

Heart On My Sleeve, Not Where It Should Be

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Heart On My Sleeve, Not Where It Should Be

by [Jonske](#)

Summary

Shane and Ilya return to the cottage after their somewhat successful talk with Shane's parents. Things are going great and they can finally be their vulnerable selves around each other. That is until pictures leak of their stay at the cottage and they're forced to face reality. It's them against the world.

Notes

I wrote this to cope with the fact that we'll have to wait a whole year for season 2 and I can't wait for the possible angst when people find out about their relationship. I know it probably goes differently in the books (I promise I'll read them soon okay).

Title is from My Moon My Man by Feist, one of the best songs of the series' soundtrack in my humble opinion. I'd like to thank @heatedrivalryru on Bluesky for helping me with the correct usage of 'milyj' = love/darling and 'zhopa' = asshole as an endearment

Chapter 1

The impromptu dinner at Shane's parents went well, all things considered. Shane's mom needed a moment to realise that the picture she had in her head of her only son was slightly off, but he was still her son. It didn't take long for her to focus on the benefits of her son being gay, the possible sponsorships and representation he could offer – a young gay, Asian hockey player! There weren't any players that fit said profile, so they had to take advantage of it.

Shane's dad didn't seem too bothered by the news, he had had the time to recover from what he saw at the cottage and was happy his son finally chose something for himself. He had always worried Shane was focusing too hard on hockey and missing out on crucial life experiences his non-hockey peers had the chance to experience. At some point during dinner he hadn't been able to stop himself from jokingly chastising Shane for fraternising with the enemy, which Ilya found hilarious.

Things were almost alright again with his parents when Shane and Ilya left for the cottage again, they were all still a little uneasy about the situation, but it could've gone worse. The short car ride was pleasant, Shane felt relieved he no longer had to lie to his parents or hide such a big part of himself.

He sent off a quick text to Rose to tell her he came out to his parents. She responded soon after, congratulating him for being brave and true to himself, hoping he could talk to his parents when he needed to instead of only having her as a support. He truly got lucky befriending her, he couldn't wish for a better friend and ally, he told her that.

They arrived at their safe haven where they didn't have to pretend or fear for being seen by anyone. Ilya reached for Shane's hand to walk to the front door together and he couldn't stop himself from smiling at how easy it was for Ilya to reach out to him. Things weren't always like this and they had gone a long way to reach this point.

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Shane woke up to the feeling of Ilya's finger tracing figures on his back. It felt nice, intimate in the way they were still naked, with Shane lying on his stomach, his face pressed into Ilya's shoulder, while Ilya laid on his side, watching him slowly blink away his slumber. "S nice," he slurred, hoping Ilya would continue. "I am trying to wake you up, not give massage." Shane protested when Ilya removed his hand from his back. "I am hungry," Ilya informed him, before getting out of bed.

Shane tried to hold onto the moment a bit longer, knowing this was only the beginning and they would have plenty more of these sweet, carefree moments. He was about to ask Ilya if

they could shower together, when his phone rang. He reached for his phone, carefully placed on the night stand where he always put his phone for the night.

“It’s my mom,” he told Ilya who communicated with his displeased face that he didn’t want Shane to pick up. “It might be important,” he reasoned. “She is calling you to ask if you want her to bring anything from your home or something stupid.” Ilya was probably right. His parents were planning to come over around 5 and knowing his mom, she was micromanaging everything again.

He ignored the call, putting on some sweatpants that Ilya had carelessly flung on the floor the night before. He was pulling on his carefully folded t-shirt when Ilya called from the kitchen, “Can you eat eggs and bacon? Or is that not in your boring *macrobiotic* diet?” Shane rolled his eyes. Ilya loved teasing him with any information he got on him, but it also endeared him how Ilya remembered these small details about him. He must’ve watched one of his interviews to find out about his specific diet.

“I’ll make an exception because we’re on a break,” he answered as he entered the kitchen. Seeing Ilya with nothing on except some underwear and an apron did things to him and Ilya clearly noticed. “You like me in apron?” he winked at Shane, who knew his face was heating up instantly.

“I like you when you don’t burn my eggs,” he dared to tease back, which prompted a laugh from Ilya, and oh, the sound of his laughter. Shane wished he was more articulate so he could express what Ilya’s laugh did to him.

Shane’s phone rang again and he frowned. Ilya gave him a look, as if telling him to ‘well, go and answer your phone then’, so he went back to their – the – bedroom. Rose was calling him, so he picked up expecting her to gush about a new role she was excited about. “Shane? Shane, are you okay? Are your parents with you right now?” She sounded concerned, stumbling over her words.

“Uhm, no. They’re at home, I’m at the cottage with Ilya. Why? What’s wrong?” “Oh, Shane, I don’t know how to tell you but everyone knows. It’s on the news, you and Ilya...” He was confused, not understanding what she was trying to tell him. He walked over to the living room, where Ilya was putting their breakfast on the table. Rose was quiet on the phone.

When he turned on the news, Ilya joined him, their hips touching as he squeezed Shane’s hip. “There hasn’t been any confirmation from either of the hockey players, but it is safe to say that no one saw this coming,” the news reporter gushed excitedly while standing outside at what appeared to be the skating ring of the Montreal Metros.

“Is there any new information on this dating scandal yet? I must confess I’m quite invested in this!” the reporter from the studio asked and Shane felt his fingers go numb when he realised what was going on. “Shane, what are they talking about?” Ilya asked, his tone carefully measured, but Shane could feel he was just as scared as he was, Ilya’s hand squeezing his hip a little too hard.

“I, uh, I don’t know. Rose called saying everyone knows, but I don’t know what they know.” He suddenly realised he was still on the phone with her and clutched the device like a life

line. “Rose, how do they know? Do they know we’re at the cottage together?” he was short of breath, panic slowly becoming master of his senses.

“Some cheap paparazzo must’ve figured out how to get to the cottage from the interview you did and he took pictures of you two there. I’m so sorry Shane, they invaded your privacy and there’s no denying what’s going on in the pictures,” she sounded angry and sad for his sake and he wondered why he didn’t feel either emotions. He was numb, his brain foggy like the last time he got a concussion.

“But, I don’t understand. This is a private lake, how the hell did he get to the cottage?!” He turned towards the television again when he saw they were playing a sequence of crudely taken pictures. It was clear the paparazzo was on a boat, offshore as he zoomed in on Shane and Ilya swimming in the lake, kissing, fondling each other, convinced no one would be able to see them.

He felt Ilya heavily breathing next to him and when he dared to glance at his face, the clear anger on Ilya’s face broke his heart. They had been so happy this morning and now everything had gone to shit. He heard Rose talk on the phone to him, but the words weren’t registering, so he hung up.

The news channel kept replaying the same photos over and over, until Ilya snatched the remote from the coffee table and changed the channel. It was a morning show, with the host and some guests discussing their secret relationship, the same pictures being displayed in the background. Ilya cursed loudly in Russian, turning the television off.

He turned Shane towards him, his hands clutching Shane’s shoulders that were shaking. “We have to be brave, Hollander.” “*Don’t* call me that,” he begged, tears in his eyes. “Shane, *milyj*, we’ll tell them all to fuck off. We are the best hockey players of our teams, they cannot fire us,” Ilya told him, bringing Shane into his embrace, squeezing tightly as if he knew Shane was falling apart and needed to be held together.

“I’m scared. They weren’t supposed to find out, we had a whole plan...” he whispered into Ilya’s chest. His head hurt, he wasn’t breathing properly, not enough oxygen reached his brain so he could figure out how to fix this. He balled his fists in an attempt to feel his fingertips, but they remained numb.

“It doesn’t matter, your mom will know what to say. I know she already has a plan and is calling people,” Ilya tried to comfort him. “She won’t be able to fix this! It’s all ruined, we’ll never be allowed to play hockey again, our lives are ruined, don’t you understand that?” Shane pushed Ilya away, desperate for his comfort but freaking out.

Shane hadn’t noticed he had been leaning on Ilya to keep himself upright, so his legs gave out when he pushed him away. He couldn’t breathe, feeling himself slump on the floor. “Shane? You are not breathing. Breathe,” Ilya told him, as if Shane couldn’t tell he was having a panic attack. “I can’t, it hurts,” he gasped, the tears he was holding back finally escaping.

Ilya tsked, sitting down on the floor, still wearing that stupid apron and pulling Shane in his lap. He held Shane’s hands in his own and put them on his own chest. “We breathe together,

okay?” and he exaggerated a big inhale and exhale so Shane could mimic him. “We focus on this and then we call your mom, okay?” Shane nodded, the fog in his head slowly lifting as his brain finally received the oxygen it direly needed.

Shane didn’t know how long it took him to regulate his breathing, but he dropped his head on Ilya’s shoulder in exhaustion at some point. Once Ilya deemed him alright again he dared to joke, “You are very dramatic.” Shane reciprocated the teasing with his usual ‘fuck off’ so Ilya knew he was okay.

Ilya wanted to say something back, but his phone interrupted him. “Is Boston coach. He is probably mad at me.” Ilya caressed Shane’s cheek, trying to stop him from worrying so much. When he answered the call, he immediately pulled the phone away from his ear, the other person yelling at him over the line. Ilya waited until he stopped before putting the phone back to his ear, “What do you want?”

Ilya remained quiet while he listened to his coach, but his face began to sour and turn ugly. “I’m not doing that”, he interrupted, which made his coach start yelling again. Ilya was about to say something, but he held himself back and breathed out through his nose in frustration. “Okay, Coach, I will come back.” He ended the phone call and cursed in Russian under his breath. “What’d he say?” Shane asked, already sensing where this was going.

“He is forcing me to go back to Boston. He threatened me with legal shit from contract, so I cannot tell him to fuck off.” Shane saw what that news did to him as Ilya looked away, trying to hide the emotions clear on his face and rubbing a hand over his face.

“He’s doing damage control, my coach is probably doing the same. The best way is to keep us separated until things cool down,” Shane reasoned. “Not helpful.” Ilya’s voice broke and Shane knew he fucked up, trying to be logical in a situation where he should be comforting. He was the one pulling Ilya into his arms this time, petting the unruly curls of his rival-lover-boyfriend-whatever they were or had been.

“I will fucking miss you. They cannot keep us apart,” Ilya whispered into his neck, sounding broken. Shane hated that he couldn’t fix this, couldn’t prevent Ilya from leaving when he knew the Russian player had no one to fall back on, unlike Shane. “They can’t stop us from calling each other. We can FaceTime and fall asleep on call.” Ilya sniffled, “Is not the same.”

Ilya pulled away, getting off the floor and heading into the bedroom to get dressed and to start filling his travel bag. Shane followed, deciding to sit on the unmade bed, a silent anchor of comfort for Ilya. He watched in silence as Ilya gloomily stuffed his clothes in the bag, Shane felt the urge to take them back out and fold them for Ilya, but he didn’t act on it.

The sound of gravel crunching on the driveway broke the quietness and Shane knew his parents were here. Not much later, the front door unlocked so he called them over, “We’re in the bedroom.” His mother rushed into the room and hugged him, “Oh, Shane. I’m so sorry this happened.” He burst into tears against his own will, but what else could he do in this situation but cry.

His dad stood awkwardly in the door frame, worried for them but unsure of what to do. Ilya zipped up his bag. “I need to go now,” he announced and Shane’s mom stood up,

unexpectedly pulling Ilya into her arms. Ilya froze, the bag still in his hand. “You’re not alone, Ilya. You have us now too. Don’t try to face this on your own, okay?” She pulled back from the hug to wipe a stubborn tear from his cheek.

Ilya tried to smile, but the tears in his eyes betrayed how he really felt. “Thank you. I will be okay.” He wouldn’t be, everyone present in the room knew he would suffer on his own, pretend he didn’t need comfort or someone to support him.

Shane watched as Ilya got in an Uber and disappeared along the road. He could feel his heart break, but he knew he had to be strong to face what would happen next. His mom showed up next to him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. It wasn’t *his* hand, but this was all he had left, so he cherished it.

“What’s the plan?” he asked, feeling numbness envelop him. It was as if Ilya had packed Shane’s heart in his bag and drove off with it, the blood no longer being pumped around his body to keep him warm, despite the Canadian summer. His mom led him to their car, informing him that the cottage was no longer safe.

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Shane stared at the empty seat where Ilya had sat the day before, blissfully ignorant of what would happen, while eating the pasta his mom had cooked with gusto. The mug in his hands felt hot in his numb, cold hands. He couldn’t stomach anything so he didn’t attempt at drinking the tea his dad had made him.

His mom squeezed his hand to get his attention, “Shane, are you listening? I have a team of lawyers already on the case to sue that paparazzo and take down any new articles written about you two. Of course the damage has already been done, but *how* we respond to this is crucial.” He nodded dumbly, not knowing what to say.

“I tried contacting the coach of the Boston Raiders to form a plan, but that man is not answering any of my calls right now. Your coach and him are probably already discussing a statement to release, denying everything I’m sure, but we can’t let that happen, you hear me?” She looked pointedly at him. “Why’s that? Isn’t it better to deny it?”

“Normally yes, but in this case, you know.... The pictures speak for themselves, there’s nothing to deny here.” Shane dropped his head on the table, getting *deja vu* from the day before, but Ilya was no longer here to comfort him, to call him his boyfriend. “Do they have more pictures? There are so many windows in the cottage...”

His mom stroked his hair lovingly, but it didn’t feel the same way Ilya did it. “The paparazzo teased on social media that he has more pictures, but isn’t releasing them yet. He said he wants to make a deal with you and Ilya,” she scoffed at the last part. Shane’s dad joined into the conversation, “He might be bluffing, paparazzi only want to shock and sell scandals.”

“The lake is private property so he clearly broke the law, trespassing and taking pictures of you two. We’re dragging him to court for this, so he’ll have to pay a hefty sum.” Shane lifted his head from the table, “I don’t care about a fine! I care about being outed without our consent, Ilya can never go back to Russia again, mom! Don’t you understand?”

Shane’s parents looked at him, shocked at his outburst. “Honey, we know this isn’t about money, but that man needs to be dealt with so people know we’re *not* okay with this.” Shane’s dad squeezed his shoulder over the table, “The damage’s been done, son. There’s no point in crying over spoiled milk. We have to move on.”

“You have to make a public statement, take back control over the narrative. You can frame the story, decide what you want to share and what to keep for yourself. I’m sure Ilya will be asked to remain quiet and wait until this all blows over, so you have to stand up for him too,” his mom encouraged him.

He nodded, his numb hands shaking as they left the now cold mug, “I need a pen and paper – I need to write this down, for me and for Ilya.” His dad quickly got him some paper and a pen, “You got this, son.”

For some time he stared at the blank paper, not knowing how one begins a statement like this, so he thought about Ilya. Strong, independent Ilya who was probably on his way to Boston. He hoped Svetlana would be there for Ilya, he deserved his closest friend to be there for him.

Shane started writing, not caring that he crossed out words or whole sentences he didn’t think the rest of the world deserved to know. They didn’t deserve to know about the sweet, caring lover that Ilya was. He felt strangely possessive of that side, but he also wanted the world to know why he fell in love with Ilya and that meant sharing a side of Ilya that the Russian player had hidden away from everyone but him.

“This is so hard,” he confessed, hating himself when tears blurred his vision. “It’s okay, honey. Take your time. This is your statement so it’s all on your terms.” He knew his mother had pulled strings to keep the reporters away from their home, probably threatened some of them to stay away or get dragged away by the police, but he was thankful she was so protective. He hoped Ilya would be protected too, the last thing he needed was being swarmed by reporters and nosy people wanting to catch a glimpse of the scandalous hockey player. It hurt to think about that.

It took Shane a ridiculous long time to finish his statement. In the meantime, his mom had made several calls, to his coach, to their lawyers, but mostly to people she knew who had influence in the media, so she could control what was being released and what had to be repressed. He had turned off the notifications on his phone, the influx of messages being overwhelming and anxiety-inducing. That didn’t prevent him from checking the messages from people he knew, like Scott, who had messaged him to let him know Kip and him were there for him when he needed them.

No one else on his team had messaged him, not even Hayden, which hurt. But Shane reasoned their coach probably told them not to contact him until they had things under control again. He would explain everything and things would get better again. That’s what he

kept telling himself, hoping that if he repeated it over and over he would eventually start to believe it to be true.

“Let’s get this over with,” his mom told him with a small smile. They were expected at the press conference his mother had organised. She’d only invited people she knew were on her side or could be controlled, so they didn’t need to be afraid of unwanted questions Shane didn’t want or could answer.

The car ride was glum and Shane couldn’t remember most of it. His dad parked the car at the back entrance so he could get inside without a horde of reporters harassing him. He felt dirty, like he had committed a crime, but no, he had done nothing of the sort. He had simply fallen in love with a fellow hockey player, who also happened to be his biggest rival, oh and they were both men.

Inside, he was led to a changing room, where the stylist his mom had hired for him handed him an outfit. It was at that moment he realised he was still wearing the sweatpants he’d carelessly put on this morning. A lump settled in his throat when he realised he was wearing Ilya’s sweatpants on accident. His mom had drilled it into him to only wear the sports brands that they had a deal with, but the one he was wearing said ‘Boston Raiders’ on the side.

Which meant that Ilya was wearing his Reebok sweatpants all the way in Boston. It was a small comfort, knowing they had something of each other to hold onto. He glanced at the suit that had been carefully picked for him, then at his sweatpants and Metros hoodie. He was doing this on his own terms, his mom had told him, so he did.

Camera shutters went off the second Shane appeared on the small stage, he pretended he wasn’t blinded by them, subtly feeling his way to the table with a ridiculous amount of microphones. He was on his own as he sat down, no one at his side, no one to touch his foot with their own foot in silent support. He couldn’t even pretend to smile at the cameras, a frown edged into his brow.

The camera shutters stopped blinding him as the reporters slowly settled, realising he was waiting for them to calm down. There was a deafening silence in the room as Shane moved his notes in a straight line, something to distract him from what he was about to say. As he looked at his carefully-written statement, he felt angry. Angry that he had to be careful with what he said in case sponsors decided to pull out of their deals, in case he offended Metros fans who counted on him as the captain of their favourite team.

In a bout of spontaneity, something Shane was not known for, he crumpled his statement in a ball and dropped it on the floor. His mom was probably freaking out at the back of the room, but he didn’t care. This whole thing was stupid. He cleared his throat, ready to face the music.

Chapter 2

“Thank you for coming today. I wish things had gone differently, that I could tell you all my story on my own terms, but I guess that choice has been taken from me.” Shane stopped for a moment, waiting for the murmuring of the reports to settle.

“I, uh, I prepared a statement and all, so I knew what to say without hurting anyone’s feelings, but I don’t know what I was thinking writing it. Ilya and I aren’t going to pretend we’re sorry for being normal human beings with emotions,” Shane rambled out of breath, feeling nervous and out of control for simply telling them whatever bubbled up.

“It was the media who came up with the rivalry between Ilya and me to begin with. We weren’t particularly fond of each other, that’s true, but we respected each other as hockey players, because we’re good at what we do and there’s nothing wrong with acknowledging that. But as the years went by and everyone focussed so much on this so-called rivalry, we started feeling trapped in this narrative, or at least I did,” he pointed out and Shane could hear the frantic typing of the reporters on their laptops, handpicking information to once again shape their narrative in a different way.

One of the reporters seated at the front raised his hand and Shane contemplated for a moment if he was ready for the questions he knew they expected him to answer. He nodded at the reporter. “What is the reason for you making this statement on your own? Is Ilya making one too, or will there be a joint statement later?” Of course they weren’t going to hold back from asking the important questions.

“I, uh, don’t know if Ilya – if his coach has planned for him to hold a statement. He’s back in Boston, so it’s just me,” he stammered and the reporter nodded, somewhat satisfied with Shane’s clumsy answer.

Another reporter raised her hand and Shane pointed at her. “Can you tell us how you ended up as lovers? Who approached who?” There was a cacophony of camera shutters going off as the frown fell of his face and he showed a vulnerable expression on his face instead, thinking about the past years, all the way back to their rookie season.

“This rivalry story set up by the media meant that we saw a lot of each other since our rookie season. We were constantly put against each other, starring in ads, asked to present an award together, play in the All Star game and such. It would’ve been strange if we didn’t get to know each other after all that,” Shane started and paused, reminiscing for a moment. They had been so young and stupid back then. *‘Irresponsible’* Ilya had told him only a couple of days ago.

“It isn’t anyone’s business how we fell in love or who approached who, that’s private and the fact that public figures like celebrities and even us hockey players are expected to show such a vulnerable side of us to the public isn’t right. Our jobs are to play hockey, but what happens off the ice and in our private homes isn’t something that should be broadcasted on the news,” Shane answered and he felt himself becoming agitated at the whole situation he was in.

“How did Scott Hunter publicly coming out as gay after winning the cup affect your secret relationship with Ilya?” a reporter asked without raising their hand, which caught Shane off guard. He felt blindsided by the question and the flashes of the cameras.

“Please raise your hand if you have a question,” Shane tried to sound polite, but the frown returned to his face. “We’ve been friends for years and I admire Scott. After his team won the cup, I was proud of him. He deserves to be happy and it’s clear Kip is the one for him. I think he chose the perfect moment to show the world that gay hockey players exist and can be successful,” he explained, unsure of how to continue.

“I don’t know how Ilya felt while watching the end of the game, but for me, seeing Scott and Kip on the ice, happy and not caring what anyone was thinking of them, I envied them. I wanted that to be Ilya and me so bad,” Shane took a deep breath, trying to keep his emotions in check. “I knew our situation was different, but we had a plan and the plan was always going to include hockey and us together in a way that didn’t invite too many eyes on us, but I guess that’s no longer possible,” he chuckled bitterly.

A reporter at the back of the room raised their hand and Shane nodded at them. “Did both your parents and Ilya’s family know about your secret relationship? How did they react?” Shane could feel his mom’s eyes on him, quietly supporting him.

“My parents know about our relationship and I’m grateful they’ve been nothing but supportive of us. I think they really like the Ilya off the ice that no one else gets to see but me and my parents. Of course, they weren’t exactly pleased when I came home with the Metros’ biggest rival,” Shane laughed at the memory of his parents’ faces, seeing Ilya in their living room wearing his stupid Boston Raiders shirt. “But I like to think they’re happy to see me happy and be true to myself, because at the end of the day that’s all that matters.”

Shane wanted to go on to the next question, but the reporters were waiting for the rest of the answer. An answer that wasn’t his to give and that broke his heart to think about. “One of the reasons why we kept our relationship from the public’s eye is because of the status quo in Russia. Being queer is still not accepted in parts of the world, a fact that people often seem to forget.” Shane paused to let his words really sink in.

“This isn’t really my story to tell, it’s Ilya’s, but I don’t know if he’ll be allowed to tell it, so I hope you’ll listen to me instead,” he stressed before continuing, “Keeping our relationship a secret was more than us being afraid of coming out in an environment where being gay is unwanted – Scott explained it perfectly in his speech and I couldn’t have said it better. Our main concern was that if anyone found out about us, Ilya wouldn’t be able to go back home to his family. Russia, and many other countries, still discriminate against queer folks. It’s not safe for most people out there and all it took was just one fucker-” Shane quickly wiped the tears from his eyes, unable to continue.

The camera flashes wouldn’t stop and he didn’t know what to say. The nervousness he had felt at the start had long disappeared, numbness enveloped him. He missed feeling warm, he missed Ilya. “I’m sorry for swearing, but this isn’t fair!” Shane burst out. “No one should be outed against their will, especially when it isn’t safe to come out. You’re all an accomplice to endangering Ilya and separating him from his family and I hope some of you at least have the

heart to realise what you've done." He breathed harshly and took a moment to compose himself.

He'd completely lost himself for a moment there and he knew the media would eat it up. He could already see the short clips of his outburst spreading on Twitter and Instagram. '*We'll tell them all to fuck off*' Ilya had told him while holding him close. He wondered what Ilya would say if he was here right now, sitting in front of all the microphones, looking into the dozens of camera lenses. He'd be better at this than Shane, that's for sure.

"I came here today to remind all of you that what happened to us was unfair and crossed a line. We're both professional athletes who take our careers very seriously. What that paparazzo did is against the law and invaded our privacy. No one should have to fear being stalked and photographed in their own home," he stressed, hoping that people would take him serious and actually listen.

"Thank you for coming today, I'm done answering questions now," Shane ended his statement promptly and stood up, wanting to be gone from this building as soon as he could. He tuned out the voices from the reporters, desperate to get anything else from him, asking him to pose for pictures. He saw his mom quickly walking over to the stage to join him backstage and he waited behind the curtain for her. He crashed into her arms when she finally appeared in front of him.

"You were very brave, Honey. It's over, you can cry now." So he did, all the way to the car, ugly heaving sobs that wouldn't stop no matter how hard he tried. He had never been a crier as a child, he never felt strong emotions, really. But ever since meeting Ilya he was a complete mess, as if the Russian hockey player had turned on a switch in his brain labeled 'unwanted emotions'. He didn't know how to handle them, these unfamiliar emotions. Did other people always have to deal with this intense level of emotions? How inconvenient.

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He lost track of time after day 4, he wasn't eating properly, he couldn't sleep, he was a complete mess. His apartment felt cold and empty, not a single trace of Ilya to be found – he'd searched his whole apartment for something, *anything* of him to hold onto. The sweatpants he was wearing were the only thing he had left of him. His mom kept calling to check up on him and he lied, knowing full well she could see right through him, but she didn't call him out for it.

Ilya had changed him, he never lied, never cried, never had these emotional outbursts. Shane's phone was somewhere on the couch with him, it probably slipped between the couch cushions at some point. He had typed so many messages to Ilya, but none were good enough to send. What could he type to fix this? He had been stupid and naive suggesting they call and FaceTime each other. Ilya had been right, it wasn't the same as being physically here with him. It would only make the aching in his chest worse.

Despite what his mother had made him promise her, he constantly checked the news and social media for people's reactions and opinions. He'd been surprised at the support they received from hockey fans and non-hockey fans. Their story had done the rounds online and now it seemed the whole world had things to say about the situation.

He still couldn't believe the mayor of Ottawa had made a public appearance to say he would look into better ways to protect public figures like celebrities and professional sport players from paparazzi. Shane knew some countries had laws preventing paparazzi from photographing public figures when they were with their children – the reason being to protect the privacy of minors – but not much was being done to protect the adults.

Shane's logical side immediately pointed out that the mayor probably didn't care about him and was simply using this opportunity to gain favour of the public. He hoped that wasn't completely true, but he could almost hear Ilya laugh at him in his head, calling him an idiot. He missed Ilya, he longed for their banter, calling each other names without really meaning it.

The sudden sound of a crowd shouting on the television brought him back from his thoughts. There was a group of people, mostly young people, in what looked like a public park. A girl with a rainbow flag painted on her cheek was being interviewed by a news reporter. "We're here to support queer sports players who feel like they're not allowed to come out in such a macho environment. We're all queer sports players ourselves who decided it was time to show the world we exist and hopefully help others come out by giving our support!" she explained excitedly, pulling a girl who stood outside the camera frame closer to kiss her.

The news reporter looked shocked for a moment, but shared the same excitement that was emitting from the whole group. The female reporter moved over to two massive men, who were obviously a couple. Shane's phone rang, which distracted him for a moment, but he decided to ignore it, he had developed some issues with unexpected phone calls.

"Would you say your football friends and teammates look at you differently now that they know you're both gay?" the reporter asked them and they chuckled, one of them muttering something to the other which made him burst out in laughter. "Some of them do, especially at the start," explained the man who made his boyfriend laugh.

"straight men tend to feel insecure about their masculinity and think that we're a threat. Once our teammates realised we won't hit on any of them, they got over it." His boyfriend had calmed down a little and joined in, "The gay jokes are a lot funnier now that they know we're actually gay. The silence and awkwardness when someone made the first gay joke after we came out to them was hilarious, but we're all good friends so we can laugh about it."

Shane tried to imagine being in the locker room with his team, joking around, maybe Ilya was there too. He couldn't picture it, yet. If those men made it work, maybe things could somewhat go back the way they were. For the first time in days, he felt a little better. This whole situation felt surreal.

His phone rang again and he groaned, sticking his hand between the couch cushions to grope for the device. He almost dropped it once he read the caller ID. "Hello?" "Open the fucking

door, *milyj*.” He sputtered, “You’re here? Why are you at my apartment?” Shane stumbled his way over a blanket that had fallen off the couch to the front door of his apartment.

“*Zhopa*, stop ignoring your phone when someone calls!” He hung up and opened the door. Shane couldn’t believe it. Ilya was standing outside his apartment. “Ilya?” he felt stupid for asking if it was really him, but he simply couldn’t believe his own eyes. “Ah, you have lost your mind. Is okay. I will come in now.” And he did, moving Shane to the side with a loving squeeze in his arm, before walking into Shane’s apartment as if he owned the place.

He dropped his travel bag next to the couch, turning towards Shane, who closed the front door on autopilot and approached Ilya. “Did you miss me?” Ilya asked with a teasing grin. “Of course I did, you asshole.” They met each other in the middle and Shane felt as if he went back in time to that hotel room years ago, his hands on Ilya’s body, pulling him impossibly closer.

They remained in each other’s arms for what felt like ages, but it didn’t feel long enough. Ilya kept whispering Russian into his hair, Shane knew without a doubt that Ilya was confessing how he felt in his mother tongue, not trusting himself to be able to express himself the way he wanted to in English.

“They will not separate us again, Shane,” Ilya promised and Shane felt himself tear up at the idea of never having to say goodbye to Ilya again, never again. “What did your coach say? Are you – did you end your contract with Boston?” Ilya wiped away the tears gathered in Shane’s eyes, offering a soft smile. “You remember our plan? I play for Ottawa, only 2 hours between us all year round,” he reminded Shane, transporting them back to that one evening at the cottage.

“You changed your contract with Boston to play in Ottawa instead? How – how did you manage that?” Shane asked, impressed at Ilya’s skills to not offend his coach and get himself into more trouble than they already were. Ilya made a sound as if it was easy, “I asked mayor that did speech on television, he talked to my coach, now I play in Ottawa.” The mayor of Ottawa... Shane laughed.

“That man is using us for publicity and you used him to get what you wanted. Smart move, Rozanov.” Shane kissed Ilya, proud of his boyfriend for figuring out a way to be together. “I am always smart. Is you who is stupid,” Ilya teased in between kisses. Shane couldn’t stand this man, but he also couldn’t stand to miss him.

“I’m starving, should we order something?” Shane looked around for his phone, getting distracted by Ilya nipping at his throat. “I couldn’t eat or sleep until I saw you,” Ilya confessed and Shane noticed his eyes shone with unshed tears. “Me neither,” he confessed. “You smell,” Ilya remarked, ruining the moment. “Fuck off.” Ilya laughed without having to hold back for anyone. “Stinky Shane. I don’t want to be around you when you’re stinky.”

“I can’t believe I love you. Get out of my house, right now!” Shane tried to sound serious but Ilya’s laugh was contagious. “You love me? I love you too, *milyj*,” Ilya sweet-talked him, pulling him not-so-subtly towards the bathroom. “If you truly loved me, you’d love me at my smelliest,” Shane retorted, but let himself be undressed by Ilya’s hands.

“When you are sweaty from hockey match you are very hot, so I don’t care about bad smell then,” Ilya pointed out, pulling his shirt over his head and dropping it on the floor without a care. They quickly finished undressing in the bathroom, Shane turning on the shower so the water had time to get hot. Ilya ushered him into the shower, ignoring Shane’s complaints about the water not being up to temperature yet.

“I missed smelling your shampoo,” Ilya admitted into his neck, rubbing slow circles into Shane’s lower back. Shane closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling of Ilya standing behind him, almost pressed chest to back.

Ilya eyed the shelf in the shower, looking for the shampoo he mentioned and put some product on his hand. “I wash your hair now, relax.” Shane kept his eyes closed, smiling the whole time as Ilya skilfully massaged the product into his scalp. “You’re good at this,” he complimented, feeling his muscles slowly relax. “I am good at many things, like... What is the word? *Treating* my boyfriend.” Shane thought for a moment before providing the correct term, “You mean ‘pampering’?” “Yes, I like pampering you,” Ilya repeated.

The thought brought such happiness to Shane that a shiver coursed through his body from the serotonin released in his brain. “I like you pampering me, like, *a lot*,” he emphasized. Ilya hummed, pressing a kiss on against his shoulder blade, “We have one more thing in common then.”

“Close your eyes,” Ilya manoeuvred his head back so he could wash his hair and kept his hand as a barrier over his eyes in case some of the shampoo got in Shane’s eyes. He took his time to softly wash out the suds, telling Shane he was finished with an unexpected kiss to his lips.

“My turn,” Shane said and they exchanged soft smiles, cherishing every second of this moment. Shane grabbed the same shampoo bottle, secretly giddy they would smell the same after their shower.

“Want me to bend down for you,” Ilya teased and Shane punched his shoulder. “We are literally the same height, asshole.” Ilya chuckled, giving him an adoring look, “Whatever makes you happy, *milyj*.” Shane poured the shampoo straight on his head, causing Ilya to protest loudly.

“That’s what you get for being mean,” Shane quipped and carefully spread the shampoo in Ilya’s curls. For a while the only sound they could hear was water hitting the tiles. “I love your curls, they’re pretty,” he confessed and gave Ilya’s nose a kiss. “I got them from my *mama*,” Ilya revealed and Shane pressed their foreheads together. “It’s a part of her that you’ll always carry with you.”

They stayed like that, frozen in time, until Shane felt his stomach start to hurt. He couldn’t remember the last time he had eaten since the incident. Ilya’s stomach rumbled loudly and they both laughed softly. Ilya turned around, allowing Shane to rinse out the shampoo from his hair.

Shane dried himself off quickly, suddenly ravenous for food. He walked into to the bedroom, putting on some sweatpants and a shirt. Ilya didn’t even bother with putting on a shirt, his

sweatpants hanging low on his hips as he entered the kitchen.

“Make me a tuna melt?” Shane asked, hoping he looked cute in his boyfriend’s eyes and not incompetent. “I am guest here. You make me cook? Tsk, I thought Canadians were polite,” Ilya shook his head in mock disbelief. “Dear Ilya, will you please make me your amazing tuna melt?” he tried again and Ilya smirked at him. “You are good at begging. I remember still.”

Shane tried to not think of the exact moment he was referring to as he found two plates and cutlery for them. He watched Ilya put their meal together with practised ease and couldn’t help himself from hoping that this was what their future looked like. Sharing meals together, showering together, simply existing in each other’s spaces. No more hiding, no more rushed moments together in dark hotel rooms only to run off again.

“You cook often?” he asked after swallowing a bite of his tuna melt. Ilya made a noncommittal sound. “I cook when I have time. I am not a shitty cook.” Shane nodded, adding the new information to his mental spreadsheet of Ilya. They knew each other’s bodies intimately, but there were so many things he still didn’t know about the other hockey player.

“I am also good at math, unlike you,” Ilya reminded him and Shane rolled his eyes, ready to defend himself. “I’m used to cooking for more than two people, okay? You’re never going to drop the burger incident, will you?” Ilya adamantly shook his head, “No, you need reminder to stay humble.”

In a bout of childishness, Shane stuck his tongue out before taking another bite of his food. Ilya gasped at him, “You stick – you dare stick your tongue out at me? I will beat you at video game. Come, Shane, we play hockey game with my face on it!” Ilya abandoned his nearly finished food, wiping his hands clean on his sweatpants. He crouched in front of the television, grabbing two controllers and searching for the hockey game they had played at the cottage. “At least finish your food,” Shane chastised, feeling like he was dating a man child.

“Stop stalling, come play so I can beat you with Montreal team,” Ilya egged him on. Shane shoved the last piece of his tuna melt in his mouth, quickly washed his hands and plopped down next to his boyfriend on the couch. “You’re insufferable,” he told him. “You love me,” Ilya returned, rubbing his damp curls on Shane’s shoulder affectionately.

“Some days I still can’t believe I actually do,” Shane mumbled as the match started. True to his words, Ilya beat him at the stupid game, *again*. He just needed to analyse his playing style and then he could form a strategy to win, same as in real life. Ilya stuck his tongue out at him in revenge and he allowed his boyfriend to be unapologetically himself. He took a picture of Ilya without even thinking about it, wanting something he could look back on to remember this moment.

“You take picture of me, I take picture of you.” Shane protested as Ilya shoved his phone in his face, taking the most unflattering pictures of him. Somehow they ended up on the floor, laughing while in a picture-taking battle to get the most unflattering pictures of each other.

“Oh this one is *definitely* becoming my lockscreen,” Shane teased with a big smile on his face. “Show me, Shane.” Ilya pressed his cheek against Shane’s to see the picture he had

taken. “You cannot show anyone that picture. I look like I do drugs.” “I think you look cute, a bit feral, but cute,” Shane defended.

“Well I have very bad pictures of you so better be careful or I will put them on my Instagram,” Ilya warned. “You’re threatening me now, are you? Well I have some interesting pictures too,” he gloated. “I think you look very flattering in this one.” Shane showed his screen and Ilya gasped before laughing, “You are not very boring right now, *milyj*. I dare you post that one, see what happens.”

Shane knew where this was going and he didn’t even pretend to not love every second of it. “Oops, I accidentally added it to my story, sorry.” Ilya chuckled, doing a bad impression of Shane’s Canadian accent, “*Sorry?* You are not sorry at all. See what will happen now!” Ilya tapped away on his phone and Shane worried Ilya would go over the top, causing another scandal. They’d barely survived the last one.

Shane’s phone buzzed with a notification, signalling Ilya had updated his story. “You have my notifications on? You are so easy,” Ilya smirked. The picture Ilya had put on his story took Shane’s breath away. It was a picture he didn’t know the existence of, taken in the early morning while he was still blissfully asleep. He looked at peace, happy, not a single frown line on his forehead.

Ilya had added a caption reading, “My boyfriend is prettiest when he dreams”. Shane covered his eyes with his arm, a poor attempt at hiding how gone he was for the other hockey player. “You asshole, I posted such an ugly picture of you! People will think I’m an asshole now” Ilya pulled his arm away, kissing his cheek. “We can both be assholes together.” Shane laughed at the sweet man. “I would never show people picture of you being ugly. I am too proud of my boyfriend,” Ilya explained.

“I fucking love you, you idiot.” Ilya kissed his other cheek, “I love you too, *milyj*.”

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