

no hands are half as gentle

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no hands are half as gentle

by [Daisies_and_Briars](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander hasn't seen Ilya Rozanov in ten years. Not since an injury ended Ilya's career overnight. In that time, Shane has faced reluctant medical retirement of his own, a big career change, and a decade of unfulfilling relationships. When he runs into Ilya at a New Year's Eve party, he can't help but fall back on old feelings.

Circumstances have changed a lot, and so has Ilya. But can the two of them overcome old wounds for a shot at a second chance?

Notes

UPDATED NOTE: please do not translate or repost this work without my permission. Do not translate it and post it after asking for permission and not waiting for me to reply.

Hello! I am VERY excited to share this fic.

For my wonderful angel Nova who deserves all the Shane autism fics in the world and I shall give you more in the future too, I hope.

Title is from "My Lady's House" by Iron & Wine (truly didn't mean to bring my I&W propaganda into another fandom, but here we are.)

Fic is almost completely written. Will be updating chapters every 2-3 days until it's done.

Disclaimers - this fic talks about autism extensively. I have autism. I feel like that's probably obvious. But just as a precursor.

Also! There is a female character in this fic that I can anticipate maybe possibly getting some mixed reactions. Please don't leave hateful or mysoginistic comments. It shouldn't need to be said, but I've done my time in the 9-1-1 fandom, I know how this works.

OKAY THANK YOU! PLEASE ENJOY!

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

Chapter 1

Toronto - December 31st, 2023

Shane Hollander is standing on a snowy, blustery Toronto street on New Year's Eve. He's about to arrive at a party where he doesn't really want to be. Namely because he feels too old to be spending his holidays at parties in bars. It feels *sad*. But also because this isn't how he was supposed to be spending his evening. Not even close.

He was supposed to be spending tonight with a guy he'd been quietly seeing for the better part of a year. Anthony; a medical researcher at the university. But a little over twenty-four hours ago, Anthony had called things off. Fine. Whatever. Shane doesn't *really* care. Not as much as he should, according to Anthony.

So here he is. Standing outside a bar he doesn't really want to enter, checking his phone to see if any notification has magically popped up to change the course of his evening. It hasn't. Anthony hasn't changed his mind. Hayden and his family are in another province. Shane's parents are spending the holiday at a resort in Turks and Caicos. There's nobody to change Shane's evening.

Shane sighs and puts his phone away.

He hears somebody walking towards the bar with a stilted sort of gait. He pockets his phone and glances quickly in the direction of the person approaching. He doesn't see much of them, in the dark and covered by winter clothes. But what he does see is that they're using a cane.

"Hey, man, you might want to watch out," Shane warns, not looking at the guy fully. "There's a pretty icy patch up ahead."

The man's forward progress comes to an immediate halt.

"Hollander?"

Shane goes completely rigid. He doesn't need to guess whose voice that is. He would know it anywhere. The accent. The tone. The *way* he says Shane's name. He knows exactly who it is.

Even if he hasn't heard from him in a decade.

Shane turns to face the image of a man he truly thought he'd never see again. A man who he's missed as much as he's resented.

Ilya Rozanov.

"Whoa," Shane exhales. He doesn't know what else to say. Stupid. He sounds stupid.

Don't think of it that way, his therapist's voice rings in his head. *The way your brain works isn't stupid or a deficiency.*

“What are you doing here?” Rozanov asks.

No *hey, how are you, man?* No, *wow, it sure has been a long time!* Cool. Great, even.

“I’m here for a party,” Shane explains. Not that he has to explain himself.

“Keith’s party?”

Shane nods.

How the fuck does Rozanov know Keith? Keith is *Shane’s* coworker!

“Ah,” Rozanov nods. “I did not know.”

“You’re here for Keith’s party?” Shane asks, although the answer seems obvious to him.

“Duh, yes,” Rozanov says.

They stand there, silent, for what feels like a full minute.

Shane looks his old rival-slash-hook up over. It’s surreal to be seeing him this close up after all this time. He’s still him, but he’s changed, too. The cane, for one thing. Shane didn’t know he needed one. He knew that the accident that ended his hockey career a decade ago had been bad, but not this bad. His face is a bit softer than it was then. He has a nice layer of scruff. He’s wearing a dark navy pea coat and red scarf that annoyingly reminds Shane of the colours of his own old Montreal uniform. Those are *his* colours.

“Nice glasses,” Rozanov says after a minute.

Shane’s face flushes. He’s suddenly very aware of the feeling of his glasses sitting on the bridge of his nose.

“Thanks,” Shane mumbles.

“You don’t wear them on TV,” Rozanov observes.

Shane blinks. “You watch our show?”

Shane has not once ever imagined Ilya Rozanov sitting around watching Shane’s commentary on *Canada’s Hockey Report*. Mostly because Shane’s not sure he’d ever have watched himself. He’s meant to be on the ice; not speaking about what other people are doing every game. But life didn’t work out that way. For either of them, Shane supposes.

“No,” Rozanov says with a smirk. “Is very boring.”

Shane scoffs. “Right. Good to see you haven’t changed, Rozanov.”

Rozanov tilts his head to the side a little and gives Shane a funny look.

“Guess I haven’t.”

There's another long silence. Shane doesn't know what to say to end it. He never does. He can fill hours of broadcast television with thoughtful commentary, but cannot carry a conversation when he doesn't know the clear next thing to say.

The way your brain works isn't stupid or a deficiency.

"Well," Rozanov says. "I am going to go inside. This is usually the first step at parties."

Shane scoffs. "Thanks. I'll try to keep that in mind."

Rozanov nods, expression full of false-sympathy. "I know you don't go to many parties. Good to leave the house sometimes, yes?"

Shane glares at him. He wants to be offended or frustrated. He really does. But honestly? He just feels a twinge of thrill. He's *still* such an asshole.

"You coming inside?" Rozanov asks, motioning towards the door.

"You need a buddy?" Shane asks.

"I am trying to finish this year's charitable acts," Rozanov says. "Clock is ticking."

"You're a dick," Shane says.

But for whatever reason, he finds himself following Rozanov towards the bar entrance, anyway.

Rozanov smirks at him, self-satisfied. Shane can remember the exact last time he saw that look. He hates to admit that he might have missed it.



Shane is only a few paces behind Rozanov when they reach the cluster of tables reserved for Keith's party. It's a pretty decent section of the floor. Keith must have an in with the owner.

Keith is a segment writer on *Canada's Hockey Report*. He's been there longer than Shane. Hell, Keith was writing for the show back when Shane was still winning Stanley Cups. Despite that, and despite being a bigger Toronto fan than Montreal fan, for whatever fucking reason, Keith has always been very kind to Shane. He has always been a friend at a time in Shane's life where he badly needed one.

Which is why it's incredibly surprising to Shane that he invited his famous ex-rival to the same New Year's Eve party without even giving him so much as a heads up. Yes, said rivalry is ten years dead now, nearly. Yes, both of their hockey careers have since ended. Still! Keith doesn't know that Shane doesn't still hate the guy. He doesn't know that Shane never did hate him.

Really, it seems to Shane like he must have thought they do hate each other. because the moment he sees Shane and Rozanov walking in together, Keith's standing up out of his seat, face blanching.

“Oh!” He exclaims, hurrying over to him. “Shane! Ilya! You're both here... At the same time.”

“I think that’s because you invited both of us, Keith,” Shane says.

“Which is very funny,” Rozanov says. “Because I did ask you if Hollander was coming.”

Did he? Interesting. Shane didn’t think to ask if Rozanov was coming to the party tonight. Mostly because he wasn’t aware Keith knew the guy.

“Ah, he wasn’t,” Keith says. “I swear. Changed his mind last minute.”

“That’s true,” Shane admits. “Yesterday night.”

“I was just going to tell whichever one of you showed up first to brace yourself,” Keith says.

“Very proactive,” Shane replies flatly.

“I didn’t want either of you to not come!” Keith protests. “Wasn’t all that competition stuff so long ago? You’re both my friends! Tonight can be fun.”

Shane looks at Rozanov. Rozanov shrugs. Neither of them seemed to realize how *intense* people think the hatred between them is. Even all these years later.

“Well, Hollander?” He asks. “Can we get along for one evening?”

“Probably not,” Shane jokes.

Rozanov smirks. “Ah, too bad. There you have it, Keith. You have to pick.”

Keith looks sick. “Pick?”

“Yep,” Shane agrees. “Which of us stays, which of us leaves? Be careful. I see you at work next week...”

“Oh my god,” Keith sputters.

Rozanov bursts out laughing. “We are pulling your leg, Keith. This rivalry... Mostly for show. Hollander and I will be fine.”

Shane tries to think back to the early days of knowing Ilya Rozanov. The rivalry had *not* been mostly for show, then. At least not to Shane. But then again, maybe Rozanov is just trying to make Keith feel better.

“Oh,” Keith exhales, relieved. “Thank god. You guys really had me going for a second there.”

Rozanov shakes his head. “Don’t worry about us. What do you say, Hollander? Can I buy you a drink? Bury the hatchet?”

Maybe that offer is entirely sincere.

Shane nods. “Yeah. That sounds good.”



“Ginger ale?” Rozanov asks as they walk up to the bar.

Shane’s stomach twists. He remembers that?

“Uh, no,” he replies. “Beer is fine. Thanks.”

Rozanov raises an eyebrow, but nods.

“Not like I’m an athlete anymore,” Shane mumbles.

Is that the only reason not to drink? No. It’s not great for his brain. He’s been advised to be careful, but not to avoid alcohol completely.

“In that case, Mr. TV Star, it’s New Year’s Eve,” Rozanov says. “Order something nice.”

Shane blinks. He forgot what it’s like having *that* voice and *that* presence tell him what to do. He forgot what it felt like to relinquish control, even of something so mundane, to someone who might do anything with it.

“Whiskey sour,” Shane says, compliant.

Rozanov smiles. “Good.”

Two minutes later, they’re sitting at a table by Keith and his other friends. Some people are from work and Shane knows them. Others seem familiar with Rozanov. Some are completely strangers. Keith runs in many circles.

“So, how do you know each other?” Shane asks Rozanov awkwardly as Keith’s other friends talk.

Rozanov finishes a sip of his vodka soda. “Me and Keith?”

Shane nods.

“I coach his nephew’s hockey team,” Rozanov says.

Shane thinks. Keith, he knows, is one of three children. The youngest. He has two older sister, each with a son. One very talented hockey prodigy being scouted by the NHL, and a younger kid who Keith thinks probably doesn’t have what it takes, but is trying anyway.

“The kid on the peewee ORHL in Cambridge?” Shane asks.

He tries to imagine Ilya Rozanov training up people’s kids and driving with them to tournaments on the weekend. He tries to picture Rozanov coaching children or spending any extended time with them at all. His brain simply refuses to load that mental image.

Rozanov scoffs. “No. What? Pee wee? You think I coach *peewees*? Christ, Hollander, I won a Stanley Cup.”

The memory of Rozanov’s win, and what happened after, sit uneasily in Shane’s stomach.

But wait... If he’s *not* coaching the pee wee team...

“You coach for the university?” Shane asks. *He* is the coach of the upcoming star? The kid everyone says will be a top draft pick next season?

“Hollander, I am hurt,” Rozanov says dryly. “You don’t follow me on LinkedIn.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “How long have you been there?”

“Almost one year,” Rozanov replies. “I worked with Owen Sound’s team for a while before that.”

Owen Sound? It’s hard to imagine Rozanov anywhere that small. But maybe it was for stability. No wonder they haven’t run into each other before this point. Honestly, Shane didn’t even know the guy was in Canada. He thought medical retirement might have landed him back in Russia, with his family.

“Wow,” Shane says. “I mean, that’s great. I hear you have a star on your hands.”

Rozanov nods. “Yes. He’s a good kid. Works very hard. Great skater. Boring, like you were.”

Shane laughs. “I’ll take it you mean disciplined?”

“What is the phrase?” Rozanov asks. “Potato potato?”

Shane can’t help but grin. “Potato *po-tah-to*.”

“Exactly,” Rozanov nods.

“Well, that’s great,” Shane responds. “I’m glad you’re still in the game, in one way or another.”

And he means it. Rozanov is a lot of things, including an asshole. But he was still one of the best players Shane had ever seen. The league losing him had been a travesty; albeit, not as much as he imagines it was for Rozanov himself.

“What about you?” Rozanov asks.

“What about me?” Shane asks. “You know what I do now.”

“Ah, but not why,” Rozanov points out. “You go from great season to bad season to gone.”

Yeah, that’s true. After his last Stanley Cup win in 2020, Shane’s performance had plummeted. He’d gone on medical leave partway through what turned out to be a short season anyway – they didn’t even make the playoffs – and never came back. His agent,

Farah, had put out a generic, well-crafted statement about the end of a long career and retiring for his health, but they'd never actually explained it. He didn't want any questions about it. He took very few interviews. He wasn't in the place for them.

Shane stares at Ilya Rozanov for a minute and wonders if he owes him his story. Probably not, right? He knows what happened to Rozanov because *everyone* knows what happened to Rozanov, not because he chose to share it with Shane specifically. No. Shane doesn't owe him his story. But for some reason, he finds himself sharing it anyway.

"I took a few bad hits before that final playoffs game in 2020," Shane says. "They built up over the years, but... There was a bad one halfway through the playoffs. I pushed through it. The team needed me, but..."

"Your head?" Rozanov asks.

Shane nods. "Yeah. TBIs."

Rozanov's mouth tightens. His eyes scan over Shane, like he's going to be able to see brain damage with X-Ray vision.

"You are okay?" He asks.

Shane nods again. "As okay as I'll ever be. Took lots of, uh, different therapies. Changing my life a bit, but... It could have been way worse."

"I'm sorry," Rozanov says. All the cheek and humour is gone from his tone. "I know... I know there were unkind things said when you retired. You deserved better."

Shane blinks. It's the last thing he expected Rozanov to say, for whatever reason. Yes, the press was brutal when Shane called it quits mid-season. Montreal was *pissed*. Thank god he got a job in another city. Shane understood their venom, though, because he didn't disclose what was wrong with him. That doesn't mean it didn't hurt.

"Thank you," Shane says, equally as earnestly.

Then he falls silent. He falls silent because the nice thing to do would be to express the similar, reciprocal sentiment. *You deserved better than what happened to you, too, and I was devastated when I found out*. But he can't say that? Can he? Not without bringing up the time he *tried* to express just that. Not without making things horribly awkward.

Luckily, Rozanov lets him off the hook by moving the conversation right along.

"At least you are still beloved Canadian golden boy," he shrugs. "Didn't lose that celebrity status."

Back to poking fun at him, then. Got it.

"No, that's true," Shane admits. "Though, I don't think people like me as much as they did."

Especially since he quietly came out as gay towards the end of his NHL career. He didn't *announce* it or anything. He just stopped hiding from the press, got spotted with a guy he was seeing casually, and confirmed suspicions when asked. Shane won *three* Stanley cups for Montreal, brought them close countless other times, and still, being into men and quitting early seemed to be more memorable to a lot of people than any of his accomplishments.

To Shane's complete and utter shock, Rozanov laughs a little and claps Shane on the shoulder.

"Is okay, Hollander," he says. "Makes you more relatable. Shane Hollander, just a human guy like everyone else."

Shane raises an eyebrow. "I didn't realize you ever thought I wasn't."

Rozanov shakes his head. "Not me. I knew."

Shane smiles. "Well, you always did have a read on me."

Rozanov's eyes widen a little.

Shane feels stupid for saying anything. Why even bring it up? Why even go there? Clearly, *clearly*, whatever had transpired between them before Rozanov was forced off the ice meant more to Shane than to him. So why even rehash it? *Stupid*.

"You know," Rozanov says quietly. "There are some benefits."

Shane isn't following.

"Benefits?"

"To being not so important anymore," Rozanov clarifies.

Wonderful. Really uplifting.

But there's a glint in his eyes. An air of mischief and hunger. It sends Shane right back to the beginning.

"Oh yeah?" He asks.

Rozanov nods. "No one gives a shit what you do anymore, Hollander."

Shane bites his lip.

That's very true.

"Or who?" He adds.

Rozanov's crooked smile practically gleams.

"Or who."

One drink later, Shane finds himself making out with Rozanov in the single-stall accessibility bathroom at this middle-tier bar. He can hardly bring himself to care about the setting. He feels *young* again, like a kid without a fully developed frontal lobe. The last time he and Rozanov had done this, nearly a decade ago now, the night had started in a bathroom in Las Vegas, not long after Rozanov won his first and only Stanley Cup. Not long before his career would be swiftly obliterated. That night, they hadn't even kissed. Right now? Rozanov is kissing him like ten years mean nothing at all.

If Shane is being honest with himself, no one has kissed him like this since.

Rozanov has Shane pushed up against a wall. He's in control, the way Shane knows he likes to be. The way Shane likes him to be. His mouth is on Shane's mouth, Shane's jaw, Shane's neck. He's pressing his body into Shane's, lifting him up just a little, in a way that allows their crotches to be dangerously close to each other. Maybe Shane should be a little embarrassed about how, even into his thirties, he's getting this hard this quickly for Rozanov. Besides, it's not like he's alone in that condition.

Rozanov shifts one of his legs upward, just enough to apply the most tantalizing amount of pressure against Shane's erection.

"Fuck," Shane groans into Rozanov's mouth.

The feedback seems to spur Rozanov further. He presses even harder against Shane, kisses him more hungrily, and seems ready to move further. But then, all of a sudden, Rozanov slips a little. His leg wobbles. He recovers quickly, but Shane feels him go rigid with what must be a sudden jolt of pain or instability. He awkwardly pulls back. Shane slides down a bit, feet firmly planted on the ground.

"Your leg?" Shane asks. He looks towards where Rozanov's cane is resting against the sink.

Rozanov nods.

"The cold can be... Uh, challenging."

Shane can only imagine. He broke his collarbone in a game once, and the following winter, it ached all the time.

Shane puts his hands on Rozanov's shoulders and steps to the side, turning them around, so it's Rozanov's back being pressed against the wall. Rozanov allows him to take the lead, eyes tracking Shane's movement, pupils big and blown.

"Are you okay?" Shane asks.

"Yes," Rozanov says. "Just a cramp."

"Good," Shane nods.

They can keep going. *His* legs are still fine.

Shane's hands slide down to the belt on Rozanov's pants. Rozanov sucks in a sharp breath. Deftly, Shane undoes his belt and pulls down his pants and the waistband of his underwear. He could probably draw this out, do it with a bit more finesse. He doesn't *need* to rush. But it's been *so long* and despite convincing himself he doesn't think about this anymore, he always has. He has been craving exactly this.

"God, *Hollander*," Rozanov exhales as Shane frees his dick from under the fabric of his underwear. It springs upwards with the release, hard and as wanting as Shane feels.

In the back of his mind, Shane knows that this is probably not a *great* idea. There are probably questions and precautions he should be taking right now. But many years ago, Shane made a similarly ill-advised choice in a hotel room with his exact mouth and this exact dick. And he's spent the entire time since trying to chase a better choice that felt as good. He's never been able to find it. Maybe that choice, all that time ago, determined this one, tonight.

Maybe we were always going to end up back here, Shane thinks as takes Rozanov into his mouth, relishing in the instant effect it has on every muscle of the other man's body. One of his hands finds Shane's head, fingers lacing through his hair, and Shane feels absolutely feral.

He still remembers what Rozanov likes. What felt good to him. Since then, he thinks he's only improved. He's keen to demonstrate that right now, but they only get about twenty seconds of action before the sound of a phone ringtone in Rozanov's back pocket startles Shane right off of him.

Rozanov's phone hasn't made a sound all night, so it surprises Shane to hear it, loud and clear, right now. But still, it's just a call. Shane assumes they'll just ignore it. That's what he'd do right now. Shane moves to continue blowing Rozanov, only to be stopped by Rozanov twisting to pull his phone out of his back pocket.

"Uh..." Shane mutters, surprised and a little put off.

"One second," Rozanov says. "I have to take it."

"Oh," Shane says, backing away from Rozanov awkwardly.

As he does, he sees a flash of the phone screen. The caller ID screen says *Lauren*. Who the fuck is Lauren? His girlfriend? Shane looks at Rozanov's ring finger. Empty. Not a wife.

"Sorry," Rozanov mutters. "I'm sorry."

To his credit, he looks genuinely frustrated to be interrupted. But not enough to just *not* answer.

He lifts the phone to his ear and, pants still down, shuffles as far away from Shane as he can manage in the tiny bathroom. He turns his back to Shane, facing the opposite wall.

"Is everything okay?" He answers the phone. He keeps his voice hushed, like he doesn't want Shane to be privy to any of this.

Shane can't hear anything that *Lauren* says in response. He just hears Rozanov sigh.

"You can do nothing?" He asks, voice pinched.

Lauren must raise her voice at that, because Shane can't almost make out her words through the speaker.

"No, no," Rozanov sighs. "Fine. I'm coming."

Oh.

He's leaving. Just like that. Shane just got him back and now... Wait, no. No, he can't think like that.

The call ends. Rozanov pulls up his pants and rebuckles his belt. He turns to Shane, expression apologetic. Shane is still on his knees on the fucking floor.

"Seriously?" Shane asks.

"I'm sorry," Rozanov says. "Emergency."

His tone doesn't sound very much like someone experiencing an emergency.

Shane grimaces, standing up off the ground, and crossing his arms in a show of discontent. Rozanov sighs. He looks around the washroom, like scanning for something. Then, he steps towards the door, where a paper cleaning schedule with a pen, hanging by a string, are fastened to the door. Rozanov grabs the pen and starts scribbling on the side of the page.

"What are you doing?" Shane asks.

Rozanov doesn't answer. He finishes writing, tears the corner of the paper off, and thrusts it at Shane.

"Here, take it," he says. "I'm sorry."

Shane takes the little torn scrap of paper, and before he can even read it, Rosanov is gone.

Shane feels whiplashed. He looks down at the little message Rosanov left for him. It's a phone number; different from the one Shane used to text years ago. A Canadian number. And he signed it off with - *xo Lily*.



Ilya Ubers home from the bar, trying not to feel too frustrated. Which is a hard way not to feel when you've been cockblocked by your ex in the middle of a reunion with a *different* sort of ex who you've spent quite some time fantasizing about getting another chance with. The situation is very frustrating indeed.

It's not that the reason he's being called home upsets him. Hell, this is a call he will answer come hell or high water for the rest of his life. God willing. He's upset because Lauren

should be able to handle this. It's not hard. It's not even complicated. It's less about Ilya *having* to come, and more about *why* Lauren's presence isn't enough to begin with. That's what bugs him. That's what hurts.

It's over twenty minutes to get back to Ilya's apartment. Better than the average day, because it's late on a holiday. Most people are indoors or at parties. Nevertheless, it feels too long. If he needs to be home, he *needs* to be home.

Out of the Uber, Ilya trudges up the front steps of his apartment building, kicking snow off his boots before walking to the elevator. His leg is killing him. He overdid it tonight, between the cold and lifting Hollander around in the bathroom. He'll pay for that tomorrow.

Ilya presses the button for the eighth floor with a gloved finger. He's still cold. Ilya grew up with winters just as bad or worse than these, but ever since his accident, he struggles to warm up again after a cold day. Like some flame of resilience in him died out that day. He finds himself feeling cold often.

When the elevator arrives at his floor, Ilya makes the short walk down the hallway to his door, bracing himself. He doesn't want to fight with Lauren. He never did. But this feels like the sort of night that could end in a fight if he's not careful. That's the last thing he needs right now.

He enters the apartment and finds her sitting in the living room, red eyed and sniffing, on her phone. *Alone*. Ilya clenches his jaw.

"Ilya," she says when she sees him, standing from the couch. "Sorry about the party."

He shrugs. He doesn't want to say he wasn't upset to leave, but what's the point in getting into any of that with his ex-wife?

"Is she asleep again?" He asks. That's the best case scenario; but also proof that he didn't need to come home.

Lauren shakes her head.

"No, I already told you. She won't even consider trying without seeing you."

Ilya had figured as much. But that doesn't quite explain why Lauren is out here. On her phone.

Ilya makes a gesture with his arms that communicates exactly this question. *What the hell, Lauren?*

"Don't give me that," she sighs. "You have no idea how much it sucks to see her struggling and all she wants is you! I'm her mother!"

Ilya feels deeply frustrated. This was supposed to be a nice night. Just the two of them, celebrating New Year's Eve together. Mother and daughter. Ilya had cleared out of the apartment, gone to a party he didn't want to go to, and sacrificed *his* night with her to give them the opportunity. And now what? It ends like this?

“I am going to check on her,” Ilya says.

He doesn't spare Lauren another second. He turns and walks towards their daughter's bedroom, swallowing down his frustration so it's no longer visible on his face.

He cracks open the door, revealing the soft green walls covered in flora and fauna wall stickers. Nina is curled on the bed, tablet in hand, eyes red and puffy. There are tear stains on her cheeks illuminated by the glow of whatever she's watching. She's not supposed to use that damned thing at night. That doesn't help with this problem.

“Nina?” He asks gently. “*Dochenska?*”

Nina's dark eyes flick up to meet his. She drops the tablet on her bed and scrambles up, arms outstretched for him. Ilya crosses the room, sits on the bed, and pulls her into a hug. He holds her head against his shoulder, fingers resting in her soft curls.

“You had another nightmare?” He asks.

“Mhm,” she whimpers.

“I'm sorry,” he soothes, rubbing her back. “I'm so sorry. You're safe.”

“You weren't here,” she whispers.

He exhales, trying not to feel guilty. She's only six.

“I'm here now,” he says. “And your Mama is here. She keeps you safe from nightmares, just like me.”

Nina shakes her head. “It's not the same.”

Yeah, he's heard that before.

Ilya tightens his hug around Nina. That always seems to help. He feels her take a big, steadying breath.

“Did you know it's next year now?” He whispers to her.

“Really?” She whispers.

“It's 2024,” he tells her. “Are you going to have a good year, *malyshka?*”

“Are we going to go skating?” She asks.

He smiles.

“Yes. Of course.”

“Then yes,” she says emphatically.

Ilya kisses her forehead. He hopes that she's right. He hopes that this will be a good year. Especially for his daughter. There have been enough challenging years behind them.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya make an effort to reconnect, and it goes a bit differently when they're living in the same city, with nothing to hide.

Chapter Notes

Posting this chapter sooner than expected because I hit my writing goal for the last bit sooner! Here ya go :) Thanks for the warm feedback on chapter 1

Toronto - January 4th, 2024

It takes Shane several days before he texts Rozanov.

If he's honest, he's not sure why. He can't pinpoint the strange, scared feeling that comes with the thought of contacting him again. At first, he thinks it's just because Ilya ran off with no explanation. Sure, he said an emergency, but some context might have been nice. He said it so *flatly*. Like it was just a lie. But that also doesn't seem like Rozanov's style; he never needed a lie to be blunt, did he?

When that line of thinking falls through, Shane wonders if it's some sort of rehashed trauma. A nervousness of revisiting a period of his life where he had to keep *so* much hidden. Things are different now. He's out. His love life is inconsequential. He's a celebrity, but less than he once was. Is it that he's afraid to look backwards?

He thinks about it. What if someone had snapped a photo of him and Ilya Rozanov walking into that bar bathroom? What if they'd posted it?

Nothing.

No disaster.

Maybe there'd be an awkward explanation. A story he'd have to spin the world. But other than that? No consequences he can think of.

So it can't be that.

That leaves only one other plausible option that Shane can think of. He's nervous to start anything again with the way the last *thing* ended. He doesn't really want to get ghosted again. Not by someone that makes him feel the way Rozanov makes him feel. Even in one night, he'd felt that spark again.

But that was a long time ago. And Ilya had been... Well, he'd been in a horrible state. His career had just been swiftly ended. He was unwell. He was... Okay, Shane doesn't quite know actually. He never got to see him.

Shane can put that behind him, though. Can't he? Clearly Rozanov had wanted to see him the other night. He'd seemed happy to see him.

Hadn't he?

And Shane... Shane knows himself better now. Far better. He can set better boundaries for himself. He's learned about a million therapy techniques. He can handle whatever happens better this time.

So after four days of stewing, he texts Rozanov back. Because he has never, not ever, been able to resist him.

Hi, Lily, he texts in the middle of watching Montreal get trounced by Buffalo. *I hope your emergency is resolved.*

He has the number saved under **Iyla Rozanov** this time. Formal but honest. There's no one to hide it from.

The response from Rozanov reaches him within minutes.

Ilya Rozanov: *Jane! My old friend. I was beginning to think you would not text.*

Shane swallows, throat tight.

Shane: *To be honest I wasn't sure if I would.*

There's a bit of a pause before Rozanov replies.

Ilya Rozanov: *How could I forget? You like to pretend to play hard to get.*

Shane's cheeks burn.

Shane: *Fuck you.*

Shane: *But seriously, is everything okay?*

Ilya Rozanov: *Yes, everything is fine. Thank you.*

Shane: *That's good.*

Ilya Rozanov: *For me. Not for you. Your team is losing.*

Shane laughs.

Shane: *Fuck off. So is yours.*

Boston is also losing to Pittsburgh tonight. Really, neither team has had a stellar season since they lost them. Not that Shane wants to gloat or anything.

Ilya Rozanov: *Not as pathetically.*

Well, that part is true.

Rozanov doesn't wait for Shane to respond before texting back.

Ilya Rozanov: *When can I see you again?*

The question takes Shane by surprise. It's direct and earnest in a way that doesn't match their previous half-flirtatious, half-antagonistic banter.

He wants to see you, part of Shane's brain thinks. *He wants to fuck you*, the other part counters.

Shane finds that he hopes the answer is both, but he's okay settling for the latter.

Shane: *Soon. Sunday?*

His show tapes Saturday nights. Unless he has another commitment booked, his Sundays are usually fairly flexible.

Ilya Rozanov: *I cannot do Sunday. Monday? During the day?*

Monday *during the day*? What is he, eighty-five? Inviting Shane to tea? But, whatever, Shane checks his calendar anyway.

He used to just know; he had his schedule and events memorized a week in advance. Since the TBIs, he's had to concede that he's lost that skill. He's constantly forgetting things. Calendar alerts have saved his ass on several occasions.

Shane is being interviewed on a podcast at nine Monday morning. Thankfully, that's virtual.

Shane: *I can do any time after 11*

Ilya Rozanov: *Good. Noon? Your place?*

His place? Shane stares at the text for a moment before replying. Why Shane's place specifically? Is this punishment for Shane being too scared to have him at his apartment in Montreal, years and years ago? Or is it something worse? Is there a reason why Shane can't go to his place?

Shane: *Are you married?*

The question comes sort of out of left field. He gets that. But between this and the call from a *Lauren* that sent him running out of that bar, Shane needs to be sure. He'd do a lot of things for another night with Ilya Rozanov, but not that.

Ilya Rozanov: *Not anymore.*

Shane stares at that for a moment. Not anymore. He's *divorced*? Whoa. Now that there's an actual confirmed marriage, ended or otherwise, Shane has to actually picture him getting married. His stomach twists at the thought.

Rozanov sends a follow up message.

Ilya Rozanov: *I am not hiding any scandal, Hollander. My apartment is just not convenient spot to fuck.*

Shane exhales, relaxing. He chooses to accept that this is probably true. Rozanov has no reason to lie.

Shane: *Alright. Noon at my place. I'll send you the address on Google Maps.*

January 8th, 2024

Weekdays can get a bit hectic for Ilya. But then again, so can weekends. So when is an opportune time to schedule a hookup? Probably never. Arguably, his work life was busier when he was playing for Boston. On top of games and practices and meetings and press, he also had to keep himself in perfect shape, which is no small endeavor. He didn't have a lot of free time, but he still managed to fill it with clubs and parties and hookups.

It's harder to schedule a sex life around being a single parent. Even with work giving him a bit more flexibility, he really doesn't want to spend a lot of evenings away from home. The nights where Lauren has Nina are a bit easier for him, but those aren't always reliable with Lauren's job. And the nights where Nina is with him he doesn't want to waste. It's sort of a pickle, as the average polite Canadian would say. So what are Ilya's options?

The school day. He can have sex during school hours. Super convenient, given that these are also regular business hours.

Luckily for Ilya, the person he's interested in having sex with right now is a TV host on Saturday nights. The opposite of regular business hours. So maybe this will work out. Ilya wants it to work out. He hasn't had a good thing going in a long time, sex-wise. And from what he remembers of Hollander? This will be a good thing.

He knocks on Hollander's door right when he said he would. It's his real house this time, not a secret secondary place. The home is fantastic, especially by Toronto standards. It's a big stone house in Forest Hill, a fancy neighbourhood that Ilya would have absolutely looked at if he had a few more years of NHL savings in his account. It has a massive stone driveway and neatly trimmed hedges and looks like it could house a huge family, not just Shane Hollander. Nina would think it was a mansion.

Hollander answers the door in sweats and a tee shirt. Absolutely casual. Nothing at all resembling the type of man who can afford this house.

“Hollander, I am disappointed,” Ilya says, looking around.

“What?” Hollander blinks, caught off guard.

“You are squatting in the house of a man with style,” Ilya says.

Hollander scowls. “Oh, fuck off.”

Ilya makes a show of beginning to turn around. It’s the most outrageous bluff he’s ever made.

“Okay,” he says, easily.

Hollander reaches and grabs his shoulder.

“Don’t,” he says quickly.

Ilya smirks. He turns back to Hollander.

“Well?” He says. “Show me around your fancy house.”

Hollander smiles knowingly. “What do you want to see first?”

“How about... Bedroom?”



They don’t do a lot of talking. They never really did, did they? That sports bar on New Year’s Eve was their longest conversation by far.

Today, they fall back into old habits. Which is exactly what Ilya was hoping for. Hollander shows him upstairs to an enormous, immaculately clean master bedroom, with a cushy king sized bed. It reminds Ilya a little bit of that suite in Vegas, on their last night together. Ilya regrets the way that night ended, in hindsight. Maybe things wouldn’t have ended the way they did, if he had handled that differently. If he had been *kinder*; less of a fucking prick. Maybe if he had at least kissed Hollander, then Hollander would have...

No. Nevermind. Not worth thinking about.

Ilya will just make sure things go differently now.

The minute he gets the chance, he kisses him. Long and slow and hot. Hollander melts into the kiss the exact way Ilya likes. Like all his self-discipline and perfection and rigidity mean nothing as long as Ilya is kissing him. Like Ilya can take this precision machine of a man and make him putty.

Eventually, Hollander pulls away from the kiss.

“Bed,” he says. “Now.”

That’s exactly what Ilya wants to hear.

“Good,” he exhales. “I want to fuck you.”

Hollander’s cheeks go a little pink.

“Good,” he echoes back. “I was expecting you to.”

Well as long as they’re on the same page.

Ilya follows Hollander to the bed, kissing him and pinning him down on his back. They make out like that for a while, slowly removing pieces of the other person’s clothing. Their bodies have changed since the last time they did this. Both of them. Neither is out of shape, but neither is in near the shape that they were at the height of their NHL careers. Still, Ilya finds himself incredibly attracted to Hollander. Still, he wants to puts his hands everywhere, his mouth everywhere. And judging by how quickly Hollander becomes aroused by that, Ilya hopes the feeling is mutual. It’s not like it was really ever washboard abs that were what drew him in to begin with.

When the get to the point of their encounter where Ilya has to take off his pants, a flash of insecurity washes over him. At the bar, he’d only pulled out his dick. He hadn’t taken off his pants. But when Hollander pulls his jeans past his knees, it’s only a matter of milliseconds before...

Hollander freezes, eyes glued to the scarring on Ilya’s left leg.

“I know,” Ilya says with a bit of a scowl. “Not pretty.”

Hollander shakes his head.

“That’s not it,” he says. “It made me think. What’s the best way for you to do this?”

“What?” Ilya asks.

He’s irritated; he doesn’t want his fucked up leg to delay anymore sex with this man.

“What position is most comfortable for you?” Hollander clarifies. “For your knee?”

“I am fine,” Ilya insists. “I am up for it.”

“Okay, but does it hurt?” Hollander asks, insistent. “Are some positions worse than others?”

Ilya sighs, frustrated and pent up.

“Yes, of course,” he replies. “But I am fine, Hollander. Really.”

“What would be the least painful for you?” Hollander asks.

“You are not going to let this go?” Ilya asks.

Hollander shakes his head. “Nope.”

“You on top of me,” Ilya admits. “Riding me.”

He can fuck Hollander no problem. In any position. Would his leg cramp like hell for it later? Yes, depending on the amount of continuous bending he’d be subjected to. But he’d do it. It’d be worth it.

“Then let’s do that,” Hollander says. “I like that.”

Ilya swallows. He tries not to take it as a comment on his ability. It’s probably just Hollander being nice. He was always so fucking *nice*. Except for when he was calling Ilya an asshole.

“Okay,” Ilya says. “Let’s do that.”

Hollander starts kissing him again, then adjusts their positions so he’s straddling Ilya. Ilya’s stomach swoops with desire. He wants this *so* badly. He *missed* this so badly.

Is that crazy? He only really had this a handful of times, albeit over the course of a few years. It ended terribly and it was barely anything to begin with. Ilya has had a whole life since then. A wife and a child. But still, he missed *this*. This is still the marker by which he compared all others. The high he could never replace.

So crazy or not, Ilya is here to take what he can get.



They fuck and then they shower. And then they make out in the shower so much that it almost, *almost* leads to more fucking.

It’s strange, really. It feels like it’s been a hundred years. It feels like it’s been three seconds. A decade is such a long time to go without being with someone you were once intimate with. And yet, they still click. Their bodies still remember each other. Shane feels more seamless with Rozanov and the changes to his leg and mobility that he’s never experienced firsthand than he has with any of his recent sexual partners. Even stranger? It feels more intimate. The way they kiss each other, the way they touch each other...

Was it always like this? All those years ago, did they touch like this? How did Shane convince himself it was a meaningless, frustration-fueled hookup? This feels like *more* than that.

“Can I get you anything?” Shane asks after they’ve dried off and changed back into their clothes. “Coffee? Water?”

It’s a little too early in the day to offer a drink.

Rozanov shakes his head.

“No, I have to go,” he says. “I don’t have much time today.”

Shane nods. He's unsure if this is just an excuse or the truth. It would be like Rozanov, right? To send mixed signals.

Rozanov scans his face, maybe searching for signs of disappointment. He probably finds them, despite Shane's best efforts.

"Next time, okay?" Rozanov says.

Shane is surprised by this.

"Next time?" He asks.

Rozanov nods. "Yes, next time. Unless this was very bad for you and you had no fun."

Shane rolls his eyes. "You know it wasn't."

"I know," Rozanov agrees. "So next time?"

"Okay," Shane agrees. "Next time."

And, despite a million little warning alarms going off in his head, Shane finds that he's really anticipating finding out when that will be.

February 20th, 2024

It becomes a habit. A pattern.

Every week, usually on a Monday through Wednesday – which Shane is assuming are the weekdays Rozanov's team doesn't have games – Rozanov comes over at least once, for sex. Sometimes he stays after, for a coffee and some light conversation, but usually he heads right out.

It's wonderful. It's the best sex Shane has had in years. It's a little bit torturous. He has no idea where it's leading or what Rozanov is thinking. In the heat of the moment, it feels intimate. Afterwards, it feels like a rehearsed dance; like they're both playing at the script of meaningless hookup, because those are the only lines they know. Shane doesn't know how to change it. He doesn't know how to address it. He doesn't even know if he *should*. He likes what they're doing. He's having a good time. But he's not in his twenties anymore. He's not getting any younger. And in his experience, messing around with Rozanov leads to feeling heartbroken and alone. That's not what he wants.

A little under two months into their new routine, Rozanov surprises Shane yet again by being the one to *sort* of address it. Sort of.

They're laying in bed after a pretty tiring, athletic round of what Shane would consider some of their best work. Seriously, a mindblowing orgasm. Rozanov had pulled Shane down onto his chest afterwards, so his fingers could card mindlessly through Shane's hair. It's all so tantalizingly comfortable. So effortlessly perfect. Shane hates how much he loves it.

"So," Rozanov says after a few minutes of that. "Is playoff season for my team?"

That's right, Shane thinks. The university season playoffs end way earlier than the NHL. Rozanov's team made it. They'll be pretty busy for most of March, as long as they keep winning.

"Hey, that's great," Shane says. "Congrats on making it."

"Thank you," Rozanov says. "But, you know, I will be busier."

Shane's heart sinks. So this is it, then. He's going to pull away. Hell, maybe he'll even end it. Shane steels himself. He's fine with this. He can be fine with this. Better to know sooner rather than later.

"I get it," Shane says.

"But maybe we can work something out?" Rozanov asks.

Shane sits up, pulling away from him so he can look in his eyes.

"What do you mean?" He asks.

"Uh..." Rozanov shrugs. "If we can't do this, maybe dinner or something?"

"Dinner?" Shane echoes.

"Yes," Rozanov nods. "The meal you eat between lunch and sleeping."

"Shut up," Shane rolls his eyes. "Are you asking me on a date?"

"Maybe," Rozanov says. His voice is nonchalant, but his eyes look serious. "There is no one to hide from now."

"No," Shane agrees. "There isn't."

There is no reason not to be as relaxed and comfortable in public as they want to be. But that's not the only factor in Shane's mind. The other thing is... Well, a date is different than sex. Sex is a means to a specific end. Dating... Well, that implies *more*. Doesn't it?

"So?" Rozanov presses.

"Yeah," Shane nods. "I'd like that."

Rozanov smiles. "Good. It will be nice."

Nice.

Never have they ever described any of the things they do as *nice*. Shane thinks he could use a little nice in his life.

"I'm looking forward to it," he says.

And he doesn't miss the look of self-satisfaction that crosses Rozanov's face after that.

“You look happier.”

The observation comes from Vlada, Ilya’s neighbor. She’s a small, weathered Russian woman who moved to Canada in the 1990s, and who happened to recognize Ilya right away when he moved into this building. She’d taken one look at him in the hallway on his moving day, let out a stern laugh, and berated him in Russian.

“Ilya Rozanov,” she’d shaken her head. “What a fantastic Russian player, *wasted* on Boston. Should have come to Toronto instead.”

Ilya had been taken aback. By that point, he hadn’t been used to being recognized very often anymore. When he was, most people wanted to talk about the accident. Or, for some reason, his rivalry with Hollander.

“Toronto wins even less than Boston,” Ilya had replied.

She had just laughed. “Not enough Russians. Too many Swedes. You would have changed our luck.”

Ilya liked her right away.

As it turns out, Vlada had lost her only son to a rare, aggressive bone cancer in his twenties. She and her husband split after that; the grief had destroyed them. Vlada was lonely. She was grieving a son and the future with grandchildren and a peaceful retirement she might have had. Ilya was freshly divorced and poorly juggling a new job with childcare. Vlada had stepped in. Since then, she’s become a huge part of Ilya and Nina’s life. She watches Nina often. She’s always here for dinner. She’s the only person other than Ilya and Lauren with clearance to pick Nina up from school. And, as ever, she makes it her God given mission to give Ilya a hard time.

He adores her.

“I look happier?” Ilya asks.

They’re sitting at his kitchen table after dinner. Vlada made cabbage rolls. Her cooking reminds Ilya of his mother’s, like when he’s eating it, he’s travelling back in time.

Nina has already left the table. She’s in the living room, playing. Or, what Ilya assumes is playing. He’s not sure he remembers playing in a similar way as a child, but he was one of two boys in a miserable household, so who knows. Nina is happily humming to herself, lining up her animal flashcards in order of which animals she likes best. She does it all the time. Sometimes the order changes, depending on new information she learns about the animals. Right now, cheetahs are in the top spot.

“Yes,” Vlada says. “Less scowly. You took the stick out of your ass.”

“There was no stick,” Ilya argues. “I don’t scowl.”

“Not lately,” she agrees. “You are seeing someone?”

Ilya flinches a little, looking over his shoulder to check if Nina is listening. She’s not. She’s in her own little world. Ilya could have a fucking cheetah in this kitchen and she wouldn’t notice.

“Oh, well that is a yes,” Vlada observes.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “I am. Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Is new,” Ilya shrugs. Then he pauses. “Sort of.”

“Sort of seeing someone sort of new?” Vlada asks. “Your English is getting worse.”

Ilya makes a face – *not* a scowl – and switches to Russian.

“An old friend that I have not seen in many years,” he explains. “We reconnected on New Year’s Eve. So it’s new, but also, it’s not.”

Vlada nods, understanding. “That’s a good choice. An old friend means they will be understanding of Nina, yes?”

Ilya looks down at the mug of coffee in his hands.

“No?” Vlada says.

“He does not know,” Ilya explains.

Vlada’s face remains neutral. She doesn’t react to the pronoun. Ilya hasn’t exactly specified his bisexuality to her before. He doesn’t really need to. The first time the issue of any sort of queer identity was presented to her in front of Ilya, she simply shrugged and said she had lived too long and seen too much to give a shit about what anyone does in their private life. So there. No issues.

“Why not?” Vlada asks. “Do you think he would not be interested in you if he knew?”

Ilya shakes his head.

“Because, if that’s the case, you can do better,” Vlada says firmly.

“I know, I know,” Ilya says. “That’s not why. He is a kind man. He would have no problems with her.”

“Well, then why?” Vlada asks.

Ilya sighs. It’s hard to explain. Maybe at first, he’d thought it had been about the nostalgia of it. How being with Hollander reminded him of when he was younger. Of some kind of glory days, filled with hockey and sex, as miserable as they’d been in other ways. But he asked

Hollander on a date. Hollander said yes. It's clearly more than sex and reliving his youth. That's not the issue.

The issue is... Well, Nina is the most precious thing in his life. She has, at points, been all he really had. His only real motivation for keeping going. He can't share that with someone who might just... Well, who might just decide Ilya isn't worth the trouble. That it's very easy to just walk away. It's been ten years, and he *understands* why it happened. He doesn't even blame Hollander. Not really. But he has to be sure it won't happen again before Nina is even a part of the conversation.

"I will tell him about Nina," he says. "When the time is right."

Or if it never is, he won't...

"It is a shame to wait, you know," Vlada opines.

"And why is that?" Ilya asks.

"You know, you have many character flaws," Vlada teases.

Ilya sighs. "Thank you."

"But your devotion to that girl?" Vlada continues. "That is impossible not to love."

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Shane's chronic pain puts a damper on his and Ilya's first date - or so he thinks.

Toronto - March 3rd, 2024

For whatever reason, when scheduling their dinner date, Rozanov somehow has a random Sunday free. That feels pretty unheard of for him, but it works with Shane's plans, too. Or at least it should.

They plan to meet at a bar downtown. Nothing too fancy or intimate. Shane thinks that works well. There's no need to put too much pressure on this, right? They've known each other for over a decade. They've fucked a bunch of times. They don't need to pretend.

That being said, Shane still feels nervous about the thought of dinner with Rozanov the way he would with someone new. Maybe even more. There's a weird fluttery anticipation in his stomach at the thought of it, the way he can't say he's felt about any other first date before. Not that Shane is a prolific dater by any means. Mostly, he dreads the awkward small talk of a first date. Somehow, he thinks if he and Rozanov just bicker the whole time, like they usually do, he'll feel more or less at ease.

All this to say, Shane is looking forward to the date. Like, *a lot*.

Except then he wakes up Sunday morning feeling like absolute shit.

It's not an uncommon occurrence. Part of the consequences of his multiple TBIs is that Shane is more prone to headaches and fatigue than the average person. It happens a lot, especially when he overdoes it at work. And it had been a big night at work last night. Toronto, Calgary, Winnipeg, and Vancouver had all won their respective games against American teams, so there was a buzz in the air. Montreal had lost, and Shane had been asked to comment extensively on that, specifically. The show had gone late, and had just been louder and more energetic than usual. Shane had neglected to go out to drinks with his castmates after, citing exhaustion. By the time he woke up this morning, it had caught up to him. Trying to stand makes him nauseous. His head is killing him. His body feels like lead.

How the hell is he supposed to make it to his date? He really wants to make it to his date.

Shane does everything he can to feel better. He guzzles water. He takes pain killers. He goes back to sleep for hours, blackout curtains drawn. He wakes up a few hours later, feeling somewhat better, but absolutely in no position to not only travel downtown for a meal, but to

sit there, in public, with all that noise and lighting, and focus on a conversation. He thinks he'd cry if he had to cry.

Which leaves him in the horrible position of having to cancel.

Shane honestly feels guilty about it. He's busy. Rozanov is busy. Rescheduling this won't be easy.

If he even wants to, Shane thinks grimly.

Maybe he won't. Maybe Shane read more into this than was actually there, the whole thing was just a nice, casual *thanks for the sex* type dinner date, and Rozanov won't care to postpone.

Shane types and deletes a text three times, trying to explain himself. Eventually, frustrated with himself and the way his head hurts trying to word a message, he decides to send a voice note.

"Hey," he starts, uselessly. "Look, I'm really sorry to do this... I get these headaches sometimes, because of the head injuries. God, that sounds like a lame excuse, but it's true. Anyway, I'm not doing great today. I think I have to cancel. I'm sorry. I hope we can postpone."

He groans as he hits send, then flops back into bed, afraid to even look to see when it's opened.

"If he doesn't understand, he's a dick," Shane counsels himself. And logically, he knows that that's true. Shane is dealing with a debilitating injury, just like Rozanov has. Though, a less dramatic one, in the way it happened. If anyone should get it, it's Rozanov.

Shane closes his eyes for half an hour before checking his phone again. When he does, he has a voice note from Rozanov waiting for him. Shane opens it cautiously.

"What is this, Hollander? You could just call. No problem about dinner. We can find another day. Are you okay?"

Shane stares at the screen long after the message ends. His eyes start to strain. He leans over and grabs his glasses from the nightstand, but pauses before he puts them on. *You could just call*. Should he call? Did he mean that? Yes? Right? Why else would he say it?

Shane sighs and calls Rozanov. It rings three times before he answers.

"Hello?"

"Uh, hi," Shane mumbles. "You said I could call. So I am calling."

"Are you okay?"

His voice sounds sincerely concerned.

“Yeah,” Shane replies. “This happens sometimes. I’m used to it.”

“I get it.”

“Thanks for understanding,” Shane says.

“Do you need anything?” Rozanov asks.

“No, I’m fine,” Shane assures him. “I’ve got naproxen. I just need to take it easy. Thank you, though.”

There’s a little pause.

“Do you have food?”

Shane sighs. He has not eaten today. That would involve getting up and preparing food.

“I’ll have to have something delivered,” he admits. “There’s tons around though.”

It’s Toronto. Every kind of food you could ever want is around.

“Have you eaten at all?” Rozanov asks.

Shane sighs again.

“That means no.”

“Okay, *Dad*, lay off of me.”

There’s an even longer pause.

“I’m kidding,” Shane says. “Because... You know... You’re fussing.”

“Ha ha, Hollander. Good joke. You have not eaten, though?”

“No, I haven’t,” Shane admits. “I’ve barely gotten out of bed.”

“Okay,” Rozanov replies. *“I will bring you food.”*

Shane sits up in bed. He moves a little too quickly, because he immediately suffers from a head rush.

“What?”

“You are lucky. My dinner plans were just cancelled. I know what helps with headaches.”

“What?” Shane asks again.

“Is connection bad?” Rozanov asks. *“I am bringing you food, Hollander.”*

“I heard,” Shane clarifies. “Just...”

Does he really *want* to do that? Is this out of some strange pity or obligation?

“Are you sure?” Shane lands on asking.

“Yes,” Rozanov says easily. “*As long as this is okay with you?*”

“It’s okay with me,” Shane replies.

He’s honestly still in disbelief. Rozanov is bringing him food? Because he has a headache and hasn’t eaten enough?

“Good,” Rozanov replies. “*See you soon, Hollander.*”

“Okay,” Shane whispers.

His head is still spinning when Rozanov ends the call.



Ilya was looking forward to a proper, adult night out. Work has been crazy, life has been crazy. Between playoffs, Nina having another bad week of nightmares, and Lauren being back in town after a work trip and wanting to spend as much time with Nina as possible, his schedule is in disarray. But he has today. And he *thought* he was going to have dinner.

Obviously, he does not hold Hollander’s headaches against him. He knows how these injuries go, longterm. One day, you think you’re fine. The next? It lays you flat on your ass. At least Ilya’s is segmented. Isolated to his leg. He couldn’t imagine it in his brain.

The point is, Ilya wanted today for himself. And wanting things for himself, outside his job and his daughter, only means one thing lately. Same as it used to, before his injury, if he’s really honest with himself. Shane. And if the original plan isn’t going to work, then the backup plan will have to do. He’d rather see him.

And that’s sort of terrifying, if Ilya is being honest. The truth is that he just wants to *see* Shane. To spend time with him. He’s not a kid anymore. He can admit that it’s not just sex. His attraction has always been *more*. He wasn’t allowed to think of that before. It was dangerous. For his career, his prior citizenship, *everything*. It’s not anymore. None of those things are at risk. But now it’s dangerous in a different way, and Ilya isn’t sure what to do about it.

He drives to Hollander’s fancy house with a bag full of tupperware. He feels a little silly about it. He’s never done anything like this.

As per a text from Hollander, he doesn’t knock. He lets himself in with a doorcode. 2442. A stupid doorcode, probably. It’s not like he is a famous person with a famous jersey number. Whatever, Ilya will give him shit about that another day.

“Hello?” Ilya calls into the house as he shuts the door. “Did you die?”

“*In here!*” Shane calls back from his living room.

Ilya walks down the hall and into the spacious living room that usually has a great view of the backyard. Today, all the blinds are drawn. The TV, hung over a fireplace, is on, playing the Winnipeg versus Buffalo game. Hollander is lying on the couch, glasses on, in sweats and a hoodie. He sits up when Ilya walks into the room.

“Should you be watching that?” Ilya asks.

He can hear it in his own voice. The *Dad* comment from earlier. He understands why it was made.

“Probably not,” Hollander admits. “I try to watch all the Canadian games I can. I’ve slept too much today already.”

“Don’t they send you the clips you need to watch for your show?” Ilya asks.

“Mhm,” Hollander nods. “But I like to watch it all anyway.”

Of course he does.

“What’s in the bag?” Hollander asks, looking at the bag full of tupperware. “I thought you were getting takeout?”

“Did I say takeout?” Ilya asks.

“Well, no, but... You cook?” Hollander asks.

“Mm, a little,” Ilya shrugs. “No, this was Vlada. And this is *ukha*. ”

“Euchre?” Hollander blinks.

“Yes, Hollander. I brought cards in plastic containers,” Ilya replies. “No, *ukha*. Russian soup. Vlada made it. It fixes headaches.”

“Oh,” Hollander replies. “Wow, uh... Thank you. Who is Vlada?”

“My neighbour,” Ilya explains. “She’s from St. Petersburg.”

“Oh,” Hollander says again. “Thank you, Vlada, too.”

Ilya nods. He feels badly, a tiny bit, understating who Vlada is in his life. She’s more important than just a neighbour. But how does he explain that without explaining Nina?

“Do you want to eat?” Ilya asks. “I can heat it up.”

Hollander nods and begins to stand.

“No,” Ilya says. “Sit. I can do it.”



Shane isn’t really used to this. Being taken care of.

He doesn't mean that in a dramatic or self-pitying way. He has fantastic parents that never left him wanting for everything. Even now, at thirty-three, when he goes home, they insist on doing more for him than he needs them to. When he was going through the worst with his head injuries, they were there for him. He has lacked for nothing in that regard.

But Shane has also had a *career* since he was seventeen years-old. He had to grow up quickly; move out, to a new city, and be independent. A lot of professional hockey players end up with wives or girlfriends pretty quickly. Having someone at home to take care of them is nice. And a lot of them are too busy or too uninterested to learn to care for themselves outside of their sport. That was obviously never an option for Shane. He's figured out how to be self-sufficient. Sometimes to the detriment of his short-lived romantic relationships. His ex certainly thought so.

So here Shane is, laying on the couch, listening to hockey and trying to keep his eyes open, while Ilya Fucking Rozanov heats up soup in his kitchen. He's not sure what to make of it.

"It smells like fish!" Shane calls out during a commercial break.

"It is fish!" Rozanov calls back. *"Is good for you!"*

Shane exhales through his mouth. He's not sure how he feels about that. But the man brought over special soup from his neighbour... And hell, if it *does* fix the headache, he'll eat whatever sort of fish soup he needs to.

A few minutes later, Rozanov walks back into the living room carrying two bowls of soup. Clearly, he had no trouble navigating Shane's kitchen. Which honestly isn't surprising, because Shane doesn't have a lot of complicated culinary things.

Shane sits up, head protesting the movement.

"Oh," he says. "I really shouldn't eat at the couch."

Rozanov rolls his eyes. "You are unwell, Hollander. You can fucking relax."

Shane smirks, despite his concerns for his couch and coffee table.

"Yes, Chef."

"Hardly," Rozanov replies as he sets the bowls down on coasters. "Do you want me to go grab place mats or something?"

Shane shakes his head. "It's fine. Thank you."

They spend the next few minutes quietly eating the soup while the game plays. It's better than Shane expected, honestly, at the promise of fish soup. It's delicious. And he does start to feel a bit better pretty quickly, if only for the protein, and nothing else.

"Tell Vlada she's amazing," Shane says when he finishes his bowl.

Rozanov smiles proudly.

“I will,” he says. “Did it help?”

Shane nods. “I think so.”

“Good,” Rozanov replies. “I’m glad.”

“Thank you for doing this,” Shane tells him. “I’m sure you could have found a better way to spend your night.”

Rozanov gives him a funny look. “I wanted to have dinner with you. I did.”

Shane’s chest flutters a little.

“Sorry, I’m sort of a boring date.”

Rozanov shrugs. “I already knew that.”

“Asshole,” Shane mumbles.

“Ouch, Hollander,” Rozanov feigns clutching at his heart. “I bring you soup, and now I am asshole?”

Shane smiles. “No. You’re not. You might even secretly be nice.”

Rozanov smiles back. “Don’t tell anyone.”

Shane blinks a few times. With his stomach full, he suddenly feels very tired.

“Our little secret,” he yawns.

“Hmm,” Rozanov replies, voice sounding strangely content.

Shane’s eyes feel heavy. He keeps blinking, trying to keep them open.

“Rest,” Rozanov says. “I’ll clean up.”

“You don’t have to,” Shane protests.

“It’s okay,” Rozanov says. Shane’s eyes are closed by the time he’s finished the sentence. “I want to.”



When Shane opens his eyes again, he’s expecting Rozanov to be gone. Shane knows he fell asleep. Probably for a while. He wouldn’t blame Rozanov for quietly departing.

To his surprise, Rozanov is still there – sitting on Shane’s couch, watching the hockey game.

“Good morning,” he says when he sees Shane lift his head. “Winnipeg is murdering Buffalo. Is satisfying to watch.”

“You stayed?”

“Yes, clearly,” Rozanov says. “How is your head?”

“Better,” Shane says.

It’s true. The headache isn’t gone, but it’s definitely faded. He feels *clearer* overall.

“Good,” Rozanov nods. “*Ukha* works every time.”

Shane smiles. He likes knowing this little tidbit of information about Rozanov. That there’s a soup he thinks is a magic cure all. That there’s a nice Russian woman who is his neighbour and who cooks for him. His life, outside of hockey and sex, starts etching itself like a picture in Shane’s mind. He wants to know more. He wants to know... He wants to know *all of it*.

The realization almost brings his nausea back.

“What are we doing here?” He blurts.

Rozanov’s eyes widen. “What do you mean?”

Shane swallows. His stomach won’t settle.

“You asked me on a date, you brought me soup, you *stayed* while I napped.”

Rozanov’s eyebrows crease.

“Should I not have?” He asks.

His tone is neutral, but Shane thinks he sounds concerned. Hurt, even.

Shane shakes his head. “No, no. I’m glad you did. I just...”

He trails off. He thinks his confusion should be obvious, but Rozanov looks completely lost.

“Those things aren’t just about sex,” Shane clarifies eventually.

Rozanov nods a little, understanding.

“No,” he agrees. “Not about sex.”

“So?” Shane presses.

Rozanov huffs, clearly frustrated by the line of questioning. “I like you, Hollander. What is the problem?”

“You like me?” Shane repeats.

“Obviously,” Rozanov says.

No. No, things don't often tend to be obvious to Shane. Not interpersonal things like this, anyway. And he knows why.

The way your brain works isn't stupid or a deficiency.

"Uh," Shane says, face burning. "I can sometimes struggle if things aren't explicitly stated."

"Explicitly stated?" Rozanov echoes. Shane can see him searching for an interpretation of these words behind his eyes.

Shane tries to simplify what he's feeling.

"If I don't know exactly what you mean, sometimes I overthink it," he explains. "And it gets all confused in my head."

Rozanov nods. "Ah."

"Sorry," Shane mutters.

"No, don't be," Rozanov says. "I can be... *Explicit.*"

Shane blushes. He's not sure if Rozanov is aware of the double meaning or not.

"Okay," he continues. "I like you, Hollander. I always did, back then."

Shane sucks in a sharp breath.

"Oh."

"It didn't matter," Rozanov says. "*Then.* There was no point thinking about it."

Shane nods. No, there wasn't. Is that what made it easier to act like Shane didn't exist at all? To cut off contact with him completely?

"I liked you, too," Shane admits quietly.

"When we were in the NHL, it had no future," Rozanov says. "Better to think of it as only fucking."

"But we're not in the NHL now," Shane fills in.

"No," Rozanov shakes his head. "And... And what was important to me ten years ago is not what is important to me today."

His priorities have changed, Shane translates in his head. That's fair. So have Shane's. Life seems endless when you're twenty and at the beginning of a career supposed to last years and years. Then it's all stolen from you and you're just... *Alone.* That changes things.

"What's important to you now?" Shane asks.

Rozanov thinks about that question for a while. He seems to really ponder it.

“Living a life that I can be happy with,” he says finally.

Shane swallows. “And where does liking me fit into that?”

Rozanov shrugs. “I don’t know yet. But I would like to see, this time. There is no NHL, no Russia, no... No reason not to try.”

“No reason not to try for... A relationship?” Shane guesses.

Rozanov shrugs. “Yes. If that is what you want, too.”

Shane exhales. “I would want that, too.”

Rozanov smiles. “Okay, then. Good.”

“Good,” Shane echoes. He feels sort of incorporeal right now, like this might turn out to be a dream at any possible second.

Tentatively, Rozanov reaches an arm out, emphasizing the space between the two of them on Shane’s couch. Shane’s stomach swoops. He scooches close enough, allowing Rozanov to wrap an arm around him and pull him into his side. Shane lets himself melt into Rozanov’s embrace, head slumping against his shoulder. Rozanov’s fingers card through his hair, just like they often do after sex. Shane thinks he likes his hair quite a bit.

“Do you want me to leave the game on?” Rozanov asks.

“Yeah,” Shane mumbles, eyes blinking open and shut. “I need to watch for work.”

“Mmm, but you’re falling back asleep,” Rozanov points out.

“I’m not,” Shane protests. “M’awake.”

“Oh, sure,” Rozanov says. “Very energetic.”

“Yep,” Shane mumbles.

“How about this?” Rozanov suggests. “I tell you what is happening in game. You keep your eyes closed. If you are so awake, you won’t fall asleep.”

Shane knows he’ll be gone in under a minute.

“Deal,” he says anyway. Just because the thought of drifting off to Rozanov’s voice narrating a hockey game – or the phone book, for all he cares – sounds fantastic.

So Shane lets his eyes stay shut and he listens as Rozanov describes what’s happening on screen. He’d have trouble doing Shane’s job, Shane thinks. All his observations about the other players are sort of snarky. Even if they are mostly correct.

Eventually, Shane does exactly what he expected he’d do. He begins to drift in and out of consciousness. Just before he’s gone for real, he feels the soft press of lips to the top of his

head.

“Sleep well, Shane.”

March 12th, 2024

Ilya is happy.

How could he not be? For the past few weeks, everything has been going his way. His team is doing well in the playoffs. They’re playing in the final game for the Queen’s Cup. Which means Ilya is doing his job and doing it well. Things are going great with Shane; they haven’t had a lot of time to see each other since the day they were supposed to have their date, but they’ve been texting. A lot. Sometimes they sext, sometimes they just talk. Ilya likes it a lot; having someone to talk to again. He feels excited for the future again. That’s something he’s struggled with a lot. Something he thinks he’d struggle with a lot more, if it wasn’t for his daughter.

Speaking of whom, things have been going a bit better there, too. The night she spends with Lauren, she’s not waking up with as many nightmares. She seems to be more comfortable in Lauren’s apartment and with spending time away from Ilya. The problem is that Lauren is a journalist. She gets sent on projects and travels for long stretches, and it throws Nina’s routine off. Nina has never been good with change. It makes her anxious, and the anxiety gives her nightmares. But right now, Lauren is home. At least for the time being. She’ll probably be sent to cover the Olympics this summer, and then that will start all of this over again. At least Ilya will be in the off-season at that point. He’ll have more time to spend with Nina.

And Shane. He’ll have more time to spend with Shane, too. He hopes.

It’s an afternoon that Ilya *might* have been able to go over to Shane’s for a quick fuck, if not for some media commitment the other man had made. Disappointing. All to say, Ilya is enjoying an afternoon off. He’s at home, bad leg up on the coffee table, reading through emails and waiting for his laundry to be done in the dryer, when a call comes through from Nina’s school. That’s not usually a good call to get before class is over. Ilya tries to think of anything that might be wrong. Nina hadn’t been sick this morning. And she *loves* school. The times where he’s had to take her out of class early for a dentist appointment or something like that, she cries. She wouldn’t be asking to come home.

“Hello?” Ilya answers the phone.

“*Hi, Mr. Rozanov?*” The school’s administrator answers. Her voice is too bubbly sweet. He hates it. Just tell him if his daughter is okay.

“Yes, hello,” Ilya repeats.

“*This is Regan at Laurent Public School,*” she replies. “*We have Nina here in the Vice Principal’s office. We’ve had a bit of an incident here and we were wondering if you and Nina’s mother could come for a meeting and to pick Nina up for the day?*”

Ilya's chest tightens. "What incident?"

"It's nothing serious. Nina is okay," Regan says.

Ilya exhales, relieved.

"Nina had a bit of a tantrum after lunch today and it was very disruptive to the class," Regan explains. *"This isn't the first time something like this has happened, so her teacher and Vice Principal Fisher wanted to have a chat with you about it."*

A tantrum? That's not like Nina. She doesn't have tantrums. She's quiet and polite and soft spoken.

"Why?" Ilya asks. "What happened to make her react? Did someone bother her?"

"You know, I'm not sure," Regan admits. *"I wasn't in the classroom. I'm sure that will be addressed when you come to pick her up."*

Ilya feels a wave of frustration. He wants to know *now*.

"I can be there in twenty minutes," he grumbles.

"Wonderful," Regan says. *"Thank you, Mr. Rozanov."*

Ilya feels shaky as he wraps up one call and moves onto the next. Lauren. He has to be the one to tell Lauren. Which isn't great, because he doesn't have a whole ton of information.

"Ilya?" She answers when he calls. *"What's going on? I'm working."*

Oh, yes, and he is just calling for fun.

"You need to meet me at the school," he says. "Nina is at the office. They said she had a tantrum, so something happened. I don't know what."

"Oh, jeez," Lauren replies. She doesn't sound as surprised as Ilya felt. *"Okay, do they need both of us to pick her up?"*

"No," Ilya says. "They want us both for meeting. I am just giving the message."

He hears her take a deep breath.

"Got it, I'll be there," she says. *"I guess this has been coming for a while, huh?"*

Ilya frowns. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean she does sort of freak out about things sometimes," Lauren says. *"She goes from zero to a hundred over, like, nothing."*

Ilya starts getting dressed to leave.

"No," he says. "She doesn't. She is always good."

“I’m not saying she’s bad, Ilya, I’m saying she does have these tantrums sometimes, and I’ve been telling you it happens when she’s with me.”

No. No, that’s not true. Lauren hasn’t said *tantrums*. She’s said Nina gets upset sometimes and won’t calm down until she calls or sees Ilya. She’s said she’s anxious. That’s *different*. Ilya is certain it can’t be that bad. Wouldn’t it happen with him, too? Wouldn’t he see it?

“Okay,” Ilya says. Because he doesn’t want to agree about anything until he hears what happened at school. Maybe another student antagonized her. Maybe it isn’t her fault. “We will see what the Vice Principal says.”

“Yeah, of course,” Lauren replies. *“We’ll see what they say.”*

They end the call, and forty-five minutes later, they’re both sitting in the Vice Principal’s office, listening to a woman with stupid leopard print framed glasses explain how his daughter had a meltdown over a group work session, when another classmate wasn’t focusing on the assignment; a workbook page about matching antonyms. They’re listening to the description of their daughter sobbing about it being unfair and the other classmate ruining her work and how no one could calm her down. How she’d cried so hard she almost choked. And while Ilya feels like *he* is going to cry and choke just listening to it, Lauren nods along like she knows exactly what they’re talking about.

Ilya feels frustrated and betrayed. Like everyone has suspected something is wrong with his daughter and failed to tell him. Like everyone is seeing something *wrong* that isn’t there. There’s nothing wrong with her. She’s a smart kid. A polite kid. Every child has bad days. Maybe she’s a little sensitive, but that’s it.

By the end of the meeting, they’re being recommended a formal assessment for Nina – “just to make sure she has what she needs” – and Lauren is thanking the Vice Principal and assuring they will do that. The whole time, Ilya just feels terrified.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

At a hockey game, Shane finds out some surprising news about Ilya.

Chapter Notes

I really thought it would take me longer to get these all posted but here we are...

Toronto - March 15th, 2024

On Thursday, Shane has a meeting at work with his cast members and the writing team. Just going over some points they want to emphasize on Saturday's show. A few of them are dumbed down versions of the same snarky things Rozanov – Ilya, he should really be thinking of him by Ilya – had said when they watched the Winnipeg game. Shane should tell him that. He's got the astute observations of a team of writers, just with the bitchiness level cranked up.

After the meeting, Keith stops Shane before he leaves.

"What do you have going on tonight?" He asks Shane.

"Ah, not much," Shane replies. "Why, what's up?"

In truth, Shane's plans involve going home and keeping an eye on Ilya's team's game. It's the final game of the season, for the Queen's Cup. It's a big deal for Ilya. *And* for Keith's nephew, Shane realizes.

"Do you want to come to the university to watch the game?" Keith asks. "It would mean a lot to Brayden if I showed up with *Shane Hollander*. Plus, your buddy Rozanov will be there."

Brayden. Right, that's the superstar nephew's name.

"My buddy?"

Keith's cheeks redden a little. "Yeah, uh... You seemed close at the party, anyway. Closer than I expected."

Shane smiles softly. "Yeah, well... He's a good guy."

He's not going to say anything else about that. Not without talking to Ilya first.

"So what do you say?" Keith nudges him. "Will you come? I'll buy you a beer. It'll be fun."

Shane considers the possible consequences of showing up at the game. Namely, making Ilya uncomfortable. What if he doesn't want the man he's newly seeing showing up to the most important work event of the year for him? But then again, what if he likes it? What if it's a good surprise? What if it's, like, a show of support? Which it *would* be. That *would* be Shane's motivation.

Shane thinks of the past. Of Ilya's reaction to seeing Shane in work situations. With the exception of the Olympics in Sochi, he'd always been flirtatious and daring about it. And what had Ilya said the last time they saw each other? *There is no NHL, no Russia, no... No reason not to try.*

"I'll come," Shane decides.

He might not even see Ilya. Ilya might be too busy. If he does, he'll just follow his lead. However he wants to greet him – like a very new romantic situation, like a friend, or like an old colleague – Shane will respond in kind. They have experience playing that sort of thing down.

"Yeah?" Keith grins. "That's awesome, man."

"Thanks for inviting me," Shane says. "I'm looking forward to it."

And he is. He finds that he actually can't wait to see the look on Ilya's face when he shows up at the arena.



The game is fantastic.

Sometimes, Shane forgets about the hockey world outside of the NHL. He forgets that there's just as much talent and love of the game in the university leagues, the AHL, the OHL, and so on. People waiting to be discovered, waiting to be drafted, waiting for their big break. Just like Shane used to be. Keith's nephew is obviously one of those people, and after a pretty spectacular victory tonight, Shane thinks he'll have no trouble.

Ilya's team wins 5-1. It's kind of a massacre. The exact kind Shane knows Ilya likes.

After the game, Keith says they should go down and talk to Ilya and the team.

"The kids will all be thrilled to meet you," he says. "You're their future, you know?"

"Brain damaged?" Shane asks dryly.

"No!" Keith frowns. "A three time Stanley Cup winner, asshole."

He knew what Keith meant. And truth be told, he wants to go see the team, too. The coach, in particular. He wants to tell him what an incredible job he's done. He wants to tell him that he could see Ilya's play style in the way his players moved on the ice, and how good that felt to watch. There was never anyone like Ilya Rozanov out there on the ice. Not for Shane.

They walk down the stands, across the arena, towards where the home team is celebrating. Shane spots Ilya right away. He's turning to walk towards the boards, a big smile on his face. He's looking at someone, motioning for them to come towards him. His smile... Shane thinks he's only seen it once before. On the television, the day he won the Stanley Cup. Maybe leading his team to victory as a coach is that fulfilling, too. But he's not looking at his team. He's looking at...

A little girl runs up to the boards.

Shane goes rigid, stopping his forward pace maybe fifty meters away from the scene.

Ilya bends to lift the girl over the boards, bringing her onto the ice, but keeping her in his arms. He presses a kiss to her rosy cheeks.

In an oversized, pink university sweater and earmuffs, Shane doesn't have to guess who this child belongs to. She has his curls. His big smile. Everything but his eyes. This is Ilya's daughter.

"What the fuck?" Shane mumbles.

Ilya has a daughter. A *child*. Why... Why didn't he say anything? Why the hell would he come to Shane's house and tell him he wanted a relationship and not tell him about what is clearly the *most important* part of his life?

Keith pauses and turns to him. "What?"

"I didn't know he has a kid," Shane admits.

"Oh," Keith says. Then he shrugs. "Lots of people have kids, man."

Right, yeah. Well, Shane isn't kind of sort of dating lots of people.

Keith continues towards the crowd. Shane stays put. He needs another moment to process.

"ROZANOV!" Keith whoops. "Congrats, pal!"

Ilya turns, child still in his arms. His eyes pass by Keith and land right on Shane. For a moment, he's still grinning. Then, his eyes flicker to the girl, and back to Shane again, and the smile fades. He's realizing what Shane is realizing.

"You all killed it, boys!" Keith keeps going.

"Ah, thank you," Ilya responds. His expression recovers from the shock. "I see you brought a rookie with you, to show how it's done."

Oh, that's Shane, is it?

Ilya looks at him again. His expression is sort of pleading. *Just be cool*, he seems to beg. He nods at his daughter a little. He doesn't want to have any sort of confrontation in front of her.

Shane isn't a total asshole. He's not going to freak out in front of a kid.

He takes a deep breath and walks towards Ilya and Keith, fake smile plastered on his face.

"Congratulations, coach," he says stiffly. "It was a great game."

"Thank you," Ilya says. "You came as Keith's plus one?"

Shane shrugs. "And to cheer you on."

Ilya takes a deep breath. He looks guilty.

"Shane, this my daughter," he says, tone becoming more serious. "Nina. Nina, this is my friend, Shane."

Nina doesn't so much look at Shane as much as he looks in his general direction. Her honey-brown eyes seem focused on a point just beside his head. He knows that trick.

"Hi," she says softly, waving her little hand.

"Hi, Nina," Shane says. "Nice to meet you."

Ilya walks over to the boards and lowers Nina down onto the other side.

"Go find Vlada," he tells his daughter. "I will see you in ten minutes, okay?"

"Nine?" She challenges.

He shakes his head. "Maybe. No promises."

"Fine," she sighs, then turns and runs off to someone, presumably Vlada of fish soup fame.

Ilya turns back to Shane and Keith.

"Listen," he starts to say. "I-"

"Is that *Shane Hollander*?" Someone skates up to the boards. Shane recognizes him immediately from the photos on Keith's social media. His nephew.

"Oh, yeah," Shane smiles at him. "Nice to meet you. Congrats on the big win."

A bunch of other players start to notice, too.

Before long, whatever Ilya had been about to say is washed away by a crowd of celebratory, young hockey players, all of whom want to meet Shane and razz their coach about a decade-old rivalry. And it's all in good fun. It's all in good spirits. Shane plays along, because he's

not here to make anyone's life harder or rain on a very well-earned parade. But the whole time, he avoids looking Ilya in the eye.

He has no idea where they stand. He has no idea why Ilya would lie to him. And the more he thinks about it, the more hurt he feels.



Ilya wouldn't characterize himself as a very anxious person. He can usually approach a problem without fretting too much, even if he takes that problem pretty seriously. He's not used to that constant tight feeling in his stomach, paired with a mind trapped in a vice grip. He's got his own issues, but that's not usually one of them. Tonight? Ilya feels pretty anxious.

If he's being honest, he's been feeling it for a few days. Since the meeting at Nina's school. He feels like a rotting fruit, with a heavy stone in the center. Mushy and useless. The hockey game, the victory, had been a brief reprieve. A task to focus on, an objective to crush. Beyond that? His brain is stuck on his daughter.

The school had said she needed an assessment. He didn't understand for *what*, exactly. He has one main fear. One worry that is gnawing at him. What if they take her to some fancy Canadian shrink and that person tells them that Nina is just like her father and her grandmother? What if he has passed on this unshakeable gloom, that killed his mother, to his child? How does he live with that?

On top of that persistent worry, there's Shane.

Ilya is certain Shane showing up at the game was meant to be a good surprise. Sweet, actually. It's a big move for Shane, who used to act like leaving a hotel room was a serious covert intelligence mission. Actually showing up in a public way for Ilya? That wasn't a small decision. And it *should* have been a good one. This is Ilya's fault, too.

Shane is going to get the wrong idea. He probably already has the wrong idea. He probably thinks Ilya is a liar. That he was playing some game. He *wasn't*. He *isn't*. He just needed to wait for the right moment. For the right conditions. He was *getting there*. Shane showing up today, had Nina *not* been here, might have gotten him a hell of a lot closer, actually. Because it's a sign, isn't it? That Shane takes this seriously. And now Ilya has maybe made him feel that *he* doesn't take it seriously...

What a shit show. One of his own making.

He texts Shane the moment he can. The moment the boys are in the locker room and he's given his speech and he's sent Nina home with Vlada for the evening. He still fears it's too late.

Ilya: *Please let me explain.*

It takes Shane over twenty minutes to reply. Ilya doesn't blame him. Maybe he's driving home. Maybe he's just pissed.

By the time he does answer, Ilya is sitting in the parking lot in his own car, feeling the strange urge to puke. He should just drive home. He should tuck his daughter into bed. He should crack a beer and celebrate his victory and relax. He should deal with this tomorrow. But he can't bring himself to move. He feels completely frozen.

When Shane's text comes through, it's genuinely a relief to be broken free from that catatonic state.

Shane: *I think that would be good.*

Ilya stares at it for a few minutes. He reads it in several tones. Earnest. Forgiving. Angry. Knowing Shane's more direct, flat delivery of most things, it's probably a combo of all three of those things.

Ilya: *Are you alone?*

He doesn't want to explain over text.

Again, it takes Shane a while to reply. While he's waiting, a message comes through from Vlada.

Vlada: *Stay out late tonight. Celebrate with team. I have Nina. You earned it.*

Well, that is certainly helpful. Ilya will not be celebrating with his team. But this does mean he has some time...

Ilya sends her a text thanking her and promising to keep her updated. Sometimes, he wishes he still had his NHL income. He'd charter a yacht vacation for that woman. Buy her a house. Whatever she wants. He owes her a lot.

Shane's reply comes in right after that.

Shane: *Yes. Just got home.*

Ilya was going to just call him. But...

Ilya: *Can I explain in person?*

He waits, breath held, for the reply.

Shane: *That's fine.*

Definitely a bitchy tone. Whatever. Ilya cannot blame him.

Ilya: *I'll be there soon.*

→→→→

Shane is of two minds while waiting for Ilya to arrive.

The first is *fuck him*, he doesn't want to hear it. The second is, he desperately wants an explanation. It's sort of a confusing juxtaposition.

If he's honest with himself, Shane is expecting the worst. Expecting to hear something sort of crushing. Something that will kill this thing between them before it even gets off the ground. But at least Ilya is coming to explain it. That's more than Shane got last time.

Shane should have known better after last time. That's what this comes down to, really. He should have known better.

When Ilya arrives, Shane is sitting at the island in his kitchen, staring at the fridge. He's trying to decide if he wants alcohol. He might appreciate the edge being taken off. He should probably be sober for this, though.

Ilya uses the door code like he did last time, before hanging up his coat and trudging, sheepishly, into the kitchen.

"Hi," he mumbles when he sees Shane. He takes a seat next to him.

Shane turns his head a little in Ilya's direction. He doesn't greet him back. Neither of them is here for small talk.

"Right," Ilya says. "Okay... So, you met Nina."

Wow. Great start.

Shane really doesn't want to say anything. He really has nothing to say until he learns more. His clenches his jaw to keep from firing back.

"Obviously, I did not mean for you to find out about her that way," Ilya continues.

"Oh, really?" Shane scoffs. "Because you had a ton of opportunities to tell me. Like, you know, when you explained that this was more than just sex for you."

"It is," Ilya insists. And, to his minimal credit, he looks horrified. "It is more than sex."

"A relationship that's more than sex, but where you hide the most important part of your life from me?" Shane challenges.

Ilya shakes his head. "I wasn't hiding. I was waiting for the right time."

"To *tell* me about her?" Shane asks. "I get not wanting to introduce your kid to the person you're seeing, okay? That's fine. But a *head's up* is probably warranted."

"A head's up," Ilya echoes. His mouth twitches a little. Like that's *funny*.

"What did you think I was going to do?" Shane asks. "Not want to be with you because you have a child? I know you were married. You mentioned that. It's not that crazy."

Secretly, Shane is scared this is the reason. He's scared that maybe he gives off the vibe that he'd be bad with kids. Or dislike them, even. He's always thought he'd be a father one day. He likes kids. He just has never been in the position to accidentally or intentionally have one.

"No," Ilya shakes his head. "I do not think this about you."

"Then *what?*" Shane demands.

He realizes he's not actually giving Ilya the time to explain. This is why he meant to keep his mouth shut.

"I needed to make sure you are serious!" Ilya bursts. "I don't know!"

If Shane was a cartoon character, he thinks his eyes would bug out of his head.

"*You* needed to make sure that *I* am serious?" He repeats.

"Yes!" Ilya snaps. "It's one thing for me to... To put *myself* in that position again... But Nina? No."

"*What* position again?" Shane demands. "What the hell are you talking about? I'm not the one that fucking ended things last time, Rozanov. That was *you*."

Ilya looks like Shane has just told him Toronto is a tropical climate.

"Are you fucking kidding?" He asks.

"No!"

"Oh, I see," Ilya replies flatly. "You are like American history textbook, Hollander. You just say whatever you want to have happened."

Shane practically coughs at the absurdity of that accusation.

"What are you talking about?" He asks, voice nearly pleading for clarity. "I *tried* to keep in contact with you pretty relentlessly after your... *After*. I tried. *You* made it clear that's not what you wanted."

"Did I?" Ilya asks. "How? I was fucking *dead*."

Shane's throat aches at the memory.

It still runs through his head sometimes, as clearly as if it was yesterday. He woke up the morning after their last hookup in Las Vegas after a *rare* decision to sleep in. He was exhausted, he had an afternoon flight. The season was over. He wasn't in a rush. So by the time he checked his phone and started to get ready, it was all over the news.

Boston captain Ilya Rozanov rushed to hospital in critical condition after being hit by a car outside McCarran International Airport.

Shane is prone to panic, generally, but he has never felt panic as desperate as when he read that. He vomited in the hotel toilet. He worked himself up into a total panic attack, trying to find more information, and realizing he couldn't. There was no one he could ask.

"I cancelled my flight that day," Shane says.

"What?" Ilya's brows furrow.

"I was supposed to go home," Shane says. "I didn't."

"What are you talking about?" Ilya asks.

"I extended my stay," Shane says. "I tried to find out what hospital you were at. That wasn't easy information to find. I ended up asking one of your teammates."

Ilya shakes his head. The anger in his eyes has faded into some kind of panic.

"No," he insists. "You did not visit me. I know. I asked."

He asked for Shane? Shane's stomach twists.

"You're right," Shane confirms. "I didn't. Because when I showed up, it was on complete lockdown. No one but your coach was allowed in until your family arrived from Moscow. *You* were in a coma, so it's not like you could say anything about it. I... I had no options."

Ilya's expression sinks.

"So I went back home," Shane says. "I waited a week. I tried to get more information about your condition, but no one would give it to me. I flew back to Vegas. I showed up at the hospital *again*, and-"

"My brother," Ilya cuts him off. Shane watches as grim realization sinks in. "You met my brother."

Shane nods. "Yeah, he's a treat."

"What did he do?" Ilya asks, voice shaking. "What did he do... I-I didn't know. I swear."

Shane feels a bit cold. He didn't know? But...

"He told me to fuck off," Shane says.

Ilya looks pale. "I didn't know."

"It was hard to know exactly what he meant," Shane says. "His English wasn't great. But the point was clear. Me showing up was humiliating to you. You didn't want to see me. Whatever was between us was over. Permanently."

The effect this has on Ilya might be less if Shane had stabbed him.

"I didn't tell him to do that," he says, eyes watering. "I didn't know. I *swear*."

“Yeah, I wondered,” Shane mumbles. “At first, I thought... Maybe something is off here. Some of the choice phrases he used... You wouldn’t use them.”

Shane probably would’ve been more hurt by the clumsy slurs hurled his way that day if he hadn’t been so afraid of someone else hearing them. If he hadn’t realized that Ilya must have heard them all the time.

“I wouldn’t,” Ilya insists.

“But then when I tried to text you about it, my number was blocked,” Shane says.

Ilya shakes his head.

“And I was blocked on Instagram,” Shane adds. “And Twitter.”

Both of which accounts Ilya deleted not long after that as a part of his complete disappearance from the NHL world. But still, it stung.

“I didn’t choose *any* of that,” Ilya says. He sounds frantic for Shane to believe him. “Alexei had my phone. He had everything. They made him my... What is the term?”

“Substitute decision maker?” Shane asks, thinking of the Ontario terminology.

Ilya nods. “Whatever they call this in Nevada.”

Shane inhales deeply. His chest physically hurts. He doesn’t know what to think. He doesn’t know what to believe. He’s been carrying this hurt for *a decade*. It has followed him into every new relationship. Into every self-assessment of his worth as a partner. It has been a deep *wound* in him. And what? It might not have even *happened*? Like, it *happened*, but it might not have actually come from Ilya? Ilya didn’t even know? He thought... What did he think?

“Shane,” Ilya says. “*Please* believe me.”

He’s actually crying now. Not a lot, but... *Enough*.

“I want to,” Shane says. “I do.”

Ilya waits for Shane to elaborate, hand rising to cover his mouth.

“I guess I just don’t understand,” Shane says. “Did you really think I’d just drop you like that? After you’d been *hit by a car* and nearly died?”

Ilya thinks for a moment before replying. He lets his hand fall away from his face.

“Yes,” he says eventually.

Shane flinches a little.

“Why?” He demands.

Again, Ilya thinks. He takes his time.

“I wasn’t the one who stopped replying before,” Shane adds. “I always tried to stay in contact, to check in on you.”

“That is why,” Ilya says. He doesn’t sound accusatory. Just *sad*. “I thought it is what I deserved.”

Shane feels bile in the back of his throat. “Why would you think that? No one deserves that.”

Ilya shakes his head. “I was not good to you. Before the accident. In Russia and after. You said as much, that night. I knew it.”

“That doesn’t mean you just stop caring about someone,” Shane says. “Was I frustrated? Yes. Would I have *abandoned* you because of it? No.”

For a moment, Ilya’s face is completely frozen. It’s like there’s a skip on the record of his thought process. He is suspended in processing.

And then he just crumples. His face falls into his hands. He makes a choked noise, and then starts muttering in Russian.

“Hey...” Shane says, uncertain how to react. “Uh...”

He reaches a hand out, placing it on Ilya’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” Shane mumbles.

The anger has sort of fizzles out in him, replaced by something far heavier. Far more morose.

“It’s not!” Ilya bursts, dropping his hands again. His eyes are red, irises brighter than usual from tears. “It is not *okay*. My brother... He took *so* much. He spent my money. He made bad decisions at the hospital. So it would be easier for him, not better for me. He *ruined* my life almost as much as that stupid driver. And now you?”

The question hangs in the air with such a weight that Shane can hardly breathe. Like Shane was that much of a loss in his life. That he measures up there with wealth and stability and health. That can’t be true. They weren’t even seeing each other. Not really. They were just... Well, they were all that they *could* be, at the time.

“Ten years,” Ilya says. Then he says something else in Russian. It sounds like a curse.

“Look, I believe you,” Shane says. He’s desperate to ease whatever maelstrom is going on in Ilya’s head. “I believe you. It’s forgiven, okay? It wasn’t your fault.”

And he means it. He *does* believe him. He can see the truth in his eyes. He doesn’t *want* to be mad. He never did. Otherwise, he never would have let him into his life again. Shane would rather hate Ilya’s brother than hold a grudge against Ilya. That’s better. That’s *easier*.

“Ten years,” Ilya says again, shaking his head. “Fucking mess.”

“Ilya...” Shane pleads.

“I can’t even regret it,” he says. “Not entirely.”

“Because of Nina?” Shane asks.

Ilya nods.

He wouldn’t have his daughter if it never happened.

Shane gets it. He understands. But where does that leave him? What net gain did he come away with?

“I can see why you didn’t tell me about her,” Shane says. “If that’s what you thought happened.”

Ilya blinks. “I’m sorry. I should have sooner.”

Shane shakes his head. “I’m just surprised you even spoke to me at that party.”

Ilya frowns. “What about you?”

“What about me?” Shane asks.

“Why did you talk to me at the party?” He asks. “You were treated so badly.”

Shane doesn’t have an immediate answer to this. He *was* treated very badly. But... Well...

“I tried to hate you,” Shane admits after a moment.

Ilya nods. “I tried to hate you, too.”

“I missed you, though,” Shane says quietly. “Every time I tried. I just wished things had gone differently.”

Ilya’s eyes water with a fresh well of tears. Shane feels his own stinging in return.

“Yes,” Ilya replies, voice tight. “Me, too.”

Shane turns his chair a little. He leans towards Ilya, twisted awkwardly in his seat.

He doesn’t need to say what he’s thinking. Ilya picks up on it immediately; the same way their bodies have always understood each other, even when their minds can’t seem to. He leans forward, too, gently, allowing their foreheads to rest against each other. They stay like that for a minute before either of them speaks again.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya says finally. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Shane whispers. “What happened to you... Fuck, I’m so sorry.”

“I would like a second chance,” Ilya says. “If that’s okay.”

Shane kisses him.

“I want that, too.”



They end up back on Shane’s couch, wrapped under a blanket. Shane is holding Ilya, and for the time being, Ilya is able to close the door on all the horrible things swirling around in his brain. His daughter’s mental health. His brother’s genuine capacity for evil and utter selfishness. How much his own shit ended up hurting Shane. The overwhelming feeling that a decade of their lives has been wasted, followed by immediate guilt for feeling that anything that led to Nina could ever possibly be a waste. His head is so *loud*. But laying there, with Shane holding onto him, things are quiet for a moment.

“Tell me about her,” Shane says after a while.

“Nina?” Ilya asks.

“Yeah,” Shane replies. “What’s she like?”

Ilya smiles softly.

“She is the best,” he says. “Best child.”

Shane chuckles. “No bias?”

“None,” Ilya says seriously. “She is so smart. She is so kind. She loves to skate.”

“Hockey or figure skating?” Shane asks.

“No,” Ilya shakes his head. “Neither. She wants to do speed skating.”

“*Speed skating?*” Shane echoes.

“Yes,” Ilya says, smile still on his face. “She loves anything that goes fast. Cheetahs. Horses. Those fast, skinny dogs.”

“Greyhounds?”

“Yes. Is good that she wants to be a speed skater, otherwise she might want to be a fighter pilot and then I would be very scared.”

Shane laughs. “This is your karma for all those sports cars.”

Ilya chuckles. “Yes. Probably true.”

“Did you always want kids?” Shane asks. He sounds a little cautious with the question.

“Mm, yes,” Ilya says. “I like kids.”

“That’s good,” Shane says.

“I was not supposed to have one with Nina’s mother though,” Ilya admits.

“Oh?”

“She was... You know.. *Whoopsy*,” Ilya shrugs.

“Oh,” Shane says again. “Well... I guess lots of kids are.”

“Lauren, my ex wife,” Ilya explains. Because why not explain? He should explain everything now. He doesn’t want any more misunderstandings. “We did not get married because we loved each other.”

“Why did you marry her?” Shane asks. He sounds even more cautious than before.

“She is sports reporter,” Ilya explains. “We would fuck sometimes, when I played in Toronto.”

“Ah,” Shane replies, voice tight.

“When the doctors said I would not play hockey again, I was going to go back to Russia,” Ilya tells him. “No work, no visa.”

“Right,” Shane says quietly. “Shit.”

“My brother is in Russia,” Ilya says. “My father, too. I couldn’t go back forever.”

“You married her for citizenship?” Shane asks.

Ilya nods. “Yes. Business arrangement. She married me, I gave her exclusive interview about my medical retirement.”

Shane takes a deep breath. “Wow. I read that piece.”

“Yes,” Ilya muses. “She is good writer.”

“That’s gotta be a breach of journalistic ethics,” Shane mumbles.

“I did not give a fuck,” Ilya says. “I wanted Canadian passport.”

“No, that’s fair,” Shane says. “Just... Wow. So you have it, then? You’re a citizen?”

“Yes,” Ilya confirms. “I voted in the last election. They did not give me sticker like Americans...”

“So you regret your choices, then?” Shane teases.

“No, not at all,” Ilya says sincerely. “It has been good to be here. Even if... Well, even if things did not go how I hoped overall.”

“You split up with Lauren after that?” Shane asks.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “We tried for a little while, to be married for Nina.”

“Didn’t work?” Shane guesses.

“Not at all,” Ilya says.

There’s a bit of a lull after that. Ilya isn’t sure if he’s overshared, which wouldn’t be like him, or if he’s left Shane with more questions.

“Well,” Shane says eventually. “I’m glad I didn’t meet you again until after the divorce.”

Ilya smirks. “Oh yes? And why is this?”

“Shut up,” Shane mumbles. He kisses the top of Ilya’s head. “You know why.”

“Jealous,” Ilya smiles.

“Maybe,” Shane admits quietly. “I would have been. Not now.”

“And what about you?” Ilya asks. “If we had run into each other sooner, would I have a reason to be jealous?”

Shane sighs. “No. Just a handful of boyfriends who thought I was cold and dispassionate.”

Ilya turns to look him square in the eye. “Then they are very stupid.”

“Some of them were quite smart,” Shane argues.

“Then they did not know you,” Ilya reasons.

“Maybe,” Shane says quietly. “I don’t think I did a good job of letting them.”

Ilya inhales deeply. He wonders if maybe they’d both inadvertently done the same thing. Ilya married a woman he knew he could never really love; for strategy, yes, but there were other, more compatible options for him. He didn’t think about really loving anyone, as lonely as he got. And Shane... Well, looks like he didn’t really try, either. Had they been waiting for each other? Even though they each thought the other didn’t give a shit? Even though they’d never actually discussed feelings at all?

“Better for me,” Ilya whispers. “I know the truth.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

A revelation about Ilya's daughter leads to Shane revealing a pretty big part of himself.

Chapter Notes

So I am autistic, but I wasn't diagnosed until I was an adult. Had done a whole MA and everything, just thinking I was uptight and better at remembering things than my peers. Anyway, all this to say, I don't have experience with the child diagnostic process, so I did my best here.

Ottawa - March 31st, 2024

Shane sits at his parents' table on Easter Sunday, distracted as all hell.

For one thing, he's exhausted. He worked last night, then woke up early to catch the Via Rail to Ottawa. Normally he'd drive. Despite the stereotypes associated with people like Shane, he's actually not a huge fan of taking the train. But he knows his limits these days; working late then driving four hours early is beyond him. So his dad picks him up from the train station, and he's relegated to feeling a lack of autonomy for the weekend. Frustrating, but it is what it is. It's Shane's life now.

On top of that – and on a more positive note – his phone is a constant source of distraction as well. And who is to blame for that? Ilya, of course. He and Shane are in pretty frequent communication. It makes Shane feel *young*. Like a teenager with their first phone or something. He's hooked.

Unfortunately, Ilya is alone this weekend. Lauren has Nina at her parents for the holiday. Ilya says he'll have dinner with Vlada, but otherwise, Shane thinks it sounds pretty lonely. He wishes he was there with him. He wishes he could bring Ilya *here*. Which is crazy. Like objectively *crazy*. They've only been reconnected for three months.

As new as it is, apparently Shane isn't doing a great job of concealing how wrapped up in it he is. His parents notice right away.

“Okay, who have you been texting all day?” His mom asks by the time dessert is served.
“You’re acting like a thirteen year-old girl.”

Shane is a little shocked, if he's honest. Once upon a time, he did a great job hiding his texting habits with Ilya from his parents.

Still, he considers his options. He hasn't been as careful because it's not technically a secret. They've been out together in public now. Dinner at a nice seafood place. They aren't hiding. They're just... *Dating*. Shane has mentioned past boyfriends to his parents. There is literally no reason to lie now.

"Uh..." Shane puts his phone down and scratches his head.

"Oh," his father looks surprised. "It's serious."

Yes.

"No," Shane shakes his head. "I'm just seeing someone, is all."

"Not Anthony, I hope," his mom says. "I don't like how he dumped you on a holiday."

Gotta love that reminder.

"It's not Anthony," Shane assures her.

Honestly, he hasn't thought of his ex once since running into Ilya at that party. Funny, really. Like everyone else was just a placeholder. Maybe they were.

"Well?" His dad presses. "Tell us about him."

"Uh..." Shane isn't sure where to begin. *He's actually my former highly televised rival that you may remember from before he was famously hit by a car.* "It's someone I used to know from the hockey world, hadn't seen him in a while, and then ran into him at a New Year's Eve party and just... Hit it off?"

"Well, that's nice," his dad nods approvingly.

"Does he still play?" Mom asks.

Shane shakes his head. "No. Coaches at the university level."

Hopefully that doesn't give it away. *Shane* didn't know before he ran into him, but that doesn't mean his mother won't. She pays more attention than him, generally speaking.

"Ah," she nods. "That's good. Similar world, but not the exact same."

"Yeah," Shane agrees.

That's true. It *is* a plus. Their careers no longer matter to their romantic relationship.

"What's his name?" Dad asks.

And there it is.

Shane frowns. “Uh...”

“You can’t say?” Dad asks.

“*David*,” Mom scolds. “Maybe it’s too early.”

Is it? Is it too early? Like, yes... Chronologically. Temporally. Literally. But emotionally? Shane feels... Shane feels pretty invested. And he thinks Ilya feels the same way.

“It’s not,” Shane says. “It’s... Okay, if I say it, you *can’t* tell anyone.”

They both look at him sort of blankly.

“Is he in witness protection?” Dad asks.

“No!” Shane insists. “No. Just, it could *potentially* lead to some media attention. For people with long memories. That’s all. I’m not trying to invite that back into his life.”

His parents exchange a confused look.

“Who is it, Shane?” Mom asks.

“Ilya Rozanov,” Shane says very quietly. Verging on inaudibly.

“Pardon?” Dad blinks. “It sounded like you said *Ilya Rozanov*.”

“I, uh, I did,” Shane confirms.

A hush falls over the table. Shane takes a bite of the angel food cake on his plate. He feels like a bug under a magnifying glass. It feels like he’s coming out to them all over again, which is entirely absurd. This can’t be *as* big news as that. Can it?

“Well, say something,” Shane pleads after he’s swallowed his bite of cake and the silence has gone on for far too long.

“Sorry,” Mom mutters. “Uh... *Wow*.”

“That’s definitely not something I expected,” Dad says.

Well, no. Why would he?

“Isn’t he...” Mom frowns, trying to think of a diplomatic way to ask a question Shane already knows is coming. “Sort of a jerk?”

Shane shakes his head.

“No, he’s not. I mean, he’s... He can be competitive and cocky, I guess. But no. He’s a good guy.”

“But don’t you hate him?” His dad asks. “Or didn’t you?”

“No,” Shane says. “The rivalry was real, but I never *actually* hated him. That was all just part of the act, you know?”

“Oh,” his mother says. “You *liked* him.”

Shane nods.

“He, um... He was hurt pretty badly,” Dad says. “How did he recover?”

“Yeah, he was,” Shane looks down at his plate, remembering. “He’s okay. His one leg has some mobility limitations and pain, but he makes do.”

“You are *not* moving to Boston, I’m sorry,” his mother blurts.

“What?” Shane blinks. “What are you talking about?”

“You living in Montreal was ideal,” Mom continues. “Toronto? Less so, but I can live with it. But you are our only child, Shane, you can’t move to the United States for a man!”

“Yuna,” Dad winces. “Maybe you’re overreacting a little.”

“Would you seriously be okay with him relocating to Boston?” She demands.

“He could have ended up in Los Angeles or Phoenix!” Dad points out. “We always knew he could end up anywhere!”

“So, Ilya lives in Toronto,” Shane says. “You don’t need to worry about me relocating. I like my job quite a lot and I’m pretty sure he does, too. But also... It’s been three months.”

His mom’s shoulders relax. She exhales heavily.

“Okay,” she nods. “In that case, honey, if he makes you happy, that’s all that matters. That’s all we care about.”

Shane smiles. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” she says.

“And if what would make me happy is moving to New Zealand or something?” Shane teases.

“Don’t even think about it,” his parents reply in unison.

Toronto - April 9th, 2024

Ilya is frustrated.

It’s early morning, he’s sitting in the waiting room of a pediatric psychiatrist's office and he is very frustrated. First and foremost, because, other than Nina, he is sitting alone.

After the initial meeting with Nina's school, Lauren had taken point on the next steps for their daughter's assessment.

"It's all going to be okay," she'd promised. "If there's something we should know about Nina, the sooner we know it, the better."

She's been so calm. So collected. She'd made Ilya feel a bit less frantic. She'd called Nina's family doctor – she's far better at phone calls than Ilya – and arranged for a referral. Everything had happened quickly and smoothly.

And then the practice called with a cancellation today, and said they could squeeze Nina in. Which, of course, lines up with an important Toronto away game in New Jersey that *of course*, Lauren has to go cover. So Ilya is at this appointment alone.

It's fine, mostly. He can handle it. This does not *require* two adults. It would just be nice to not have to hold all this worry by himself. It would just be nice if the career came second sometimes. But he knew that, when they got married. He knew that, when she decided to keep the pregnancy. He knew what he was signing up for, and Lauren has never misled him.

Nina is sitting in the chair beside Ilya, colouring in a colouring book, when the receptionist calls for her. It's not one of the many books available to the visiting children, provided by the office. Nina won't use those. She's very careful about colouring in the lines and using the right colours. If she sees another child's less detail oriented work, it bugs her. Ilya usually packs one of her many animal-themed colouring books and her pencil case whenever they go anywhere.

"Irina?" The receptionist calls.

Nina doesn't even look up from her colouring.

"I like Nina better," she says.

"Okay," the receptionist says kindly. "Nina. Dr. Bradbury is ready to see you now."

Ilya taps her shoulder gently. "Time to pack it up. Okay?"

"Okay," she says.

She's completely nonchalant. She doesn't think today *means* anything. They obviously haven't told her she's being assessed. Just that she has an appointment with a new kind of doctor, who makes sure minds are healthy, like her regular doctor makes sure bodies are healthy. She's too young to get much beyond that.

The point is, Nina isn't nervous. She doesn't have any reason to be. Ilya, on the other hand, is terrified. He's terrified that this Dr. Franco is going to take one look at his daughter, nod her head, and say, *yes, unfortunately, your child has all the early warning signs of being depressed as an adult. Good luck.*

The appointment starts off alright. Dr. Franco is a small, soft spoken woman with an Italian accent. Ilya finds her a bit challenging to understand sometimes, but she seems to do great

with Nina.

“First, Nina and I will spend some time together,” she says. “Then I will talk to you, okay, Dad?”

“Okay, yes,” Ilya nods. “Thank you.”

“Papa,” Nina corrects. “Not Dad.”

“Is okay, Nina,” Ilya tells her. It’s technically not wrong.

“It’s not your name,” Nina whispers.

“My bad,” Dr. Franco corrects with a smile. “I’ll know for next time, Nina. Okay?”

Nina nods, looking satisfied.

Ilya leaves the office and waits back by reception. He takes his phone out and stares at it. He considers texting Lauren to update her. But there’s nothing really to update. He considers texting Shane. Just to... Just to tell someone what he’s feeling. But he hasn’t actually talked about this with him yet.

It’s not that he’s hiding it. He’s not. He’s done hiding parts of his life. They just both decided, mutually, to wait a while before making their relationship about more than just *them*. Ilya has Googled a lot. It is not advised to get a child involved with a new partner. Not for a while. So they’re waiting. And part of that – and this is on Ilya because Shane hasn’t had enough information to give an opinion – is probably not unloading too much child-related stress on the new partner. He thinks anyway. He’s not sure. It doesn’t seem like a good practice, anyway.

When Nina is done with Dr. Franco, she seems happy. She doesn’t seem depressed, anyway. Though, Ilya knows how easy that is to fake. Can she be that good at six? That’s very scary to think.

“Mr. Rozanov?” Dr. Franco says. “Your turn.”

His turn? Are they assessing him too? He’s never had anyone *tell* him what’s wrong with him in so many words. He just knows. He knows that he’s got what his mother had. It comes in waves and sometimes it fucking takes him out at the knees, but he’s always been able to fend it off. He *has* to.

Ilya follows Dr. Franco into her office and sits across from her.

“So, Nina is a lovely little girl,” she says.

“Thank you,” Ilya says tightly.

“She’s very bright,” Dr. Franco continues. “She loves things very deeply.”

“Yes,” he nods.

“I think I have a strong sense of what Nina might be experiencing, regarding some of the social difficulties at school,” she continues. “But I’d like to ask you some questions first, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” Ilya says.

Dr. Franco smiles. “Great. You’re the primary caregiver?”

Ilya nods. “Yes. Her mother travels for work. So do I, but uh... Less.”

“Okay, good,” Dr. Franco says. “So you’re the best person to ask.”

To ask what? He still doesn’t know.

“Sure.”

“In your experience, does Nina look at you or others in the eye when she’s talking to you?” Dr. Franco asks.

Does she *what*? What does that have to do with anything?

Ilya shrugs. “I don’t know. Yes? For me, yes.”

Although, even as he says it... Not always. That’s not always true. Not when she’s focusing. Not when she’s in a bad mood or tired.

“Sometimes,” he amends. “Mostly.”

“What about other people?” Dr. Franco asks.

He shrugs again. “Less, maybe.”

“If you walked up to Nina and started talking to her, or if you called her name, would she turn her head to look at you?”

Ilya rubs his right temple with his knuckles. “I don’t understand.”

“Okay,” Dr. Franco nods. “Let’s say Nina is playing with toys.”

“Okay,” Ilya says, following.

“If you walked into the room and asked her a question, would she turn her head to look at you?”

Ilya tries to think. He doesn’t know the answer. It’s not something he pays attention to, because she always answers him. If he asked her to, she would. He thinks she does... She’ll turn to him, smile that big smile.

Some days I swear she doesn’t even look at me.

Lauren’s voice makes its way into his head.

“Sometimes for me,” Ilya says. “Always if I ask. Less for her mother.”

“Okay,” Dr. Franco nods. She makes note of that answer.

“I don’t understand the issue,” Ilya confesses. His voice sounds a tad irritated. He doesn’t mean to. “Is not looking away from her colouring book a sign of being depressed?”

Dr. Franco frowns. “Depressed? No. I have no reason to be concerned that Nina is depressed.”

Ilya exhales, feeling a hundred pounds lighter. That’s great. That’s *fantastic*. She passed the test, then. She is all good. She is not depressed. She is a happy, bright, passionate child, just like he thought. Now with professional approval. Stupid Vice Principal.

“That is huge relief,” Ilya says. “Thank you.”

“Are *you* concerned she’s depressed?” Dr. Franco asks.

Ilya shakes his head. “No, no. Just was told to bring her here for concerns, and... And there is family history of depression. My mother.”

Me.

She nods, understanding. “I see. Well, I certainly don’t think that needs to be a concern as of right now. Sometimes, these things can present during adolescence or later. For now, Nina is a very happy child, as far as I can see.”

Ilya sighs with relief. “Thank you. That is very good to hear.”

“I’m glad,” she smiles. “So, the next question-”

“Why next question?” Ilya asks, interrupting. “If she is okay, then I don’t understand.”

Dr. Franco frowns. “Mr. Rozanov, Nina wasn’t referred for a mental health assessment. She was referred for an Autism Spectrum Disorder assessment.”

→→→

Shane is compiling notes on last night's games. Toronto and Vancouver both won. Great news for the whole nation, he’s sure. If Toronto wins tonight, they’re in the playoffs. Then the whole city – or the hockey world, anyway – will get sort of rambunctious. A small part of Shane is glad the focus isn’t on Montreal. He can talk about them. He *often* talks about them. But it still stings, just a little.

Shane is just finishing up organizing his thoughts, because he won’t remember them all by Saturday, when his phone starts to ring. He checks the caller ID to see that it’s Ilya.

Shane smiles as he answers it. He wonders if this is a sex-related call. It is that time of day. The middle of the afternoon on a school day. In hindsight, he should have guessed Ilya had a kid.

“Hey you,” he says into the phone.

“Are you home?”

Ilya sounds really serious. Not like a flirty foreplay type call at all.

“Yeah,” Shane says. “Why? What’s up?”

“I am outside.”

“Okay,” Shane says. “Do you want to come inside?”

The sound of the door unlocking electronically is all the answer Shane needs. Ilya hangs up the phone and walks inside.

Shane rises to greet him.

“Hey, what’s...”

He trails off when he sees the look on Ilya’s face. The look Shane would imagine after someone’s dog died or something.

“Ilya?” He asks. “What happened?”

He’s standing in the doorway, coat and scarf still on. It’s clear he’s been crying.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles.

“For what?” Shane asks, confused. Confused and very concerned.

“I shouldn’t... This isn’t your issue. I just didn’t know... There’s no one else to tell.”

“Tell what?” Shane asks.

He walks forwards and tentatively reaches for the scarf around Ilya’s neck, searching for permission to take off his heavy outer layers of winter clothing. Ilya doesn’t stop him. Shane takes the scarf off from around his neck, folds it neatly, and then moves to work on the buttons of his jacket. Ilya just stands there, like a child trapped in design he doesn’t understand. Gently, Shane frees him of his coat.

“I just dropped Nina off at school,” he mumbles.

“This late?” Shane asks, turning towards his hallway closet to hang up the coat and scarf.

“She had appointment with child psychiatrist.”

Shane freezes, hand on the coat hanger. That doesn’t sound great.

“Oh?” He asks. “Is that a normal thing?”

He finishes hanging the coat as Ilya explains.

“No,” he says. “She had... They called it *tantrum*. At school. They wanted her assessed. Lauren set it up and I didn’t understand.”

Shane’s stomach twists. He can maybe see where this is going. There are only a handful of options from there.

“Okay,” Shane says. “Assessed for what?”

Ilya’s jaw twitches. It looks like he’s trying hard to keep himself together.

“She is *happy*,” he insists. “She is very smart! Smarter than her classmates. Smarter than I was. She makes friends. She can have friends!”

Ah, yep. There it is.

“Assessed for what, Ilya?” Shane asks again. Though he thinks he knows.

Ilya sniffs. “They think she has Autism Spectrum Disorder.”

Shane nods slowly. “Okay. They think she might or said she does?”

“They need more time with her,” he says. “But doctor is pretty sure.”

“Alright,” Shane says. “Okay, so... So, it’s not a *bad* thing.”

“How?” Ilya asks. “They’re saying something is wrong with her. That she will have *difficulties*. I don’t... I don’t want her life to be *harder*.”

Shane shakes his head. His chest feels tight.

The way your brain works isn’t stupid or a deficiency.

“Ilya, she won’t know any differently,” he says. “Sure, maybe some parts of life will be harder for her than other people. But it’s all going to be in how the people around her frame it and teach her to see herself.”

“How do you know?” Ilya demands. “We don’t know! All I know is how people in Russia were treated for this.”

“I’m autistic,” Shane blurts.

Ilya goes rigid. It seems to take him a moment to process. Too long of a moment. Panic swells in Shane’s chest.

“What?” He asks.

“I’m autistic,” Shane says again. “I have... I have ASD. I have that.”

“You do?” Ilya asks.

“Yes,” Shane says.

“I didn’t know,” Ilya says.

“No shit,” Shane replies. “I got diagnosed at *thirty*. Never would’ve been if not for the TBI stuff. They had me seeing a psychologist afterwards who caught it.”

Ilya’s shoulders fall. The tension in him seems to dissipate. He covers his mouth with his hand. He looks away from Shane.

Shane’s heart rate picks up.

“It’s not a big deal,” Shane says quickly. “If it mattered, don’t you think you would have fucking noticed already?”

Ilya shakes his head. He speaks into his muffled palm.

“It is big deal.”

Shane flinches. Is he really that *bothered*? By something he never even picked up on?

“It is big deal,” Ilya says again, dropping his hand. “She will be like you?”

Shane blinks. That wasn’t where he thought this was going.

“Uh...” Shane struggles to answer. “It’s not, like, a one size fits all condition.”

“You...” Ilya says. “You are very successful.”

“I’ve done alright,” Shane agrees.

“You were best player in NHL after I left,” Ilya says.

“Wow,” Shane replies flatly.

“Olympian silver medalist,” Ilya continues. “TV star.”

“Star might be an overstatement,” Shane says, cheeks heating.

“You are talented and wealthy and well respected and adored,” Ilya prattles on.

“Jesus,” Shane mumbles.

“You have a good life,” Ilya finishes.

Yes. He can’t deny that. He has a good life. But it’s not *that* simple.

“If she has autism, that won’t determine whether or not she has a good life,” Shane says quietly. “All the things that determine that for any other kid still apply.”

Ilya takes a deep breath. He nods.

“There will be *different* challenges,” Shane says. “That’s all. You’ll figure it out. She’s not going to be the *exact* same as me, and I had no fucking clue as a kid, but... Maybe I can help. I don’t know.”

“I don’t want her to suffer,” Ilya admits, voice hoarse. “When I was kid, my mother... She struggled so much with her own mind. I don’t want this for my daughter.”

Shane feels for him. He really does. He can imagine if his own parents had gotten that news when Shane was three, instead of thirty, how they might have worried. His mother would have worked herself into a frenzy, trying to soften the edges of life for him. It’s what any good parent would want. But it wouldn’t have changed a very simple fact.

“Sometimes it’s hard, knowing your brain just doesn’t work the way everyone else’s seems to,” Shane admits. “Sometimes that feels lonely.”

Sometimes people think you’re cold and dispassionate and robotic. Sometimes people think you’re difficult. Sometimes people just get a *sense* about you and don’t like it.

And sometimes a beautiful, impossible man stands in front of you crying with relief because he thinks the most important person in his life shares traits with you. So, it’s not all a wash.

“But...” Ilya frowns. “It’s not everyone else.”

“What?” Shane asks.

“You said your brain doesn’t work like everyone else,” Ilya reminds him. “But maybe is not true. Maybe Nina’s works the same way.”

Shane smiles. “That’s true. See? Maybe she won’t feel that way, then.”

Shane realizes what he’s said a moment too late. Implied a future where he gets to know her. Maybe that’s too presumptuous. But the way Ilya looks relieved and possibly hopeful in response? It feels like that’s something he would want, too.

“C’mere,” Shane says, opening his arms for Ilya.

Ilya steps forward, enveloping Shane in a hug. He squeezes him tightly.

“Thank you,” he mumbles. “Thank you, Shane.”

Shane rests his head against Ilya’s shoulder. He realizes that, apart from his parents and medical professionals, he hasn’t told anyone else about the diagnosis. There had been no reason. Only risks. Shane had never felt comfortable. But here he is, telling someone. And being embraced for it, literally.

“Thank you,” Shane whispers in response.

And standing there, still in his front entryway, hugging a man who has gone through a rollercoaster of emotions today, and probably still has a lot in front him, all Shane feels is love. Love and a strong desire to be whatever sort of support he needs.

April 26th, 2024

By the end of the month, it's official. Nina has an Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis.

Ilya has wrestled with a lot of feelings about it. Mostly fear. And then guilt at the thought that Nina can sense the fear, and might take it to mean he loves her less. He might be overcorrecting, in turn. Spoiling her and telling her he loves her more than anything at every possible opportunity. If she thinks anything is wrong, Ilya cannot tell. She's been just the same as always. That has also helped him. Nothing is *different* about her now. They just have more information. It is what Lauren said the whole time.

He sits down with Lauren for a long talk about everything after the appointment. After the list of recommended next steps and reading materials and all the things that Lauren is good at keeping track of but that make Ilya feel entirely overwhelmed.

"You're doing better with this than I expected," Lauren admits, over coffees at Ilya's kitchen table.

They've been looking at programming to enroll her in. Neither of them wants to go overboard with it. Sure, she needs some coping skills and resources, but Ilya doesn't want her life to become an endless mission to *change* her. He wants her to keep up the things she loves, like skating lessons.

"It will be okay," Ilya tells her. "She can still win Olympic silver medal if she wants."

Lauren scoffs good-naturedly. "Not gold?"

Ilya smiles. "Yes. Even better. Several gold medals."

"Well, good to know we're being realistic about everything," Lauren chuckles. "Honestly, when all this started, I sort of thought you were going to just... I don't know, shut down?"

Ilya shakes his head. "No. If I need to help her I will help her."

"I know," Lauren says. "I know that. You're a great dad. You just... I don't know, Ilya. You seemed hesitant to admit anything was going on with her."

"To me, she is perfect," Ilya says quietly. "Always."

"I know," Lauren says. She smiles sadly. "Of course she is."

"But I want her to have advantages in life," Ilya says. "Not hardships. So we will make sure she has help she needs."

Lauren nods. "Exactly. I feel the exact same way."

"Which is why I have been thinking about something you might not like," Ilya says.

His stomach twists with a bit of dread at what he knows he has to bring up. But it's been on his mind for weeks now, and this diagnosis is the final push he needs to address it.

“Okay,” Lauren says, brows furrowed. “What is it?”

Ilya takes a sip of his coffee before answering.

“I am seeing someone,” Ilya says. “Since January.”

“Okay,” Lauren says again. She fiddles with her mug in her hands. “I’m confused about how this is on topic.”

There is no hurt or jealousy there. There are no feelings between them. Ilya knows she dates too. Especially on her work trips.

“He told me recently that he has same thing,” Ilya says. “Autism.”

Lauren’s eyebrows raise. “*Oh*. I see.”

“He is successful,” Ilya says. “Good job. Good life. Big house.”

Lauren smirks. “Good for you, Ilya.”

“No,” he shakes his head. “Not what I mean. I mean, he is like her, and he has a very good life. He got to do dream career, even.”

Olympic silver medal, etcetera.

“Oh,” she nods. “Okay. I mean, that’s great. I’m glad you have an example of that to help you right now.”

“Yes,” Ilya says. He is glad, too. But that’s not all. “I would like for her to have that too.”

Lauren’s eyes narrow. “You want her to meet your boyfriend?”

“Yes,” Ilya says. “Not because he is my boyfriend. Because he is very good person. I have known him for many years. I have been thinking about this. I know it is soon, but I don’t think it would be...”

Ilya searches for a word. He doesn’t want to use something with too negative of a connotation.

“Hasty,” he decides.

Lauren takes a deep breath. She thinks about it for a minute. Ilya really isn’t sure which way this will go.

“All the reasons it makes me uncomfortable are sort of unfair,” she says. “They’re about me, not her.”

Ilya swallows. He waits for her to continue.

“You know how she is with big changes,” Lauren says. “You’ll be careful? Ease her into it?”

Ilya's stomach untwists, relief coursing through him.

"Of course," he tells her. "Yes."

"Then if you think it's what's right for her, and for *you*, I support it."

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Shane meets Nina.

Toronto - April 29th, 2024

Shane is riding the post-orgasm high of truly fantastic sex when Ilya sort of flips the script on him.

He's laying in his large bed, head on Ilya's chest, feeling both their heartbeats and just breathing. He could fall asleep like this. He *should* fall asleep like this, except for the fact that he needs a shower. Maybe that can wait until they're ready for round two.

His brain is blissfully and uncommonly thoughtless, when Ilya poses a truly unexpected question.

"Do you want to come over for dinner tomorrow night?"

Shane sits up, twisting his body to look at him.

"What?" He asks.

"Do you want to come over for dinner?" He asks. "We can eat, watch Toronto lose to Boston, and so on."

"And so on," Shane echoes.

"It is not very complicated question, Hollander," Ilya says, looking at him with a degree of apprehension.

"Yes, I would like to come for dinner and watch the hockey game," Shane says. "But... Uh..."

Ilya reads the question in his hesitation.

"Nina will be there, yes," Ilya says.

"And that's okay?" Shane asks.

Ilya nods. "Yes. I think so. If it is okay with you."

Shane is honestly surprised. They'd discussed waiting. Not rushing into introducing Nina to any new partner, not Shane specifically. Some online resources say waiting up to a year can be prudent. That feels *very* long to Shane, but he'd wait. She's not his kid. He'll do whatever Ilya thinks is best for her. Obviously they met at the hockey arena, but that doesn't really count.

"Yes," Shane says. "It's okay with me. I want to meet her properly."

Ilya smiles. "Yes?"

Shane nods. "Of course I do. She's important to you."

This was clearly the right answer. Ilya lurches forward in bed, wrapping his arms around Shane, and pulling him back down on top of him. He kisses him, hand cupping Shane's face. Shane melts into it. Nobody kisses him like this. Nobody has ever kissed him like this. Only ever Ilya. There's no way to really explain the difference. It's an innate feeling. A *knowing*. Over a decade ago, Shane hadn't understood it. He thinks he does now.

"I love you," Shane mumbles into Ilya's lips.

Ilya pulls his head so he can look Shane in the eyes. He looks like he's seen fireworks go off or something.

"Really?"

"Yeah," Shane says, suddenly self-conscious. "Is that okay?"

Ilya smiles. It's a big, goofy grin that makes him look younger in an instant.

"I love you, too," he tells Shane, voice thick with emotion.

Shane kisses him again. Slow and sweet and full of love.

"Is it too soon to say that?" He asks. "Is that crazy?"

Ilya shakes his head. "No. We have already waited too long."

Isn't that the truth? Circumstances kept them apart for a decade. Injuries and misunderstandings and one terrible brother. They have a lot to catch up on. Shane doesn't want to waste another second.

April 30th, 2024

Shane shows up to Ilya's apartment with a gift bag in hand. It's pink and shiny, with tissue paper poking out from the sides.

"For me?" Ilya asks flatly. "Wow, Hollander. You guessed my favourite colour."

Shane rolls his eyes. "It's not for you."

“Then, who?” Ilya asks. “Because Nina’s birthday is in August. And I know you are not trying to bribe my child.”

Ilya watches Shane’s cheeks go pink.

“A gift is not a bribe,” Shane says.

“You sound like politician,” Ilya comments.

“It’s just something for her!” Shane protests. “To make a good impression.”

Ilya smirks. “You are nervous. You are scared of six year-old.”

“I’m trying to be nice!”

Ilya steps forward and kisses his cheek. “It is very nice. Don’t worry. She will love you.”

Mostly because Ilya has already hyped Shane up. He sat her down and explained that he had a boyfriend and what that meant. He showed her clips on Shane on TV. His new show. The Olympics. A game he and Ilya had played against each other, way back when. He’s not sure why, exactly. He wanted to convey that Shane is special; someone he has known for many years, and who is very talented at what he does.

“Do you remember what Dr. Franco said about your brain? How it works differently?” He’d told her afterwards.

“Yes,” she’d nodded. “Because of *autism*.”

“Shane’s brain works that way, too,” he’d explained. “Because he has autism also. So you and him have this in common.”

“And we both like skating,” she’d said.

Ilya had just smiled at that.

“Yes, also skating.”

He had liked that she was already equating those two facts in her mind. Just casual facts about herself; she likes skating and she has autism.

“Nina!” Ilya calls into the apartment now. “Shane is here. Come say hello.”

“*Coming!*” Nina calls back.

A moment later, she comes running towards the door.

It’s a nice, semi-warm day. This sort of weather means Nina is almost always dressed in overalls, because she doesn’t love the way waistbands on pants feel. Today, they’re pink denim overalls on top of a purple tie-dye tee shirt. Ilya’s not sure this is particularly good fashion sense, but at least she’s comfortable.

“Nina, do you remember Shane?” Ilya asks, even though he’s absolutely certain she remembers all the clips he made her watch.

“Yes,” Nina nods. “Papa says you were the best hockey player in the *whole* NHL.”

Shit.

“Oh really?” Shane smiles. “That’s nice to hear.”

“No!” Ilya interjects quickly. “Is not what I meant. *After* I left. You were best *after* I left.”

“You didn’t say that,” Nina shakes her head.

“I believe you, Nina,” Shane says. “And I am really happy to meet you properly.”

“We met at the hockey rink,” she reminds him.

“You’re right,” Shane says. “We did. Hey, uh, I got you something.”

He extends the gift bag towards her.

Nina’s eyes light up. She glances at Ilya, like asking for permission.

“Go ahead,” he nods. “What do you say?”

“Thank you,” Nina says, reaching for the bag.

“Why don’t you take it to living room? Sit on the couch,” Ilya suggests.

Nina does as he suggests, hurrying into the living room. Ilya takes Shane by the hand and leads him in that direction. They stay standing, hovering in the living room, fingers laced together, as Nina flops onto the couch and tears into the carefully arranged tissue paper. Kind of like a puppy with a stuffed toy. She’s a bit feral. Ilya’s genes maybe.

Nina pulls what appears to be a large, rectangular box out of the bag and looks it over.

“Wow!” She exclaims, turning the front of the box to show Ilya.

Ilya finds himself looking at a jigsaw puzzle, with several hundred pieces, creating the image of an Olympic speed skater. Team Canada, of course. A jigsaw puzzle... Huh. This is very kind of Shane, really. But she’s six. This might be sort of boring...

“Wow,” Ilya parrots. He puts on a smile for good measure. “A puzzle.”

“It’s a *speed skater*, Papa,” Nina says, like this is the most serious thing she’s ever seen.

“It is,” Ilya agrees. “What do you say?”

“Thank you,” Nina says to Shane. “What do I do with it?”

Ah, yes. This was Ilya's concern. It is a bit too old for her, isn't it? Like, better for maybe sixty or seventy year-olds?

"You have to find where all the little pieces go to make up the picture," Shane says. "It takes a while, but you slowly get to make the picture."

Nina stares at it for a moment. Ilya gives Shane an apologetic look. This may not go over the way he hoped.

"Can we make it now?" Nina asks, looking at Ilya. "I wanna make the speed skater picture."

Ah. Well Ilya stands corrected.

Nina looks at Shane. Direct eye contact, Ilya notices.

"Can you teach me, please?" She asks.

Shane grins. "Sure, if that's okay with your dad."

"Sometimes I forget what passes for fun in this country," Ilya says. "Yes, of course. Do your puzzle. I will make food."



To Ilya's surprise, the evening goes exactly this way. Shane sits with Nina at the kitchen table, working on a jigsaw puzzle for octogenarians, probably. Nina hangs on his every word, like he's a teacher of some very important class.

"So, the best way to do it is to start from the edges," Shane explains to her. "Like building a frame, then filling the rest in."

They work in relative quiet, Nina only really speaking up when she finds a puzzle piece that fits.

"I did not know you were puzzle expert," Ilya says, grabbing Shane a drink from the fridge. Nina has gotten up to use the washroom, and they have a moment alone.

"I'm not," Shane laughs. "I got into them for a while after I had to stop playing hockey. I had to cut back my screen time, and I was *so* bored. It was a brain approved activity."

That does make sense. Shane has always been pretty beholden to his routines. Ilya can see how he would have needed to find things to fill the gaps.

"Isn't puzzle piece the symbol for that very shitty autism group?" Ilya asks.

He's been doing his research.

"Oh," Shane blinks down at the puzzle. "Yeah, I guess. But that's not *this* puzzle's fault."

"No, this is true," Ilya says.

“I still like puzzles,” Shane frowns.

“Okay,” Ilya nods. “Be careful, you might make my daughter boring like you.”

Shane looks amused. “I don’t know... She jumped at the opportunity. She’s got an eye for this... She might already be boring.”

Ilya can’t help but laugh. “Is the Canadian in her.”

“Of course,” Shane replies.

Because the puzzle is monopolizing the kitchen table, they eat at the coffee table in the living room, waiting for the hockey game to start. Nina gets a bit frustrated at being pulled away from the activity.

“It’s not done yet!” She complains.

“We are going to take break to eat dinner and watch the hockey game,” Ilya reminds her. “You can finish later.”

“But I like this *more*, ” she persists.

Is she seriously saying a jigsaw puzzle is better than hockey? That’s absurd. What has Shane done to her? Maybe they should drop all plans and immediately go skating...

“That’s the cool thing about puzzles,” Shane chimes in. “You don’t have to do it all in one sitting. It’s like a game that lasts several days. So it’s not over too quickly.”

Nina considers this.

“Once it’s done, it’s done,” Ilya says. “Better to take breaks.”

“I think I’m ready for a break,” Shane agrees.

Nina takes in this feedback and lets out a huff.

“*Okay*, ” she concedes. “We can take a break.”

“Wow, thank you,” Ilya says dryly. “You are very accommodating.”

Nina nods sagely. “You’re welcome, Papa.”

Shane just laughs.



Nina is conked out by the end of the first period, puzzle temporarily out of her mind, but certainly not forgotten. She slumps against Ilya’s shoulder, little body rising and falling with each breath.

“Are you okay to wait while I put her to bed?” Ilya asks Shane. He’s not staying over tonight, but Ilya doesn’t want him to leave. Not yet.

Shane nods. “Yeah, take your time.”

Ilya carries her to bed. He thinks she’ll sleep well tonight. No nightmares. He can usually tell by the mood she’s in when she falls asleep. Tonight, she’s happy. Preoccupied with the excitement of a new person paying attention to her and a new hobby acquired.

Nina stirs a little as Ilya tucks her in.

“Shh,” he soothes her. “Stay sleeping, *malyshka*. Is bedtime now.”

“Okay,” she mumbles, eyes fluttering open and shut.

He kisses the top of her head, then turns to leave the room.

“Papa?” She calls after him.

“Yes?” He asks, pausing.

“Can Shane come over again soon to do more puzzles?” She asks, yawning.

Ilya’s chest feels warm.

“Of course,” he tells her, smiling. “I’d like that, too.”

“Good,” she says, barely audible. She’s hardly hanging onto consciousness.

It was a sleepy, off-the-cuff request, but Ilya knows she means it. He feels elated. His brain conjures the image of future Sunday mornings, waking up and making breakfast for the two of them, working away on a puzzle like two endearingly boring treasures. God, he’s getting ahead of himself. But how can he not be hopeful? Tonight has gone so well.

Maybe it’s unwise. Maybe it’s premature. But Ilya is hopeful.



When Ilya gets back from putting Nina to bed, Shane thinks he looks a little different. Warmer somehow. Like there’s a slight glow to him that wasn’t there before. When he sits back down next to Shane, he hardly waits a beat before pulling Shane in for a kiss. Shane kisses him back, then settles into his arms to watch the rest of the game.

“She wants you to come back for more puzzles,” Ilya tells Shane during the next commercial break.

Shane smiles, pleased. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yes,” Ilya confirms. “She likes you. Thank you.”

“Bribery works,” Shane observes.

“No,” Ilya shakes his head. “You spent time with her explaining things. She likes that.”

“Oh,” Shane says, feeling secretly proud to have done a good job. “Well, I like her, too.”

Ilya makes a contented little hum. “Yes, she is pretty great.”

“You were right,” Shane says. “Perfect kid, no bias.”

Ilya laughs. “Told you!”

“You’re a really good dad,” Shane says quietly.

Ilya goes still.

“I mean it,” Shane says. “I know... I mean, I don’t know everything about your childhood. But I know it wasn’t easy, so... So you should be proud of yourself.”

It takes Ilya a moment to reply to that. When he does, his voice sounds thick with emotion.

“Before she was born, I was scared,” he says. “That I would be shit father, like my father was shit. Like my brother is shit.”

Shane can only imagine how real that fear would be. He has great parents. He’s never had to fear that he doesn’t have an example of how to do it, in the times where he’d imagine himself as a father someday. He can imagine that the lack of that would cause some pretty serious self-doubt.

“But it was not as hard to be decent as I thought,” Ilya says. “I thought, what would my mother do? Then I did that.”

“I don’t know anything about your mother,” Shane says quietly.

“She’s dead,” Ilya says. “Died when I was twelve.”

Shane’s heart sinks. “I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago,” Ilya mumbles.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Shane offers.

“It’s sad story,” Ilya warns. “Not as boring as puzzle, but not uplifting.”

“I want to know anyway,” Shane says.

He wants to know all the important things about Ilya. Everything that matters to him, to who he is, even if it’s not easy to hear.

“Okay,” Ilya says quietly. “I will tell you.”

Ilya tells Shane about his mother's suicide. About finding her. About how hard that had been on him. And it goes on from there. The hockey game fades into the background as Ilya and Shane just *keep* talking. About their childhoods. About their injuries and what it was like to be forced out of their sport, their career. About life afterwards, and all the good and bad that came with that.

Ilya tells Shane about being terrified of being sent back to Russia, with no job in the States. How he was so scared of having nothing but his leech of a brother. How he felt, someday, that he would die like his mother, too. It hurts Shane to hear that. To think of that possibility. To imagine finding out, a world away, and never understanding. To never have had a chance to meet or know Ilya again.

Shane tells Ilya about coming out to his teammates in Montreal. It wasn't too long after Scott Hunter's famous post-Stanley Cup win kiss with his now-husband. He'd known he was gay for a little while – not bi, like he'd been hoping and trying to convince himself – and finally, very quietly, stopped hiding it.

"I always felt like I was apologizing for it, in a way," Shane admits.

"Apologizing?" Ilya asks. "Why?"

"Like I came out, but I was always doing everything I could to downplay it, or make everyone feel like they didn't even have to notice it," Shane says. "Like I could convince them it didn't matter, I was still the hockey star they wanted."

"You were," Ilya says. "Three fucking cups."

Shane shrugs. "Yeah, but... I don't know. I don't know, I was already so different. Asian, gay... I mean, autistic too, and I could *feel* being that different, even though I didn't know. I felt like I owed them being better than most, because I didn't fit in. Not really."

Ilya shakes his head. "You don't fit in because you are better. Not sheep. Not average."

"Well, thanks..." Shane mumbles. "You know, the only time the NHL Commissioner even wanted to speak with me? After my whole career and all the achievements... All he wanted to do was say he appreciated me *not* being like Scott Hunter."

Ilya frowns. "Old?"

Shane scoffs. "*No*. And we are that old now. He meant that I wasn't loud or proud, you know?"

"Oh," Ilya says.

Shane had gotten into a fight about it with an ex once. An educated, academic-type. An activist. He'd called Shane a coward. Said he could use his voice for more, but that he shut up for the money. Shane never knew if that was fair or not. Shane just knew he was scared. They didn't last very long anyway. That was probably for the best.

"Do you wish it had been different?" Ilya asks. "That you had been... *Louder*?"

Shane considers this. “If it was always going to end this way? With career ending TBIs?”

“Sure,” Ilya shrugs. “Yes. No other changes.”

“Then yeah,” Shane admits. “I guess... Because, what did all that silence and loneliness get me?”

“Fuck load of money?” Ilya reasons.

“Not all it’s cracked up to be,” Shane admits.

“Yeah, must suck,” Ilya teases.

“I know, I know,” Shane sighs. “I’m *incredibly* lucky. I’m not arguing that. Just... It was really lonely, all those years. Stanley Cups don’t share a life with you.”

Ilya hums in understanding. He runs a thumb over Shane’s cheek bone.

“You still have a lot of life left to share, Hollander.”

Shane turns his head to press his lips against the pad of Ilya’s thumb. For the first time since being medically retired from the career he loved made his life feel very much *over* in many ways, Shane thinks Ilya is right. There is so much *more* ahead of him.

“I have a good feeling about that,” Shane murmurs.

“Yes?” Ilya asks. “And why is that?”

“You know why,” Shane says.

“Many boring puzzles in your future?” Ilya teases.

Shane smiles. “Yeah, something like that.”

Somewhere in Cottage Country - August 2nd, 2024

The splash off the side of the dock sprays water across Shane’s neck and face. It’s not entirely unwelcome. The late summer sun is high in the sky and hot.

In the lake, wearing a bright blue lifejacket made of neoprene, Nina twists around to look at Ilya and Shane, who are sitting on Muskoka Chairs. Her eyes, warm in the sunshine, are big with anticipation.

“Ten!” Shane calls out to her. “Definitely.”

Nina grins. She’s missing one of her top teeth, leaving her smile adorably gapped.

“Ah, no,” Ilya shakes his head. “Six point five. *Maybe* seven.”

Nina’s jaw drops. “What? No!”

Shane looks at Ilya, eyebrow raised. “A little harsh, judge. Wow.”

“Is cannonball contest!” Ilya protests. “Cannonballs make *big splash!* This was tiny splash, *dochenka.*”

The water running down Shane’s cheek begs to differ, but he gets the sense Ilya is riling her up.

“I’m *small!*” Nina complains.

“Yes, very,” Ilya says. “Only six years old.”

“Seven in a week!” She argues.

“Oh, right!” Ilya smirks, eyes full of as much love as there is mischief. “Seven in a week. Maybe next week you will be able to make big splash.”

Nina huffs, and swims over to the ladder to climb back up onto the dock. Dripping wet, she hurries over to the edge again, as close to Ilya and Shane as she can get.

“I’ll get it,” she grumbles.

“I still think it was a ten, Nina,” Shane says.

“I can do a bigger splash!” She insists.

Shane gives Ilya a long look.

“What?” Ilya shrugs.

Asshole, Shane mouths, but he’s laughing.

Nina cannonballs off the dock again, creating roughly the same size of splash as she did the time before. When her head re-emerges, squished between the shoulders of her lifejacket, she looks at her father expectantly.

“Whoa!” Ilya exclaims. “I was hit by tsunami wave. Hollander, did you feel that?”

“Huge splash,” Shane agrees.

Nina grins, triumphant.

“This one is for sure a ten,” Shane says. “Right, Ilya?”

“Eleven maybe,” Ilya nods.

“Yes!” Nina exclaims. “*Thank you!*”

“Eleven?” Shane asks. “Wow. I think that makes you the best cannonballer in the world, probably.”

“Yes, this is true,” Ilya agrees. “Gold medal for Team Canada.”

Nina giggles. “We kicked Team Russia’s *butt*. ”

Oh, the antagonistic gremlin thing is a shared gene. Good to know.

“Oh, you think so?” Ilya asks.

“Yes!” Nina calls back, laughing.

“No, no. You are wrong. Russia sat out this year. Are you sure you want to try and beat them?” Ilya asks, rising to his feet.

“YES!” Nina calls, even louder.

“You are asking for brutal defeat,” Ilya says, shaking his head. He pulls off a university-branded tee shirt, and tosses it on the chair, so he’s wearing nothing but a pair of dark swim shorts. Shane can’t help but look. He really is so beautiful, even sporting a mild sunburn from yesterday’s boating excursion around the lake. Looking at him still makes Shane dizzy in the best possible way, even with months of unfettered access behind them.

Ilya steps towards the edge of the dock. Shane notices that he shifts his weight entirely to his good leg. He doesn’t want to jump with the bad leg. Shane knows the warm weather is better for Ilya’s pain, and he can mostly disguise his injury. He uses the cane less. Has less of a pronounced limp. Still, Shane has learned to identify the small ways it impacts Ilya, even when Ilya doesn’t want anyone to see.

Launching himself off of one foot, Ilya cannonballs into the lake. The splash he creates is so big, it soaks Shane’s shirt. Shane laughs, covering his face with his arm.

Ilya pops back out of the water and shakes his hair out of his face.

“See?” He says to his daughter. “Very big splash.”

Nina is laughing. She has a great laugh, Shane thinks. Like whatever is funny is the only thing in the world that matters.

“What does our judge say?” Ilya asks Shane.

“Hmm,” Shane feigns consideration. “It *was* a big splash, but I also have to consider style and sportsmanship.”

“Sportsmanship!” Ilya balks. “Since when is this the rule?”

Shane shrugs. “I’m the head judge, I think. Seeing as our other one ended up in the lake. So... I’ll give that an eight.”

“An *eight*?” Ilya protests.

“Six point five,” Nina says.

Shane laughs. That's exactly what he deserves.

Ilya flops back into a floating position on his back and clutches at his heart.

"No! I lost! I am worst cannonballer!"

Nina keeps laughing. She starts splashing him. A very gracious winner, indeed. Ilya is raising himself.

Watching them, Shane finds himself overcome by a soul-deep sort of peace. He's been looking forward to this trip all summer. Actually, it's been a weird summer for him, routine-wise. Usually, in his show's off-season, he spends almost all his time up here, at the cottage. Why wouldn't he? What else did he ever have to do? Now, he finds himself spending more and more time in the city, not wanting to spend too long away from Ilya and Nina. But *finally* their schedules – and Lauren's schedule with Nina – allowed for this. A weeklong trip for the three of them.

It's the first time Nina will be staying over anywhere that isn't her direct family's, or anywhere unfamiliar generally. Ilya was nervous about it; disrupting her routine and dealing with that fallout. However, apart from a few hiccups here and there about things like food and bugs, it's been great so far. Nina has seemed comfortable, for the most part. Ilya has been able to relax and enjoy himself. It all makes Shane exceptionally happy; like he fits their life already, pre-made for them.

Shane is also pretty excited, because tonight his parents are coming over for dinner. Which means they're meeting Ilya and Nina for the first time. Is he a bit nervous about it? Yes. But not in a bad way. In a way that matches how important this is. It's a pretty big deal for his parents to not only meet his boyfriend, but his boyfriend's daughter. There's a seriousness there. A future promise. *This is the family I hope I'm building. I hope you love them, too.*

Meeting Nina had felt that serious to Shane. As had meeting Vlada, a week or so later. He had a concept of how to win Nina's approval, but not Vlada's. All he could do was praise her soup. It turns out, that was enough. Vlada is a big hockey fan. She told him he was good *for a Canadian*, and that she likes that he makes Ilya happy. Shane likes that Ilya has her; a connection to his culture, and someone that treats him better than his own family did. She can be a bit gruff and blunt, but she loves Ilya and Nina, and she's a damned good cook. He enjoys her company and having her approval means a lot.

Shane isn't really worried that his parents won't like Ilya. He thinks they will. Ilya is a lot more charismatic and kind than they probably think, based on his old hockey days' reputation. And he knows they'll love Nina. His parents love kids. They wanted more than just one, but life didn't work out that way. He thinks they're secretly disappointed they don't have grandkids yet, too. They'd never *say* that to him, though. Maybe, if things continue at the rate they're going, they'll be able to get all that desire to spoil someone out on Nina.

Shane is anxious, but he isn't worried. So when he really thinks it through, what he's feeling is anticipation. Eagerness. *Hope*. Like two pieces of his soul get to finally connect. And if he's honest with himself, this is something he needs. He's spent so many years putting different parts of himself into different boxes. He's done with that.

Going forward, Shane thinks, this is it. This is the life he wants. This is the life he always felt was too far away. And this time, he's going to do whatever he can to cherish and keep it.

Chapter 7: Epilogue

Chapter Summary

A little epilogue <3

Chapter Notes

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

Toronto - October 12th, 2024

It's a strange night for Ilya. Good strange, but strange. Unexpected, until recently.

He is sitting on Shane's couch, in Shane's big, fancy house, but Shane is not here. And even though Shane is not here, Ilya is not alone. Nina is here. Vlada is here. And strangest of all, Shane's parents are here. It's quite the assortment.

They're eating dinner in front of the television. Shane would be horrified. Tough luck, though. No one wants to miss his show.

It's the first episode of the season. The hockey season has just begun, too. Ilya is very lucky to not have a game tonight. He arranged practice with his team around this. He has to watch it live.

Everyone is mostly quiet in the minutes leading up to the show. They all want tonight to go well. No one wants to jinx anything. How would they do that? Ilya doesn't know. But still, he finds himself holding his breath.

"This is ridiculous," Yuna Hollander exhales during the last commercial break before the show. "Do commercials always go this long?"

"I don't know, honey, you watch more of these things than me," David replies.

Ilya likes Shane's parents. They're very kind people. They love their son very much. They're sort of like parents you'd find on a Hollywood TV show; the idealized experience. The type that, if Ilya had met them at thirteen years-old, he might have cried and asked them to adopt him.

"Is greedy television networks," Vlada observes. "Disgusting."

Ilya smirks.

"I think it's the same time as the last commercials," Nina says matter-of-factly.

Ilya smiles at her. He's come to understand more about the way she interprets things. He can see the similarities between her and Shane sometimes, and it makes his heart happy. Their mutual, precise way of seeing the world.

"Oh, look," Ilya says as the screen changes. "Show is starting."

Yuna takes a deep breath through her teeth. "Here we go."

David takes her hand and squeezes it.

Ilya wishes he had Shane's hand here to squeeze. But that would mean this whole thing wouldn't be happening, so there would be nothing to be nervous about.

The opening credits scene for *Canada's Hockey Report* rolls and it opens on a studio with four commentators, including Shane. Who, Ilya might add, looks very dashing in his suit.

"There's Shane!" Nina says, pointing at the TV.

"Yes," Ilya agrees. "Looking very handsome."

"Isn't it a good suit?" Yuna asks. "I *told* him to work with that brand."

"You have better style, clearly," Ilya agrees.

"Wow," David mumbles. Clearly the progenitor of Shane's fashion sense.

The lead commentator – not Shane, but some boring guy named John that Ilya can barely pay attention to – welcomes the audience back and recaps what's happening tonight. Toronto versus Pittsburgh, correspondents at the arena, commentary in the studio, yada yada yada.

"I can't watch," Yuna groans. "I need them to get to it."

"Shane said before the game starts, right?" David asks. "It'll be soon."

"Yes," Ilya agrees. "It will be soon."

They chat a bit about their hopes for the season. Teams they're excited for. New draft picks on Canadian teams.

Nina sighs loudly. "They talk *a lot*."

"Yes," Vlada agrees. "So much small talk."

"Normally I don't mind but tonight I'm antsy," Yuna says.

"*And what about you, Shane?*" John is asking. "*Any hopes for your old team this year?*"

"I hope they lose," Ilya mutters.

Not because they're Montreal. Because they treated Shane badly when he left.

Yuna glares at him for a second. Then her shoulders slump.

“Yeah, me too,” she mumbles.

“John, you know I’m always rooting for Montreal,” Shane says diplomatically. *“But Ottawa is getting stronger every season, and this might be their year.”*

It goes on like this for a few more minutes, and then one of the other commentators, Marcel, turns to Shane. Marcel is the funny one. The bold one. The one who says things the others won’t. That’s why they chose him for this bit.

Marcel, wearing a very stupid green suit, smirks at Shane.

“Now, Hollander,” he says, wiggling his eyebrows.

Shane sighs, as if he didn’t plan this. He very much did.

“Yes, Gagne?” Shane asks.

“You know I have to bring it up.”

Shane shakes his head. *“Have to and want to are different words, but alright.”*

Marcel laughs. *“Come on. We all saw the photos. They were everywhere online. You and Ilya Rozanov, leaving some fancy wine bar together.”*

“Here it is,” Yuna mumbles.

Ilya holds his breath.

When the photos had leaked online, by someone who recognized Ilya and wondered why the hell Shane Hollander was leaving a bar holding hands with him, his former nemesis, Ilya and Shane had honestly been surprised it took so long. They had all until two weeks ago, completely private. It had been Shane’s decision to address it head on in this way. On the show. To the only audience that would even remember their former epic rivalry.

“You know what?” He’d said. “I finally deserve a moment to be a little bit loud.”

And it had made Ilya’s heart explode. Because Shane was doing it for himself, yes, but he was also doing it for *them*. To right a story that had been told very wrong for over a decade.

“Yes,” Shane nods. *“I’m not sure what was so interesting about them, to tell you the truth. We’re adults. We drink wine.”*

“Was it a date?” Marcel asks.

He knows it was. They’ve gone out to a pub with Marcel and his wife. She is much more intelligent than him, it’s baffling.

“Yes,” Shane says. *“It was. He’s my partner, so it’s not an uncommon occurrence.”*

“Wait, wait, wait,” Greg, the third commentator chimes in, doing his bit. “You and Ilya Rozanov? Weren’t you rivals when you played? Like in a big way?”

Shane nods. *“What’s a rivalry without a little tension, you know?”*

Marcel laughs. *“Wow, Hollander. Does Montreal know about this?”*

Shane shrugs. He looks easy. Confident. Ilya knows he’s shaking right now.

“They do now,” Shane says. “But there’s really nothing that needs to be said, you know? We’re two people who no longer play hockey, who love each other very much, and that was never a factor during an NHL game.”

Ilya preens.

“Very sappy, Hollander,” he whispers at the screen.

“That was nicely said,” David nods approvingly.

“They’re going to think he let you win,” Yuna says. “Or vice versa.”

Vlada scoffs. “Ilya would never do this.”

“Well, neither would Shane!”

David insists. “He was a good enough player, I think that much should be obvious.”

“Did you ever let him win?” Marcel asks.

“Absolutely not,” Shane says. *“And he wouldn’t like me if I did.”*

Marcel laughs. *“Fair enough, eh?”*

And just like that, it’s over. They move onto something else. The spectacle isn’t even fifteen minutes of fame. It’s thirty seconds. Ilya is glad. He doesn’t want this to be drawn out for Shane.

There’s a moment though. A small flash of time. Shane turns to the camera, just briefly, smiles, and winks.

Ilya’s cheeks heat. That was for *him*.

“Papa!” Nina gasps. She leans into Ilya’s side, smacking his arm excitedly. “He smiled at us!”

Ilya smiles.

“Yes, look at that. That’s pretty special.”

Yuna looks over at the two of them. Her smile is so warm, Ilya feels it in his core. He nods a little at her. Like a promise. *We will love him. We will take care of him. Always.*

He hopes she knows that. He understands what it's like to worry for your child.



Shane is exhausted by the time the show is over. More so than usual. For one thing, it's the first show of the season. He's had months off to fall out of routine. For another, the anticipation of tonight's *reveal* was draining. He had been sort of terrified it would all go wrong. It didn't. He can have that at least. He told the world he loves Ilya Rozanov and it went well.

As long as he doesn't check online comments... That could be bad. But you know what? He doesn't care. Farah can deal with that.

By the time Shane makes it home, close to midnight, he's ready to collapse. He has a bunch of people waiting up for him. To celebrate this moment; a small one, in the grand scheme of things, but big for him. Shane has been out for years, but this is the first time he really gave himself a moment to take up space. He's proud of himself. And he feels a sort of thrill, if he's honest. Now the whole world – or whoever the hell is still tuning in – knows that Ilya is his. That he is Ilya's. Hopefully they got the message; he always was, even when he wasn't ready to accept it.

He walks up to the house, only to find Ilya waiting for him out on the porch. He's leaning against the front column, wearing a big sweater, arms crossed, smiling down at Shane.

"Hi," Shane says, stopping at the bottom of the porch stairs.

"Hello, *partner*," Ilya smirks.

"Shut up," Shane laughs. "What would you have said instead? Boyfriend didn't feel adult enough."

"Hmm," Ilya considers. "Lover?"

Shane rolls his eyes. "Gross."

"You looked very good tonight," Ilya says. "That is your best suit."

Shane looks down at himself. It's a dark suit, almost black, but with a slight plum tinge. He hadn't been sure about it.

"Really?" Shane asks.

"Your mother agrees," Ilya says, smirking.

"Oh my god," Shane blushes. He does not want to think about Ilya and his mom sitting around discussing his looks. "Where is everyone?"

"You're in luck," Ilya says. "Vlada went home. Nina is sleeping in guest room. Your parents tried to stay away and could not."

It's a five bedroom house. There is a lot of guest space. But the smallest one, down the hall from the master, has become Nina's in the months since their cottage trip this summer. Not that they're living together. They aren't. Not yet. But sometimes they stay at his place. Sometimes he stays at theirs. He thinks he wants to ask them to move in eventually, *soon*, he just doesn't want to rush anything where Nina is involved. Making her feel like she has a room at his place is a good first step.

"So everyone is sleeping but us?" Shane asks, smiling.

Ilya smirks. "Yes. Why? You want to fuck?"

"No!" Shane blurts. "Jesus. Not with my parents here!"

Ilya laughs. "I know, I know. Had to check."

"I am tired," Shane says. But he pauses. The night is nice. Cool but not cold. Not bad at all. "However..."

"However?" Ilya asks.

Shane walks up the porch steps up reaches to pull Ilya in for a kiss. Ilya complies gladly, running his hands over the fabric of Shane's suit.

"You want to sit out here for a bit?" Shane asks. `

"In the cold?" Ilya asks.

Shane nods. "Yeah, I don't know. I just want a moment."

"Okay," Ilya says. He wraps an arm around Shane, pulling him close. He kisses the side of his head. "You can even have two moments, maybe."

Shane laughs a little. "Oh yeah? That's generous."

"We have time," Ilya says.

Shane relaxes his head against Ilya. He takes a deep breath. They *do* have time. Despite what they lost.

They still have all the time in the world – together.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone for reading this! Writing it and deciding where it should end, I realized there's a lot more story to tell. I'd be interested in writing a sequel, if people would want to read it?

Again, thank you for the warm welcome to the Hollonov fandom!

End Notes

Hello everyone! I post writing updates for this fic and others on my Tumblr blog at <https://www.tumblr.com/blog/cal-daisies-and-briars> - stop by if you wanna chat 9-1-1 and/or Hollanov fics <3

I am also on Twitter @calwritesfic

ALSO: I am working on original fiction if you are at all interested in that <https://calmcw118.substack.com/>

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