, for the first time in days, has a shape he can hold.

Chapter 17

By the time Detroit comes to town, Ilya can admit to himself that he's not at his best.

Not bad. Not noticeably off. Just... *off*. Like there's a half-second delay between thought and movement; everything he's doing is technically correct, but it's hollow. Practiced, not instinctual like it should be.

The game moves around him anyway. It always does.

This is one of the last games before the All-Star Game, and he's holding onto that weekend like a lifeline. Four more days. One more game after this. Then he gets on a plane and goes west to see Shane and remember what it feels like to be in the same room as the person you love.

He tells himself that's enough to get through.

The rink is loud. Boston fans are always loud, the sound pressing in from all sides. The ice smells sharp and familiar. His body knows what to do even when his mind keeps drifting.

Stick on ice. Read the play. Win the draw. Get to the corner.

Midway through the third, he wins the end zone face-off and barely has five seconds to see if his pass even connected before the whistle blows hard.

The noise shifts.

Ilya straightens and looks up just in time to see bodies collide near the blue line. Gloves on the ice. Linesmen trying to wedge themselves between two players.

A fight.

He hadn't seen what started it.

He coasts toward the fringes, scanning jerseys, clocks the number: Kane. Their Kane. Defenseman. Steady. Rarely even chirps, let alone drops the gloves.

"What happened?" Ilya asks Marley as he glides to stop next to him.

"Didn't see it." Marley shakes his head. "No bad hit. No slew foot. Came out of nowhere."

That doesn't make it make more sense.

Eventually, the linesmen pull Kane and the opposing player apart, sending Kane toward the penalty box with a shove and a stern word.

Kane stands in the box, jaw set, chest heaving, eyes still sharp with adrenaline. He doesn't look regretful. He looks... resolved.

Ilya files it away. Hockey is hockey. He'll ask him later.

Detroit scores on the power play that comes out of it; breaks the tie. The building tilts. They push. They don't get it back. The horn sounds, final and unforgiving.

They lose.

Ilya wishes he cared more.

The locker room afterward is subdued, but not devastated. It wasn't a disaster. It was a game that slipped. It happens. Still, he knows he should say something. He's the captain, that's his job.

He peels off his gloves, his helmet, his shoulder pads, faster than usual, like if he gets out of the room quickly enough, he won't have to feel the weight of expectation settle on him.

"I'll be back," he mutters to no one in particular, already stepping into the hall.

He tells himself he just needs a minute.

The hallway outside the media rooms is quieter, the noise muffled through concrete and doors. He slows as he passes the open door to the post-game presser, drawn by his own name being mentioned and then, unexpectedly, Kane's.

"...you don't fight often. Especially not like that. Can you explain what led you to decide to fight Gauthier?"

Ilya stops, leans against the doorframe.

Kane stands at the podium, half-dressed, hair damp, jaw tight. He looks uncomfortable, but not uncertain.

"Guy had it coming," Kane says flatly. Ilya feels his eyes widen; that sort of borderline rude attitude with the media is much more his style, not Kane's.

"You drew a penalty that ended up costing you the game," the reporter presses.

Kane's mouth tightens. "I'm aware."

"Those sorts of mistakes can be costly at this point in the season," the reporter tries again. "What's your justification for taking the risk?"

There's a beat. Just long enough to feel like a choice being made.

"It's no secret Marleau publicly supported Shane Hollander when he came out," Kane says carefully. "Gauthier asked me how I felt about it. Apparently, that I spoke with Hollander myself to give him my support wasn't the answer he wanted."

A ripple of discomfort moves through the room. Shifts of weight. A cough.

"He had a few... choice words after that," Kane continues, his voice even.

Someone inhales sharply. Ilya realizes belatedly that it's him.

The reporter tries to recover. "Chirping happens all the time in hockey..."

“Slurs aren’t chirping,” Kane cuts in, sharp now. Decisive. “And anyone who thinks otherwise has no business playing this game.”

“Alright, we’re done here...” the team’s PR manager steps in immediately, voice smooth, already redirecting.

Kane steps back from the podium, eyes hard, and turns.

He nearly runs straight into Ilya in the doorway.

“Sorry,” Kane starts automatically, then frowns. “Cap...”

Ilya grabs him by the shoulder, rough, unthinking, and gives him a shake.

“Do not apologize,” Ilya says, voice low and absolute. “Not to me.”

Kane blinks. “I shouldn’t have lost my temper. I know it hurt us...”

“I will never be upset about you fighting homophobe,” Ilya says immediately.

Kane hesitates. “Even if it costs us the game?”

Ilya snorts, sharp and humorless. “There is no such thing as losing when you punch homophobes.”

Something in Kane’s posture eases, just a fraction.

They walk back toward the locker room together, shoulder to shoulder. The room quiets when they enter.

“What was that about?” someone asks.

“Guy dropped slurs,” Kane says with a shrug. “Wasn’t gonna let that go.”

There’s a beat.

Then someone says, “Yeah, fuck that guy.”

“Good,” another adds. “Shut that shit down.”

“No place for it,” Marley says, immediately.

A few nods. No debate. No awkward silence. Just... agreement.

Ilya stands there, arm still around his d-man, and feels something warm in his chest.

Later, alone at his stall, phone heavy in his palm, he texts Shane.

Jane

Ilya: Did Kane really talk to you after you came out?

The reply comes fast.

Jane

Ilya:Did Kane really talk to you after you came out?

Jane:Did I not tell you?

Jane:Yeah. He texted me. It was nice of him.

Jane:Why?

Ilya stares at the screen.

He doesn't know how to explain the feeling moving through him; relief, pride, something like safety settling into his bones.

He knows Kane didn't do it for him. Didn't even do it for Shane. Kane did it because it was right.

And the locker room agrees.

Something deep in his chest settles at that.

He types one more message before he can talk himself out of it.

Jane

Jane:Did I not tell you?

Jane:Yeah. He texted me. It was nice of him.

Jane:Why?

Ilya:I am going to tell team about me

Ilya gets to the rink earlier than usual.

Not the normal early, the kind where he's just first among the regular early birds, but early enough that the hallways are still mostly quiet, half the lights overhead still off. His bag is slung over his shoulder as he walks past the familiar turns with a faint sense of unreality, like he's watching himself do this from a few steps back.

He tells himself it's just another day.

His body, traitorous as ever, does not believe him. His stomach feels hollow, tight in a way that has nothing to do with hockey. This is different. This is the kind of fear that doesn't burn hot; it just sits there, patient, waiting.

He drops his bag in his stall unceremoniously before turning to look at the coach's office.

Coach LeClaire's office door is half-open. The man is already inside, jacket off, coffee in hand, flipping through something on his desk. He looks up when Ilya knocks.

"Rozanov," he says easily. "You're early."

"Can we... talk?" Ilya asks. The words scrape on the way out, tighter than he hoped.

Coach pauses. Just a beat. Long enough to notice. He sets the coffee down and gestures toward the chair across from his desk.

"Sure," he says. "Come on in."

The door clicks shut behind Ilya, the sound sharp and final in the quiet. He doesn't sit right away.

LeClaire studies him with the kind of quiet attention that made him dangerous behind the bench. The kind that reads shoulders and breathing before stats.

"You're not about to tell me you're hurt, are you?" he asks, concern already creeping in.

"No," Ilya huffs a short laugh, but it comes out rough. He sits, perching on the edge of the chair like he might stand again at any second.

"Okay," he says slowly. "Then talk to me."

Ilya opens his mouth. Nothing comes out. His hands curl into fists in his lap, knuckles whitening. He loosens them. Tightens them again.

"Legal trouble? Money problems?" LeClaire tries, gentler now.

"No," Ilya says quickly. Too quickly. "No."

Coach holds his gaze, searching.

"Roz," he says quietly, "you don't scare easy. So if you're this wound up, I need to know what we're dealing with."

Ilya swallows. His throat feels too small for the truth. Silence stretches. Ilya stares at the edge of the desk, at a coffee ring ghosted into the wood. His pulse thuds hard enough to make his vision shimmer at the edges.

"I have personal news," he says finally. "About me."

"Alright." Coach leans back slightly, giving space.

Another breath. Another. This is where he usually just says the thing. Takes control. This time, the words stick.

"I have been... hiding something," Ilya says. "For long time."

LeClaire's brow furrows; not alarmed, but alert. Worried.

“Ilya,” he says carefully, “whatever this is, you’re not in trouble for being human. If you need help...”

Something in Ilya’s chest twists painfully at that.

“I am bisexual,” he says at last.

For half a second, LeClaire’s eyebrows lift. Surprise, plain and unfiltered. Then his face settles, lines smoothing.

“Oh, thank god,” Coach mutters with a deep exhale. “Kid, I thought you were gearing up to tell me you had a drug problem or something.”

Ilya just stares at him. He vaguely thinks he should probably be offended, but he’s too confused. He’d thought of a lot of possible reactions to his words: anger, disappointment, mild annoyance. Relief wasn’t one of them.

“I don’t care who you love,” LeClaire clarifies when it’s clear Ilya isn’t going to speak. His smile is gentle. “You’re an excellent centre. A leader. A pain in my ass in the best way. None of that changes. You liking men doesn’t change your hockey.”

He says it so simply. Like that’s it. No follow-up. No visible recalibration. Just acceptance, clean and immediate.

Ilya feels it land somewhere deep, like a hand bracing him before he tips.

“If you want to be out publicly,” LeClaire adds, “you’ll have my support. Management’s too.”

“I cannot,” Ilya says instantly. The words come out rehearsed, practiced in private. “Russia is not... safe.”

Coach nods once. No questions.

“But I want to tell the team,” Ilya says. “I do not want to lie to them anymore.”

“When?” the coach asks.

Ilya opens his mouth. Hesitates. His mind floods with faces. Silence. The wrong kind of quiet.

LeClaire watches the hesitation settle in his shoulders.

“How about after practice?” he offers. “No game tonight. Gives people time.”

Then he grimaces slightly, like he’s already annoyed at the concept.

“Not that how anyone reacts is your responsibility,” he adds. “If they have issues, that’s theirs to unpack. Not yours.”

Ilya exhales shakily.

“Okay,” he says.

Practice passes in a blur.

His legs feel heavy. His timing's off by fractions that matter to him, even if no one else notices.

He misses a read he shouldn't. Overthinks a pass. Nothing catastrophic, nothing that couldn't be waved away as just an off day. But Ilya Rozanov didn't have off days.

More than once, someone glances at Ilya a second too long. Marley notices first, eyebrows knitting, then Oregon. Kane watches him with a faint crease between his brows, like he's trying to solve a problem.

They all know something's off.

After practice, while guys are peeling out of gear, towels slung low around hips, the room loud with the usual post-skate chaos.

Coach claps his hands once.

"Alright," he calls. "Listen up."

The noise dies down instantly.

"Our captain's got something he wants to say."

A few heads turn. A couple of guys straighten without meaning to. Marley meets Ilya's eyes from across the room, surprise flickering there, and then, quietly understanding, a nod. A silent, *"You've got this."*

LeClaire continues, "Couple ground rules first. What's said here stays here. This room is private. Privacy is respect. If I find out anyone's been running their mouth, I will bag skate you until you wish you'd never joined this sport."

He scans the room once, sharp and unapologetic.

"Next," he continues. "Your captain is choosing to trust you with something personal here. You will be supportive. If anyone's got an issue with what's shared in the next few minutes, keep it to yourself."

There are confused faces, but no one tries to argue, so Coach gestures to Ilya and steps back. "Cap."

Ilya stands.

The floor feels too far away. His palms sweat. He hooks his thumbs into the waistband of his compression tights just to anchor himself.

He has stood in front of this team a hundred times. He's addressed them after losses, after wins, before playoff games that felt like wars waiting to happen.

This feels harder than all of those times combined.

“All of you know I am... private person,” he starts. His voice is steady, even if his hands aren’t. “I keep a lot to myself.”

A few murmurs of agreement. Someone snorts softly.

“But I love this team,” Ilya continues. “I love you guys. And I want to be better about not keeping everything locked away.”

Someone mutters, “We love you too, Rozy,” and there’s a ripple of quiet agreement.

Ilya swallows, pushes on.

“At this point, you know I have someone special,” he says. “Some of you even guessed they are in Montreal.”

A few heads tilt. A couple quiet whispers.

“But you don’t know why I have been so careful,” Ilya adds.

This is the moment. His mouth goes dry again.

“I am bisexual,” he says. “And my partner is a man.”

The room is silent.

Ilya forces himself not to rush, not to fill the space with apologies or explanations. He dreads his teammates’ faces, but he makes himself look. They’re quiet. Not cold. No harsh glares or deep frowns. No tight jaws.

Just surprise. Confusion. Processing.

Someone lets out a low “oh.”

“There... there are things I cannot share,” Ilya says, wincing a bit. “But I will answer what I can.”

The tension in the room shifts; not vanishing, but loosening. The guys glance at each other, uncertain. Then Johansson clears his throat.

“How long have you known you’re bi?” he asks, cautious but sincere, in his lilting Swedish accent.

“I was... fourteen, I think,” Ilya answers. “Sort of always knew.”

“Are you planning to come out?” One of the younger guys, Kohn, asks.

“No,” Ilya answers firmly. “Russia is... not safe.”

There are a few murmurs around the room. Sympathy, anger, and disappointment on his behalf.

“How long have you and your boyfriend been together?” Dubek pipes up, a tentative smile breaking through.

“Last summer,” Ilya answers, a smile sneaking out before he can stop it. “But he has been... special to me for years.”

“Years?” someone gasps.

“*Da*,” Ilya says, softer now. “Since summer before my rookie season.”

The room quiets again; Ilya looks at two dozen bewildered faces.

“I understand if anyone is confused,” he starts quickly. “Or upset I did not tell you sooner...”

“Hey,” Oregan cuts in, already standing. “Don’t.”

Ilya blinks.

“You don’t need to apologise,” the goalie says. “Jesus, man... that must’ve been terrifying to carry around all these years.”

Quiet agreement echoes through the room.

“Yeah,” someone else adds. “For real.”

Kane stands and crosses the room in three long strides.

“Come here, Rozy,” he says.

Before Ilya can react, Kane pulls him into a crushing hug.

Then suddenly, he finds himself in a team group hug worthy of a Cup win, not a locker room confession.

Someone is wrapping around his back, chin on the top of his head; Marley. Someone laughs. Someone else claps him on the shoulder. Varkov reaches in, ruffling his hair.

The huddle closes around him, warm and solid. Unmistakably there.

Ilya laughs, breathless, overwhelmed, and lets himself lean into it.

For the first time since he last left Shane’s arms, he doesn’t feel quite so lonely.

Not here.

Not anymore.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

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

Shane barely glances at the number on the keycard sleeve before he pockets it.

He thanks the woman at the desk, nods automatically, and turns toward the elevators without even considering his own room. Ilya texted him a number an hour ago. Different floor. Same hotel. Close enough that Shane can already feel the gravity of it pulling him.

The elevator ride is too slow.

By the time he reaches the door, his chest feels tight with anticipation, with relief, with something like guilt he can't quite name yet. He knocks once, sharp and impatient, and the door swings open almost immediately.

Ilya is already there.

Shane knows him well enough now that the assessment happens before the greeting. Before the smile. Before the arms coming up.

Ilya looks... wrung out.

Not sick. Not upset in any obvious way. Just worn thin, like someone who's been holding themselves together very carefully for too long and hasn't quite figured out how to stop yet. His eyes brighten when he sees Shane, but the light doesn't reach all the way through.

It hits Shane harder than he expects.

"Hey," Ilya says, voice soft, already reaching.

Shane doesn't say anything. He just steps forward and wraps his arms around him, pulling him in hard, chest to chest, like he's afraid that if he lets go even for a second, Ilya might slip right through his hands.

Ilya makes a small sound, halfway between a breath and a laugh, and clutches back just as tightly. He tucks his face into Shane's neck and stays there.

"I missed you," Ilya murmurs.

"I know," Shane says, because he does. Because he feels it in the way Ilya's fingers curl into the fabric of his coat, like he needs the confirmation that Shane is real and here and not going anywhere. "I missed you too."

They stand there longer than necessary. Long enough that the door swings shut behind Shane on its own.

Only then does Ilya pull back enough to look at him properly, hands still anchored at Shane's waist like he's afraid of drift.

“You okay?” Shane asks quietly.

Ilya hesitates. Just a fraction of a second too long to be nothing.

“Yes,” he says. Then, after a beat, softer: “I am just... tired.”

Shane nods, like that answers everything. Maybe it does.

“Come on,” Shane says. “I need a shower.”

Ilya’s mouth curves into the smallest smile. “I will join you.”

Shane huffs a laugh. “I wasn’t asking.”

They don’t talk much after that.

The shower is hot and quiet and uncomplicated. Ilya presses close, arms around Shane’s middle, forehead resting between his shoulder blades, while the water runs over them both. No urgency. No expectation. Just skin and warmth and the simple, grounding fact of another body in reach.

After, they dry off lazily and collapse onto the bed together, still damp, limbs tangled without thinking about it. Shane barely remembers drifting off, just the weight of Ilya’s arm slung over his chest, the steady rhythm of breathing, the constant noise in his head dimming the way it always does when Ilya is near.

The phone ringing is what wakes him.

Shane blinks into the dim light, disoriented, the hotel room unfamiliar for a second before memory settles back in. Ilya is already reaching for his phone, eyes still heavy with sleep.

“It’s John,” he murmurs. “I should take it.”

Shane just nods. Ilya answers and puts the call on speaker.

“Hey,” John Landry says. “Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“No. No, is fine,” Ilya replies, voice rough. “Was just napping.”

“Ah,” John answers. “Sorry to interrupt nap time. Just wanted to catch you before you’re dragged into all-star weekend craziness.”

“You are forgiven,” Ilya replies dryly.

John chuckles. “I just wanted to give you an update. I’ll keep it brief.”

Shane listens quietly as John runs through it; Boston wants clarity, but they’re not pushing. No ultimatums. No deadlines yet.

“We don’t need to rush,” John says. “You’ve got leverage this year, Ilya. More than you think. If you go to market, there *will* be interest.”

“From places we want to have interest?” Ilya asks, eyes flicking to Shane.

“Yes,” John replies, voice steady.

Shane feels something loosen in his chest.

“You are sure?” Ilya presses, tone a bit uncertain.

“Look, I’m not going to make promises,” John says. “But you’re in a good position.”

“Okay.” Ilya doesn’t sound convinced.

“Try not to stress too much,” John tries to reassure. “Things are in place. You’re doing all the things you should be. We can afford to wait.”

“Alright,” Ilya concedes with a sigh. Shane leans in, wraps an arm around his waist, and feels Ilya sink back into him.

“Anyways, I won’t keep you,” John adds. “Try to enjoy your weekend.”

“I will. Thank you.” Ilya replies, then the line goes dead.

Ilya sets the phone aside and immediately leans further into Shane’s space, tucking himself in close, forehead pressed against Shane’s collarbone.

“Better?” Shane asks.

“Yes,” Ilya admits. “A little.”

Shane brushes his fingers through Ilya’s hair, feeling how much tension is still coiled in his neck. “My mom says the same on my end,” he says quietly. “We wait until the end of the regular season. Then move fast.”

“And you are sure they will let you go?” Ilya asks into Shane’s skin.

“If I waive, they have to listen,” Shane says. “If only to get it over with as cleanly as possible.”

Ilya hums, thoughtful. “The only thing that makes them look worse than forcing trade on their captain is if people know you asked for one,” he says.

“Exactly,” Shane agrees.

“They will not let you go for nothing,” Ilya says.

Shane smiles faintly. “They won’t be offering nothing.”

They lie there for a moment, letting the shape of that possibility settle between them. Not certainty. Not a promise.

But real. Possible.

Shane’s alarm goes off ten minutes later, shrill and unforgiving. They both groan.

“Noo...” Ilya whines dramatically, burying his face into Shane’s shoulder.

“Come on,” Shane says with a chuckle. “All-Star Weekend waits for no one.”

“Stupid media and their stupid questions,” Ilya mutters.

Shane laughs harder.

From Scott's perspective, the hotel bar is almost civilized.

It's the sweet spot of All-Star Weekend, the lull between obligations where everyone who can escape does. Half the players are upstairs napping, the other half have peeled off with spouses, parents, and kids. The noise level is low enough to hear yourself think. The bartender looks bored instead of hunted.

Scott claims a corner booth with Kip and orders a beer he doesn't really plan to drink. Shane shows up five minutes later, slides in across from them, shoulders a little looser than typical, but with a tiredness Scott recognizes immediately.

"How you holding up?" Scott asks, aiming for casual.

"I'm fine." Shane shrugs unconvincingly.

Kip snorts. Scott hums, unimpressed.

"Sure," Scott says. "That convincing 'fine' or the kind you tell people you don't trust with the truth?"

Shane exhales through his nose, glancing down at the condensation on his glass. "The diplomatic one."

"Thought so."

Kip's knee bumps Scott's under the table, a quiet *don't push too hard*, and Scott lets it go. Shane looks tired. Not the post-game exhausted kind. Something heavier. Something that lingers.

And Scott knows what it is. He's listened to more than one late-night text about Montreal, about a locker room that feels hostile in small, exhausting ways, about management that doesn't seem to care.

Because somewhere along the way, he and Shane have become actual friends. Not just friendly colleagues, but the kind who text semi-regularly, who complain about work, who check in without a reason. It's not something Scott ever expected, to be one of the people the famously private Canadian captain opens up to, but it's been... nice. Comforting, even, to talk to someone who understands the job *and* what it means to exist inside this league when it doesn't always feel like it was built for you.

They're halfway into a tangent about New York's upcoming road schedule when a shadow falls over the table.

"Well," a familiar accented voice cuts in. "This is rude."

Scott closes his eyes.

“I step away for one media obligation,” Rozanov continues, sliding into the booth beside Shane without asking, shoulder pressing unapologetically against Shane’s, “and suddenly there is queer hockey player meeting I was not invited to. I am offended.”

“We’re not a meeting,” Shane says, rolling his eyes. “And you’re late.”

“I was busy being important,” Ilya replies, then reaches over and steals a sip of Shane’s drink.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Scott mutters. “You again.”

Rozanov grins at him. Wide. Sharp. Delighted.

“Scott Hunter,” he says brightly. “Still employed. Good for you.”

“Still annoying,” Scott shoots back. “Good to see nothing’s changed.”

Rozanov’s gaze flicks to Kip, curiosity replacing mischief as he assesses him.

“And you must be the boyfriend,” Ilya says. “Hello.”

Kip blinks. “Uh, hi?”

“Ilya Rozanov,” Shane supplies, like this explains everything.

“I know,” Kip says faintly.

Rozanov turns fully toward him, elbow on the table. “So. Tell me about yourself before Hunter ruins the mood.”

Scott glares. “I will ruin you.”

“Please,” Rozanov says airily. “You are too slow.”

Shane sighs. “Be nice.”

“No,” Rozanov says immediately, without looking at him. “So,” he says to Kip again, undeterred. “What do you do?”

“I’m in grad school,” Kip says. “Art history.”

Rozanov hums. “Smart. Ambitious. Interesting.”

“Thanks?” Kip says, clearly still not sure what to make of the Russian.

“Much too good for fossil Scott Hunter,” Rozanov continues. “You are young. And very handsome. Can do much better than boring, mediocre hockey player.”

“Hey!” Scott starts to argue, but he’s cut off by a yelp.

“Ow,” Rozanov says, glaring at Shane. “You kicked me. This is violence. I will tell league, get you fined.”

Shane just snorts, shaking his head slightly.

“Stop antagonizing Scott,” Shane admonishes, but his tone is fond.

Scott expects Rozanov to push, to keep chirping. He always does.

But instead, Rozanov nods, a small smile lingering as he looks at Shane. The two of them hold each other’s gaze for a second too long; quiet, absorbed, completely unconcerned with their audience.

Kip looks at Scott.

Scott looks very hard at his beer.

“Oh,” Kip says quietly.

The moment snaps.

Both Shane and Ilya turn at once, clearly clocking the realization.

They exchange a look, brief, wordless, loaded, and Shane exhales.

“Okay,” he says. “We weren’t planning to make this a whole thing.”

Scott raises a hand. “I already know.”

Shane blinks. “You... what?”

“Wait,” Kip says, amused. “You were right? *This* was your guess? After dinner?”

“The secret boyfriend,” Scott confirms.

“How?” Shane asks on a rough exhale.

Scott shrugs. “I have eyes. And pattern recognition. And once I knew you both had someone for years, it wasn’t too hard to put the pieces together.”

Shane groans, burying his face in his hands.

Rozanov chuckles, then sobers, something earnest settling in his expression.

“Hunter,” he says carefully. “I meant what I said at MLH awards. What you did... it mattered. For Shane. For me. We... have a future now because of it.”

The sincerity catches Scott off guard. Kip’s hand squeezes his knee under the table.

“Uh,” Scott clears his throat. “You’re welcome. I wasn’t trying to make a statement or anything.”

“I know,” Rozanov says. “But you did.”

“We wouldn’t be here like this without you,” Shane adds.

“Oh,” Scott says quietly, not really sure what else to say.

Conversation drifts after that; lighter, easier. Scott lets it wash over him as he leans into Kip’s side. He hadn’t been trying to change the league when he kissed his boyfriend on camera. He’d just wanted the same thing everyone else had.

Knowing it mattered anyway sits strangely warm in his chest.

“We’ll see how it shakes out next year,” Shane says at some point.

That catches Scott’s attention. It reminds him of something he’s been curious about; something he’s not sure it’s his place to ask, but this feels like as good a moment as any.

He waits for a lull, glances reflexively over his shoulder to make sure no one’s too close, then clears his throat.

“So,” he says, looking at Rozanov. “Word is Boston’s being weirdly patient about your contract.”

Ilya’s expression flickers. Shane’s fingers tighten briefly around his glass.

Another silent conversation passes between them.

“I am thinking I may weigh some other options,” Rozanov says quietly.

Scott blinks. Kip straightens.

“It... would be nice to be closer to family,” Ilya says, glancing quickly at Shane.

“And, umm...” Shane adds, voice a bit shaky. “He may not be the only one looking for a new team...”

Scott goes still. Kip chokes on his beer.

“Together?” Kip asks.

“Hopefully,” Shane says. “Eventually.”

“Nothing’s guaranteed,” Rozanov says cautiously. “But it is not impossible.”

Scott just gapes.

Holy shit. They were *in love* in love.

Rozanov was saying he’d leave Boston, the team that drafted him, for Shane. And he isn’t surprised Shane wants out of Montreal. Still, it’s a risky game they’re playing.

“That’s actually really sweet...” Kip mutters.

“Yeah,” Scott has to agree. “It really is.”

Later, after greasy food and one drink too many, Scott looks at Shane and feels the sudden need to apologize.

“I’m sorry,” he blurts.

“For what?” Shane stares at him curiously.

“That fight,” Scott clarifies. “I didn’t know, okay? I swear. I...”

“It’s fine,” Shane rushes to say. “It was years ago...”

“No.” Rozanov interrupts, pining Shane with a look somewhere between excitement and frustration, before pointing straight at Scott. “You will tell me.”

“What?” Scott balks.

“Years!” Rozanov complains. “Years I have asked him: Hollander, why did you fight boring Scott Hunter? And years he has told me it was nothing. Silly. Dumb insults. But no!”

Kip snorts at the dramatics.

“Hollander is almost as boring as you. Terrible chirping,” Rozanov continues. “If he fights, you started it. So you will tell me. What did you say?”

Scott groans, knowing he wasn’t getting out of this.

“It was really nothing, Ilya,” Shane tries to placate futilely.

“I’m curious too,” Kip says, looking at Scott. “You so rarely fight.”

“Ugh, fine,” Scott gives in, shooting an apologetic look at Shane. “It was dumb. I was having a shit road trip. I was all in my head. Rozanov made some dumb comment about how playing at home is better for me.”

“True,” Rozanov cuts in.

“Hush,” Shane tells him.

“Anyway,” Scott continues. “Then the next night, Montreal kicks our ass, and Hollander says something like ‘hope you show up next time’. And, I didn’t know. I promise. I didn’t mean anything more than poking at the rivalry...”

“Ugh,” Rozanov groans. “Get to the point, Hunter. What did you say?”

Scott looks at Shane, whose cheeks are as bright red as Scott’s feels.

“He...” Shane starts, continuing when Scott nods slightly. “He said, ‘You’re starting to sound like him.’”

Rozanov stares at Scott, and for a second, he’s not sure he isn’t about to get punched again, but then Rozanov’s face splits into the biggest grin he’s ever seen. And then he’s laughing. Rozanov is proper, head thrown back, laughing.

Shane buries his face in his hands. Scott wants to do the same, but then Kip is laughing, slinging an arm around his shoulders, eyes full of delight.

“Incredible,” Ilya gasps between laughs. “You. Scott Hunter. And he...”

“I cannot believe you,” Shane groans.

Ilya slings an arm around his shoulders. “You love me.”

Shane rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling.

Scott watches them; the ease, the affection, the way the table feels safer than it has any right to, and feels a small, steady bloom of pride settle in his chest. Not loud. Not triumphant. Just the knowledge that being honest, once, had mattered.

He leans back, lets them have their space, and wonders, not for the first time, what part of the game Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are going to change next.

The room is quiet in the way only hotel rooms get late at night, the kind of silence padded by thick carpet and distant elevators and the low hum of a building that never fully sleeps.

Ilya lies on his back, sheets twisted around his legs, Shane half-draped over him, warm and solid and very real. Their bodies still carry the echo of the game, and their celebration after: muscle-deep exhaustion, damp hairlines from the shower. But there's no urgency left in it now. Just weight. Heat. Familiarity.

Shane's head is tucked under Ilya's chin, breath slow and even, one hand spread over Ilya's ribs like it belongs there. Because it does. Because this, this quiet closeness after noise and spectacle and cameras, is the part Ilya always craves most.

It had terrified him once. Still does sometimes. How much he wants these moments of quiet intimacy. But he's helpless to resist, so he'll take as much of it as he can get for this last night.

The last night. The reminder is sharp and entirely unwanted.

Tomorrow, they'll part again. Different flights. Different cities. Different versions of themselves, required by different rooms.

The thought still hurts. A dull ache, persistent. He doesn't think that will ever go away entirely.

But it doesn't scare him the way it used to.

Ilya stares at the ceiling, tracking a faint shadow where the curtains don't quite meet. His chest rises and falls beneath Shane's hand, steady. He lets himself focus on that rhythm instead of the calendar, the logistics, the thousand what-ifs waiting just outside this room.

There is still something else, though.

Something heavier than distance and loneliness.

A sadness that doesn't line up neatly with the facts of his life. One that lingers even on good days. Even now, with Shane warm against him and the weekend having gone better than he dared hope. It doesn't feel dramatic. Just... persistent. Like a tide that never quite recedes.

He doesn't have words for it yet; in English or Russian. Only the sense that it isn't Shane-shaped, or hockey-shaped, or even Russia-shaped. That it would still exist if all of those problems vanished tomorrow.

He knows, dimly, that he should say something. To Shane. Probably to some sort of professional. He thinks he might, eventually.

But not now. Not with everything else in motion. He doesn't think he can afford to start wading into it when he's just started figuring out how to keep his head above water.

"Hey," Shane murmurs, barely awake. His thumb shifts, a lazy arc against Ilya's side. "You okay?"

Ilya exhales softly through his nose. Of course Shane notices.

"Yes," Ilya says, then amends it, because he's trying, really trying, to be more honest. "I think so."

Shane hums, presses a kiss into the hollow beneath Ilya's jaw. Doesn't push. Doesn't interrogate. Just stays.

It's enough.

They lie like that for a while. Ilya lets his mind wander without forcing it into dark corners. Lets it move through the weekend instead: the ridiculous suits at the game, the way Scott had laughed with his whole body, the warmth of that booth in the bar, Marley's text afterward telling him to call when he's back in Boston.

People. Plural.

That's the difference, he realizes. The thing he's been circling without naming.

When he leaves tomorrow, he won't be going back to an empty house that knows too much about him and nothing at all. He'll go back to a team that knows him. To friends who don't need translation. To a city that, for the first time, doesn't feel like a holding pattern.

He still won't have Shane there. That part is still painful. Still twists something low in his chest.

But the loneliness doesn't feel bottomless anymore.

"I was thinking," Ilya says quietly.

Shane shifts, eyes opening this time. "Dangerous."

Ilya snorts. "Very."

He hesitates, just long enough to feel it. Then: "When we go back... it will be hard."

Shane's expression softens, serious now. "Yeah."

"I still hate that we have to do this," Ilya continues. "That we cannot just... exist."

"I know."

Ilya shifts onto his side, tucks his forehead against Shane's. "If Ottawa does not work," he says. "If next year is not what we want..."

Shane waits. Always waits.

“I will be okay,” Ilya finishes. The words surprise him a little with how true they feel. “I will be disappointed. Angry, probably. But I will survive.”

Shane smiles, slow and fond. “You’ve survived worse.”

“Yes,” Ilya says softly. “But I do not want to only survive.”

Shane presses their noses together. “Me neither.”

The clock on the nightstand glows some ungodly hour. They should sleep. They both know it. The morning will come whether they’re ready or not.

Ilya pulls Shane closer anyway, memorizing the weight of him, the familiar curve of his shoulder and hip. This doesn’t need to be dramatic. It doesn’t need to be final.

It’s just... theirs.

Tomorrow, they’ll separate again. There will be practices, and games, and reporters, and obligations. There will still be uncertainty, risk, and plans that depend on too many people who aren’t them.

But there will also be texts. And calls. And teammates who know his truth. A coach who didn’t flinch. Friends who held him tight.

Ilya closes his eyes.

For the first time in a long while, the future doesn’t feel like something he has to brace against.

It feels like something he can walk toward.

With Shane.

With others.

With himself.

And that, finally, feels like more than surviving.

Chapter End Notes

I agonized over this chapter, and I'm still not 100% happy with it. But if I spend one more minute working on it, I might actually go insane lol

Chapter 19



Tyler Kensley
@TylerKensleyNESN

Trade deadline has come and gone with no movement on a contract extension for Raiders captain Ilya Rozanov.

Team sources continue to say talks are “ongoing,” but notably no announcement today.

4:12 PM · March 7, 2018



Tyler Kensley @TylerKensleyNESN · March 7
Replying to @TylerKensleyNESN

To be clear: Raiders never indicated an extension had to be done by today.
Still — captains approaching UFA don’t usually let this much time pass without clarity.



Leslie @DirtyWaterBoston · March 7
Replying to @TylerKensleyNESN

Not saying it means anything. Just... interesting 🙄🙄



Tom O'Shea @gardenbelacher · March 7
Replying to @TylerKensleyNESN

Every other move today but this one... 😬



John Donnelly @SouthEndHockey · March 7
Replying to @TylerKensleyNESN

If he wanted to stay, he would've signed already.



Elliotte Friedman
@FriedgeHNIC

Worth keeping an eye on Ilya Rozanov's contract status after today's deadline.
Boston captain remains unsigned with free agency looming this summer.

6:42 PM · March 7, 2018

Inside a Season of Contrasts: Metros' Culture Under Scrutiny After Disjointed Campaign



By Emily Kaplan | ESPN NHL

Last Edited: March 25, 2018, 9:37 AM ET



On paper, the Montreal Metros' season had bright spots.

Their captain delivered one of the most complete performances of his career, setting personal benchmarks while earning widespread respect across the league for both his play and his leadership. Yet despite that individual success, Montreal's season was decidedly lackluster — and according to multiple league sources, the contrast only made the team's internal struggles harder to ignore.

Several players and team-adjacent sources who spoke to ESPN on the condition of anonymity described a locker room that felt increasingly disconnected as the season progressed, raising questions about culture, accountability, and the organization's handling of sensitive issues.

“When your best player is doing everything right and it still doesn't come together,” one source said, “people start asking different questions.”

Individual Excellence, Collective Friction

The captain's on-ice performance remained a stabilizing force throughout the year. His consistency, professionalism, and visibility — both on and off the ice — stood in contrast to a team that struggled to find cohesion, particularly during key stretches of the season.

Sources described a widening gap between leadership expectations and day-to-day locker room realities.

“He set a standard,” a source said. “But standards only matter if everyone feels held to them.”

Younger players, in particular, were said to struggle with mixed messaging, as internal concerns were sometimes addressed quietly, or not at all.

Concerns Around Inclusion and Response

Several sources told ESPN that issues related to discriminatory language and behavior emerged during the season, drawing increased attention after the captain publicly came out earlier this year.

While sources emphasized that incidents varied in severity — ranging from inappropriate comments to dismissive attitudes — frustration grew around how concerns were handled internally.

“It wasn’t always about what was said,” one player explained. “It was about what happened after — or didn’t.”

According to those familiar with the situation, efforts to prioritize harmony over accountability sometimes left players uncertain about expectations and consequences. The Metros declined to comment on specific allegations, stating that the organization “takes all concerns seriously” and remains “committed to maintaining a respectful, inclusive environment.”

Leadership Without Alignment

Sources were careful to note that team leadership often appeared caught between competing priorities, with limited authority to enforce change without organizational backing.

“You can lead by example,” one source said. “But you can’t lead alone.”

As the season wore on, several players described a sense of emotional fatigue, particularly as on-ice results failed to reflect the work being done by those at the top of the lineup.

When Culture Shows Up on the Ice

While it’s impossible to draw a straight line between off-ice dynamics and on-ice outcomes, league executives contacted by ESPN acknowledged that cultural misalignment often manifests in subtle ways.

“Details slip. Trust erodes,” one executive said. “You stop seeing five guys pulling the rope the same way.”

Montreal’s late-season inconsistency — including defensive breakdowns and uneven effort — mirrored what sources described as a room struggling to function as a unit.

Looking Ahead

As the Metros enter the offseason, questions remain about how the organization will address the concerns raised internally and whether changes will be made to better align leadership, accountability, and culture.

“This wasn’t a lack of talent,” a source said. “It was a lack of alignment.”

For now, the season stands as a study in contrast — one player at the height of his powers, and a team still searching for cohesion.



Hockey Night in Canada
@hockeynight

Sources: Metros captain Shane Hollander has informed the organization he will waive his no-movement clause this offseason, opening the door to potential trade discussions.



1:04 PM · April 21, 2018



Hockey Night in Canada @hockeynight · April 21
Replying to @hockeynight

Hollander's decision comes amid weeks of reporting and league-wide speculation about internal culture and accountability issues within Montreal's locker room following an unsettled season.

Another Exit. What Now for the Raiders?

Man In The Crease

Last Edited: May 9, 2018, 11:00 AM ET



Today on Man In The Crease, guest analyst James Park joins us as we break down Boston's playoff exit, the weight of the 2014 Cup legacy, and what captain Ilya Rozanov's pending unrestricted free agency could mean for a team at a crossroads. We also discuss Shane Hollander's decision to waive his no-movement clause in Montreal, how it may reshape the offseason market, and touch on other league notes, including coaching shakeups, trade deadline regrets, and early summer roster questions around the league.

TRANSCRIPT:

HOST 1 (Mark Delaney): Welcome back to Man In The Crease, your go-to hockey podcast. And today's first story is the big one: a disappointing end to the season as the Boston Raiders exit the playoffs in the first round.

HOST 2 (Chris Holden): Season's over. Another playoff run, another early exit, and the same question we've been circling for years now — why can't this team get back to what they were in 2014?

GUEST ANALYST (James Park): Because it's not the same league anymore. And honestly, it might not be the same team, even if the jerseys look familiar.

MD: Boston's been consistent. You can't argue that. Playoffs every year. Competitive every year. But "competitive" and "championship" aren't the same thing.

JP: Exactly. And that's where this conversation gets uncomfortable, because now it overlaps with Ilya Rozanov's future.

MD: Let's talk about him. Drafted by Boston in 2009. Developed there. Captain there. This is the only NHL organization he's ever known.

CH: And he's been everything you want. Durable. Productive. A leader. He didn't disappear in this series — if anything, he was one of the few guys who looked like he understood what was at stake.

JP: Which almost makes it worse.

MD: Yeah. Because when your captain is doing his job and the result is still this... then what exactly are you selling him on?

CH: That's the problem. Boston snatched him up as a number one draft pick at the end of what was shaping up to be an incredibly successful rebuild. But ever since their Cup win, that momentum seems to have stalled.

MD: And now he's staring down unrestricted free agency.

JP: For the first time in his career. And timing matters. This isn't a declining veteran trying to squeeze out one last deal. Rozanov's about to turn 27. He's squarely in his prime. This is when players decide what the rest of their career is going to look like.

MD: Which brings us to the wrinkle nobody in Boston wants to talk about yet.

CH: Shane Hollander.

(brief pause)

MD: Montreal's captain is waiving his no-move clause.

JP: That changes things. Whether people like it or not.

MD: These two have been linked since Juniors. Same position. Same age. Same leadership role. And for years, the rivalry was the story — Raiders versus Metros, Rozanov versus Hollander.

CH: Now it's a market story.

JP: If Hollander is available via trade, that affects how teams plan their summers. It affects cap flexibility. It affects who waits, who moves early, who suddenly has options they didn't think they had.

MD: Including Rozanov.

CH: Especially Rozanov.

MD: Boston has to be asking itself a hard question right now: Are they building something that convinces their captain to stay — or are they assuming loyalty will do the work for them?

JP: Because loyalty only goes so far when the league keeps moving.

MD: If Rozanov walks, people are going to call it betrayal. That's inevitable. But the truth is more complicated. He'll be highly sought after by teams with records just as good as Boston's — or better.

CH: Yeah. This isn't about one series. Or one contract. This is about whether Boston can honestly say the next chapter looks different from the last four years.

MD: And if they can't?

(pause)

JP: Then this exit won't be remembered for how it ended — it'll be remembered as the moment everything changed.

...

Chapter 20

The facility is almost empty when Shane gets there.

Not *closed*, never closed, not really, but empty in that strange way buildings get when the people who used to fill them have all been sent somewhere else. The fluorescent lights hum. The air smells like disinfectant and the faint, permanent ghost of sweat that no amount of industrial cleaning can scrub out of a hockey rink.

Good.

He doesn't think he has it in him to talk today. Not to staff, not to guys who still believe in things turning around, not to anyone who might look at him with that mixture of pity and relief; poor Shane, *brave* Shane, *complicated* Shane, and expect him to play the role correctly. Definitely not to any of the number of people who will probably be glad to see him go.

He walks the familiar route on autopilot. Keycard. Turnstile. The hall that bends left and then opens into the locker room corridor. His skates aren't in his bag; he's not here to work. Still, his shoulders feel like they're braced for contact. Like his body is waiting for someone to clip him in the corner and smile about it afterward.

The Metros' locker room door gives that familiar soft resistance before it swings inward.

Dim. Quiet. A few stalls stripped bare already, nameplates removed, the space beneath them looking wrong; too blank, too clean, as if someone erased evidence of a life. The playoffs are still going, somewhere else. The building is still wearing the costume of the season, but the room itself has started to shed.

Shane's stall is still his.

For now.

He stands there for a second, staring at his name, the worn strip of tape someone stuck above the hook months ago and never bothered to replace. He thinks, absurdly, about how many times he walked past that name without looking at it. How certain he'd been that it would always be there. That this place, this team, this city, wasn't a job so much as an identity he'd been issued at eighteen and never put down again.

Then he exhales, low and slow, and starts to pack.

He moves like someone trying not to wake a sleeping animal.

There's an order to it, even when he pretends there isn't. He starts with the easy stuff: extra socks, practice tees, the bottle of grip spray he stole from the equipment room and always meant to return. His hands know where everything is without thinking, which is its own kind of cruelty. He folds, stacks, and tucks things into a duffel bag that has been with him for more than half his career. The zipper catches once, and he swears under his breath, a flash of heat that vanishes as quickly as it came.

The room is so quiet he can hear the clink of his own choices.

He hasn't been traded yet.

Not officially. Not on paper. Not in a way that would make headlines or scroll across the bottom of a sports network like ticker-tape doom.

But his mom made it clear: the deal is done in every way that matters.

It's waiting on timing, on the league's calendar, on the Cup Final ending, so the world has something else to look at while Montreal does what it always does: protect itself first. The ink will go down almost the second the season is truly over. A clean story for the public. A clean break for the team.

A mess for the person who has to live in his own skin.

Shane sets a photo face-down in his palm before he realizes what he's doing.

It's a cheap thing: a Polaroid someone took at a team barbecue years ago, when he was still young enough to believe the room would grow with him. He's grinning in it, sunburned, arm around a teammate who isn't even in the league anymore. In the background, there's a blur of blue-and-red lawn chairs and someone holding a beer like it's a microphone.

He stares at it until the edges of it start to blur.

It isn't regret.

Not exactly.

It's something messier. Something outside of his control.

Montreal is the only team he knows. He gave his whole career to this place: his knees, his shoulders, his voice. He gave it the best parts of his youth, his time, his body. He gave it his leadership, the parts of his heart he could safely offer. He tried to give it *truth*, too, eventually, even when it came out clumsy and raw and unavoidable.

And Montreal, some of them, made it feel like he'd handed them something dirty.

He hates that it's ending like this.

He hates the quiet cruelty of it, the way the room cooled around him without ever fully freezing. How people learned not to look too long, not to stand too close, not to be the one caught offering him comfort in case that comfort got used against them as a weapon.

He hates that he still loves this place anyway.

He can love something and still leave it. He knows that. He has to know that, because if he doesn't, then what he's doing becomes a betrayal instead of an escape.

He starts to fold the Polaroid, changes his mind, unfolds it, and slides it into the side pocket of his bag like he's hiding contraband.

There's a sound in the room; his own breath, a little too shallow.

He forces it deeper.

Ottawa.

The word tastes unfamiliar, even after months of saying it in his head, after the careful conversations with his mom that never used direct language, after the late-night texts with Ilya that danced around logistics like they were stepping stones across thin ice.

Ottawa is going to be an adjustment.

To say Ottawa has been struggling is an understatement. It's a rebuild and a grind and a fan base that's hungry enough to turn on you when you blink wrong. It's a city that will want him to be a symbol. A story. A hometown hero. A redemption arc.

He's scared of that.

He's also, God help him, excited.

Excited to play somewhere that doesn't make honesty feel like a disruption. Somewhere being himself won't turn him into a quiet emergency everyone pretends not to see. Somewhere he can exist in his own skin without feeling the room sharpen around him.

And hopefully...

He squeezes his eyes shut.

Hopefully, he can do it with Ilya.

God, he hopes he can do it with Ilya.

His mom and John seem confident. Confident in the way that makes Shane want to trust them even when he knows better than to trust anything this big. They have plans, contingencies, soft launches, the kind of strategy that sounds like it was built by people who don't believe in miracles but know how to force probability into a corner.

Shane is used to control. Used to being the one who reads the play, adjusts, and compensates. Used to being the one who takes the heat so other people don't have to.

This, this waiting, this helplessness, makes him want to crawl out of his own body.

Because all they can do now is wait and see if the rest of the world cooperates.

He zips a second bag and sets it down harder than he means to.

He's tired.

Tired of hiding. Tired of living like love is something you do in stolen hours, behind locked doors. Tired of only getting to see the love of his life a few times a year, of measuring affection in scraps of time between games, travel, and obligations. Tired of sneaking in and out of hotel rooms and apartments like they're committing some kind of crime.

It isn't sustainable. It never was.

And sure, Ottawa won't fix everything.

Ilya still can't come out publicly. Not until he has permanent residency secured, until Russia becomes something smaller in their rearview mirror, until safety is more than a hope. And even then... there will be choices. There will be consequences. There will be headlines that flatten them into something digestible.

They still don't know when or how to tell a team they're together. They still don't know what it will feel like to wake up in the same bed and not have to say goodbye two hours later.

But it's a start.

It's being in the same city.

It's getting to do the mundane parts of love: groceries, laundry, arguments over thermostat settings. It's waking up and making coffee without checking the calendar to see how soon the clock turns cruel again. It's being seen in public together without it turning into a scandal.

It's a life.

He stares at his stall, at the little scuffs in the wood where his skates have bumped it a thousand times. The grooves in the bench where someone carved their initials a decade ago. The hook that's slightly bent because he once yanked his suit bag off it too fast, rushing to get to a team event he didn't want to attend.

Footsteps in the hallway jolt him out of his thoughts.

Shane's spine goes tight on instinct, shoulders bracing, mind already flipping through scenarios: trainer, staff, some teammate who wants to talk him into staying, someone who wants to apologize, someone who wants to ask him to keep being *polite* about how they treated him.

Then Hayden's voice cuts through the doorway.

"Jesus, Hollander. You trying to sneak out without saying goodbye?"

Shane exhales so hard it almost hurts.

Hayden and J.J. step into the room, both of them in street clothes, both of them looking like they came here specifically to find him. Hayden's expression is carved from stubborn fury, the kind he wears when he's two seconds from taking a penalty he doesn't regret. J.J. looks quieter, but his jaw is set the way it gets when he's decided he's not letting something slide.

"Thought the place was empty," Shane says, aiming for light. It lands somewhere around *tired*.

"It was," Hayden says. "Then we realized you were being weird."

"I am always weird," Shane says automatically.

J.J. snorts. "Yeah. But this is a different weird."

Shane's hands pause mid-fold. The fabric of his practice jersey bunches between his fingers.

"I'm just packing," he says, like it's nothing. Like it isn't a funeral with zippers.

Hayden's eyes flick to the bags. To the stall. To the way Shane has stripped his space down to bare hooks and a clean bench.

"Uh-huh," Hayden says. "And I'm just here because I missed the smell of disappointment."

"Hayden..."

"No," Hayden cuts him off, voice sharp, then softens on the next breath like he hates himself for making it sharp. "Sorry. Sorry. I'm..." He gestures helplessly. "I'm pissed."

Shane's throat tightens, a stupid, inconvenient warmth threatening behind his eyes.

"You don't even know it's happening," Shane says, reaching automatically for diplomacy. "There's no guarantee. Nothing's signed. It's..."

"Bullshit," J.J. says simply.

Hayden nods. "Absolute bullshit."

Shane closes his eyes for a second. Opens them again.

They're looking at him the way people look at you when they've already said goodbye in their heads, and they don't know how to do it out loud.

"I didn't want it to be a whole thing," Shane says quietly.

Hayden's face twists. "It's already a whole thing."

"Yeah," Shane admits. "I know."

J.J. walks closer, stops by Shane's stall, and for a second, he looks around like he's committing the room to memory, too. Like he understands that even if this place has been cruel, it's still been *theirs*.

"You okay?" J.J. asks.

Shane almost laughs.

He's not sure what *okay* means in a moment like this.

"I'm..." He tries again. "I'm excited."

Hayden's brows lift like he's surprised Shane is brave enough to say it.

"I'm excited," Shane repeats, firmer. "And I'm angry. And I'm sad. And I wish it could've been different. All at the same time."

J.J. nods like that makes perfect sense. Because it does.

Hayden's hands flex at his sides, restless. "You should've gotten better," he says, and his voice is rough. "This place should've been better for you."

Shane swallows hard.

“I gave them everything I had,” he says, and the words come out flatter than he feels. “I don’t think... I don’t think I have anything left to give.”

“Then don’t,” Hayden says. “Don’t give them another goddamn thing.”

J.J. reaches out and tugs Shane’s duffel bag toward him. “What’s left?”

Shane blinks. “You don’t have to...”

“Shut up,” Hayden says, already grabbing a pile of gear like he’s offended Shane thought he’d be allowed to do this alone. “We’re helping.”

“And after,” J.J. tacks on. “We’re going to that diner, and you’re going to order the extra bacon I know you always want.”

Shane’s laugh comes out thin.

He lets them help.

They move around him like they’ve done this a hundred times; tidying his chaos, packing the things he’s too tired to think about. Hayden crams items into a bag like he’s trying to fit anger into fabric. J.J. folds things neatly, the way he always does, precise and careful, like order is a small kindness he can offer when he can’t fix anything else.

Shane watches them, chest tight with something that isn’t pain exactly. Something steadier.

“Hey,” Shane says quietly, when Hayden jams a stack of shirts into the wrong compartment and mutters a curse at the zipper. “Thanks.”

Hayden doesn’t look up. “Yeah.”

J.J. does. He gives Shane a small, serious look. “No thanks needed, Capitaine.”

Shane’s throat tightens again. He turns his head, pretends he’s checking the stall to see if anything’s left.

When the last bag is zipped and strapped, when the floor around his stall is clean in a way that makes his skin crawl, Hayden steps back and blows out a breath.

“That’s it,” Hayden says, like he doesn’t quite believe it.

“That’s it,” Shane echoes.

He hoists one duffel bag. The weight of it pulls at his shoulder, familiar and grounding. The kind of weight he understands.

He starts toward the exit, then stops.

Because leaving without looking feels like cowardice.

Shane turns back.

The locker room is dimmer now, like the overhead lights have decided to match his mood. Rows of stalls disappearing into shadows. The team logo on the far wall, bold and bright and indifferent. The empty spaces where guys used to laugh too loud, where he used to sit after games and feel like this room was the whole world.

He lets himself feel it.

The grief. The anger. The love that doesn't excuse what happened. The years that still mattered, even if they ended wrong.

He doesn't regret leaving.

He regrets that leaving has to be what saves him.

Hayden shifts beside him, quiet for once. J.J. stands on his other side, steady.

Shane takes one more breath of the room, of the place that made him, and then tried to unmake him.

Then he turns away.

The door opens with the same soft resistance. The hallway beyond is empty and bright, and leading somewhere else.

He steps through.

And even with the ache in his chest, even with the mess of it, Shane feels something else too, small, stubborn, and undeniable.

A pull forward.

A beginning, hiding inside an ending.

Chapter 21



ESPN
@espn

BREAKING: The Montreal Metros have traded captain Shane Hollander to the Ottawa Centaurs in exchange for draft picks and prospects.



SHANE HOLLANDER TRADED TO OTTAWA CENTAURS

11:16 AM · June 18, 2018



ESPN @espn · June 18
Replying to @espn

Hollander waived his no-move clause earlier this offseason.
Trade comes amid months of reporting around internal culture concerns in Montreal.



Alex Tremblay @BleuBlancRage · June 18
Replying to @espn

Wait. WHAT. That's the captain. That's actually the captain.



Jean-Luc @oldforumghost · June 18
Replying to @espn

After everything he gave this team, that's how it ends?? Ottawa?!



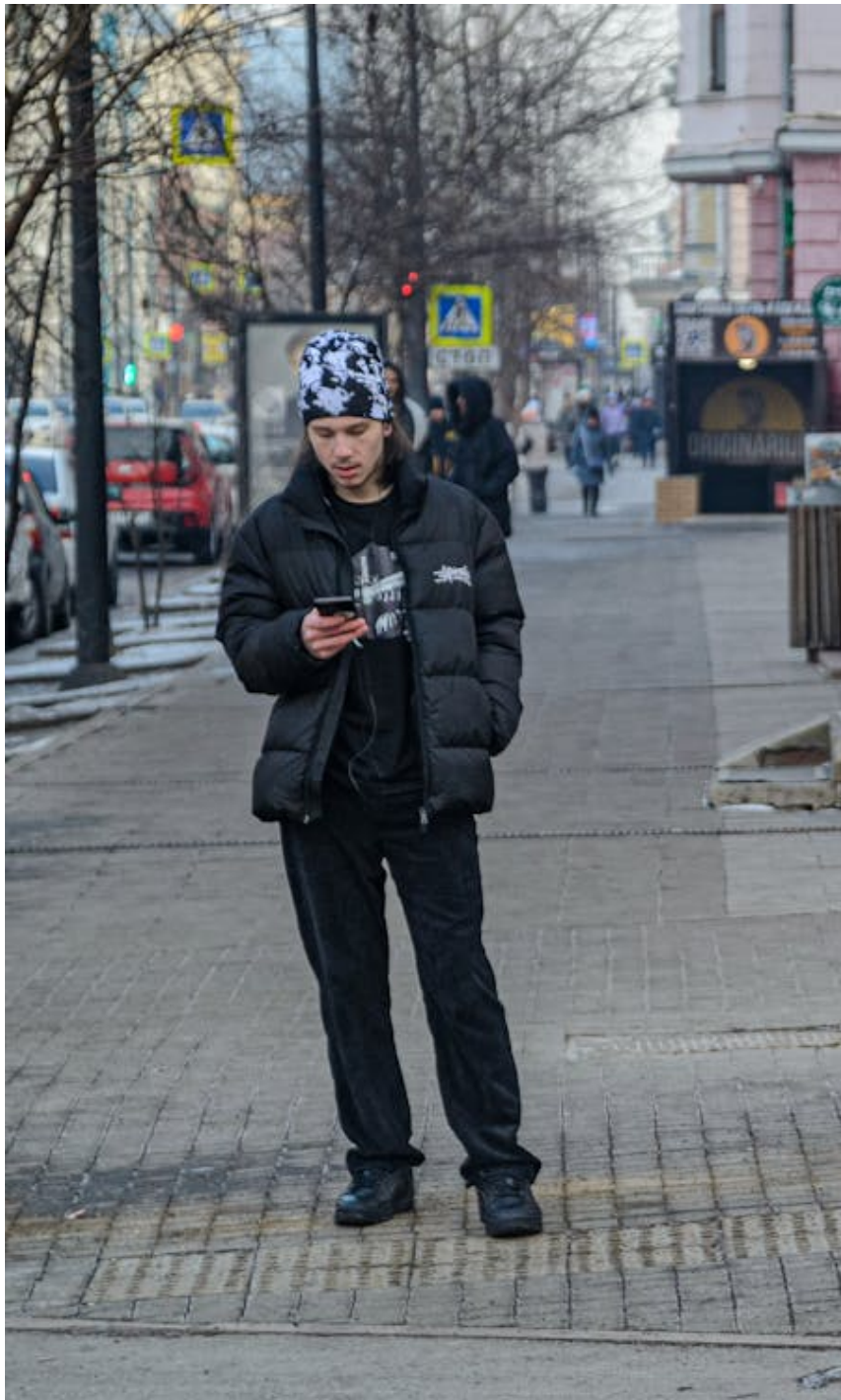
Centre Ice Truth @CentreIceTruth · June 18
Replying to @espn

You don't send your captain to a rebuilding rival unless you want him gone.



Soph @RedWhiteAndGone · June 18
Replying to @CentreIceTruth

This feels less like a trade and more like being shown the door



Evan Brooks @hockeybutgay · June 18
Replying to @espn

So your captain comes out and has a career year and gets traded away. Cool. Cool cool cool.



Daniel Roth @statsnotstories · June 18
Replying to @hockeybutgay

Correlation isn't causation. Hockey trade, not a conspiracy.



Lucas @NorthBankSeats · June 18
Replying to @espn

Are we really pretending this isn't about how uncomfortable the organization got once he came out?



Paul Desrosiers - Tape2Tape @tape2tapethoughts · June 18
Replying to @espn

He didn't fail Montreal.
Montreal failed him.



Hockey Night In Canada
@hockeynight

BREAKING: Former Raiders captain Ilya Rozanov has signed a multi-year deal with the Ottawa Centaurs.
Rozanov has spent his entire MLH career in Boston after being drafted by the Raiders, and served as team captain for five seasons.



12:08 PM · July 1, 2018



John Donnelly @SouthEndHockey · July 1
Replying to @hockeynight

I'm sorry WHAT.



Ryan Mac @spoked4life · July 1
Replying to @hockeynight

NO.
No no no no no.



Ethan Miller @neutralzonenorth · July 1
Replying to @hockeynight

This isn't chasing a Cup. So... what is it?



Kevin Walsh @bostonbackbone · July 1
Replying to @hockeynight

You don't leave Boston for Ottawa. I don't care what the explanation is.



Tom O'Shea @gardenbleacher · July 1
Replying to @doraemon

This is fake. This has to be fake.



Raiders Receipts @RaidersReceipts · July 1
Replying to @hockeynight

Didn't he say earlier this year he spent a lot of time in Canada in the offseason?



Chase @memorylanehockey · July 1
Replying to @RaidersReceipts

He basically straight-up said he has family in Ottawa... But still... throwing away Cup potential for what?



Pat @BlackGoldForever · July 1
Replying to @hockeynight

Captain. Drafted here. Built here.
This is unforgivable.



JulesFortin @MetrosWatching · July 1
Replying to @hockeynight

I give him and Hollander a week before someone gets murdered.



Benji @bostoniceboss · July 1
Replying to @MetrosWatching

Oh. Oh no.



Chris @hockeycontextmatters · July 1
Replying to @MetrosWatching

But if they don't... that 2017 All-Star Game magic was something else...

Ottawa's Gamble: Genius, Career Suicide, or Both?

Man In The Crease

Last Edited: July 3, 3018, 12:00 PM ET



On this emergency episode of Man In The Crease, we're joined again by analyst James Park as we talk Ilya Rozanov's shocking decision to sign with Ottawa, a move that has upended the MLH offseason. We dig into why the signing defies hockey logic, what non-hockey factors may be at play, and how Ottawa's bold bet on pairing Rozanov with longtime rival Shane Hollander could either redefine team-building — or explode spectacularly.

TRANSCRIPT:

HOST 1 (Mark Delaney): Welcome back to an unexpected episode of Man In The Crease, your place for all things hockey.

(beat)

Alright. We were *done*. We had our offseason calendar mapped out. And then — this happens.

Ilya Rozanov signs with the Ottawa Centaurs.

(beat)

I still don't think I've fully processed that sentence.

HOST 2 (Chris Holden): Nobody has. Because it makes no sense. None. From a pure hockey perspective, this is one of the most baffling signings we've seen in years.

GUEST ANALYST (James Park): We're going to take our time with this, because this isn't just a shocking signing — it's a destabilizing one.

Ilya Rozanov signing with the Ottawa Centaurs isn't just a surprise. It fundamentally breaks how we usually understand star decision-making in Major League Hockey.

CH: Right. Because when something doesn't make sense, the instinct is to look for the missing variable. And the problem here is — we've checked all the usual boxes.

MD: Let's start with what we *know*. Rozanov is 27. He's in the middle of his prime, cementing himself as a generational player. He's coming off another elite season. This is *the* contract — the one players build their entire careers toward.

JP: And Ottawa is not the optimal destination by any traditional metric. They finished near the bottom of the standings. They're rebuilding. They're years away from being a finished product.

CH: And he didn't take the best offer.

MD: That part keeps getting lost. This isn't a cash grab. Isn't a "they paid him to suffer" situation. League sources were pretty clear — there was more money on the table elsewhere. More stability. More immediate winning potential.

CH: If you stay in Boston, you're betting on institutional competence. You're betting on a team that *always* finds its way back to relevance, even when it stumbles.

JP: And you're betting on the idea that being "consistently competitive" eventually turns into another Cup. That hasn't happened since 2014 — but it's still the pitch.

CH: By leaving, Rozanov is walking away from that safety net. He's choosing volatility. And elite players almost never do that voluntarily.

MD: Which is why fans are calling this self-sabotage.

(beat)

And it forces you to confront the uncomfortable thought that this wasn't about maximizing hockey outcomes in the short term.

JP: Which really only leaves one conclusion: there were significant non-hockey factors involved in this decision.

CH: And even *that* doesn't fully explain it. Because players have non-hockey reasons all the time. Family. Location. Lifestyle. We see that. But they usually balance those things *against* competitive reality.

MD: Rozanov didn't balance. He overrode.

JP: That's the part that keeps tripping people up. Because even if you accept that this was about life, or environment, or something deeply personal — it still looks, on paper, like career suicide.

MD: Which would already be enough to make this one of the strangest signings of the decade. But then you remember who else is now in Ottawa.

CH: And that's when this stopped being weird and started being unprecedented. Because this isn't just Rozanov to Ottawa. It's Rozanov to *Shane Hollander's* Ottawa.

MD: We've only ever seen them play together once.

CH: The 2017 All-Star Game.

JP: And people remember it because it felt effortless. Like the game slowed down when they were on the ice together.

MD: But that was one night. No systems. No hierarchy. No long-term consequences.

CH: An 82-game season is where chemistry gets tested. That's where egos, habits, and leadership styles either align — or clash.

MD: Which is where this combination could either be a golden ticket or a death sentence. Because these two have been rivals since before day one.

JP: This rivalry isn't just competitive; it's symbolic. Two different leadership styles. Two different markets. Constant comparisons. Constant pressure.

CH: Same draft class. Same position. Both immediately elite. And from the jump, the league leaned into it.

MD: Every opportunity they had, they were put side by side — or opposite each other.

JP: Headlines. Marketing. National broadcasts. “Who’s better?” debates every year. They leapfrogged each other statistically, season after season.

MD: One year it was Rozanov. Next year it was Hollander. Back and forth, back and forth — two generational centers defining the era.

CH: And that rivalry wasn't just player versus player. It was city versus city.

MD: This matters. Because we're not talking about a manufactured rivalry between expansion teams.

JP: This is Major League Hockey bedrock.

MD: Boston and Montreal. Original Six. A rivalry as old as the league itself.

CH: Generations of hatred, respect, trauma, mythology — all of it.

MD: And Rozanov and Hollander didn't just play *for* those teams. They embodied them.

JP: They became avatars. Proxies. Symbols. Faces of the franchise.

(pause)

MD: Here's the question nobody wants to ask out loud: how much of their rivalry is real?

JP: Because some of it is absolutely media-driven. The league *loves* a binary. Two elite centers, same age, opposite sweaters — it writes itself.

CH: But you don't get compared like that for a decade without internalizing some of it. Even if you respect each other, that kind of pressure leaves a mark.

MD: And now they're supposed to coexist. Not just coexist — *collaborate*.

CH: It's hard to get a read on the pair outside the context of the rivalry. Because outside of official obligations — All-Star Weekend, league events — we never see them together.

JP: Of course, we don't. Anything else would've been framed as fraternizing with the enemy.

MD: And that pressure matters. When the league builds a narrative that hard, players don't get to step outside it without consequences.

CH: So is there competitive fire there? Almost definitely. But genuine animosity? Maybe. Hard to say.

JP: Or was it just two elite players forced into opposition because the story demanded it?

MD: We don't know. We've never been allowed to know.

(pause)

CH: I want to shift to the Ottawa aspect of it all.

We said this after the trade, and I still believe it: moving Hollander felt like a snub. A player who brought back-to-back Cups to Montreal doesn't usually get shipped out the moment things get uncomfortable.

JP: Ottawa didn't just acquire him — they centered their rebuild around him.

CH: And now they've doubled down. Adding the one player who's been narratively tied to him for a decade.

MD: This isn't roster building anymore. This is identity construction.

JP: Let's not lose the practical questions. They're both centers.

MD: So, do you take the risk of moving one of them to wing? Or do you put a star player on the second line?

CH: You have to think one of them is moving to the wing — situationally, at least. Rozanov has already indicated he's open to that.

MD: But two stars don't win Cups alone.

CH: We just watched Hollander have an incredible season in Montreal and still miss the playoffs. Talent without structure has a ceiling.

MD: This is where Ottawa either looks visionary or reckless.

JP: If this works, it changes how we think about team-building. About stars choosing environment over efficiency. About what "prime" actually means.

CH: And if it doesn't?

(pause)

MD: Then this becomes a case study in what happens when you stack talent without an actual game plan.

JP: There is no middle outcome here.

MD: Ottawa is either about to look very, very smart — or we're watching the slow ignition of the largest implosion in hockey history.

And the only way to know which one it is... is to watch.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

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

By the time Marley lets himself in, Ilya has already packed three boxes labeled **KITCHEN** in thick black marker, and a fourth box labeled **KITCHEN (DO NOT LET SHANE SEE)**.

Marley pauses in the hallway, taking in the scene: tape dispenser on the counter, bubble wrap everywhere, Ilya's dining table turned into a cardboard factory.

Marley looks at Ilya. Then he looks at the box.

"Do not let Shane see," Marley reads aloud. His mouth quirks. "Bold strategy."

Ilya keeps taping without looking up. "Is not bold. Is survival."

Marley steps inside, toeing the door shut behind him. "You know he's gonna FaceTime you at some point and immediately clock that you're hiding something, right?"

"I am not hiding," Ilya says, offended. "I am... planning."

"And what happens when you get to Ottawa?" Marley asked, amused. "You guys are moving into the same house."

"Ah, by then it is too late," Ilya replies with a smirk.

"Okay, Martha Stewart," Marley snorts and drops a stack of packing paper onto the table like he's clocking in. "What's in the contraband box?"

Ilya's phone, propped against a mug, buzzes at that exact moment.

As if summoned.

Shane's name lights up the screen.

Ilya's chest does the small, stupid lurch it always does, like it's still surprised that this is real, that he gets to have this, even now, even after everything.

He answers on the first ring.

"Hey, *dorogoy*," he says, and immediately his voice softens, whether he wants it to or not. "You call to supervise my packing? Like dictator?"

Shane's face appears, slightly blurry, bad lighting maybe, or cottage Wi-Fi, or both. He's wearing a baseball cap and a T-shirt with some Ottawa logo on it that makes Ilya's stomach do something strange and pleased.

"I'm calling to make sure you're not doing something insane," Shane says. "Which, based on the boxes, I'm already losing."

Ilya angles the phone a little so Shane can see the mountain of cardboard.

There's a pause.

Then Shane squints. "Is that... four kitchen boxes?"

"*Da*."

"Why?" Shane asks, as if the concept of Ilya owning objects is personally offensive. "Why are you shipping kitchen stuff from Boston when I'm shipping kitchen stuff from Montreal? We're going to have, like, seven spatulas."

Ilya lifts his eyebrows. "We will have one spatula. Because I am throwing away your terrible spatulas."

Shane's eyes narrow. "My spatulas are fine."

"They are plastic," Ilya says with disgust. "They melt."

"They don't melt."

"They *will* melt," Ilya says, deadly calm. "Because you will put them on pan by accident. Like you did last time."

"I didn't..." Shane starts, then stops, because he absolutely did.

Marley makes a low sound from the table that might be laughter or might be choking.

Shane notices him then, focusing. "Is Marleau there?"

Marley leans into the frame with a grin. "Hi, Hollander."

Shane's expression shifts instantly, relieved. "Hey. Thanks for helping him. If he tries to pack anything insane..."

"He already is," Marley says.

Ilya points at him without looking away from Shane. "Marley is traitor."

Marley points back. "You're packing a mortar and pestle."

Shane's eyebrows shoot up. "Why do you own a mortar and pestle?"

Ilya blinks. "For cooking."

Shane makes a face like he can't tell if Ilya is serious. "You have... hands. You could just... chop garlic."

"It is not the same," Ilya says, offended.

Marley shakes his head, muttering, "This is the weirdest domestic dispute I've ever witnessed," and starts wrapping a stack of plates like he's trying to protect them from the force of Ilya's personality.

Shane's voice goes warm around the edges. "Okay. So. Real question. Are you actually shipping pans?"

Ilya smiles, slow and smug. "Yes."

Shane groans. "We talked about this. I have pans."

"You have *one* pan," Ilya corrects. "And it is scratched. And it is too small. And you use it for everything."

"It's multifunctional," Shane argues.

"It is abused."

Shane leans closer to his camera, eyes narrowed. "Ilya. Tell me you're not shipping the cast iron."

Ilya's smile widens.

Shane closes his eyes. "*Ilya.*"

"I already won argument," Ilya says sweetly. "We keep my pans. You keep..." he searches for something charitable, "...your... toaster."

"My toaster is fine."

"Your toaster burns bread," Ilya says.

"It toasts bread."

"It makes bread taste like smoke and shame," Ilya says flatly. "This is not toast. This is punishment."

Marley laughs out loud that time, and Ilya points at him again, because yes, *good*, everyone should be laughing at Shane's terrible appliances.

Shane exhales through his nose, clearly trying not to smile. "Okay," he says, voice resigned. "Fine. Pack your stupid pans."

"I will," Ilya says, triumphant. "Thank you."

Shane shakes his head. "I hate you."

"Liar," Ilya says easily.

Shane's expression softens, the way it does when Ilya says something like that, like he's still not quite used to it. "Yeah," he murmurs. "Yeah, okay."

For a moment, the call goes quiet in a comfortable way, and Ilya feels it: the small, strange peace of being able to exist like this. Normal, almost. Domestic.

Like they're allowed.

Marley keeps packing in the background, humming under his breath, the sound steady and ordinary.

Shane clears his throat. “Oh, before I forget. Mom sent me six more house listings.”

Ilya groans immediately. “Six?”

“Six,” Shane confirms, sounding pleased with himself, which is insane behavior for a man who has spent the last decade pretending he doesn’t care about anything except hockey.

Ilya squints at the screen. “You have problem.”

“I do not have a problem,” Shane says, affronted.

“You have *obsession*,” Ilya says. “Like old man on Facebook.”

“First of all,” Shane says, “I’m not old.”

Ilya makes a face. “Debatable.”

“And second,” Shane continues, “it’s not an obsession. It’s... research.”

“It is addiction,” Ilya says. “Next you will start watching house-flipping shows.”

Shane’s eyes flick away. Just a fraction.

Ilya narrows his gaze. “You already watch house-flipping shows.”

“I watched one,” Shane says defensively. “It was on.”

“You watched one,” Ilya repeats, like tasting betrayal. “At cottage.”

“It was raining!”

“You watched house-flipping show at the cottage?” Ilya’s voice goes scandalized.

“It was about cabins,” Shane argues.

Marley coughs into his fist, shoulders shaking.

Ilya looks toward him. “Why are you laughing? You are also old.”

Marley straightens, offended. “I’m not even thirty!”

“Ancient,” Ilya says. “Almost as ancient as old man Hunter.”

Shane laughs; it’s real and unguarded. It loosens something in Ilya’s chest that had been tight all day.

Shane’s smile lingers as he says, quieter, “We’re not going to be at the cottage as much as we wanted, though.”

The words land softly, but they land.

“*Nyet*,” Ilya agrees, just as quietly. “Moving is... eating everything.”

“Yeah.” Shane shifts, pulling his cap off and running a hand through his hair. “I thought once the season ended, we would have... more time. But it’s just logistics.”

“It is okay,” Ilya says, like he can make it true by saying it. “It is just one summer.”

“Still sucks,” Shane says, and there’s no drama in it. Just honesty.

Ilya swallows. He wants to say, “*I would take scraps forever if it meant you stayed.*” But that’s too much, too raw, too close to the fear he has finally stopped letting steer him.

So he says, instead, “Next summer will be better.”

Shane looks at him for a beat. Then nods. “Yeah. Next summer.”

A pause, and then Shane adds, carefully, like he’s stepping onto ice he trusts but still respects: “Are you... ready for Ottawa?”

Marley glances up from packing paper, clearly listening now without trying to look like he is.

Ilya exhales through his nose. “Ready is... strong word.”

Shane’s mouth quirks.

“It will be hard,” Ilya admits. “They lose a lot.”

“They do,” Shane agrees, unapologetic. “Like... a lot.”

Ilya makes a face. “I am used to winning.”

“I know,” Shane says, amused. “I’m sorry in advance.”

Ilya considers this. Then says, solemnly, “You will owe me many kisses. For suffering.”

Shane’s eyes warm. “Deal.”

But underneath the banter, it’s real: new systems, new pressure, new expectations.

And still, Ilya feels the difference.

“I think,” he says slowly, “it will be... friendlier.”

“Yeah. It’ll be nice not being on a team where everyone is afraid of being seen with me,” Shane says quietly, and something in his voice is so tired that Ilya’s throat tightens.

Ilya’s grip tightens on the tape dispenser, the plastic biting his palm.

Then Shane shakes it off, just a small movement, a return to the present. “Actually,” he says, “speaking of... the Ottawa captain texted me again. Just checking in. Saying he’s excited.”

Ilya blinks. “Again?”

Shane shrugs, almost embarrassed. “Yeah. And one of the other guys reached out, asked if I would be willing to do some charity stuff before the season starts. Just... normal. Not management speak.”

Ilya feels something warm move through his ribs, slow and steady.

“I got message too,” he says.

Shane’s eyebrows lift. “You did?”

“*Da*. From captain. He said they are happy I came. They said...” Ilya searches for the words in English, annoyed, “they said Boston will miss me, but Ottawa is lucky.”

Shane smiles. “See? That’s what I mean. It’s different when it’s not PR.”

“Yes,” Ilya says softly. “It is... human.”

Shane’s expression shifts, thoughtful. He opens his mouth, then hesitates.

Ilya flicks his eyes to Marley, a quiet “*be right back*,” and Marley lifts two fingers in a lazy salute without pausing his packing.

Ilya snorts, then takes the call into the living room anyway, because he trusts Marley with his life, but Shane deserves privacy if he wants it, and Ilya will guard it like it’s sacred.

“Have you thought more about... when you want to tell them you’re bi?” Shane asks once Ilya is alone.

Ilya’s stomach tightens, but not with panic. Not like it used to.

He thinks of LeClaire’s “*oh thank god*.” Thinks of Kane’s hug. Thinks of Marley’s couch. Thinks of the way it felt to stop lying.

“I think,” Ilya says slowly, “I will not announce.”

Shane nods immediately. “Okay.”

“I will just... say it when it feels right.” Ilya shrugs one shoulder. “Like someone makes joke, or someone asks about girls, and I say, ‘No. I am in love with a man.’”

Shane’s smile is small and fond. “That sounds very you.”

“I do not want it to be... whole thing,” Ilya admits.

“I get that,” Shane says.

There’s a silence, and it’s not awkward. It’s the kind of quiet where the truth gets to sit between them without being a grenade.

Shane’s voice goes careful again. “What about... us?”

Ilya’s chest tightens, different than fear, more like anticipation. He lets out a breath.

“Not right away,” he says. “We need... time.”

“Yeah.” Shane nods. “I agree.”

Ilya's mind runs through the timeline automatically: immigration paperwork, residency, the careful legal milestones.

"My PR," he says quietly. "It could be a few years. Or more."

Shane's face tightens, just a flicker. He knows. They've said it. It still sucks every time.

"I cannot be public before then," Ilya continues. "Not safely."

"I know," Shane murmurs. "But I don't want to wait years to tell the team."

"No," Ilya agrees. "Me neither."

Shane hesitates. "Next summer?"

Ilya blinks. "Next summer?"

"Give it a season," Shane says. "Let you get settled. Let me get settled. Let the team know us first as... just us. Then we tell them."

Ilya thinks about it. One season of inside jokes. One season of normal. One season of being *Ilya Rozanov, teammate*, before being *Ilya Rozanov, story*.

He feels, strangely, his shoulders loosen.

"That is..." he says slowly. "That is good plan."

Shane's smile is immediate. Relief. "Yeah?"

"*Da*," Ilya says. "We will see how first season goes. And then..." He shrugs. "Next summer."

Shane nods. "Okay."

The conversation shifts as Ilya goes back to the kitchen. Shane rambles about something to do with the cottage and a leaking window. Ilya tapes another box shut and lets Shane's voice sit in his chest, steadying him the way a hand on his back would.

Marley clears his throat loudly, startling Ilya out of his bubble and cutting Shane off.

Ilya turns his head. "What?"

Marley lifts a small wooden sign he's just pulled from a drawer, something decorative, embarrassing, with cursive writing on it.

It says: **LIVE LAUGH LOVE**.

Marley looks between Ilya and the sign. "This yours?"

Ilya stares at it, horrified. "No."

Shane's voice, delighted: "Oh my god."

Ilya's eyes narrow. "Marley is lying."

“I’m not,” Marley says. “It was in your kitchen drawer.”

Ilya looks at him like he has betrayed the entire nation of Russia.

Shane is laughing now, fully. “You have a Live Laugh Love sign?”

“I do not!” Ilya snaps, then points at Marley. “He put it there.”

Marley holds up both hands. “I did not.”

Shane is still laughing. “Ilya. Why was it in your kitchen drawer?”

“I do not know!” Ilya says, helpless with fury. “Maybe... gift?”

“A gift you shoved in a drawer?” Shane asks, wheezing.

“Yes,” Ilya says, because yes, obviously.

Shane laughs harder. “Okay. We’re keeping it.”

“No,” Ilya says instantly. “Absolutely not.”

“We’re keeping it,” Shane repeats, maliciously cheerful. “I’m putting it in the Ottawa kitchen.”

“You will not,” Ilya says, deadly calm. “I will burn it.”

“Shane, text me your address,” Marley says, grinning. “I’ll smuggle it out of here and mail it to you.”

Ilya points at him. “Traitor.”

Marley points back. “Menace.”

Shane’s laughter quiets into something softer, and when he speaks again, his voice is warm in a way that makes Ilya’s chest hurt, not with sadness, but with fullness.

Ilya’s hand stills over the tape again as Shane and Marley’s chatter washes over him.

There will be losses. There will be ugly headlines someday. There will be days when the old fear comes back like muscle memory, when Ilya’s sadness makes no sense, when the world feels too sharp.

There will be paperwork and waiting and decisions too far out of their control.

But...

Shane is on the screen, smiling at him like he’s already home. Marley is in his kitchen, packing boxes like this matters too, like Ilya matters. Ottawa is waiting. Not as a promise. As a place.

But they will be together.

Ilya feels the words settle in him, steady and real. He reaches for the tape again, another box, another ordinary thing, and keeps going.

Together.

Not perfect.

But real.

And, finally, *finally*, enough to build a life on.

Chapter End Notes

Well... welcome to the end.

I want to thank everyone for all the insanely lovely comments and all the support throughout this. I never meant for this fic to be what it's become. Originally, this was just supposed to be a "what if they bonded with Scott Hunter?" fic, but as fics tend to do, once I got started, the idea kept growing.

A few people have asked already, and yes, there is a second part that is already planned (even a bit of it's written). But, that one's gonna hurt (me, at least). And I don't have a super clear path for its resolution yet. So I don't want to get anyone's hopes up and make promises that it'll ever actually see the light of day. Hopefully, this ending will be satisfying enough.

Thank you for all the love ♥♥♥♥♥♥

Chapter 23: A/N - Sequel Posted

Hey everyone,

I had a few requests to post an update if/when the sequel was posted, so that those of you subscribed would be notified, so...

Consider this your official notification!

Chapter 1 is now posted :)

[A Little Less Like Lonely \(A Little More Like Home\)](#)

Series: Kick At The Darkness ('Til It Bleeds Daylight)

by Snaptic

Summary:

When Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov arrive in Ottawa, everyone expects the hard part to be hockey.

What they don't expect is how difficult — and how hopeful — it will be to finally build a life together.

As the Centaurs rebuild, Shane and Ilya navigate new teammates, new expectations, and the unfamiliar challenge of letting their relationship exist outside of stolen moments and long-distance phone calls.

Because it turns out, being on a losing hockey team might be the easy part.

Learning how to have a future together is something else entirely.

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