influential men

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influential men

by lyric_ghost

Summary

Shane Hollander, captain of the Boston Raiders, is the the undisputed best hockey player of his generation. But he's lonely. His relationships with women have never worked out, and he's afraid he knows why.

Ilya Rozanov is a charismatic, openly bisexual personal trainer and influencer. His content is half thirst traps, half brutal and perceptive hockey critique.

It's no surprise, really, that Shane falls for him so hard and so fast.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane shouldn’t be lurking on social media. People say the worst shit online. Even the brightest star in the MLH isn’t immune to that.

And there’s no question that Shane *is* the top player in the MLH at the moment. He's a generational talent on a level of his own. The Boston Raiders have won the Cup three times since Shane became captain in 2013, and in the year when they didn’t win, 2015, Shane had the flu. It’s not unlikely they’ll lift it up again in 2018, too.

Maybe that has something to do with why Shane is wasting his time on the internet this evening while snow falls over his Boston penthouse. The tension coiling through him just won't fade, and it's been that way for so long. A good hard game used to let him slip into that perfect focus that left all other thoughts behind. But for the past few years, there’s been nobody in the MLH who can really push Shane to his limits as an opponent, leave him wrung out and exhausted and ready to fall into that sweet, deep sleep he misses so badly. And there’s nobody he can really enjoy beating, either. The expectation is that he’s always the best, and if he fails, it’s a disappointment.

Going for a run, which usually helps when Shane gets feeling like this, is out of the question. Even here in the heart of the city, the sidewalks are all foot-wide icy paths carved into grubby, two-foot-deep snow. Plus, these days it gets dark early, gets light late, even more so than in Ottawa.

Sometimes Shane wishes he’d been drafted to a Canadian team so he wasn’t so far away from home.

Anyway, today the topic of discussion on Reddit is (not for the first time) the merits of Vincent Lemaire, who was drafted second the year Shane was drafted first. For a while, the NHL tried to spin up some kind of rivalry between them for PR, to add some excitement. That soon fell flat: Lemaire is a good player, just not a match for Shane. In the end, there was never any contest at all, except in the minds of people who thought Shane was too “cerebral.” They never seemed to be able to provide examples of what that actually meant.

Reddit mostly agrees that Shane and Vincent are not on the same level, though a few Lemaire fans are arguing on his behalf. What’s weird is that lots of people are replying to the Lemaire fans using the same meme.

It’s a picture of a strikingly beautiful man who’s as built and muscled as any guy on Shane’s team. That’s clear because the man is shirtless, wearing only sweatpants and a gold chain with some kind of small pendant glinting where it rests on his chest.

This stranger looks loose-limbed and relaxed, sitting on a couch with an arm stretched out over its back like he’s saying *I own this place,* like he loves inhabiting his body. That’s a

feeling Shane has never been able to grasp, although it seems as though he ought to; his own body is nothing if not a perfectly honed machine.

The man's face is handsome too: expressive and confident, interesting in its angles. His curling, dark blond hair is half-damp, as though he just got out of the shower.

The subtitles on this image say: *Hollander is best, it's just a fucking fact.*

At first, Shane thinks this is one of those memes where people edit out the real words and put in whatever replacements suit the current situation. As he scrolls, though, the same image keeps popping up. Did this guy really say that?

Eventually, breaking his rule of only commenting online when he's contractually obligated to, Shane actually replies to one of the images: *Sorry, who is the guy in the picture?* This should be safe; he's using a totally anonymous username that's mainly for lurking. So there's no reason for him to feel nervous or awkward about it. Even if someone doxxed his Reddit account, Shane's never done anything bad. He sometimes gives diet and workout tips to guys in fitness subs.

Ilya Rozanov. Influencer, he's so funny, responds one commenter, providing an Instagram link.

Thank you, Shane types.

He clicks on the link. Instagram opens up, and there's no question this profile belongs to the same man: Ilya Rozanov, a personal trainer, apparently. There's a link to inquire about booking a session in the Boston area(!), and the text: *Correct opinions about ice hockey. I will probably never reply to your DM.*

There are a lot of thirst trap photos. The videos are more varied. Some are Rozanov (again, gorgeously shirtless and wearing that thin gold chain) demonstrating workout tips in a gym. Others seem to be hockey tips filmed in the Raiders' very own practice rink, Victory Ice Arena, which has public sessions when the Raiders are out of town. It's oddly surprising to see this man in a place that's so woven into Shane's life.

In the majority of the reels, however, Rozanov is sitting on the couch in what's obviously his home. It's such a warm, comfortable-seeming place: a large sash window, framed pictures and a Boston University pennant on the wall behind him, a knitted blanket with a bright geometric design tossed over the back of the couch.

Not at all like Shane's penthouse, which is pretty much exactly how it was when the interior designer he hired left. The penthouse is bold, plain, masculine. Those are the words the designer chose when they were talking, because Shane didn't know what he wanted. He doesn't hate what he got: dark wood floors, good quality furniture in simple shapes, lots of blue. His apartment is a lot like some of the hotels he stays in, actually.

Shane plays through the reels, choosing them more or less at random. In the ones on Rozanov's couch, he's often ruthlessly tearing into a team or a player for their weaknesses—always with a hockey-typical amount of cursing and in deep, Russian-accented tones that are

nice to listen to. Rozanov *is* funny. Charismatic, too. Shane breaks into laughter at a scathing diatribe about Hayden Pike's missed shots this season and then stops himself guiltily, as though a reporter is going to pop out of the walls of his penthouse and catch him being unsportsmanlike.

From Rozanov's comments, it seems like half his viewers find him hilarious, and the other half love to hate him. Rozanov feeds off the hate comments, often creating reels demonstrating the exact skills he's criticizing in professional NHL players.

And . . . he's good. Like, actually good. His handling of the puck is smooth, easy. His skating is fast and natural. Of course, demonstrating a single skill in isolation is nothing like playing in a professional team. For all that Rozanov groans about the Centaurs' failures, he surely couldn't stand to-to-toe with worst of them. But all that cocky boasting isn't totally baseless. Rozanov has real skills as well as good looks and a wicked tongue.

Yes, Rozanov obviously has played hockey at some point, even if he was just a kid. Shane wonders why Rozanov gave it up, if he still loves it so much. He'd be a great player to watch.

The video that the meme was taken from is one of Rozanov's most popular. "Are you *fucking* kidding me?" he says, next to an image of an article with the headline: *Lemaire and the Art of Instinct: Why Shane Hollander is Overhyped*.

"I'm so sorry this writer can't do basic fucking math," Rozanov says. He counts on his fingers, starting from the pinky and working inward. "Goals, assists, points, shooting percentage. Whatever stat you pick, Hollander is best, it's just a fucking fact!" As though he's genuinely getting a headache, he rubs his forehead hard. "Like, I get it, it's fun to argue on the internet. But it is not fun when the argument is so fucking stupid. There is no Hollander–Lemaire rivalry, it's just Hollander way in front"—Rozanov holds his hand out to demonstrate—"and Lemaire following him like a slow sausage dog on long leash. Can we please argue about more interesting shit like whether Comeau actually knows the difference between left and right. Which, he doesn't."

Shane bursts out laughing again. He can't help but watch the reel several times more, even though it's strangely kind of embarrassing. It shouldn't be; Shane's used to this kind of praise, or at least he thought he was.

Eventually, Shane moves on, prying further into Rozanov's posts and stopping on a photo from June two years ago. Rozanov, shirtless still, smiling wide, crowded together into the frame with a bunch of other friends in the bright summer outdoors. A flag with blue, purple, and pink stripes is painted on his cheek.

Oh.

Rozanov looks so joyful, grinning in the sunshine with his arms around his friends. So gorgeous.

Shane closes his laptop, gets a ginger ale from the fridge, sits on his own couch. Puts his head between his knees for a minute, just until the worst of the agitated buzzing along his skin

goes away. When he's more centered, he leans back and sips his drink, focusing on the familiar taste to bring him back to himself.

After Rose broke up with him last year, Shane had some questions to face. "Have you ever been with a guy?" she'd asked.

"No." How could he risk totally fucking up his career? How would he even meet someone without doing something potentially disastrous like downloading Grindr or going to a gay club?

"Have you ever thought about it?"

"Yes," Shane had said. The word just came out. Yes, he thought about it before Rose, and he thinks about it even more now. He thinks about it when he uses the dildo in the plastic box in his closet. He thinks about it and tries *not* to think about it, which is actually thinking about it even more. He *doesn't think about it* so hard that it feels like it's going to destroy him, sometimes.

Before Rose, Shane wouldn't have known what the bisexual flag meant. He did some research that summer, half a year ago. He still isn't completely sure whether that flag is for him.

He's dated four nice, beautiful women, Rose being the last of them, and none of those women made Shane feel the way he feels looking at the way this shirtless hockey influencer is sprawled there on the couch, the way he occasionally winks at the camera. It's not just that Rozanov is beautiful. It's the way he seems so free.

But that captured moment of Rozanov's happiness at the Pride parade—it's so totally out of reach for Shane. Impossible. Shane's never even tasted a kiss with another man. How could he, when he's been a celebrity since he was eighteen?

Chapter End Notes

Hello, welcome to this fic! ❤️ First-time readers beware there may be massive spoilers in the comments, so you may want to avoid the comment section!

And to all the people who have come to re-read after finishing the fic: in the words of Ilya, good job, I love you!

Chapter 2

Shane now has an anonymous second Instagram account.

It happened about two weeks after Shane first discovered Ilya Rozanov. On wintry nights when Shane was at home alone, lying on his couch and staring at his phone by the light of a single lamp, his thumbs had taken him again and again to Rozanov's funny diatribes and his cocky smile. And that terrified Shane, because it would take just one fumble for ShaneHollanderOfficial to like Rozanov's reel. Would someone suspect that Shane had some further interest in Rozanov that went beyond hockey? Shane didn't want to find out.

So, Shane is now NewYorker1990. He was actually born in 1991, so that part's fake, and the NewYorker part was inspired by his dad sending him an article while Shane was trying to think of a name. This is perfect: it has no connection to Shane Hollander, who was born in Ottawa and lives in Boston.

To make his profile seem more genuine, Shane takes photos of some of his meals and posts them, always making sure that nothing else is in the photo except his black kitchen countertop. No identifying details. He can't afford to make a mistake.

With this safety mechanism in place, Shane can keep watching Rozanov without risking everything. This is probably not healthy. Shane knows it. But the playoffs are getting closer, and Shane's not feeling in sync with himself like he wants to be. He's off his game oh so slightly—maybe just five percent. That's still not good.

He can't really tell whether this thing with Instagram is hurting or helping. It's probably bad that Shane keeps thinking about Rozanov's apartment and how it would feel to live there, to just . . . be a normal guy and be bi, or gay, and kiss whoever you wanted, and make videos telling professional hockey players that they're fucking useless, and not have to worry all the time about whether you were letting everyone down.

In March, Shane likes one of Rozanov's posts for the first time. This is because Ilya—Rozanov—has bought a dog, a soft, sweet puppy that he's named Anya. Rozanov obviously dotes on her, and the wave of reels where he's ranting about hockey while cuddling her into his forever-shirtless chest get considerably more likes than before. The sight of it makes Shane feel—something. And plenty of people are liking the Anya content, so nobody will notice.

Rozanov is super responsive to comments praising his dog, too. And eventually Shane can't resist. Sweaty-fingered, Shane types out: *Anya is great! She's becoming a hockey fan already!*

An hour or so later, Rozanov actually replies. *Thank you! It means a lot that my fans like her too.*

That's a lot more vulnerability than Shane had expected. It's a connection, though a tiny spiderweb-thin one, between him and Rozanov. It keeps Shane up late, way later than he should be staying up since he has a game the next day.

That's been happening too much recently, anyway. But the tough thing about sport is that stuff you can't put numbers to, like gut instinct and confidence, can either destroy you or make you fly high. Right now, Shane doesn't see the playoffs going well, and he can't tell whether that's Instinct or self-fulfilling prophecy.

At least Rozanov is definitely less hard on the Raiders—not surprising, since they're his home team. He's hopeful about their chances. When he criticizes Shane, he's always correct and even . . . kind. He never calls Shane a dumb fucker or useless.

That's not really surprising either. Shane is the captain who got the Raiders three Cups. Boston is loyal to him. It doesn't mean anything.

And yet Shane keeps watching Rozanov's videos like they're a lucky charm.

It's extra embarrassing, then, when Boston's first game in the playoffs goes badly. Shane heads home, showers miserably for like half an hour, and opens up Instagram as soon as he's toweled off. He's dreading Rozanov's breakdown of the game. Rozanov fucking hates Montreal, too, which makes Boston's defeat by them even worse.

Instead, what greets him is a reel on a totally different subject.

Rozanov is sitting cross-legged on a soft rug on his floor and petting Anya. The sunshine is bright through his apartment windows, spilling over the living room and turning the edges of Anya's speckled fur golden-white. "I have been getting so many DMs asking for fitness help from people who don't live in Boston," he says. "Okay, so I am offering a new service. Limited time only, and limited numbers. If you don't get chosen, sorry." A curling smile that doesn't look sorry at all. "Fill in the form I link, and I will create a custom workout video for you. Fifty dollars. Thirty minutes. And yes, it's a *workout* video, perverts. I only fuck for free."

Shane would never have imagined that he'd be laughing tonight, but Rozanov has made him do the impossible.

And there's absolutely no way he can resist this. He needs it. He'd spend five thousand dollars for it.

After a couple of clicks, Rozanov's simple form opens up in front of Shane. It asks for some basic details—name, age, fitness level, any injuries, fitness goals. Shane gives a fake name, of course.

What are Shane's fitness goals?

I already have a strength training program. And I jog for cardio, and I do yoga. And I play a sport, like I wrote above. I need a routine to help me focus on the ice—

Shane backspaces.

I need a routine to help me focus during sport and get from 95% to 100%.

It's a few days later, the morning before an away game in Montreal, when Shane gets a reply. His hotel room is worn and tired-looking, a lot like Shane himself, and the lamp by his bed doesn't work. Shane has to scramble in the winter dark to find his phone on the nightstand when his alarm goes off.

When he sees the email from *ilyarozanov81*, he sits up in bed, all at once wide awake.

Congratulations! You have been chosen for one of my custom workout videos.

Sean, I am going to create a routine for you based on stretching and mindfulness, with elements of yoga and barre. If this is acceptable, click this payment link.

"Fuck," Shane says to himself. Is this good? Has he taken this obsession too far?

Doesn't matter. A thirty-minute video just for him, and Rozanov might even call by a name that sounds almost like his own?

After checking twice that the payment system is truly private, Shane pays.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Tags have changed, please note them!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Boston beats Montreal, though only just. The Raiders are still in the playoffs, and that's what matters.

Shane’s leg bounces throughout the plane flight home until Marleau, who’s sitting next to him, begs him to stop. Normally this would be time for someone to holler at him that he needs to get laid. Usually, Shane might make up a lie, go out with them for a short while that night and then disappear at a bar, claiming to have gone home with a girl. He isn’t sure how often they believe him.

Nobody’s in the mood for that today.

Back in his Beacon Street penthouse, Shane shoves his dirty clothes in the laundry machine, takes a shower, and makes himself a small bowl of brown pasta, greens, beans, and tuna. He eats while messing around with his TV to get Ilya Rozanov’s downloaded video to display on it. That was part of Rozanov’s instructions that came with the .zip file he sent. Do the routine on a quiet evening when you can relax afterwards; put the video on your TV; eat something light beforehand; dim the lights a little; lay out your yoga mat; put a full glass of water nearby before you start.

Shane follows the instructions one by one, and some of the energy coursing through him starts to ebb away already. It’s not always easy being captain of a MLH team, being a role model and a brand ambassador, knowing that every split-second decision he makes on the ice carries the hopes of all his teammates and their fans. Checking simple tasks off a list is nice.

At last, they’re all done. Shane sits on his couch and presses play on his TV. And Rozanov appears.

For once, Rozanov is wearing a tank top—which is fine, and practical. His golden cross is still gleaming over it. He’s in his apartment’s living room, as usual, but the lights are dimmed there too, and Rozanov’s sitting cross-legged on a carpet rather than sprawled on his couch. No music is playing in the background: that’s unexpected but welcome. It kind of makes the video feel less manufactured, more like a real person just talking to Shane.

“Hi, Sean,” Rozanov says. It’s not the peppy greeting Shane is used to from fitness professionals. Rozanov’s tone is more serious and quieter than usual, though he’s still smiling. “This video is for you. To get you back to one hundred percent.”

Sean, the name so close to his own, sends a tiny thrill up Shane's spine. Oh, it's not smart that he's doing this, but he's not going to stop. Rozanov's voice sounds so good, so confident that his video will work.

"Make sure you followed my instructions," Rozanov goes on. "You should have a glass of water next to you."

"Yeah," Shane murmurs.

"You're going to do some movements that I think you already know, from what you said on your form. Tonight, you're going to do them mindfully. You will think only about your body, how it feels, and what I am telling you to do."

Shane takes in a deep breath and lets it out. He's not going to fuck this up.

"Okay." Rozanov's smile curls up a little at its ends. "You will start with stretching. Get down on the floor. Legs apart in a V-shape. You'll stretch your hamstrings."

Shane does it.

"You know how hard to push yourself: only until you feel a little bit of burn, not so much that it really hurts. Go to your left side first. You will reach for your foot and stretch. I think you must be very flexible, doing so much yoga."

Clearing his throat, Shane glances up. The video now has a split screen: on the left, Rozanov still sitting cross-legged and facing him, looking right at him like he can see through the TV, while on the right another Rozanov is doing the exercise. He is *very* flexible, pushing himself flat along his own leg.

Shane looks down again, focusing on pressing his upper body close to the thick muscle of his quads.

"Good. Now the other side."

More stretches follow, and now the movements turn into yoga poses. Cobra, child's pose, dolphin: lots of being on the ground. Yes, Shane has done these before, so why is it different? He is more relaxed already. Lighter.

"Next you will move onto your hands and knees. Box pose. You know it," Rozanov says in that sure, steady tone. "Focus on the position of your body and what it's telling you. Through the yoga mat, you can sense the hard floor against your hands and your knees. Your muscles are relaxed now. It's comfortable to be in this pose. You can stay like this for a long time."

"Fuck," Shane mutters to himself. He's getting hard. Really?

"Extend your left leg straight behind you. You will lift it slightly and then lower it. Pulse like that ten times. Don't bring it down again until you are done."

He does as Rozanov says, following along as the man on the right side of the TV moves his leg with perfect control. This exercise is followed by more and more—one where Shane

pushes his leg backwards, one where he moves his legs out sideways, opening up his pelvis. Shane has been on his hands and knees for maybe like ten minutes at this point, but Rozanov is right: Shane is strong. It's easy to be in this pose. Comfortable, if not for the hardness in his sweatpants. He's getting a little sleepy, actually. Like he's drifting away or sinking into a warm bath.

On the TV's left side, Rozanov is still sitting cross-legged, simply looking at Shane. Watching him.

"Now you will move into locust pose. That means on your front, arms at your sides, and lift your legs up from the ground as much as possible."

"Oh, fuck," Shane mumbles again, because this is *not* the position he wants to be in right now. But it's not like he can do anything else. He gets down on the floor, trying to ignore his semi-hard dick pressing against his yoga mat, and follows the order. At least his arousal isn't too urgent, thanks to his sleepiness.

"Good," says Rozanov. "Hold. You will focus on the feedback from your body. Slow breaths. You are doing well."

Closing his eyes, Shane tries to focus not on that particular part of him, but on his bare forearms, on the bruises from a hard check yesterday. On his breathing. Everything is both vivid and a little distant.

Then Rozanov is leading him through more poses and stretches. Shane does his best to follow. His joints are loose, and it's hard to think. He wishes Rozanov was in the room with him. Touching him. Even putting one warm palm on his shoulder. Still, Rozanov's voice is good to listen to.

"Now you will lie down fully. Arms by your sides, face up. Breathe deep. We are finishing with a visualization.

"Gravity is pulling you downward. You can feel it. There's a direct line of gravity from your body, to your floor, to the foundation of your house. Sense it, how you are connected to the earth in every place your body touches the mat."

Shane senses it.

"The gravity goes on downward. From your foundations, down through the dirt, to the earth's hot core. You are connected all the way. Gravity is holding you. Feel the line of it, how it travels thousands of miles. Can you feel it?"

"Yes," Shane murmurs. He really can.

"Good. You will lie like this. As you breathe in and out, you will be aware of your breaths and the pull of gravity. I will count, and you will breathe. Slow and deep. One. Two. Three . . ."

Shane is waves on the shore, moving only when Rozanov counts. It's bliss.

Hours later—or that's how it seems—Rozanov's voice breaks the spell. "You're all done now, Sean. You did a good job."

Without opening his eyes, Shane rolls onto his side. He's almost asleep, smiling into the yoga mat.

"I want you to slowly sit up and take a drink of water."

Reluctantly, Shane does. He's in such a daze, it takes him a few minutes before he can figure out how to shuffle over to the side table where he left his glass.

"Good," Rozanov says. "This is a good workout and visualization for you. You will not have trouble reaching a hundred percent now, I think."

The water is cool and refreshing. Shane rubs his eyes and looks at the TV again; at some point he forgot to keep doing that. Rozanov, unexpectedly, is petting the ears of his puppy, who is half-onscreen. "Look, Anya wanted to meet you," he says tenderly. "Anechka, you want to be in the video?" He hoists her up and settles her in his lap. "Anya, this is Sean. Sean, this is Anya."

There's a lump in Shane's throat. "Hello, Anya," he says in his empty apartment.

"Thank you for watching my video," Rozanov says, scratching Anya's head. "I hope you had good time. Have a relaxing night tonight."

But Rozanov doesn't turn off the camera right away. He spends some time baby-talking to his dog in Russian and smoothing his big hands over her soft fur. It's so sweet, so unlike his usual brash persona. Shane feels guilty; surely Rozanov didn't mean to include this in the video.

It's helpful, though, because it gives Shane the chance to come back to himself more fully. What the fuck just happened to him, and why did it feel so good?

God, Rozanov is so hot, even in the frozen image that the video ended on. The erection that Shane lost at some point during all that reawakens at the memory of Rozanov's steady voice, at Rozanov's gaze that was only for Shane. Shane finishes the glass of water and stumbles into the shower again, where he comes in about thirty seconds flat.

He just about manages to put on some pajamas and slide into bed before he falls into the deepest, most restful sleep he can remember having, ever.

Chapter End Notes

I am not a fitness, medical, BDSM, or mental health professional. Don't take anything from this story as advice.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day after he watches Rozanov's video, Shane scores a hat trick against Montreal, winning the game for Boston.

Obviously, the guys swarm him in the locker room afterward.

"Captain!" Marleau grabs him in a rough hug.

"Yeah, Hollzy!"

"Look at this Zen motherfucker! He definitely got laid," says Kane of the one-track mind. In Kane's point of view, pussy is the cure for everything that can ail a man, up to and including a broken leg.

Unprepared for the joke, Shane lets too much show on his face.

"Oh yeah, he did!" Kane crows. "Who's the girl with the magic—"

Shane shoves him amiably. "Shut the fuck up!"

"Okay, but Hollzy," said Saint-Simon, "can she come with us to Montreal?" He might not be fully joking. Who wouldn't do anything to win?

"No," Shane improvises. He needs to keep it short; he's not good at lying. "She's, uh, really busy. With her job."

"Phone sex," Kane prescribes promptly.

"Fuck *off*," says Shane more seriously, and, well, he's their captain who won three Cups for them. They shut up.

That evening, Shane drives to his favorite jogging spot: the Chestnut Hill reservoir all the way down Beacon Street, half an hour from his apartment near the state house and the Common. After he parks his car, he stretches a little—and Ilya Rozanov's voice guiding him through those stretches comes back to him.

Shane scrubs his hands over his face and sets off on his first loop around the water.

Rozanov could live near here. It's very possible. Rozanov goes to the practice rink at Victory Ice Arena often, so it's reasonable to think he could live in Brighton. Shane could run into him on the street one day. Because he's a real person, not just a face on a screen.

What's haunting Shane is that Rozanov is a *fan*. He seems to think highly of the great Shane Hollander. And he's bisexual. In a different world, one where nobody cared if you were gay

or bi or whatever, Shane could slide into his DMs from his official account. And there's a chance—maybe a large chance—that Rozanov would be interested.

But Shane *cannot* afford to think that way. He's not even out to his parents, for fuck's sake! He's barely been out to *himself*. This secret, this huge aspect of who he is, has been totally his own all his life. Even Rose only knows that he's thought about guys at least once. Nobody in the world really knows him. And nobody ever can.

In a secluded spot by some blossoming trees, Shane stops and leans over, bracing his hands on his legs as though he's winded. He's not; his cardio endurance is great. It's just hard to stomach sometimes that he's going to be closeted, if that's the right word, forever. Until he dies.

He's never felt for a woman the way he feels about Ilya Rozanov, and the way he felt about Timpson when he was on the farm team, and Faulkner when he was in juniors. And he won't marry a woman just for appearances. That would be cruel to her.

So he's never going to be in love. He's never going to be married. He'll probably be in the Hall of Fame, and people might make comments about how he was a *lifelong bachelor*. And that will be all he did with his life.

"Fuck," Shane says to himself. His eyes are prickling. But he doesn't let any tears fall. Two decades of hockey—hell, two *years* of hockey—taught him that you don't cry, no matter what.

The drive home is tough, and not just because of the shitty Boston traffic and ten million stoplights on Beacon Street.

Naturally, the first thing Shane after preparing his dinner is to take out his phone and see what's new from Ilya Rozanov. It's way too late to try breaking this addiction. This guy is just too . . . everything. Too funny, too charming, too sweet with his dog, too hot with that whatever-the-fuck-it-was meditation thing. So much of an asshole when he's ranting about the efforts of professional hockey players who put literal blood and sweat into their work.

Shane just can't help it.

The next away game comes, and Shane doesn't try to watch Rozanov's video in the hotel in Montreal. The video feels sacred.

Shane remembers it, though. He remembers it when he jerks off and remembers it at bedtime when he does Rozanov's visualization again. "You will not have trouble reaching a hundred percent now," Rozanov had said with total confidence.

And he's right. The Raiders win in Montreal, and they win at the TD Garden too, and that's enough to get them through to the third round.

There, they face Toronto, and wow, Shane is not going to be popular the next time he shows his face in Canada, because they knock Toronto out in the seventh game.

All that's left, then, is the final series. The Raiders versus the New York Admirals.

And it's as hard as climbing up a cliff-face. Shane is back on top of his game, but the Raiders are really suffering with injuries. Shane himself has a bad elbow from a dirty check, and if it wasn't the playoffs he might be out for a game to recover. They can't afford that now.

The Raiders do their best. But in the end, the Admirals take the seventh game 4-3.

Shane watches as their families pile onto the ice and embrace the exhausted Admirals.

And then he watches as Scott Hunter beckons a man down out of the crowd. And kisses him at center ice.

A few seconds after this long kiss begins, Shane realizes there are going to be cameras on him. He forces himself to stop gawping and applauds. "Yeah, go Hunter!" he calls out. "Right, Marly?"

"Yeah," Marleau says. "Yeah!" He starts clapping too, and gradually the rest of the Raiders join in.

And . . . the world doesn't end. An NHL captain kissed another guy in public and . . . it's okay. Sure, there will probably be waves and waves of hate online. Sure, lots of people in offices will be mad. But it's basically . . . okay. more people are cheering than not.

That evening, in the privacy of his hotel room, Shane puts his earbuds in and goes to see what Rozanov has to say.

There is a new reel uploaded just an hour ago. For once, Rozanov is actually wearing a shirt in it. His demeanor is totally different, too. There's no cocky smile, and he's sitting up straight.

"I will talk more about today's game later," Rozanov says. "For today, I just want to say—we owe a lot to Scott Hunter." He sniffs hard and then raises his chin defiantly, as if to say *I didn't just do that*. "You know I was born in Russia. I have probably said so. I mean, you can tell." There's a flicker of his smile. "And if I had not been adopted here when I was nine, I would still have Russian passport. I would never be able to go on here and say, 'I'm bi.' So . . . appreciate this. Especially if you grew up in a place where it was mostly safe to not be straight. Because every time a Scott Hunter shows the world that you can be a great hockey player and a good man and be in love with other men, he opens a path for others to do the same. It must be so hard to be the first. Maybe is less hard to be the second. I hope that in the future, nobody has to keep this thing a secret when it's nothing wrong. And Scott Hunter has shown us that being gay or not makes no difference when it comes to playing hockey.

"Even if he is seventy-eight years old."

Shane's throat is tight. *Maybe is less hard to be the second*.

Nobody is better qualified to be the second out NHL player than Shane Hollander, best of his generation.

But Scott Hunter had someone to kiss on the ice. Shane doesn't.

Yet.

Chapter End Notes

Because I like talking about Boston, I have written a tumblr post about some of the locations in this chapter: https://www.tumblr.com/lyricghost/816605138062049280/boston-places-influential-men-chapter-4

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As usual, Shane heads to his cottage, his “fortress of solitude,” after the season ends. Being back in Canada does feel weird, in a way. Because he’s lived in Boston his whole adult life, the city’s become an inextricable part of him. At the same time, he will always be Canadian in his heart—and at the Olympics, of course.

Shane swims in his private lake, works out in his gym, sets aside an hour or so each day to read the endless stream of content and think pieces inspired by Scott Hunter’s revelation. And Shane keeps up with Ilya Rozanov’s posts, of course.

Three days into Shane’s vacation, there’s something new: for the first time, someone else—a very beautiful woman—is sitting on Ilya’s couch by his side. It’s embarrassing how quickly Shane’s heart sinks; Ilya always said he was bisexual, right? And Shane is a total stranger to him. He’s becoming like those people on the internet who think they’re friends with celebrities just because they see them a lot on TV.

And Ilya looks really happy. More like he did on Shane’s private video, with a wide smile rather than the cocky smirk he often wears. “This is my old friend Sveta. Svetlana,” he explains. “We were childhood friends in Russia. We lost track of one another for a while. It was by luck we found we were in the same city after all.”

“And we are still both hockey fanatics,” Svetlana says with a smile that mirrors Ilya’s and an accent that’s reminiscent of his, too. She looks comfortable sitting there next to him with her legs crossed.

Ilya tells the camera: “Her father is Sergei Vetrov. Legendary Russian goalie. Don’t write stupid comments correcting her about hockey. She knows more than you.”

Svetlana laughs. “He has not changed at all! Still full of mischief. A little taller, though.”

Ilya pretends to be outraged. “A little taller?! I left Russia at age nine!”

“Like I said, a little taller. Maybe inch or two.”

They start play-wrestling, and Shane turns his phone off and goes for a run.

Ilya described her as a childhood friend. They might not be dating. The video was painful anyway, and it’s only after a lengthy jog that Shane has untangled why: because Ilya is so intimate with his friends, including Svetlana and the friends in the photos he posts. In the sacred privacy of his cottage, Shane can allow himself the thought that he has no friends who are that close to him.

His teammates are his friends, yes, and they insult and shove one another just like any hockey players do, especially when they're bored or annoying each other during long roadies. In happier moments, they hug and show physical affection, too. Yet there's some quality missing in the way Marleau and the others are with Shane, compared to how Ilya is with Svetlana. *Tenderness* might be the word.

Sometimes Shane thinks that being called a generational talent has put up an invisible wall between him and his peers. People look up to him, admire him, are jealous of him, or want to able to boast that they beat him, the great Shane Hollander.

Though the next few days, Shane tries—mostly unsuccessfully—to go cold turkey on Ilya's instagram. Svetlana doesn't show up again. There's one reel of Ilya at Victory Ice Arena demonstrating crossovers, which he does very well, and a workout video where Ilya's sweating and shirtless as he talks about good rowing machine form. Everyone in the comments of that one sees it for exactly what it is; there are lots of flame and panting emojis.

Is it weird if Shane likes the skating video even better? It's not like crossovers are hard, any kid can do them, but Ilya really does them so fluidly.

Shane has accepted that this is how his vacation will be—just relaxation and occasional Rozanov addiction—until just about halfway through, he gets an email. From Ilya Rozanov.

Hi Sean,

Hope you enjoyed your personalized workout. Will you tell me how it was? I always want to get better.

Best,

Ilya

There's no possible universe where it was better. Shane's mouth is dry as he replies.

Hi Ilya,

Thank you very much for the video. It was really good.

Best,

Sean

He doesn't know what else to say or how to explain how he felt. He doesn't want to be an online weirdo; he faces enough of those himself.

Surprisingly, another email arrives a minute later.

Hi Sean,

That's great. Did the video help you get to complete 100% like you wanted?

Shane really has a problem, because no way Ilya means that as sexually as it comes off in Shane's mind.

Hi Ilya,

Yes. It did. Thank you.

After some struggle, Shane adds:

It was a very unique workout. I mean that in a good way.

After another minute, Shane's phone pings again.

Hi Sean,

I always like to hear my clients have good experience. It is too bad you don't live in Boston. If you did, I could train you here. A couple of my clients graduated in spring and moved away, so I have extra time.

Shane can hardly believe what he's reading. His first reaction is that it's impossible: Ilya would have to know who Shane really is.

Is that so bad, though? Ilya doesn't have to know that Shane . . . might be interested in guys. Nobody has to know that Ilya is training Shane at all.

And Ilya's video did make a difference to his game. Shane still watches it occasionally—not too often, so that its impact doesn't wear off with familiarity. How much better could Shane be if he trained with Ilya all the time?

Shane closes the gmail app and turns on the TV. For once, he doesn't even want to play MLH15.

After breakfast the next morning, Shane totally gives in, just as he knew he would. He's helpless to resist.

Hi Ilya,

That would be great. Actually, I am in Boston sometimes. I have several homes. That's not a lie, though he doesn't have one in New York, which is where he said he lived on the form. *But is it okay if you don't post about our sessions on Instagram?* Not that Ilya ever does that —he's never mentioned a client. *I am a public figure to some extent and I prefer to be private.*

Best,

Sean

After Shane hits "send," he's dizzy. He has to put his head between his legs for a while. What is he doing?

Exactly thirty-six minutes later, at 11am on the dot, Ilya responds:

Dear Sean,

That's no problem. My clients' details are always private. You said you work out a lot, so maybe you have a home gym? We can train there for privacy.

When do you want your first session?

Ilya in Shane's own home is a totally unexpected image that leaves Shane speechless. It is the smartest solution, though. In public, someone could take photos of them and start a rumor. "Why is Shane Hollander spending time with this influencer?"

I'm sorry, I'm away now, Shane writes. He's never regretted being on vacation before. *I'll be back in Boston in September. Could we start then?*

No problem, is Ilya's response again. *Email me with your schedule when you are back.*

Shane flops backward on his couch. This summer, he fears, is going to go very slowly.

During the months until September—even at training camp—Shane re-reads this email thread again and again, to a definitely unhealthy extent. He doesn't have to completely avoid thinking about Ilya's videos, either: apparently several of his teammates have encountered them and developed crushes on Svetlana, so the ones with her are acceptable discussion material. As for Ilya and his sexuality . . . the comments aren't bad. A few remarks that make Shane cringe. It's not as awful as he might have predicted. Maybe Scott Hunter deserves some credit for that.

When Shane finally returns to his Boston penthouse, which his cleaning service has left perfectly neat and tidy, he's almost sick with nerves. His home looks nice, all good quality fabrics and sturdy furniture and real wood, but it might be too cold and sterile in comparison to Ilya's. Shane has no college banners to put on his walls, and displaying Raiders merch would just be bringing work home. His trophies are all in a separate room, since it's kind of weird to just keep them out—right?

Shane also half worries that Ilya will have changed his mind about training him, but it doesn't go that way. They agree on a date—a training date, a date for the training session—a week before the preseason starts.

Three days before the training session, Shane meets up with Marleau and his other closest friends on the team at a bar. He doesn't drink, but he does take photos with his phone.

"This is new. You taking up photography as a hobby, Hollzy?" Saint-Simon asks him.

"Maybe. Kinda," Shane says. He has one of the photos, plus a few others people have sent to him, printed and framed and hung around his apartment. He doesn't know why he never bothered to do this before. Well, he sees the guys at work all the time, so there never seemed to be a point in having photos of them as well.

And then the appointed day arrives. Shane's wearing the brand new sweatpants and t-shirt one of his sponsors just sent over. That's nice, right?

The only hitch is that he . . . has failed to think of a way to reveal his real identity to Ilya before they meet.

"*Dear Ilya, I am actually the captain of your home hockey team. You talk about me all the time. I was just calling myself Sean as a joke.*" No.

"*Hi Ilya, I'm secretly Shane Hollander! Surprise!*" No.

In his final email to Ilya, Shane just tells him to head to the penthouse; Shane's given the doorman permission to let Ilya in.

Shane is sitting on his couch, slightly spiralling, when there's finally a firm knock at his door. "Get it together," Shane mutters to himself. He can pull himself together before a game, no matter how stressed he is.

The ice is his home, though. This is unfamiliar territory.

Shane takes a deep breath, heads over to the door, and opens it.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter coming very soon.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya Rozanov is so beautiful in person that Shane can hardly breathe. Not what a model agency or Hollywood director would call perfect—he has that mole on his cheek and it looks like his nose has been broken before—but he's so, so full of life, so confident even as he stands in his sweatpants and sweatshirt outside the door of Shane's fancy penthouse. His shoulders are broad. Is that golden necklace hidden underneath his outer layers?

"Shane Hollander," Ilya says—without surprise, though there is a trace of throatiness in his voice. "Ilya Rozanov." He extends his hand.

Automatically, Shane shakes it. It's warm, slightly rough. "Hello. You—knew who I was?"

"You are a bad liar," Ilya says, but he's smiling what seems to be a genuine smile. There's no meanness in his expression. "Will you invite me in?"

"Oh, yes, of course." Shane stands aside as Ilya puts down the gym bag he was carrying and removes his sneakers by stepping on each shoe's heel. Wait, should Shane be concerned about . . . stalking? "How did you know?"

"It wasn't hard," Ilya says. He starts ticking off points on his fingers, starting with the pinky, just as Shane's seen him do many times on Instagram. It's so weird seeing him make the same gestures in person. "One: you said you do so many fitness activities. You are either a professional or competitive athlete, or a rich person with no job who can afford to spend so many hours working out, or you are lying about your fitness. I thought to myself, I don't think he is lying about that, because why lie and say you need to get to 100%? Two: On your form, you didn't say exactly which sport you play. Why not say it? It may be a secret. Why a secret? You're famous and don't want me to know. Three: I am a hockey influencer, so if you are an athlete, you are probably hockey player. Four: So you are a hockey player trying to hide who you are, and you call yourself Sean—sounds like Shane. Five: I know from this documentary that Shane Hollander does yoga. That's not common among hockey players."

Ilya moves on to the other hand. "And six: you *did* play better after my video." He says it with a touch of arrogance that's exactly as hot as Ilya's cockiness always is.

Shane is light-headed. Ilya smells of body wash, and cologne, and a hint of cigarettes. Shane never knew Ilya smoked. He's really here, in Shane's apartment, and—"You knew who I was before I said I was in Boston?"

"Yes," Ilya says simply. "That is why I made the video just for you. You don't need to be stronger or more flexible or have more accurate shot. You need something different."

You. The word arrives in Shane's mind all by itself, as though it's a fact of the universe. He clears his throat. "Do you want something to drink?" That's the next thing to say when guests

arrive. All the rest of it . . . he can't tell how he feels. Happy? Overwhelmed?

"Thank you, but no. I brought water." Ilya unzips the sports duffel, takes out a plastic bottle, shakes it. "Let's talk before we start."

"Yeah, sure." Shane leads him over to the living area, the couch.

Ilya surveys the space before sitting by Shane's side. "I was thinking, we can start with some stretches together. Then some yoga. I will touch you to help. I saw your TV show, as I said—your yoga form is not good."

It takes Shane a second to catch up with this. "The episode about my cottage?"

"Only you, Mr. Millionaire Real Estate, you would call *that* a cottage." Ilya's demeanor is easy, teasing, as though they're long-time friends rather than basically strangers. "To a poor boy from Moscow, and then Allston, it is a mansion."

"It's a good investment," Shane says. It's what he always says when people rib him about his properties. It's nice being chirped by Ilya, though. Really nice. He was dreading having Ilya act like a *fan* around him. He should have known Ilya Rozanov would never do that. "You live in Allston?"

"Yes, very near to the skating club rink, only fifteen minutes' walk from Boston Landing. A very empty place, but maybe you know it?" Ilya says playfully.

"I've been there once or twice," Shane says. Or most days when he's at home, to be more accurate. Ilya is right: the Boston Landing development is kind of a ghost town, apart from Victory Ice Arena.

He's rewarded with a smile from Ilya. "See, you're funny."

Shane's face warms. Very few people have ever told him he's funny. "You bought your place to be near the rinks?"

Ilya rolls his eyes. "I didn't buy any place. I rent. But yes. It is hard to get ice time when you are not on a team and not a competitive skater. And it's expensive." Comfortable, he leans back on Shane's couch—not quite as slouchily as he does at home, but close to that. "I am a tourist to every rink in Boston. Cambridge, too. Victory is by far the best. The ice on public rinks is terrible."

Shane wouldn't know. He hasn't skated with the public since he was fifteen or so. "I could help you get ice time at Victory."

Ilya shrugs one shoulder. "Don't want to trouble you," he says, while looking up at Shane in a way that makes Shane's heart squeeze.

In that case—"Why don't you join a hockey team?" It's a question that's been bothering Shane for a while. "Like a local one. You'd get ice time. And you're obviously good, right?"

Amiably, Ilya says, "I was on the BU team. But I was very bad."

“I don’t believe that.”

In response to that, Ilya just says, “We should get started.” He sits up. “I’m not busy, but you’re the captain of the Boston Raiders. Probably you need to go to a photoshoot or sign autographs.”

“I don’t sign autographs that often,” Shane says. Oh, Ilya is even more likeable than he had expected. So much *more* than he had expected. Effortless to talk to, enchanting in the way he moves his body, witty. Gorgeous—his face and neck are speckled with freckles and moles that aren’t really visible in his videos. Shane will never be able to forget them.

“Ah, so you have photoshoot,” Ilya says. “What is it? Luxury watch? Dunks?”

“No photoshoot. Just meetings with my publicist and Raiders PR and stuff,” Shane says.

Ilya sighs. “Boring.” He stands and picks up his bag.

“Yeah, it is.” That’s the cost of playing hockey. Well, one of the costs. Standing, Shane says, “My home gym is this way.”

Following, Ilya says, “Of course, no public gym with commoners for Mr. Number One in the MLH.”

“Shut up,” Shane says. The next moment, anxiety twists in his stomach. Did he go too far?

But no, Ilya’s laughing. “Mr. Lord Talon Award.”

“Shut up!” Shane’s heart is fluttering. He really, really, really never wants Ilya to leave.

This is terrible. And it's wonderful.

Chapter End Notes

You may note some mysteries here, like: what's the deal with Ilya and playing on the BU team? Please trust that it's all there on purpose and will be revealed in time! ❤️

Victory Ice Arena is Warrior Ice Arena irl. I don't know, I guess I felt that since the team is the Raiders in this universe, their practice rink needed a different name too?

And BU is Boston University.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane's gym room used to be a walk-in closet, so it has no windows. It's pretty nice anyway, though: new hardwood floors, all mirrors along one side, and a few photographs of Canadian forest scenery on the cream-painted walls. Otherwise, there's just the fixtures Shane uses most: weight bench and a rack of weights, treadmill, rowing machine, and the space where Shane has spread out his yoga mat in preparation. The designer asked Shane if he didn't want more in here, but what else could there be?

"Here it is," Shane says, switching on the overhead lights. In the mirror, he walks in with Ilya by his side. The two of them are about the same height and size, yet the contrast in their ways of carrying themselves is stark: Shane has one thumb tucked in a pocket, while Ilya's swinging his arms as he strides into the space.

"Nice," Ilya says, looking around. He drops his gym bag by the weight bench. "A little bright."

"I can dim the lights," Shane says, sliding the dimmer switch as he speaks. Sometimes he uses this setting to meditate here. And this way, the room is more—intimate. Two people who are strangers in bright light have something in common at dusk: they're both facing a world where some questions are unanswered.

Wearing a satisfied expression, Ilya turns back to Shane. "Better. Come here."

Shane does. His body is as worked up as it is when he's about to step onto the ice; adrenaline is coursing through him. Being alone here with Ilya is so private.

"You're going to start by walking on the treadmill for five minutes. I can't stretch you deep until your muscles are warm." Ilya sets a timer on his wristwatch.

Flushing, Shane turns on the treadmill and steps onto it. Okay, *surely* Ilya doesn't get how what he said sounds, right?

Ilya's leaning one elbow on the treadmill. "This forest in your photos, is it anywhere special? Your home?" he asks. Shane just tries to breathe; the room usually smells of fake pine, that's what the cleaning people do to it, yet all Shane can smell is Ilya's freshly showered scent and his cologne, and that slight bitterness of cigarettes.

"I think it's Banff National Park in Alberta," Shane says. "Canada."

"Is that where you're from?"

"No, I'm from Ottawa."

"Do you miss it?"

“Well. Yeah,” Shane says. There’s always a tiny ache in his heart that comes when he talks about something Canadian and most of the guys on the team miss the reference. “I guess you feel the same way. About Russia?”

“Yes.” Ilya’s gazing at one of the photographs on the walls. “And no. My life would have been very different if I grew up in Russia. I wouldn’t be out, for example.” A sideways glance, as if to say: you knew, right?

“Oh yeah. That’s tough.” Shit, Shane hadn’t prepared for this. The last thing he wants is for Ilya to think he’s homophobic! “Boston’s good, right? I mean, if you’re bisexual?” He’s not totally sure he’s ever said the word *bisexual* out loud before.

“A hell of a lot better than Moscow.” A smile that might be described as bittersweet. “And Boston has some Russian pharmacies. I see a Russian doctor in Brookline. She’s always telling me not to smoke,” Ilya says, put-upon, as if that isn’t a totally normal thing for a doctor to say.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” Shane says. “Especially if you want to be serious about hockey.”

“I am serious about making videos telling the Metros how shit they are,” Ilya retorts with a flash of his trademark cocky smirk. “Anyway, for me it’s like, in America I’m Russian. If I went back to Russia, they would see me as American, probably. It is the same for you?”

“The same multiple ways.” At hockey camps and games, Shane was *the Asian kid* and later, *the Asian guy* for years and years. It was only after he was picked first in the draft that he got to be *Shane Hollander* instead. “I’m happy to still represent Canada in the Olympics, though.”

Ilya leans toward Shane and, conspiratorially, asks, “Is there really as much fucking in Olympic village as they say?”

Taken aback and thrilled, Shane says, “Basically, yeah.” This is nothing he hasn’t heard or discussed countless times in locker rooms, but it’s different with Ilya. Shane has never wanted to know what happens when his teammates have sex.

Ilya laughs. “Tell me a story about it. One you would not tell the media.”

So Shane recounts the time his roommate in Sochi sexiled him for fifteen minutes to get with an female curler. He doesn’t say how their other teammates gave Martin so much shit for it, just because he chose a woman who was square and strong rather than lithe and delicate.

Then Ilya’s watch beeps, prompting Shane to stop the treadmill and get off. Shane says, “I’m just gonna—” and unzips his hoodie, folds it, and sets it on his weight bench.

When he turns around, Ilya has stripped off his sweatshirt, too, revealing a sleeveless black tank and that golden chain across his clavicle, its cross pendant glinting on the dark fabric. His arms are big with natural muscle; seeing him up close, Shane can tell for sure he isn’t on gear, which is always a topic of conversation on the internet about any guy who weight trains. No, Ilya is healthy. Beautiful.

“Get on your yoga mat,” Ilya says. “We are going to focus on hip and leg stretches, of course.”

Yeah, those are the trouble areas for hockey players. It’s nice to know that Ilya is good at what he does.

They begin with simple hamstring stretches: Shane with his legs open in a V, pressing his body down to his thighs. Ilya rests his hand on Shane’s back, encouraging him gently to deepen the stretch. “Remember, don’t think,” Ilya says. “Just focus on what you feel and what I am telling you. Nothing else matters right now.”

Shane has to fight a shiver.

Then Ilya tells Shane to move his legs into a diamond shape and stretch forward, and again, Ilya’s hand is there between his shoulderblades. Fuck, Ilya is in his space; Ilya’s sitting back on his heels, so their knees are nearly touching. Shane can feel the heat from Ilya’s skin, or maybe he’s just imagining it.

If Shane doesn’t distract himself fast, the consequences will be catastrophic. Why didn’t he jerk off before Ilya arrived to prevent this?

Shane tries to remember the start of the season; when did he earn his first point? Yes, their first game, against Buffalo. Okay, four points in that game . . .

“Now, on your back,” Ilya says. “Bend your right knee.”

Shane knows where this is going. And yes, that’s where it goes. Ilya’s hands expertly lift his thigh so it’s vertical. Then, while one of Ilya’s hands is still firmly grasping Shane’s thigh, the other manipulates his lower leg upward until the whole leg is straight again. This stretch is never easy, no matter how often Shane does it with the PT: hockey tightens the hamstrings, fighting against any flexibility Shane gains.

But the PT doesn’t speak to him in this deep, sure voice, doesn’t grip him as tight. The PT isn’t Ilya Rozanov.

“Don’t think, Shane. I will take care of it,” Ilya says. “Just feel your body and the burn in your muscle. Tell me if it hurts too much.”

Second game. Shane closes his eyes tight. Uh . . . two points. Maybe.

Ilya lowers Shane’s leg, waits, presses it upward again. “Is this okay? You like it?”

“Uh.” Shane has to keep his voice normal. He cannot fuck this up. “Yeah.”

“Good.” Ilya sounds pleased.

Shane’s teetering on a knife-edge, wishing he'd worn shorts so Ilya’s hand was on his bare skin, and at the same time desperately trying to banish that image and the fantasy of Ilya’s touch. Not appropriate!

Ilya moves on to Shane's opposite leg. "You're strong here," Ilya says, repeating his motions from before. "Lots of muscle. This is why you need me." His fingers are pushing into Shane's thigh. If only he'd leave a bruise so Shane had something to keep.

Shane clenches his jaw. Third game . . . God, this is so much, he doesn't know how he's going to survive when Ilya's gone.

A second rep of this stretch. A third.

Finally, Ilya puts Shane's left leg back down on the yoga mat.

And Shane realizes he's absolutely, unmistakably hard, and now he's lying flat there's no disguising it.

Clarity comes rushing in. Pushing himself up on his elbows, Shane says, "Fuck—I'm so sorry—I can—"

"Hey, hey." Ilya smooths his hand along Shane's shin. "It's okay. It's normal."

"Yeah." Shane's heart is still jackhammering as he sits up. What was one of the best days of his life has just turned into a fuckup he will never forget. "I'll just—"

"I can help you with this too," Ilya says. "You want that?"

Shane's ears are ringing. "What?" Is Ilya's face flushed too? He doesn't seem angry, or mocking, or disgusted.

No. He's looking at Shane with open desire.

"I promise, Shane, I don't offer this to my other clients," Ilya says. "Ever. Only to you. You want me to blow you? It is just an offer."

Never, until the day he dies, is Shane going to forget Ilya Rozanov's voice saying these words.

What could Shane possibly say? No?

"Uh. Yeah." Is this real?

"Yes?"

Shane's shaking. "Yes." God, he wants it so bad.

"Okay. But I will kiss you first." Smoothly, Ilya grips Shane's chin.

And they're kissing. Ilya Rozanov is kissing Shane, and it's not a quick meeting of lips, and it's not the kisses Shane has shared with his girlfriends. It's a kiss that rewrites the meaning of the word *kiss*, because Shane's body recognizes this, needs this, understands itself in this pleasure with Ilya in a way it never understood itself before. Shane's hand is sliding into Ilya's soft curls all of its own accord.

Making a sound that's almost a groan, Ilya shifts his weight forward, toppling Shane backward again onto the yoga mat. Ilya crawls over Shane's body, holds one of Shane's wrists down against the floor. "You want to stop?"

"Why would I want to stop?" Shane pants.

Ilya doesn't need any further answer; his mouth is on Shane's again. He lets Shane's hand go only to squeeze Shane's pec—which no-one has ever done before—and that makes Shane buck under the cage of Ilya's body.

Breaking the kiss, Ilya trails his hand down Shane's chest and stomach. Frustratingly, it reaches Shane's waistband and moves upward again: he's pushing up Shane's shirt to kiss his abs.

"Oh, fuck," Shane says. He's so much closer to coming than he should be. Getting to an orgasm during sex—with one of his girlfriends—was always a hard trek. With Ilya, satisfaction is right there for the taking, an apple from the tree. Fuck.

"Okay, okay," Ilya murmurs into Shane's abdomen. "I will blow you now, okay?"

"Yes!"

And Ilya does. He frees Shane's dick from his sweatpants, touching it with no hesitation. With tenderness, even. He kisses the tip, making Shane shiver, before swallowing Shane deep.

It's been a while since Shane got a blow job, and it's usually pretty good, but this is so intense, almost too intense, like Ilya's mission is to drive Shane crazy in ten seconds flat. His mouth is hot; his shoulders are flexing as he works hard to give Shane pleasure. A brief respite for worshipping the head of Shane's dick—then Shane's being relentlessly swallowed again, and Ilya's hand is flat on Shane's abs, holding him down as Shane tries to learn from him and forgets the next instant, because he just can't think, he can't hold off any more, he's —

"I'm going to, I'm—"

Ilya takes him *deeper*. And Shane comes.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I'm not a medical, bdsm, physical therapy or any other kind of professional, so don't take this as advice!

Comments and kudos are much appreciated.❤️

Chapter 8

Shane is on his back. On his yoga mat, in his home gym with the heated floor.

With Ilya Rozanov's head of curls between his legs.

Shane just had his first time with a man. With *Ilya Rozanov*. And now Ilya's pushing himself up, licking his lips. He swallowed Shane's come.

Ilya's chest is heaving, making his gold pendant gleam. His hair is messed up where Shane grabbed it. His mouth is red. His strong, bare arms are loose by his sides, and he looks proud and happy: his mouth is curling into a smile, his chin is raised. His gaze is hot, devouring Shane.

And Ilya is hard. Not hiding it, letting Shane take in the sight of his arousal as he kneels, sitting on his heels with his legs open.

Oh, God, Shane is never going to forget this sight either. Ilya Rozanov got hard blowing him, oh fuck.

In the locker room, the concept of sucking dick is shameful, an insult. Shane has asked himself over and over why he can't see it that way, why the fantasy of having a dick in his mouth has gotten him off reliably over so many years.

Ilya isn't ashamed.

Dazed, Shane tucks his dick back in his pants, sits up, and just . . . touches Ilya's chest, where his heart is beating. Trails his fingertips down Ilya's warm body, the black cotton material over his abdomen.

Ilya's watching him with a hot, approving gaze. The room is so quiet—just the sound of their heavy breathing. It's weird, because they're not talking, but they understand one another, Shane's sure of it. Ilya Rozanov knows him now as nobody else in the world knows him. And Ilya's not telling him he needs to change himself or behave differently or do anything at all. Ilya's just letting Shane do exactly what he truly wants. For maybe the first time ever.

Shane's waited twenty-seven years for this, and even a second more is too much. Still a little shaky from his orgasm, he scrambles onto his hands and knees and nuzzles his face into the hardness between Ilya's legs. Ilya's hand lands gently on the crown of Shane's head—not pushing, only lightly scratching Shane's scalp—and Shane rubs his cheek against the hot erection he can feel through Ilya's sweatpants. Kisses it. His eyes are prickling, which is ridiculous.

"Can I—" Shane asks, muffled, into the fabric.

"Yes. But this is your first time doing this, yes?"

“Yeah,” Shane admits.

“Then I’m going to sit on your weight bench. Okay?” Ilya strokes Shane’s shoulder.

“Okay.” It’s embarrassing to sit up and meet Ilya’s eyes again, but Ilya isn’t laughing at him any more. Shane hadn’t known Ilya Rozanov could look so sincere.

Ilya does as he said: standing smoothly, not seeming to care about his erection, he walks over to the weight bench. There, Ilya takes off his tank top for some reason—fuck, he's just as perfect shirtless as he was in the videos—and pushes his pants down enough to take out his dick before he sits next to Shane’s folded hoodie. Shane follows and sinks onto his knees again.

Ilya’s dick is gorgeous. Big, like Shane’s. They’re well matched. If it wasn’t rude, Shane thinks he could stare for hours at it.

He also desperately needs to suck it.

Copying Ilya, he leaves a kiss on its tip before wrapping a hand around the base and taking it in his mouth. It feels really big and hot—yes, he’d read about that in online how-to-give-a-blow-job articles, most of them written for women—but no printed words could convey how fucking good it is to be on his knees with a man’s dick, *Ilya*’s dick heavy and thick on his tongue. Shane knows he shouldn’t try to go too deep too fast. He wants to anyway. The sensation of being *filled*, combined with the power Shane feels, the realization that he can make Ilya’s thighs tremble as they’re trembling now—they’re pure, fiery desire running through Shane’s veins.

Focusing on keeping his teeth away from Ilya’s delicate skin, Shane tongues the underneath of the head, which felt good when Ilya did the same to him. When Ilya moans, the sound is electric; Shane knows he’d be rock hard himself from that alone if it was physically possible right now.

Shane needs more. He takes Ilya a little deeper and starts to suck him in earnest, trying to set up a rhythm, to make it even a tenth as good as Ilya was. There’s a taste in his mouth—precome—and that’s good too, it means Ilya likes this. It means this is real—the velvety hardness of Ilya against his tongue is real, the scent of Ilya’s body is real, the sounds of the blowjob are real and *Shane* is doing it, he’s—

“Shane, off—” Ilya says suddenly, and of course Shane leans back, letting Ilya’s dick free—it makes a wet sound as it leaves his lips—and Ilya comes into his own bunched-up cotton tank, which he’s grabbed and put in place just in time.

It didn’t even take Shane that long. The post-orgasm high, which should be wearing off Shane by now, intensifies: he made Ilya Rozanov come. In like sixty seconds?

“Why . . .?” Shane pants. “The shirt?”

Ilya’s flushed, with some post-orgasm silliness in his smile. “I thought Shane Hollander probably does not like mess.”

“I usually don’t,” Shane admits.

Shane’s not sure what’s supposed to happen next; Ilya is, it seems. He drops the ruined bunch of cloth on the floor (gross), picks up his water bottle from his gym bag near the weight bench, and sits on the floor next to Shane. “I didn’t even need this after all,” Ilya says, half-laughing. He takes a swig and offers it to Shane.

That’s another kind of intimacy. How could Shane not accept? He takes the bottle, drinks—it is nice to refresh his mouth—and hands the bottle back. Worry is starting to overrule the laxness in Shane’s body, though. Ilya’s right: this wasn’t what they’d planned. So what now? Does Ilya leave? Shane doesn’t want him to go. They haven’t even had their scheduled 45 minutes together yet, have they?

“Yeah, I guess we didn’t finish our workout,” Shane says. Shit, was it wrong of him to have sex with Ilya if Ilya’s his employee? Is he an asshole?

“That’s okay. Remember, I don’t fuck my clients,” says Ilya. “So you are not my client any more.” He puts his hand on the hardwood floor so it’s touching Shane’s, pinky to pinky.

“Right,” Shane says. Is Ilya saying they’re not going to see each other again? Has Shane used up all he’ll get of Ilya Rozanov already?

Ilya’s hooked the strap of his gym bag with his foot and is pulling it over. Once it’s within reach, he digs around in it and pulls out his phone. “But if you want, you can give me your phone number. And we can meet up again to *not* work out. Or just watch hockey together, if you want. Bring your jersey, I can give you *my* autograph. It is very valuable. I have almost a million followers.”

“You’re up to that many?” Shane asks. That’s a lot, isn’t it?

“Of course. I have a good gimmick. Most hockey influencers are boring. But sexy, shirtless bisexual Russian influencer—even people who don’t give a shit about hockey are interested.” Putting his hand behind him, Ilya leans on it and tilts his head back as though he’s posing for a magazine, showing off his throat, his naked chest, his abs—except he’s just looking at Shane. Posing for Shane, with his reddened mouth and sex-brightened eyes.

“You’re so fucking arrogant!” Shane says, delighted.

“But it works,” Ilya points out, breaking the pose. “Or did you watch my videos only for hockey?”

“Shut up!” Shane elbows him—Ilya gently shoves him back—and then they’re wrestling on the floor. Ilya is strong, his body is massive—but Shane is his match, and a few seconds later Shane is on top of him, straddling him, breathless yet again. He wishes he could stay here. Ilya’s body feels so fucking good, every single part of it. With Ilya shirtless, Shane can feel the heat of his skin, smell the scent of his cologne and him even more clearly.

“Come on, Hollander.” Ilya’s smile is fading. “You want my phone number or not?”

“Oh, shit! Yeah, of course.” What Ilya was asking hadn’t properly registered in Shane’s mind: Ilya wants to see him again. Ilya *wants to see him again*.

Shane rolls off of Ilya and pats his pockets. “Uh, mine’s in the living room. Can I?” He reaches out.

Ilya places his own phone into Shane’s hand. There’s an empty new contact waiting for him. Nervously, Shane fills it out before giving the phone back.

Ilya presses “call.”

In the distance, a ringtone plays faintly.

That’s another bond between them. Ilya Rozanov is the first man Shane has ever kissed. The first man he’s ever blown, and the first one who’s ever blown him. And now they’re in each other’s phones. Ilya Rozanov, there at the touch of a button.

“Shane,” Ilya says, his accent making Shane’s name his own, as always. When Shane turns to him, Ilya kisses him softly. Shane’s jaw aches, but that’s okay; he kind of loves that ache, because it’s a reminder of what they’ve done.

“Call me,” says Ilya after their lips part.

“I will.”

“Okay.” Ilya winks at him. How can something so cheesy be so hot?

Still stunned by, well, the entire sequence of events that happened after he opened his door, Shane leans against the treadmill as Ilya shoves his ruined tank into his bag (gross), pulls his sweatshirt on over his bare chest, and takes a last long, lascivious swallow from his drink bottle. Now, *that* was definitely on purpose, right?

Shane walks Ilya to his door, because that’s polite. At the very last moment, his brain gets back online and he blurts out, “You’re not going to tell anyone. Are you?” God, his life will be totally, utterly fucked if Ilya does. At some point, Shane forgot that Ilya is not his friend. He's a stranger from the internet.

“No, never,” Ilya says passionately. “I grew up in Russia, I know how to keep a secret, especially a secret about fucking men. Don’t worry. You’re safe with me.” He grabs the back of Shane’s neck—but rather than going for a kiss, Ilya rests their foreheads together for a few seconds.

“Okay.” Straightening up, Ilya readjusts his bag on his shoulder. “Bye, Shane.”

“Goodbye, Ilya,” Shane says.

He opens the door, lets Ilya out, closes and locks it again. Buries his face in his hands. Once he’s heard the elevator chime and whirr as it takes Ilya away, Shane whispers to himself, “What the fuck. What the fuck!”

He’s grinning. It’s not a very familiar sensation. And Shane wishes he had *somebody* to text or call about this right now, someone to talk to about the most bizarre and unexpected and wonderful hour of his life. But there’s nobody he can tell. He has to hold this firework-joy inside of himself silently.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Shane's looking at the missed call on his phone screen, he hesitates for a minute before eventually saving the number that called him as *Lily*.

He's so tempted just to risk someone knowing that he's messaging Ilya. Ilya Rozanov, even. That doesn't necessarily mean outing himself, right? Ilya is openly bi, but nobody thinks that boring Shane Hollander might be gay. Shane checks online sometimes, and the consensus seems to be that Shane is either ultra-straight or "hockey-sexual."

Shane hates when people say shit like that. And it's exactly why this afternoon means so much to him. What he and Ilya did wasn't just about getting off. It was the expression of another aspect of Shane's self that has been locked away for so long. Sex is part of the tapestry of life for most people. Why can't Shane have that, too?

Still buzzing with the glow of Ilya's presence and an amazing orgasm, Shane looks at his phone's contact list and thinks: maybe someday. Not yet; the thought of it is still terrifying. But someday.

Have a safe journey home, he texts Ilya, because what's what he usually says when people leave his apartment after a get-together.

No, Ilya responds alarmingly.

No? Shane asks. Did Ilya misunderstand?

I'm going to Trader Joe's, Ilya elaborates. *It's good for doing checking practice and grocery shopping at the same time.*

Then another message: *Oh, of course. You don't know. Mr. four times MVP of the year gets his groceries delivered probably*. 🙄

Smiling ridiculously, Shane sits on his couch. *I have a meal service, actually. I'm usually not here often enough to have real groceries.*

🙄 is Ilya's reply again. It's so endearing.

Since then, they've been texting a little every day. Ilya chirps him about his games and sends him a couple of pictures of Anya. Shane treasures them. And it all tastes so, so much like what Shane desperately wants: not just a hookup.

But Ilya hasn't suggested getting together again. Shane thinks maybe the ball is in his own court: Ilya kind of made the first move, so it's Shane's turn to make the second. He desperately wants to. It's just hard to decide what to do, especially when he's jetlagged and

subtly freaking out that his teammates will be able to read his mind. Should he invite Ilya over for dinner? Or is that too much? Are they just FWBs or something?

At least it's not affecting his game. Not at all. "Hollander is on fire this season," a commentator says of the Raiders' first few games.

Shane's parents see the difference in him when they meet up for dinner after a game in Montreal. "You look happier," his mom says.

"I am happy," Shane says. "The team's in a great place. And my bad elbow from last season hasn't bugged me for months. I was worried—you know." He's too superstitious to say it out loud, but being an athlete means being aware that every injury could be the one that plagues your career or even ends it. He's truly grateful that his elbow feels fine now.

The guys notice, too. "Come on, who is she, Hollzy?" Kane asks. "You didn't even smile like this for fucking Rose Landry!"

"Maybe it *is* Rose Landry," says one of the rookies.

"He's got it bad," Marleau says, slapping him on the back.

As a matter of fact, Rose has been inviting Shane to have dinner with her; she's in New York while he's in town playing the Admirals.

If Shane could tell anyone, it's her. She's never breathed a word to anyone about whatever happened at the end of their relationship. Shane hasn't been great with keeping up with her, though. He realizes now that the conversation they had, the one where she asked him whether he'd ever been with a guy and he said no, cut a little too close. Despite her kindness and understanding, he freaked out.

Now . . . .

I'm sorry, Shane texts her. *I would love to, but there's someone new, and I really don't want to start up tabloid speculation again.*

She replies, *Believe me, I understand* ☹. *Maybe let's call to catch up sometime?*

That would be great, Shane says.

Because after New York, the team calendar has a blessed stretch of two days off. That has to be the time. If Shane doesn't see Ilya again soon, Ilya might lose interest. He can't wait any longer.

Do you want to come around to my place on Wednesday? is what Shane eventually messages Ilya. That should be fine: not too intense, not too casual.

Hm, I can make room in my calendar for you, Ilya writes back.

Shane is on tenterhooks throughout the New York trip. The Raiders eke out a win in overtime, and then it's a quick plane ride back to Boston.

While he's in the air, Shane gets a new alert: *Early snow flurries expected tomorrow, October 16.*

Angling his phone screen away from Marleau, who is deeply absorbed in some game on his own phone anyway, Shane messages Ilya: *Will you still be okay coming over tomorrow with the snow?*

Did you forget that I am Russian? Ilya messages him back.

No, just wondering whether the T will be messed up. Ilya has said that he didn't drive to Shane's place the first time because parking in the heart of the city is such a pain.

You could come to my place instead, is Ilya's unexpected reply. *The snow will help hide you. And you could meet Anya.*

I would love to meet her, Shane says. He's been longing to pet her for ages. *I guess it's okay if you're there too.*

All set then. Come over at four? I'll send you my address.

Okay.

"Texting that girl you definitely don't have?" Marleau says, raising an eyebrow.

A denial is ready on Shane's lips. Instead, he finds himself saying: "Maybe."

"Yeah! That's what days off are for." Marleau grins at him briefly before opening up the game again.

On Wednesday morning, Shane spends way too long trying to pick out his clothes. After Rose, he'd considered getting a stylist before deciding it didn't really matter. Now he wishes he had. Then again, it's not like he could ask a stylist about the best outfit for meeting up with a guy on what might be a date or just a hookup, he wasn't sure.

There is one thing Shane is sure about, though. And it's something he does have a level of experience with, thanks to the dildo in the box in his closet.

Shane wants Ilya to fuck him.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to believe that Ilya would not have sex and then explore the produce section without washing his hands but tragically I don't think that is supported by the text 😭

Next update either tonight or tomorrow and I bet you can guess what happens

We meet Anya! That's what you were thinking right? 🤔

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Most of the drive to Ilya's place is, as Ilya had said, the same as Shane's drive to the Raiders practice rink. The difference is that the journey ends in the broad streets of Allston rather than in the Boston Landing luxury development.

Unlike Shane's stretch of Beacon Street, which is pretty much all brick homes, Ilya's neighborhood mainly has houses with vinyl or wood siding. Typically, the buildings are two stories high, with multiple doorbells and other indications that they've been divided up into apartments. There are small yards, too, often with low chain-link fences around them. Away from the noise and traffic of the city center, it's peaceful here, especially with flurries of snow blowing around over the streets. The snow isn't staying on the ground yet, which is nice. One less thing to fret about.

It's terrifying, this thing with Ilya. But it was worth it last time. It's worth the risk.

Ilya's home looks like it's probably a foursquare that had several extensions added to its sides and back. His door is at the left side; Ilya has explained that his apartment is the second floor of the house, the top floor, while a lesbian couple lives on the first floor. The sight of the pride flag flying from their porch sends a pang through Shane's chest. It's amazing to think that some people can just live this way, totally open about their love.

After parking his car, Shane takes a deep breath, puts on his reading glasses as a layer of disguise, and walks up through the snow up the concrete side path to Ilya's door. Before he can even ring the bell, there's the scuffling of dog paws indoors and a single soft bark, which is immediately followed by some gentle-sounding Russian. The dog paws thump away again, and the door opens.

"Hi," says Ilya. Today he's wearing a close-fitting black tank under an open hoodie, with his gold cross glinting on his chest, as always. The way he carries himself, all loose-jointed, makes the outfit gorgeous. It's just too bad he's slightly blurry at the moment, but he's beautiful anyway.

"I didn't know you wore glasses," Ilya says in a tone of appreciation, backing a few steps up the staircase behind him so Shane can come inside.

Shane removes them and folds them in his hand, trying not to betray his nervousness. "Only for reading. I just didn't want to be recognized. I actually can't see well wearing them if I'm walking around."

Now Ilya's features are clearer: he's as handsome as ever, of course, and wearing a smile that's softer than the one he wears in his videos, though there's still a light of mischief in his eyes.

Leaning against the wall, Ilya says, “You think you are Clark Kent? Big, six foot tall hockey player, totally disguised by a small pair of glasses?”

“Shut up. I’m wearing a hat too,” Shane says, tucking the glasses in his coat pocket, but he can’t put any sincerity behind the words. Shane’s missed being chirped by Ilya like this. It’s flirty, irresistible when Ilya does it.

A rack of shoes is squeezed next to the wall, so Shane starts taking off his own sneakers to put them there.

“You look pretty in them, though,” Ilya says. “The glasses.”

The words are a shock; nobody has ever told Shane he was *pretty* before. He fumbles as takes off his coat and hangs it on a hook above the shoes, pulls off his knitted hat and hangs it there too.

Ilya doesn’t remark on Shane’s lack of response. He just says, “This way,” beckoning Shane up into his home.

The narrow staircase opens onto the living space Shane recognizes from Ilya’s videos. It’s so weird: Shane knows the couch, the photos, the BU pennant on the wall, the knitted blanket, the geometric rug over the worn wooden floorboards.

The rest of the room is equally cozy. Though the space is small, the large sash windows give it plenty of light. To the left of the couch, beyond the area that’s visible on Ilya’s Insta reels, there’s a tidy kitchen area, open-plan with no division between it and the living room. To the right, pushed against the wall, stand some more chairs, a tripod and a ring light. Today, a coffee table that Shane’s never seen is in front of the couch, together with a large, empty dog bed and a dog’s rope toy.

Ilya’s home smells good. Only a tiny bit like cigarettes—he must go outside to smoke—and not at all like dog. The scent is mostly coffee, cleaners, and Ilya’s cologne. It feels like a home; there are ring marks on the coffee table, and Shane can imagine the other chairs being pushed around the couch when Ilya has people over.

“It’s really nice,” Shane says, and it is. “There’s just one thing missing.”

Ilya raises his brows. “Oh?”

“Where’s all the Raiders stuff?” Shane asks, not quite able to hold back his smile. “We’re your home team.”

“So just because I live in Boston I should buy expensive Raiders shit for my house?” Ilya says, coming closer. He’s smiling too. “No. I’ve been thinking, maybe if they win fourth Cup this decade, maybe then they get something small. A coaster.”

“Wow,” Shane says. “It’s hard to please you, huh.” Anticipation thrums through him as Ilya moves into his space.

“No, it’s easy to please me sometimes,” Ilya says, putting his hand on the back of Shane’s neck. Ilya’s touch is firm and warm against Shane’s snow-chilled skin.

Shane can’t resist any more, and neither can Ilya, obviously, because the next moment they’re kissing. Ilya is really good at kissing; Shane hadn’t had the brainpower to form that thought before, but it’s true. Ilya’s lips are soft, his kisses are addictive.

The unexpected nudge of a nose on Shane’s leg leads him to break the kiss. “Oh, hello,” he says.

Her tail wagging, Anya is holding a stuffed animal—a duck?—in her mouth and gazing at Shane with pleading eyes.

“Ah, you found it! Good girl, Anechka.” Ilya squats down and says more to her in Russian while softly stroking her back. “When she gets too excited about people at the door, I tell her to go and bring me her duck,” he explains, glancing up at Shane.

In love with her already, Shane crouches too. “Can I pet her?”

“Yes. She is a good dog,” Ilya says. “Too friendly sometimes, but she is doing her best. We go to obedience classes together. Positive training only,” he adds, as though Shane would ever envision him harshly disciplining her. Despite his asshole persona, Ilya is unwaveringly gentle with Anya, even when she disrupts his videos. Seeing Ilya act that way always does something to Shane’s heart.

Anya’s fur is soft under Shane’s fingers as he carefully pets her head; her tail’s still wagging furiously. To Shane’s eye, she resembles a beagle, what with her floppy ears, though he’s not sure where her speckles might come from. “She is a good dog,” Shane says, fighting a lump in his throat. It’s awfully tempting to imagine a future where he gets to know her well. Shane didn’t realize how much he wanted this life—Ilya, this homey apartment, the pride flag downstairs, everything—until he saw it. Yeah, he’s thinking way too far ahead, but he can’t help it. Shane can’t seem to help anything when it comes to Ilya and wanting too much.

“Okay, Anechka. Go lie on your bed. I can’t believe you are not tired after the dog park,” Ilya says after a few minutes. Shane thinks maybe Ilya is just speaking English for Shane’s sake, because it’s only after Ilya says a couple of sentences to her in Russian that Anya trots off and flops into her little round bed.

Shane stands; Ilya does as well. Despite the snow flurries, the afternoon light coming through the living room’s half-closed blinds is golden and warm, illuminating the outline of Ilya’s curling hair and his cheek.

This time, Ilya doesn’t need to say anything. They’re reaching for another again, grabbing each other for a deeper kiss than before. Shane puts his hand under Ilya’s unzipped hoodie, needing to feel the strength and shape of Ilya’s body; Ilya seems to take that as a cue, because he quickly strips the hoodie off and throws it somewhere behind him.

Beneath it, Ilya’s arms are bare, and the scent of his cologne, or body wash or whatever, is stronger. It’s like before: the desire Ilya sparks in Shane is so incomprehensibly more than

Shane has felt with women or even his crushes on guys in the past. Shane needs to feel Ilya's skin against his own, needs it right now or he just might die.

Now Shane's regretting the flannel shirt he wore over his t-shirt. He tries to unbutton it without stopping their kiss, but eventually fails and steps back to pull it off over his head instead. Quickly, he folds it and sets it on the coffee table so it won't be wrinkled when he leaves.

Bizarrely, that seems to turn Ilya on: he grabs Shane's chin and kisses him so powerfully that Shane half-falls backward onto the couch. Ilya scrambles over him, and oh, it's bliss, that weight of Ilya's muscled body on his, even though Ilya's knees are outside Shane's legs—he's trying not to squash him. Still, Ilya's pressing Shane into the cushions, pinning him down, kissing Shane's neck, and Shane wants him to leave hickies. He wants everything from Ilya. Even feeling Ilya's bare arms against his own is a lot. And—god—Ilya is getting hard, Shane can feel it. Shane is too.

"What do you want today, Shane?" Ilya says into his neck. "Right here, on the couch? Or in the bedroom? Or we just continue kissing? I am not doing this in front of Anya, so she has to go into the bedroom if we fuck here."

"Uh," Shane says. God, how is he supposed to phrase it?

Ilya stops nibbling Shane's throat and moves up to look at his face. "What? What is it?" Ilya looks worried, and like he's trying to pretend not to be worried.

There's nothing to do but say it. "Have you ever topped?"

"Have I ever—" Ilya flops on top of Shane, laughing into his shoulder so heartily that Shane can feel it shake Ilya's whole body. Shane is beginning to get pissed off when Ilya lifts his head and says, "I'm not doing good enough job if you have to ask me that." He runs his hand along Shane's inner thigh. "Are you saying you want me to fuck you, Shane Hollander? You want me to be your first?"

"You're not my first, I've been with several women—" Shane says defensively.

"Oh, *several* women!" Ilya says in delight.

"Fuck you!" Shane makes a half-hearted pretense at getting up.

"No, I will fuck you." Ilya kisses Shane's cheek firmly. "I will fuck you so good you will never think about a woman ever again."

It's embarrassing what those words do to Shane. Honestly, sometimes Ilya's lines are so corny, but the way he says them, with total commitment and no shame at all, makes Shane believe him. Well—it's that and the fact that Ilya's been amazing at everything sex-related so far.

"Okay," Shane says. Fuck, he wants Ilya in him.

"Yes, now?" Ilya checks, his eyes bright.

“Yes, now.”

Ilya murmurs some Russian against Shane’s cheek and then seems to pull himself together. “Okay. We have to go quietly so we don’t wake Anya. She will cry at the bedroom door when she realizes she is locked out.”

That cannot be helpful for Ilya when he’s hooking up—and there’s no doubt he has lots of sex, right? It’s surprising he hasn’t come up with a better system here.

Shane’s way too hard to think about it further, though. He gets off the couch, maneuvering carefully given the fact that he’s wearing fairly snug jeans, and takes the hand Ilya offers him.

Ilya kisses Shane one last time before, startlingly and very sexily, fully lifting him up by his thighs and carrying him into the bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry the actual 🔥🎇 is in the next chapter, it got too long when combined! Next chapter will be soon, probably tomorrow (Monday).

However, we did get to meet Anya 🥹 I hope you love her too!

An American foursquare house, for those who don't know, is like a boxy-shaped classic type of two story house with a porch. Basically just don't picture a ranch style house. For anyone who's interested, I have written a tumblr post exploring the geography and architecture in this chapter: https://www.tumblr.com/lyricghost/817046695101792256/boston-places-influential-men-chapter-10

And I seem to have inspired myself with my Clark Kent reference - look at my profile and you'll see a little 1.3k fic in which Shane Hollander is a mild-mannered sports reporter covering the Metropolis Metros 😉 and hockey player Ilya Rozanov is in love with him of course!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya's bedroom is plainer than the living area: a nightstand, a closet, a mirror, a dresser with what looks like a lot of hair products on one side of it, by the mirror.

That's all Shane sees before Ilya sets him down and backs him against a wall to kiss him. Being carried by Ilya was good, but even better is being touched by Ilya everywhere, body against body: Ilya's slid one big, warm hand up Shane's shirt to grope his chest, and his dick is hard, pressed to Shane's own, and his lips are insistent, clever, soft. Shane reaches for Ilya's hair, tangles his fingers in it to feel Ilya even more. Even the hard wall behind Shane feels good because he's being pushed against it by this perfect body and this man who enchanted Shane the first time he saw him in a little box on his phone screen.

"You have been thinking about it? Me fucking you?" Ilya says against Shane's lips, so close that it tickles. Their noses are touching.

"Yeah," Shane says, breathing hard. He's going light-headed. Maybe too much kissing, except it could never be too much. The room smells like Ilya, like his hair products and his cologne, which means Ilya is everywhere. "I got ready. At home."

Ilya nips at his lower lip, kisses it better. "You thought of me inside you," Ilya says, his voice a little hoarse. His thumb rubs over Shane's nipple.

Maybe light-headed isn't the word. Shane is just *light*, weightless in the same way he was when he got hard in his home gym. It feels so . . . free.

"Yeah. I thought of you inside me," Shane says, and the words send tingles all over his skin.

It's true. Just before Shane left his apartment, he made sure he was ready to be fucked by Ilya. And Ilya was there, too, in ghostly form: Shane's memories, Shane's desires. The impression of Ilya in the empty air.

With his fingers in his ass, Shane was thinking of Ilya. How much better he'd be than the dildo. And now, as Ilya pins Shane in place, takes his breath away with another deep, dirty kiss that feels like sex, Shane's struck again by the image of Ilya fucking Shane in the space Shane made for him.

"Oh fuck," Shane says.

Ilya's hand leaves Shane's pec, comes to rest on Shane's waist. "Are you okay?" Ilya asks. His mouth is red; his eyes are sincere.

"Yeah," Shane says, his breath fast. "I just don't want to wait any more." He's twenty-eight: why has he denied himself this for so long?

“Okay. No more waiting.” Ilya’s hand moves down to rest, unbearably, on Shane’s jeans fly, so close to his dick. “I will take your pants off now.”

“I can do it.” Shane pulls off his shirt and reaches for his jeans button, but Ilya is in the way.

“I want to do it,” Ilya says. His eyes are intent; it feels like he's utterly focused on Shane, like nothing else matters.

Shane makes a sound he’s never heard himself make before. “Okay,” he says, letting his hand fall loose by his side. He’s so aroused, and the world is hazy; he has to lean back against the wall and close his eyes. It feels so good, Ilya unbuttoning Shane’s jeans, pushing them down, pushing down Shane’s boxer briefs as well. The air is cold on Shane’s erection. He’s naked. Ilya’s about to fuck him. He can’t fully believe it’s true.

“Step out of your pants and get on the bed,” Ilya says. He takes the shirt from Shane’s hand. “I will fold them for you.”

Shane does. He’s buzzing from head to toe. He needs to touch his dick as much as he needs to breathe—it’s agony not to—yet he doesn’t want to. He wants Ilya to do it. Shane has to close his eyes to survive the need and the floating feeling in him.

Then Ilya’s crawling over the bed, naked, bringing the warmth of his body to the slight chill of the sheets. His face is flushed and happy in a way it never was on his videos. Only Shane knows this side of Ilya.

“You look good in my bed,” Ilya says, and the soft way he says it makes Shane feel—that this might be more than a hookup for Ilya. The same way it’s more than a hookup for Shane.

So that he doesn’t end up saying way too much and freaking Ilya out, Shane asks, “You got my stuff?” He glances around—there are his clothes on Ilya’s dresser, in a fairly neat square pile.

“Yes, I folded your fucking pants, oh my *God*, Hollander.” Ilya is kissing Shane’s chest, over Shane’s heart. He says a word in Russian. “Hollander, there is no one like you.”

“There’s no-one like you either.” Shane’s mouth is curling into a smile, and he can feel it’s a silly one, not cool. He doesn’t really care. “Why’re you calling me Hollander?”

Ilya’s leaning over Shane; his curls, which were styled off his face, have come loose. Now they’re falling over his forehead. “You’re right. I should only call you Shane.” His thumb brushes oh-so-gently over Shane’s cheek. “Shane. I’m going to finger you. Yes?”

Shane makes a sound he’s never heard himself make before. “Yeah. Yes.”

“Okay. Turn on your side, away from me.” Ilya maneuvers Shane where he wants him, goes away for a few seconds to fumble in the nightstand, and comes back with lube that he’s holding in his hands, warming it up.

The anticipation is killing Shane. He puts his hand on his dick, just once, to take the edge off—and it feels like he’s way too close to coming, so he stops, even though that feels

unbearable.

“I will start now. Okay?”

“Yeah, yes!”

Ilya’s almost spooned around Shane’s back, kissing between his shoulderblades; Shane didn’t expect him to be so close for this. He traces a slick finger around Shane’s entrance, not even close to pushing in.

“I can–go faster,” Shane says, panting. It’s not what Ilya is doing, exactly; it’s what he’s *not* doing, and what he’s about to do, and how hard Shane already is. “I have a, uh. A dildo at home.” That is just not a sexy word, unfortunately.

“A big one?” Ilya says. At the same time, he slowly slips his finger in, making Shane gasp. It’s not that much to take. But it’s *Ilya’s finger* in Shane’s body.

“Okay? Good?” Ilya asks, his hand stilling.

“Yeah, good, good.” It is good. Shane’s eyes are burning, and it’s not from fear or anything. He’s not afraid now. Ilya’s taking care of him. The bittersweet part of this is regret. This feels so easy, pleasurable, and both incredibly important and . . . not. Nothing about Shane changed in the moment after Ilya pushed his finger into Shane’s ass. The world thinks this is such a big deal, but it’s actually just something that two people can do together if they like each other, and if they want to.

It is—really nice, though. The pleasure is building gradually, just slow movements, tender. Ilya’s doing this to Shane, doing what he wants, and Shane is just—taking it.

“Still okay?”

“Yeah.” It’s hard to say the word without drawing it out into something like a moan.

Ilya slides another finger in, bringing another moan from Shane, as much as he tries not to. And it’s different. Ilya’s stretching him now, working him open beyond what Shane did before, or maybe his body’s tightened since then.

“Oh, fuck!” That was Shane’s prostate.

“Bad?”

“No, no—ah—don’t stop!”

Shane’s curled forward, grasping the bedsheets. He thought this would be less work than sex with women—he would just lie there—but it takes work of another kind to weather this storm, the arousal in him, the pleasure that’s making his hips want to buck. Shane’s never been that loud during sex before now, but apparently that’s different too when he’s about to be fucked.

Fuck, how much better is it going to be with Ilya actually inside him? With Ilya's body flush against his—

"Ilya, Ilya—I need it," Shane says. His body's trembling with the force of that need. The whole world is just him and Ilya in this bed.

"You need my dick?" Ilya is at three fingers, Shane thinks, pumping them in and out of Shane with a steady rhythm.

"Yeah, I need you—in me—ah—"

A groan, and the fingers stop; Shane wishes he could have seen Ilya's face just then. "Okay," is all Ilya says. His accent sounds thicker now.

Ilya's fingers slowly pull out, and Shane thinks he makes a sound of loss. There's the familiar sound of a condom being put on—Shane tells himself he has to stay relaxed, don't clench up—and then a pressure at his asshole.

"Oh, God," Shane is saying. Ilya is pushing in. Slowly. There's really no pain, it's smooth and slick. Shane's body was ready. But the *heat*—this is Ilya's dick in Shane—Ilya Rozanov is fucking him right now, oh fuck—

"Still okay?"

"Don't stop, don't stop." Shane will die if he does.

It's going on forever—until it's done, and Ilya's chest is against Shane's back. Ilya's kissing Shane's ear. Shane is shaking, but he thinks Ilya is too.

Shane kind of wants to stay like this, joined together. But he also wants—needs—to be fucked right now.

"Does not hurt?"

"Doesn't hurt, it's fine—fuck—please!"

Ilya understands; he starts to move. Oh, the drag of it, on Shane's prostate but also just the *sensation*, being so full, having Ilya in him, feeling Ilya's breath on the back of his neck—it's beyond imagining, it's so good, and Shane's dick is full and hot on his thigh, rubbing there from Ilya's thrusts, because Ilya's starting to set a rhythm and all Shane can do is follow.

If Shane had known it would be this amazing, he would have been getting fucked by men years ago. But maybe it wouldn't be this good with any guy but Ilya.

Ilya, who's awkwardly shoving the fingers of his other hand in Shane's mouth now—it's like he read Shane's mind, knowing Shane wanted to suck Ilya's dick too. Shane's sweating, and they're really fucking now, it sounds like sex—Ilya's moaning in his ear, the sound of skin meeting skin as they move together—the bed is creaking—and that pressure in Shane's mouth, and in his ass, of being full of Ilya everywhere—every time Ilya's dick meets Shane's

prostate it's another burst of pleasure—and most of all the thought, *I am being fucked by Ilya right now—*

Shane comes.

Chapter End Notes

I hope it was worth the wait!

Next update probably Saturday.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Shane comes back to himself, his own spend is cooling on the sheets in front of him, and Ilya is still as close to him as another person could be: physically inside him, filling him up, and as if that wasn't enough, also holding him with one arm around Shane's ribs. Ilya's kissing the nape of Shane's neck, too—and the back of his head, anything Ilya's lips can reach.

Maybe this was just a hookup, but it doesn't feel that way.

Shane's on the verge of both exhilarated laughter and tears: he's just been fucked for the first time, by a guy he really liked, and it was amazing, and weirdly easy; his hands and feet are prickling with pins and needles from the orgasm he managed totally hands-free, just from the pleasure of a dick in his ass.

For years, Shane had suspected, often with fear and dread, that he was not only gay but a bottom. Today, with Ilya pressed against him and in him, it's more like the world is clicking into place. *Yes, this is who I am. This is what I like*. His life isn't going to be what he expected—no wife wearing his jersey to games and leading the WAGs—but there's something else here that could be beautiful.

Being with Ilya today was beautiful.

Maybe Ilya is having feelings that are somehow similar: his abdomen, pressed against Shane's back, is spasming slightly in a way that could mean he's laughing or crying. Shane runs his hand over Ilya's arm that's wrapped around him. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm okay. I am very good." Ilya's accent is still heavier. "Are you?"

Giving in to the post-orgasm high, Shane lets himself laugh briefly. "Yeah. Very good too."

"Are you cold?"

"No." And Shane really isn't. A few feet away, Ilya's old cast-iron radiator is clanking away, pouring out warmth; Shane hasn't been cold since he first stepped into Ilya's living room. For the first time, the thought occurs to Shane that Ilya has turned up the heat in his probably-drafty old apartment so that they'd be comfortable during sex.

Ilya's considerate like that. He pretends to be an asshole, but he mostly isn't at all. That's the secret that Ilya's followers don't know.

"You want to stay here a little longer? Until Anya wakes up?" Ilya says.

"Yeah," Shane said. All the earlier urgency of Shane's need to be fucked has dissipated, leaving this lazy, comfortable arousal and a longing to keep touching Ilya skin to skin.

“Okay,” Ilya says.

Shane lets his eyes close and his mind drift, contented; his thumb is rubbing Ilya’s arm, while Ilya’s breaths are soft on the back of his neck. Ilya’s not sleeping, though: occasionally he kisses Shane’s skin some more. Shane could stay like this forever. He wishes he could.

The downstairs neighbors arrive home, judging by the sound of a car parking on the street outside and the shake of the downstairs front door opening.

“Ah, fuck,” Ilya says, and Shane’s confused until five seconds later there’s a quiet bark, quickly followed by the scuffling of dog toenails on the floor and then scratching at the bedroom door.

Laughing again, Shane says: “You got caught.”

Ilya sighs deeply. “Yes. I will go shower, unless you want to. I would say we can shower together, but we can’t let our captain get injured from trying to fit two men in a small bathtub.”

“I thought you weren’t a Raiders fan?” Shane teases.

“No, I just said I’m not buying expensive Raiders shit. I am from Boston after all.”

It’s a good thing Ilya can’t see the smile Shane’s wearing right now. He’d know in an instant how fast Shane has fallen. “You can go first,” Shane says. He decides to be bold. “We can shower together at my place. Sometime. It’s a waterfall shower, so . . .”

“Oh, well, if it’s a *waterfall* shower, definitely yes. Mr. Three Times Cup Winner is too important to fuck in normal shower.”

“You’re an asshole,” Shane says fondly. That *was* a real yes, right?

“Okay, I’m going.” Ilya smacks a kiss to Shane’s cheek and pulls out slowly.

Shane has to breathe out slowly through the loss, to the point that Ilya checks again that he’s okay. But he is, there’s no pain, and Shane tells Ilya so. Shane just misses the sensation of him a bit.

It’s not bad, though, to doze more in Ilya’s bed for a while.

Ilya slips out of the room quickly, preventing Anya from rushing in. Through the door, his voice is soft, speaking soothing Russian to calm his dog. Then his feet pad over the floor to the bathroom, which shares a wall with the bedroom; Shane can hear the water running and the splashing of Ilya’s quick bathing.

Once the water stops, Shane sits up. Still nude, using his towel to dry his hair, Ilya comes in carrying a second, folded towel, presumably for Shane.

It’s obvious that Ilya is on some level posing for Shane, wanting Shane to notice his beauty. And yeah, there’s a lot to notice. All of Ilya, from his muscled shoulders to his chest to the

trail of hair over his lower abs to his big dick to his strong, hairy legs is—just perfect. Shane wouldn't change the smallest detail.

Yeah, Shane is . . . probably definitely gay.

"Done staring?" Ilya asks, smirking.

"What if I say no?"

"Then I will let you stare more. Or maybe I should send some nice pictures to your phone, so you can see my dick any time."

Shane stands to take the towel from Ilya. "Sounds good," he says, his pulse starting to race once more.

"Then it's a deal," Ilya says in a low voice that suggests he's getting turned on all over again too.

Ilya's bathroom is, indeed, small. To Shane, who's used to his own homes and relatively spacious hotel bathrooms, it's tiny. But it's clean, and Ilya's shower gel smells great on Shane's skin.

When Shane gets out of the shower, the bedsheets have been stripped, both Ilya and Anya are gone, and a pair of clean sweatpants, a pair of socks, and a sweatshirt with a local gym's logo on it are set out on the mattress for him. Of course, it's just a suggestion from Ilya; Ilya hasn't even said anything about it. Shane could put his own clothes back on.

He chooses Ilya's clothes instead. They're softly worn, cozy on his skin. He's aching all over in a good way, in a way that feels like a trophy, and the clothes suit that better than his own new ones.

After Shane finishes pulling Ilya's sweatshirt on, he takes the opportunity to glance around the room. It is pretty bare, definitely not as homey as the living space.

The apartment door opens, closes, and both dog and human footsteps come in.

Shane leaves the bedroom, and is greeted anew by a delighted Anya, who obviously wants to jump up on Shane's legs but is fighting the urge—she rushes toward him, tail wagging, then backs off, then steps forward again. She's so sweet, Shane has to crouch again and pet her while Ilya hangs up her leash by the front door.

When Ilya returns, Shane stands. There are a couple of snowflakes caught in Ilya's damp curls, and Ilya's cheeks are pink. His hoodie is fully zipped up, but he wasn't even wearing a coat. Ridiculous.

Ilya visibly takes in Shane's outfit. "You look nice."

Flushing, Shane says, "You look cold. It's still snowing outside?"

"Terribly," Ilya says. "See for yourself. The roads might be bad."

Shane pushes a blind aside to see the street; it's totally clear. The snow's still melting as soon as it hits the earth.

What Ilya meant was something completely different.

Shane lets the blind close again. "Yeah," he says, his mouth curling into a smile. "Really bad. Probably bad to drive on."

"You might have to stay longer," Ilya says, walking into Shane's space, gripping Shane's chin.

"Yeah," Shane says again. God, when Ilya grabs him like that, he just wants to fall to his knees. It's some reflex he never knew he had.

Ilya kisses him.

Shane kisses Ilya back, and there's no urgency any more; they can relish it, because this definitely isn't a quick fuck. Ilya's smoothing his hands all over Shane's body as though he's learning its shape, and Shane wants to do the same except he's addicted to tangling his fingers in Ilya's curls, which might be a problem but he never wants to leave Ilya, so it's fine.

"Mm," Ilya says at some point. "Are you hungry? I have some leftover chicken in the fridge —lemon and herb, very boring, good for stupid hockey player diets. Or I can make salmon."

Shane is so gone for this man. "Why did *you* cook it if it's so boring?"

"I had lemon and chicken and I didn't want to go shopping," Ilya says. Shane can't quite tell whether he's lying. "Shane, you don't know how *boring* it is to be a normal person and cook every fucking day."

Shane snorts. "I'm sorry for your suffering. We can eat the chicken."

Although the kitchen area's not big, it's larger than the bathroom; there's enough space for Shane to help by dicing some vegetables while Ilya boils some brown pasta and gets the chicken heating up.

Shane has never done this with any of his girlfriends. Rose was too famous and too busy to cook for herself, and with the others, Shane was too busy. His average relationship length is about six months, and he's never dated anyone over the summer, which means his time with his girlfriends was always little glimpses here and there: dates at restaurants or clubs that maybe ended with sex at his home. He was always focused on the next game, prepping for a roadie, on a roadie, tired from a roadie.

That's what he told himself then. It's more apparent now that he didn't make room in his schedule for his girlfriends because he didn't want to.

As Shane dishes up the food, Ilya gives Anya her dinner, which keeps her occupied for a few minutes so that Shane and Ilya can curl up on the couch, side by side under the famous knitted blanket.

The snow flurries are tapping at the windows, and the chicken is fragrant and tasty. Shane's eaten a hell of a lot of dry chicken breast, some cooked by himself and some served to him at events, and this isn't that.

"So," Shane says. "What was it like going to BU? You know I never went to college." This seems like a safe question to start with. Ilya knows so much about him, surely, yet he doesn't know that much about Ilya, and he wants to.

"You're asking about when I played hockey for BU," says Ilya, raising his eyebrows judgementally.

Caught out, Shane rubs the back of his neck. "That, or in general."

"I was not good on the BU team," Ilya says emphatically. "And my adoptive father was dying of cancer."

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry, Ilya." It's so fucking unfair: Shane has two parents, while Ilya's presumably lost three. And even so, Ilya shines so bright, he's so determined and loving and funny.

Shrugging, Ilya fiddles with a piece of carrot on his plate. "It was years ago now. Tell me about when you were Canadian rookie in Boston. Let me guess, Marleau was a big mother hen to you."

"Pretty much," Shane admits. Marly's his best friend on the Raiders, and just a good guy overall. If Shane were to come out to anyone he knows, other than Rose, it might be him.

Anya, having finished her dinner, comes and flops hopefully on top of Shane's feet. Ilya scratches her head, murmurs something in Russian that Shane's 90% sure means *good girl* or *good dog*. Shane pets her, too, as he eats.

They spend the rest of the meal talking about hockey in one way or another: first, Ilya's views on the Raiders, and then their takes on other teams of note. They argue with each other, of course, —Shane suspects Ilya chooses half his opinions based on what will rile Shane up most—but deep down, they mostly agree.

Ilya puts the plates away in the sink. Anya trails him to the kitchen, where she finds a toy and starts squeaking away at it relentlessly. Ilya comes back and turns on the TV to a hockey game: Buffalo vs. Tampa Bay. By now, it's dark.

"I think I'm rooting for them both to lose," Ilya says, happily settling into the couch.

"You know, I can see why you decided to make money as a professional hater," Shane says.

Ilya holds up a finger. "False. I hardly make any money from my Insta. Didn't you notice I have no brand deals or sponsored shit? I will die before I advertise some stupid fucking supplement that says you can get ripped without working out."

Ilya is always such a fascinating mystery to Shane. "Then why'd you do it if you aren't making money?"

Ilya turns to him; the TV is shining colors interestingly on the contours of his face. “Because I am an asshole who loves attention and pissing people off,” he says, smiling.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Shane says. “Well. Not completely true.”

Ilya just looks at him, looks with so much feeling in his eyes that Shane simply has to kiss him. Soon, they’re making their way into the bedroom again, hurriedly putting a new fitted sheet on the mattress before Ilya’s on his back on the bed and Shane’s nuzzling his dick, not rushed now, savoring it. After all, Ilya doesn’t have work until ten the next morning.

Ilya’s mattress is old, sagging a bit in the middle, and his radiators never stop clanking even after Ilya turns down the heat in the evening. Yet that night, snuggled up with Ilya, Shane sleeps more restfully than he has for years.

Chapter End Notes

I worked super hard on this, hope you like it!

Another reminder: BU is Boston University.

Hoping to update tomorrow (Sunday), but if not, Monday.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane's phone alarm goes off at 6. Ilya's follows at 6:15.

The sky outside is still dark. Of course, Anya, who slept on Ilya's legs, is very awake and licking Shane's face.

By the light of his phone screen, Shane rolls over to see a wakeful Ilya wearing a gentle expression. It's possibly the most gorgeous Ilya has ever been: his lips are soft and full, not smirking, and his eyes are sincere. Not that Ilya isn't also sexy when he's being an asshole, to be honest. All Ilyas are perfect.

"I should go," Shane says, although he hates every word of the sentence. "You have work."

"You do too." Ilya's voice is throaty from sleep. "You can use my toothbrush if you want." At the expression Shane makes, Ilya smiles with a hint of his usual devilishness. "You are okay with my dick in your mouth, but my toothbrush is too much?"

"Shut up," Shane says, running his hand over Ilya's neck, his bare, strong shoulder that was hidden under the comforter.

"Go," says Ilya. "I will make you hot drink to take in the snow. You like coffee? Tea? Or iced coffee like a Boston person?"

Regretfully, Shane has to answer: "Uh, I don't drink caffeine during the season."

"I have tea with no caffeine."

Is it ridiculous for Shane to wonder whether this was just for him? Shane saw the previous evening that Ilya's fridge is full of Stop and Shop brand regular soda, nothing caffeine-free. "If you don't mind. Thanks."

"It is okay. I have to get up to walk Anya soon anyway, and then I will skate before work."

Shane peels himself out of bed, and, shivering in the cold, goes to Ilya's bathroom. After some reflection, he squeezes Ilya's toothpaste on his finger and does his best to clean his teeth that way.

When Shane comes out, Ilya has a big insulated cup waiting for him, as promised. His curls are an absolute mess from the night before, and the sweatshirt he'd worn to bed is rumpled. He's so lovely.

Fuck morning breath—Shane pulls him close for one last kiss. Anya is dancing around their feet, clearly sensing that something is going on, or maybe just excited that the humans are in the kitchen, where food comes from.

“Bye, Anya,” Shane says, bending down to pet her soft fur one last time. He stood. “Bye, Ilya.”

“Bye, Shane.” Ilya scoops Anya up into his arms, murmuring to her in Russian.

Turning away and heading down the stairs is one of the hardest things Shane has ever had to do. It gets even harder when Shane is in his Land Rover, turning on the heat and the seat warmers and taking a sip from the steaming tea.

It’s ginger-flavored. A coincidence? Or is Ilya a big enough fan to know that Shane’s favorite drink is ginger ale?

That morning, Shane’s apartment seems very big and very empty. So does his waterfall shower as he stands under it, letting the water soothe his wonderfully sore muscles.

Before he leaves for work, Shane carefully washes up Ilya’s insulated mug. As he sets it on the drying rack, he realizes: he’ll have to see Ilya again to give it back.

Maybe this is Ilya’s way of saying he definitely wants to meet Shane again.

At morning skate, the guys notice Shane’s mood, of course. “I’ve never seen you so relaxed, captain,” St.-Simon says, elbowing him. “She’s that good?”

Fuck it. “Better than good,” Shane says. Everyone else gets to talk about the people they love. Why can’t he? He just has to think of something to say about Ilya that doesn’t give the secret away. “She made me tea to take on the drive home.”

“Damn, fucking tea? Holy shit,” says Kane, coming out of the showers. “My girl usually just gives me a—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Shane says, mostly because that’s what you say when guys talk shit about your woman.

“Shut up, Kane.” Marleau throws his arm around Shane. “For you, Hollzy, sounds like a keeper.”

“This man is gonna be married by the end of the year,” Carmichael says from behind Shane.

Shane’s chest aches. Partly from the idea of marriage: a wedding that gets featured in magazines, that’s universally called sweet and romantic, that’s seen as *normal*. Partly because these men, his closest friends, don’t know him. If it’s not those stupid fucking jokes about him being a hockey robot, it’s chirps about his utterly vanilla, presumed heterosexual tastes. What would they say if he told them he spent the last afternoon and night being fucked, sucking a man’s dick, reveling in Ilya Rozanov’s body?

That evening, in the warm comfort of his spacious living room, Shane gathers his courage and texts Ilya: *How’s Anya?*

Ilya replies an hour later with a photo of Anya, her tongue lolling out of her mouth, being petted by several women in a gym. *In heaven. She likes coming to spin class.*

You take her to work? That's nice.

I take her almost always. As long as clients are okay with it.

Another message follows a moment later. It's Ilya facing a mirrored wall in an empty gym room with spin bikes behind him. His curls are damp with sweat, his muscles gleaming with it, his tank clinging to his abs. He's wearing shorts that aren't that short, but they cut across the middle of his thick thighs. Hockey player thighs.

Wow. Not everyone looks good sweaty, but Ilya really, really does. His face is flushed, like . . . well, like when he was fucking Shane.

Just finished spin class? Shane asks.

That's all you want to say?

Shane sighs and adjusts his position on the couch. His body is interested in the picture for sure.

What can he say next that doesn't fuck everything up? Ilya knows he looks hot.

Shane settles on: *Just trying not to feed your ego.*

Ilya doesn't reply until half an hour later, at which point Shane's hair is a total mess from the number of times Shane's run his hand through it.

I have almost one million people on Instagram to feed my ego, writes Ilya. *I want to know what YOU think.*

Shane gives in. *I think you're beautiful. You know that.*

Another picture comes, and this time it's what Ilya promised: a dick pic. A good one, because how could it not be: Ilya's dick is big, fully hard, and his naked thighs and abs are perfect, and Ilya's hand is there so casually in the image, loosely around the base, like he could touch himself or not.

I know that, Ilya writes.

Shane's mouth goes dry. *Are you at home?* It looks like Ilya's in his bed.

Yes. You?

Yes. Quickly, Shane hurries into his bedroom and gets into place on the bed, sitting against the headboard.

The next moment, there's an incoming video call from Ilya. Shane answers, of course.

Sitting on his bed in the same position as Shane, Ilya is shirtless, freshly showered, with his gold cross gleaming on his chest; his hair's wet and pushed back from his face, just starting

to dry. Ilya looks fascinatingly different with his hair like that. His face seems more chiseled, equally handsome but in a new way.

He's still holding his dick just as he was in the picture: unbothered.

Fuck, it's only been a day but Shane needs him again. Needs his dick, specifically, but also his rough hands, his lips, the scent of him.

"Hi, Shane," Ilya says.

"Hi."

"So," Ilya says, relaxed, leaning against the headboard. "If you liked my picture, show me."

This is the same easy, firm tone Ilya used in the videos. Shane kind of missed it, as much as he likes Ilya when he's being sweet.

A little light-headed, but pleasantly so, Shane angles the camera to show the bulge in the sweatpants he wears as pajamas.

"More," Ilya says. "Show me your dick. But take your t-shirt off first."

Shane tries to steady his own breathing as he pulls off his shirt, pushes down his waistband, shows the phone his erection that's getting harder by the second. The air is a little cool on his bare torso, his nipples. He wants to grope his own chest the way Ilya did. But Ilya hasn't told him to do anything like that.

It feels good to wait for Ilya's instructions.

"You want to come tonight?" Ilya asks him over the phone. He says it like it's obviously *his* decision, not Shane's.

A little shivery, and really turned on now, Shane says, "Yeah. I want to." Shane would beg if Ilya asked him to. Fuck. That image . . .

"You will," Ilya says. "But first, before you touch yourself, you will tell me what you thought of my picture." Ilya's stroking himself now—slow, casual.

Shane closes his eyes for a moment. He's so light he thinks he might fly away as the planet spins. He could get lost in space. "I thought. I like your body." Shane's not good with words in these moments. But he's trying. "It's . . . you're beautiful. I wanted to touch you. And suck you."

"You always want that," Ilya says.

It's true. Ilya is always right about this stuff. "Yeah. I always want that," Shane echoes, his face burning. It's embarrassing, yet saying it makes him even more aroused—and there's that calm that settles in when Ilya acts this way, a soft calm so blissful Shane could chase it forever.

“Good.” Ilya’s hand is moving a little faster now. “You can touch yourself. Jerk yourself off in your normal way. I want to see what you do when you are alone.”

In a rush, trying to keep himself in the camera’s frame, Shane reaches to the bedside table, gets lube, and starts stroking himself in earnest. But it’s not like normal, because he can see Ilya doing it, hear the sounds Ilya is making. Ilya’s getting turned on by *Shane* doing this—

Shane’s getting close to his peak; there’s wetness at the head now, he’s rubbing his thumb in it. He can’t stop himself from moaning, from chasing his orgasm fast—and when Ilya comes, Shane only needs a second more.

Fuck, it’s good—not as good as with Ilya in person, but miles fucking better than doing this alone. After it’s over, Shane leans back against his headboard, exhausted. He’s come partly over his hand, kind of over his duvet, and he isn’t even mad he’s going to have to wash it.

“You are beautiful too,” Ilya says, his voice rough post-orgasm.

That single sentence from Ilya makes Shane’s whole body warm, turned on; if he hadn’t finished a second ago, that would do it.

“Fuck, can you come over someday soon?” Shane pants.

“Yeah. Give me a minute, Hollander.” Ilya’s head is tilted back, rested on the headboard, and his eyes are shut. “I will look at my calendar in a minute.”

It’s really nice to know that Shane affected Ilya as deeply as Ilya affected him. “No problem.”

In the end, it’s about five minutes before they’ve both cleaned up and checked when they’re available. The bad news is that their schedules don’t mesh well: Shane is flying out the next morning and will be gone for five days, and once Shane is back Ilya is fully booked with trainings in the day and pilates classes in the evening. What with one thing and another, they won’t be able to see each other until shortly before Halloween.

They do find a date, though, for Ilya to come “to pick up his mug and try out the shower.” He even promises to bring Anya, too, and to try Shane’s “boring” cooking.

“Good night, Shane,” Ilya says. He’s just a few miles away; why the fuck isn’t Shane there?

“Good night, Ilya,” Shane says. Once the call’s over, he marks the day on his phone's calendar with immense care. He wishes it were sooner, but what matters is that Ilya’s coming to him again.

He’ll just have to make it through the five days of travel, when he’ll have less time to himself to look at Ilya’s messages and watch Ilya’s videos.

Everything goes normally during their first game, up in Montreal. As usual, Shane’s parents come, and Shane takes the opportunity to have dinner with them, making up for the Canadian Thanksgiving he missed earlier in the month. They tell him he’s been electric on the ice—the Raiders destroyed the Metros.

There's a question implied in what they say. Shane doesn't answer.

That evening, alone in his hotel room, Shane enjoys a new reel from Ilya, who is delighting in the Metros' shame. Ilya is a hater of a lot of teams, but he might hate the Metros most of all—which is funny, because the Metros are really no competition to the Raiders. They didn't even make the playoffs the last two years.

Ilya also announces at the end of this video that he's expanding to YouTube, and all of his hockey-related reels will be copied over there. Was this inspired by his conversation with Shane? He'll be able to get more money from ads on YouTube, right? But Shane doesn't want to directly ask. People can be awkward about finances, and Ilya clearly isn't thrilled at the difference between Shane's wealth and his own.

The next morning, it's up for a trip all the way down to Florida. Shitty scheduling, nobody's happy about the long journey, but the Raiders still pull off a win. And Ilya's still messaging Shane consistently with a mix of chirps and shameless sexting, which is an even bigger win.

The last stop is Detroit, which is facing a brutal cold spell. Here, tiredness and bad luck take their toll, and it's a loss. No big deal, but still—nobody likes to lose.

While the Raiders are waiting by their gate in Detroit for the flight home, Shane hears a familiar deep voice, and a familiar Russian accent, made tinny by electronic speakers.

Ilya. Drawn like a moth to a flame, Shane gets up to join several guys who are gathered around #27, Varkov, and his phone.

These are all the usual suspects: Shane's teammates who follow Ilya's videos. Svetlana's guest star appearances in Ilya's reels are what originally attracted them to Ilya's content, and they're basically her loyal fans at this point, but most of them seem to enjoy Ilya's roasts too.

"That arrogant motherfucker!" Marleau says, sounding almost impressed as he stares at Varkov's phone.

"Uh oh," Shane says. "What did Rozanov do?"

"Bitched that we're too slow and *challenged us to a race*!" says Dubek. "Like, daring us to fucking race him, one lap around the ice. Like at All-Stars, the speed competition."

"What?" Shane says, baffled.

Marleau shakes his head. "He said he can beat any of us, except maybe you."

"Is not smart," Varkov says gravely. "He would be very embarrassed if we accepted his challenge."

"He's lucky we're not," Marleau says.

"Yeah," says Shane. What the fuck is Ilya up to?

As soon as Shane gets home, he drops his stuff by the doorway and takes out his phone. *What are you doing?* he messages Ilya. During the flight, Shane had checked YouTube: Ilya posted the same challenge on there, and it's been racking up views fast ever since. Not exactly going viral, but there's chatter about it on Twitter and Reddit as well as Instagram.

Can't sext now, client in 3 minutes, replies Ilya immediately.

That's not what I'm talking about and you know it.

Because Varkov is right: the painful truth is that Ilya is not at a professional MLH player's level. He can't be. And Ilya is so proud of himself—how would he deal with the humiliation of losing badly after issuing such a public challenge?

But Ilya is not stupid; if anything, Shane's time with Ilya has proven the opposite. So why the challenge? Why set himself up for failure?

I will call you 8 this evening, Ilya replies half an hour later.

Okay.

Troubled, Shane unpacks his bags, showers off the grime of travel, takes a prepped meal out from his freezer and puts it in the oven.

He just doesn't want to see Ilya get hurt.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? 🤔

Next update hopefully tomorrow (Monday) but if not, Tuesday.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At 8, Shane is stretched out on his couch, waiting for Ilya's call. Hopefully, the fact that he's in his living room will make it clear that this is not a sexy conversation.

His phone lights up; Shane answers the video call to see Ilya sitting in his car. It's dark, and the parking lot of the gym is pretty grim behind him; it's all shadows and concrete.

"Five minutes before I head out to skate," Ilya tells him before taking a swig from a can of off-brand Coke. It can't be good for him to be drinking caffeine this late. Maybe it's just the lighting in his car, but Ilya looks tired.

"Okay. So . . ." Shane says. When Ilya remains totally unhelpful, just sipping his soda, Shane asks it plainly: "Why did you issue this bullshit challenge to the Raiders?"

"Because I can skate faster than them," Ilya says. "Probably Scott Hunter can skate faster than them, and he is seventy-two years old."

Shane rubs his temple. "Can you be serious for just a second? What's the point of this?" Why can't Ilya be happy just roasting the Raiders like he normally does? Why did he have to make it personal?

Ilya tips his soda can up, drains the last drops. "Because I will win."

"Will you?" says Shane. That's the real question, and the obvious answer is *no*.

"Maybe," Ilya says. "I can beat the rest of them. Maybe not you." He smiles a little; it doesn't seem very happy. "But Shane Hollander is the king of hockey. Nobody can be blamed for not beating you."

"Ilya." Is that what it is—Ilya feels bitter, or sad, that he's not at Shane's level? "It doesn't matter to me that you're not . . . like, a professional hockey player."

Ilya puts his soda can down and sits more upright in his seat. "Here is all that matters, Shane: do you trust me, or don't you? I am telling you I can do it. You just need to decide whether you believe me."

"I do trust you." Despite the fact that they haven't known each other that long, Shane trusts Ilya deeply. That's why it hurts that what Ilya's doing doesn't make sense.

"Okay," says Ilya. Neutral, but it feels like an accusation. "I have to drop Anya at home before I go to the rink. She is falling asleep here in the car. Have a good night, Shane."

"Good night, Ilya."

Ilya hangs up, leaving Shane with a pit of loneliness in his stomach. He's terrified of seeing Ilya with wounded pride. At the same time, the idea of bringing Ilya to meet his friends, into his life just a little bit, is tempting. The concept of skating with Ilya, of *playing against Ilya* is even more so.

Sometimes you think you know a guy, and then when you're on the ice with him, you see a whole different side. Gentle giants like Marleau are unstoppable defensemen. Guys who act tough can falter or get afraid when the team needs them most.

Shane wants to know all of Ilya, and to do that, he has to play hockey with him.

The next day, Shane drives to Victory Ice Arena at Boston Landing for a small social media activity and then practice. Halloween is approaching, and the social media guy thought it would be interesting to get some short clips of the players doing Halloween-adjacent activities. Shane has been promised he won't have to wear a costume beyond, potentially, a hat.

Boston Landing is a strange place. It was meant to be a luxury development, with luxury apartments much like all the others that are springing up around the city. Shane guesses there was more supply than demand, though, because there's usually nobody else around on the streets, and most of the boutique shop fronts are empty. Some of the guys frequent the single fancy coffee shop that's open on the road toward the rink, and then in summertime there are sometimes yoga classes on the grass in front of the arena facility. The whole development is pretty, modern but with some greenery, waiting for people to come.

Victory Ice Arena is pretty nice too, especially given that the general standard of ice rinks is to be fairly spartan at best. Leaking roofs, melting ice, moldy changing rooms—Shane's seen it all. In contrast, Victory Ice Arena is sleekly modern, exuding an air of expensiveness, and it weirdly still smells of new plastic several years after its opening. The rink is on the second floor, up a flight of stairs, which is also unusual.

Anyway, Shane heads up the back staircase, away from the public, and gets changed into his practice gear with the guys. Out at the arena, the social media guy, Whelan, is waiting with some whimsical costume hats, as promised. Shane accepts a plastic crown from Whelan, while Marleau gets a pirate hat.

The king of hockey, Ilya had said. It's definitely not the first time Shane's been called that. As a kid, his dream had always been to be the best; now he's twenty-eight, being the king has lost some of its appeal.

After some compulsory playing around for video purposes, the guys leave the ice for a short break and to switch out their costume headgear for helmets. The assistant coach, Reilly, is there scrolling through his phone.

Shane takes his chance. "Hey," he says. "You have a second?"

Reilly smiles, puts his phone away. "Of course. What's up, Hollander?"

“Did you hear about this, uh, influencer on Instagram? Who issued some kind of challenge to us?”

Rolling his eyes, Reilly says, “You don’t have to worry about that asshole. We’ll just keep on ignoring him. Right, Whelan?”

Hunched over the videographer’s camera, Whelan gives a thumbs up.

“Actually,” Shane says, “I was thinking. We could give it a try. So, for one thing, he has a lot of followers, so that could be good publicity. But also, he’s, uh. Bisexual? So it could be like, you can play. A positive message for the LGBT community.” This might have sounded more convincing when he rehearsed it last night.

Reilly sighs. “Yeah, that’s nice, Shane, but this guy’s gonna lose like the idiot he is. So even if we decided to encourage this behavior, where’s the good PR in us steamrolling him? It just makes us look like assholes.”

“Well, that’s what I was thinking,” says Shane. “So I figured, he can do his speed challenge, but we can also do some other activities. Maybe a scrimmage, just to get some fun video. That way, even if he loses, it’s like, we can all get along and play together.”

“Yeah, and we could invite that friend of his, too,” says Dubek casually from over Shane’s shoulder.

Shane turns around to face a pack of his teammates wearing expressions of keen interest.

“Svetlana Vetrova, Sergei Vetrov’s daughter,” says Varkov with starry eyes.

“Come on, dude,” says Kane.

“And the thing with the donors on the 10th of November fell through,” says Shane, playing his last card, “so we have a spare day with everyone available.”

Maybe it’s peer pressure that wins the day, in the end. Or maybe it’s just that Shane Hollander, best of his generation, heart of the Raiders dynasty, captain and star center who never makes waves or demands or trouble, simply asked.

The date is set. November 10th, Ilya Rozanov and Svetlana Vetrova are invited to spend two hours with the Boston Raiders, including a tour of the training facility, a hockey trivia competition, a skating speed competition, and a short scrimmage.

Shane hasn’t felt this nervous in years.

Chapter End Notes

Thank goodness they didn't have sex in this chapter also, or the story would never progress 😭.

Next chapter will be Ilya and Svetlana's visit. I read on the wiki that Svetlana worked for the Raiders as an analyst or something at some point? Either I missed that in the show or it's a book only thing. Anyway, in this world that isn't the case and Svetlana owns and runs a luxury car dealership.

This chapter now has an accompanying tumblr post exploring some Boston locations in it! https://www.tumblr.com/lyricghost/817354264265506816/boston-places-influential-men-chapter-14

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Maybe this is like during the playoffs," Ilya says, backing Shane up against his marble kitchen island. He slides his hands under Shane's thighs and smoothly lifts him up onto the countertop. "Maybe we shouldn't fuck." He leans forward and meets Shane in a kiss.

"I haven't always stuck to that," Shane says, feeling up the muscles of Ilya's back under his shirt. Every time Ilya picks Shane's 200-pound self up so easily, it drives Shane a little crazier for him. "And I still win Cups, so . . ."

"Mm." Ilya goes for Shane's neck, kissing, nipping. "Does your team know that you are bad?"

The words send a shiver down Shane's spine, stopping him from confessing that it was only with one girlfriend in one year. "I'm not exactly in the habit of—ah—telling them what I do in the bedroom." Shane grabs Ilya's hair and steers him back into a kiss that ends all talk of not having sex that night.

A couple of hours later, they're lying amid clean sheets in Shane's bed. Ilya's head is resting on Shane's shoulder in a display of trust that makes Shane's heart hurt; Shane's body is aching in the best way. Those aches will remind him of Ilya tomorrow when they're at the practice rink tomorrow, pretending that they're strangers. How is Shane going to make people believe that Ilya doesn't mean anything to him? He's not going to change these sheets until he sees Ilya again. He wants the scent of Ilya bathed in his soap to linger in them. He wants to find a curly blond hair clinging almost invisibly to his pillow in the morning.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" Shane asks him.

"You have asked this too many times," Ilya says sleepily. He rubs Shane's side. "If I am not ready now, I never will be."

Although Ilya can't see him, Shane nods. Ilya can't stay tonight, Shane knows. Ilya has two early sessions he couldn't cancel at his gym in Allston. And Anya is at Ilya's apartment, hopefully sleeping after her final walk of the day.

Shane closes his eyes and savors their last minutes together before Ilya's phone alarm goes off, breaking them apart.

That night, Shane's dreams are restless. He's haunted by an Ilya who's ashamed, resentful, telling him to go away. But when he wakes, he thinks of the real Ilya saying, "Do you trust me, or don't you?"

Whether it's the right decision or not, Shane has chosen to trust him.

Despite the gray November weather—and Boston can sure be gray when it wants to be—the morning is brighter because Shane knows he'll see Ilya soon. Shane enjoys his morning off with some gaming, inevitably choosing MLH15. If Ilya were here, he might chirp Shane for that: playing pretend hockey in his time off playing hockey.

Then it's time for the short-ish drive to Boston Landing and Victory Ice Arena. While Raiders practices are usually public, today the whole ice complex is closed. Not that people often come to practices anyway; this isn't Canada, where ice hockey is the national sport. Privately, it's a relief to Shane that he can usually walk around the city without being treated like a celebrity.

Shane gets changed as usual, picks up his skates from the equipment manager. They've just been sharpened, and Shane knows he always gets obsessive about his skate blades when he's worried. He likes a deeper hollow for more grip, but that means when he first steps out on the ice on newly-sharpened skates they tend to feel extra sticky, clingy, until the edges wear down just slightly.

Most of the guys are still hanging out in the arena seats; Shane heads onto the ice, scuffing his skates sideways a few times to blunt them just a touch. Ilya and Svetlana must be here by now, getting a facility tour from Reilly and Whelan. Ilya will be given some practice gear to change into, not that anyone expects him to do any serious checking. It's mostly to protect the team from liability if he falls and hurts himself.

The double doors to the rink area clank open.

"And here's the rink, of course—you know this part," Whelan is saying. He has a helmet tucked under his arm.

Ilya's next to him, walking in sneakers, with a sports bag over his shoulder. No skates yet, but he's wearing Raiders gear. Shane's team. Svetlana, next to Ilya, is wearing a Raiders jersey and skinny jeans. She has what's probably a skate bag over her shoulder too.

Neither Ilya nor Svetlana seems really nervous; it's as though they've always been a part of this place. Well, Svetlana is a famous goaltender's daughter, so she's surely been in plenty of arenas, around plenty of hockey players all through her life. And, of course, Ilya comes here to the practice rink all the time, so maybe it's not surprising that he's comfortable here, too.

"And here's the team," Whelan goes on. Another member of the marketing team has a video camera trained on them. Right: this is a PR event.

Smoothly, Shane leaves the ice—at least his blades feel normal again—and steps out onto the rubber matting surrounding it. The other guys, who've been sitting in the seats or just hanging out standing, are waiting for him to introduce himself first. Shane's used to that: he's the captain, after all.

"Hi," Shane says. In his skates, he's an inch or two taller than Ilya and more than a head higher than Svetlana. Shit, he should have taken them off before this. "Shane Hollander, great to meet you." He shakes Svetlana's hand first.

“Good to meet you too,” Svetlana says with a Russian accent and a charming, self-assured smile that’s a cousin of the cocky smirk Ilya’s wearing right now. It’s not hard to see why they’re friends: both beautiful, both in love with hockey, both at ease with themselves in a way Shane never has been.

Shane turns to Ilya. They shake hands. “Uh, welcome,” Shane says. “Great to have you here.”

“Great to be here,” Ilya says. “Glad your team didn’t chicken out.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that,” Shane chirps back, and he doesn’t have to make an effort to smile as he says it. There’s a scattering of friendly laughter around them; this is good marketing content for the team. But Shane is just so, so happy. Ilya’s here.

Then it’s over, and Ilya and Svetlana are being greeted by the rest of the team. While they talk, Shane sits, takes off his skates, wipes the blades with slightly awkward hands, despite the fact that he’s done this so many times it’s automatic.

Shane’s in his sneakers by the time Whelan says: “Right! It’s time for our trivia contest.” Duly, Shane gets in line to be mic'd up with all the other trivia contestants.

They’ve set up chairs and a Raiders backdrop in the open area outside the rink. The teams are 5 versus 5: Ilya, Svetlana, Marleau, Carmichael, and Dubek on one side; Shane, Varkov, St-Simon, Kane, and Connors on the other. Varkov is immediately dejected, as expected; Dubek is thrilled to be sitting next to Svetlana, who’s paying him no attention at all.

Whelan acts as master of ceremonies. They start with some basic stats and hockey history facts—the year of Lemieux’s five magic goals or Orr’s airborne one. When both teams crush these, they move on to more obscure trivia: Olympic medals, rule changes, when the USA won gold at Worlds. But they’re neck and neck on these too, and Ilya isn’t even bothering to chime in, just smirking as Svetlana nails every question.

“Final round,” Whelan announces. “Two more questions, just for fun. First: when did Sergei Vetrov retire?”

“Aw, come on!” Kane complains.

Shane racks his brain. He should have researched Svetlana’s father, shouldn’t he? But he can’t come up with an answer, and neither can his team.

“Sorry,” he ends up saying.

Svetlana sighs and holds up her team’s whiteboard. “1990,” she says. “But I don’t want to win if the contest is not fair.”

“Don’t worry,” Whelan says. “Here’s our final question. Why did Shane Hollander choose the number 80 when he joined the Raiders?”

“Ah,” Svetlana says, sounding more pleased.

“Wait, what *is* the answer, Hollander?” St-Simon whispers to him.

“You’ll see in a minute, dumbfuck,” Kane whispers to him.

Shane writes carefully on his whiteboard, which is not really big enough to fit the full answer; Svetlana’s writing something too.

“Time’s up!” Whelan announces. “Team Vetrova, you want to go first?”

Smiling with some mischief in her eyes, Svetlana holds up her whiteboard. In crammed-in, small letters, it says: *Raiders centers since 2002 always have numbers in 80s. Mgmt suggest 81 but Hollander superstitious, prefers even numbers—chooses 80.*

“Hollander?” Whelan asks.

Surprised, Shane holds up his whiteboard. It basically says the same thing. “Yeah. How’d you know?”

Svetlana laughs. “I want to be clear. All the other facts were my own knowledge. But this specific one, I knew because Ilya told me last year that he read it in a magazine.”

“This is lie,” Ilya says immediately, flushing. “She is a liar!”

“Ohhh, he’s a Hollander fan!” Carmichael crows amid a round of laughter.

“I am an angel,” Svetlana says.

Is Ilya really that big a fan of Shane? He didn’t act all star-struck when they first met. But when Shane thinks about this . . . for years now, Shane’s been careful not to mention the minor superstitions that he, like all hockey players, holds onto. If Shane let this slip in an interview, it must have been long ago. It definitely wasn’t anything from the past year or two, he’s sure.

As Whelan presents Svetlana with a cheesy plastic trophy and she and her team pose for the camera, Shane tries to gauge his feelings about this revelation. Ultimately, Shane has no right to be mad, because he has done the exact same thing: he followed Ilya’s videos religiously, he even thought about them while . . . uh . . .

Yeah, he’d be a fucking hypocrite to be upset about this.

When Whelan announces that it’s time for the fastest skater contest, Shane finds an opportunity to smile at Ilya. And Ilya, with what might be relief under his facade of cockiness, smiles back.

Chapter End Notes

I know you all want the next part, it's coming this evening!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To warm up, they'll have ten minutes of casual ice time before the speed competition. Shane suspects this is also to get more footage for social media, which is fine.

As Shane's putting his own skates back on, he glances at Ilya. Ilya's videos never let Shane get a good look at what skates Ilya was wearing. Now, Shane can finally see: they're professional-level boots, the same Bauer Vapor skates that several of his teammates wear.

Ilya is *really* serious about this. Firstly, that level of skate is fucking expensive for a normal person. And secondly, a more casual skater wouldn't even be able to use them because the material would be too stiff for someone without enough muscle to make it bend at the ankle.

But Ilya does have a hockey player's legs; Shane has seen them.

Svetlana, who finished lacing up her skates first, slips onto the ice smoothly with a gaggle of hockey players around her. Shane's left with a few others, including Marleau. And Ilya.

"So, Rozanov," Marleau says as he steps onto the ice with Ilya, leaving Shane trailing a little behind. "When'd you start skating?"

Three videographers are now filming them, one accompanying each group on the ice and another one up among the seats, and they're all still wearing their body mics from the trivia contest. Shane's going to have to work hard not to give anything away.

"In Russia, when I was a child," Ilya says easily. "My father had great hopes for me. That I would go into the KHL."

Shane can't help himself: "Maybe you'd have ended up here anyway. In Raiders gear," he says. It's a wonderful fantasy.

Marleau laughs his big, booming laugh. "Don't make this guy's head any bigger than it already is, Hollzy."

For a moment, Ilya's face is somber, probably from the thought of his late father. Then he grins and does an effortless turn to skate backwards facing Marleau. "No, Hollander is right. Though maybe I would prefer to be a Metro. Historically, they're the best team in sports. Well, they used to be."

"Oh, you motherfucker!" Marleau says, obviously more amused than annoyed.

"Talking up the Metros? You better watch out during the scrimmage, Rozanov," says St-Simon, coming up behind them.

“They’re hardly a threat,” Shane points out. “It’s been two years since they even made the playoffs, and ten years since they got past the first round.”

“Oh, so you’re saying Canadian teams are not as good as American teams?” Ilya asks him. “You know you’re on camera, yes?”

“Fuck off, Rozanov!” Shane says. God, he likes Ilya so much.

And it’s just great to hang out with both Ilya and Marleau, Shane’s closest friend, at the same time. What’s even better is that Marleau and Ilya are really getting along. Ilya’s being an asshole, like always, but Marleau isn’t easily ruffled by it, though he pretends to be outraged.

The ten minutes come to an end too soon. On the ice, one of the marketing guys starts drawing a start/finish line. Off the ice, Carmichael, Ilya, and a rookie named Johansson are stretching. These are the three who were tapped to take part in the speed competition: Johansson because the team wants him to pick up some fans, and Carmichael because, as a massive defenseman, he’s not the fastest of the team. The idea is to let Ilya save face to some extent rather than matching him up with the team’s speediest guys. Like Shane.

To be honest, Shane is kind of jealous.

“Okay, the record is 13.02 seconds for one lap,” Whelan narrates to the camera with his back to the rink. “But nobody here has made that number.”

“Hollander has never competed in the speed event, though,” Svetlana points out from behind him.

“That’s true, he hasn’t.” Whelan grins at Shane. “He’s too busy grabbing records in other events.”

“Hey, I’m just a spectator here!” Shane is not going to blush about this.

Carmichael steps onto the rink, rolls his shoulders a few times, gets into position. Svetlana and Ilya are sitting side by side, both intensely focused on the activities on the ice. Shane is stuck several seats away, wishing for nothing more than to sit next to Ilya, to hold his hand and tell him he’ll do great.

Reilly does the honor of blowing the whistle to start; Carmichael takes off, skating around the rink at what looks, like Shane, to be a decent pace compared to most players in the world, though definitely nowhere near the fastest guys he’s seen at the ASG. Carmichael is simply a wall of a man, not built for speed.

Carmichael passes the finish line, makes a hard stop in a spray of ice. “15.01 seconds,” Whelan announces.

“Nice work!” Shane says, giving Carmichael a high five when he comes to sit down.

Marleau gives Carmichael a slap on the shoulder. “Don’t quit your day job, huh?”

“Fuck you!” Carmichael shoves him amiably.

But Shane can't pay attention any more, because Ilya is getting on the ice, and Shane might be sick.

"How are you feeling, Ilya?" Whelan asks him with a camera hovering over his shoulder.

"Good," Ilya says, straightening his helmet. "I don't think I will beat the record today. But I will beat *him*, Carmichael, definitely." He grins and gets into place.

Shane's fingers dig into his own thighs. The whistle blows. Ilya takes off.

And—fuck, Ilya *is* fast. He was *right*—he's utterly at home on the ice, quick as a comet and smooth as mercury—soaring back to the finish line and, after it, stopping hard yet beautifully controlled, just like Carmichael.

Standing up, Svetlana shouts something victorious-sounding in Russian. Shane would kill to be able to do the same. Ilya was perfect.

"13.31 seconds," Whelan says, staring at his stopwatch. "Ilya, that—would get you a win some years, at the All-Star Game. Most years, actually."

"I know," Ilya says, stepping off the ice. Svetlana comes to celebrate with him, but he's not smiling as much as Shane had expected. For a second, he hugs Svetlana like he's tired, practically flopping over her shoulder. But once he lets her go, he smirks, saying, "So? Time for the scrimmage?"

"Well, we had, uh, one more Raider—"

"I'll do it," Shane says, standing. "If that's okay, Johansson?"

The young rookie has been sitting with Oregan the goalie, looking anxious, to Shane's eye. "Oh, sure, no problem," he says at once.

Several of the guys whoop. "Yeah, Hollander!"

Shane takes his blade guards off, steps onto the ice.

The whistle blows, and Shane's off. It's been a long time since Shane just tried to skate as fast as he could. He's not sure he's ever done it this way, lapping an empty rink. It's a pleasure to leave all the usual stresses of hockey behind and simply fly over the ice.

Before Shane knows it, he's past the finish line. Panting, he skates back to Whelan.

"13.13," Whelan calls out.

A chorus of cheers rings out from the assembled team members in the arena seats. There are more guys than there were ten minutes ago; his teammates who didn't want to take part in the PR activities have arrived for the practice that's about to start.

"Hollander, you beaut!" Marly says.

“What is the thing you said, Ilyusha, that was turned into a meme?” Svetlana asks Ilya archly. “*Hollander is the best, it’s just a fucking fact*?”

“It *is* a fucking fact,” Ilya says from his seat a few feet apart from Shane. “Hollander is the best player in the MLH right now. But I am also pretty fucking good.” He smiles at Shane, and it’s unbearable that Shane can’t kiss him right now.

“Can we try to tamp down on the cussing?” Whelan asks in the tone of a man who has asked this many times before and never succeeded.

“You’re not bad,” Shane says. “But let’s see how you do during the scrimmage.”

There’s a lot more excitement in the air than there usually is before practice. Even the guys who never cared about Ilya before are interested in him now. And Shane—as he gets ready, puts his mouthguard in and his gloves on, he’s thrumming with energy.

Reilly divides the guys into teams and shifts and runs over the plan quickly. To Shane’s great satisfaction, Ilya is placed on his right wing in the first shift.

“Eight minutes,” the assistant coach says. “Two minutes per shift, and let’s try to finish with nobody injured, okay?”

What he means is that they shouldn’t check Ilya, at least not like they’d check one of their peers. They should take it easy, remember it’s for PR. But Shane can tell, simply from the way Ilya is moving and hefting his stick in his hands, that Ilya is not planning to take this easy. And that’s fine: Shane isn’t either. The idea of having Ilya on his wing is incredible.

The puck drops; Shane steals it immediately from Carlton, their second line center, and—passes it to Ilya, who is exactly where he should be, like he read Shane’s mind—

The next few seconds are a weird process of the other guys waking up to the fact that Ilya is *actually playing*. Like, this is not fucking around, indulging some influencer who wants to pretend to be a Boston Raider. Ilya fits in. Weirdly, impossibly, he *is* exactly that good.

Shane already knew. Part of him knew just from seeing Ilya in person on the ice.

It ends in a stunning, textbook slapshot from Ilya, assisted by Shane. The accuracy of it, from that distance . . . what the fuck?

Reilly blows his whistle. Shane’s teammates are mostly looking around, looking at each other, like they’re trying to confirm that just happened.

From the rinkside, Svetlana shouts something celebratory in Russian; Varkov, who’s on the bench, stands up and shouts too.

“What?” Ilya calls to the other men on the ice. Shane’s never seen him look so happy; Shane’s never wanted to be fucked by him this much. “I told you all you are fucking slow!”

“Fuck you, Rozanov!” Dubek says in a way Shane learned years ago is the best possible compliment. Someone who isn’t good isn’t worth facing; if Ilya were just a stupid influencer,

Dubek would probably be nice to him, tell him he did a good job. Now, Dubek is grinning too.

Everyone re-sets, and the atmosphere is very different now. It’s not a joke any more; it’s a true challenge, and Shane couldn’t wait another second to see what else Ilya can do.

They start again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for so many lovely comments on the last chapter 😭😭❤️❤️ I hope this one satisfied everyone's wishes!!

I have seen a lot of great questions in the comments and requests for Ilya’s POV. You will have answers to your questions in the next few chapters ❤️ I love reading your thoughts and theories!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane steps off the ice, and he's not quite in his body. As though he's living a dream, but it's real. The plasticky smell of the rink is real, the texture of his mouthguard is real on his tongue, his own sweat trickling down his back is real. Those two-minute shifts were punishing ones, because that was not the lazy scrimmage it was supposed to be. It was some of the most thrilling hockey of Shane's life.

Ilya's ahead of Shane, walking across the rubber matting to reunite with Svetlana, who's speaking to Ilya in rapid, exhilarated Russian as he catches his breath. Varkov quickly walks to them, now no longer solely interested in wooing Svetlana. He's asking Ilya questions, from the sound of it.

It's easy to guess what those questions are. The rest of the guys, clustered around Shane, are asking them too, with overlapping voices that are hard to handle when Shane already feels so *much* and is giving his all not to show it.

"Okay, he's definitely played professionally before," Carmichael says to the group at large. No need to specify who *he* is. "Right?"

Marleau takes off his helmet and shakes his sweaty hair. "Earlier he said wanted to go into the KHL as a kid. Didn't say he did."

Kovalev, a shy Russian defenseman who was a rookie last year, is already tapping on his phone, eager to help. "I do not remember guy named Rozanov in KHL. I Google now."

"Didn't he play for BU?" Shane asks as casually as he can.

"But why would a guy from the KHL with those skills be working as a fucking personal trainer in Boston?" That's Dubek, who's peering over Kovalev's shoulder.

"If he played for BU, why the fuck didn't he get drafted?" says Carmichael.

Kovalev looks up from his phone. "No Rozanov in KHL. And I think I remember him if I saw him."

Head coach LeClaire, who hadn't involved himself in Ilya's PR activity previously, joins this little huddle. "All right, take five, guys. We'll tie up the thing with Rozanov while you have a breather."

"Hey, coach," Shane says after the others disperse. "You think you could find some tape of Rozanov at BU?"

With an analytical expression that Shane knows well, LeClaire glances at Ilya, who's now helmetless and chatting with Whelan. "It was already on my to-do list. I'll send you what I

find, if you want."

"Yeah, thanks."

Shane has to get himself together for the rest of practice. But all he can see is Ilya from behind: his damp curls, his casual confidence and strong posture. Shane was right to have faith in him, because Ilya's skills are better than Shane even imagined, and now everyone on Shane's team has seen how fucking charming and likeable Ilya is too. It would be . . . so, so great, in a different world, to be able to say, "This is the guy I'm dating."

Or even: "This is the guy I love."

Shane *has* to be patient. He'll be alone with Ilya this evening; they've already planned for Shane to go to Ilya's apartment.

Before Ilya leaves, he comes to shake Shane's hand one more time, since Shane is the captain. "Hope you had a great day with us," Shane says.

"It was okay." Ilya smiles at him with joy, relief, mischief. "Your guys seem tired after only a little scrimmage. Maybe after you work on their speed, you can improve their stamina. Just a small tip from me to you."

The videographer filming them audibly laughs.

"You are unbelievable," says Shane, shaking his head. Ilya's inches away; Shane could kiss him with one step forward. "Good luck, man."

"Same to you," says Ilya. His hand leaves Shane's.

"Great to have you," Shane says to Svetlana, shaking her hand too.

She smiles, radiant. "Same. Good luck in the playoffs this year. Buffalo might give you more trouble than you expect."

When Svetlana's eyes meet his, Shane wonders for a moment whether she *knows*. He can't tell. But she says nothing, just waves goodbye to him together with Ilya and heads out, accompanied by Whelan and, interestingly, Reilly.

No practice, in Shane's entire career, is as torturous as the one that follows. By the time he's driving back to his apartment, he's half jumping out of his skin. Even the long shower under his waterfall showerhead doesn't really help.

At six, Shane starts the journey down Storrow Drive, which is still clogged with traffic, westward to Allston. Eventually, after way too long, he's parking near Ilya's apartment, jamming his toque on his head and his reading glasses on his face, and walking up the side path to Ilya's apartment.

Ilya opens the door; once Shane removes his glasses, he can see that Ilya's curls are softly disordered, freshly showered and not styled, and there's a pillow mark on his cheek. Ilya's been napping. He looks less tired than he was the night before.

“Still playing Clark Kent,” Ilya says. A gentler chirp than usual. More tentative, perhaps. “You know Halloween is already past.”

“I know.” Shane hangs his hat up next to his coat. “Where’s Anya?”

“She is having a sleepover with the neighbors downstairs. Don’t worry, this is a treat for her, and for them.”

“Oh, right.”

Ilya leads Shane up the stairs. Up in Ilya’s living room, Ilya turns around and says, “Well . . .” There’s a trace of his cocky smile there, but it’s unsure.

Shane shoves him against the wall and kisses him the way he’s been dying to for hours. He needs to touch every inch of Ilya’s muscles that made him a powerhouse on the ice today. He needs Ilya to hold him down and fuck him until Shane doesn’t know anything but being filled up by him. How is it possible that one man can be such a funny, affectionate, arrogant asshole that he’s made Shane fall head over heels for him, *and* so impossibly good at moving his body in hockey and in sex? It’s like Ilya was created just to drive Shane wild—he’s Shane’s most unreachable fantasy—and Shane’s tipped over the brink. He might never be normal again. He’s holding on tight to Ilya’s hair, he’s grabbing Ilya’s chest, he’s grinding against him and kissing him—

Breathing heavily, half-laughing, Ilya asks, “You liked what you saw today?”

“Fuck you,” Shane says, pulling Ilya closer to him, grabbing his firm flesh harder. “Oh my god, fuck, Ilya, what the fuck.”

“You need me?” Ilya’s sucking a hickey into Shane’s neck, and Shane only wants him to do it harder. Mark him up.

“I need you, I need you in me, I have since, oh, God.” Whatever. Shane kisses him again, because he can’t bear not to. Ilya’s lips are soft and clever, irresistible. It’s fine, Ilya will know. Ilya always knows just what Shane loves.

And he does. Ilya picks Shane up, carrying him by his thighs, and takes him into the bedroom. This time, Ilya crawls on top of Shane and holds one of his wrists, pushing it down into the mattress. “This okay?”

Shane goes light-headed so fast and deliciously it’s terrifying, and ecstatic. “Yeah—don’t stop—just take it, just do it—come on—”

Ilya grasps his other wrist and does the same. “Why did you wear jeans? Harder to take off and fuck you. Not smart when you are so needy.” Bullshit; Ilya is just as hard, Shane can feel it.

“Oh, my god, Ilya—”

“Shane, Shane,” Ilya says. He lets one of Shane’s wrists go to unbutton Shane’s jeans one-handed—thank god Shane didn’t wear a belt—and Ilya’s so right, he’s so right, and Shane

has never gone so far into the deep, quiet place like this, where all he knows is Ilya's touch and Ilya's voice. "Yes?"

"Yes," Shane breathes. He can barely manage the word. "Yes!"

At some point, Ilya tells Shane to lift his hips—he does—and then his pants are gone, and his legs are over Ilya's shoulders and Shane is being fingered, and Ilya is sucking hickies into Shane's pecs, and then Ilya is pushing into him. And it's bliss, because Ilya is holding down one of Shane's wrists again, and Shane *is* just whatever Ilya needs him to be—just there to be fucked by Ilya, possessed by Ilya, to take it and take it and take it.

Ilya reaches between them, uses the precome on Shane's dick to jerk him off once, twice—and Shane comes, harder than he ever has before.

Chapter End Notes

Well I guess Shane liked it lol

Might do another sneaky little update this evening!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

> Hi all, please read to the end of this chapter before forming any opinions, because there are some twists and turns ahead! And just a reminder, Ilya and Svetlana have told us that Ilya was adopted to the USA at the age of 9. Thank you and enjoy ❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane is warm underneath Ilya, stroking his back while Ilya nuzzles his face into the crook of Shane's neck. Normally, Shane would want a shower, but he's so boneless he couldn't possibly get up, and letting go of Ilya again is equally impossible. At least Ilya has thrown away his condom and cleaned them up quickly with a cloth.

"Ilya," Shane murmurs.

"Mm?"

"Why didn't you stick with hockey after playing for BU?" Now that Shane's haze of lust is clearing—well, mostly, being entwined with a naked Ilya will never not be hot—the question is really starting to bug him. Ilya loves hockey, that's clear. Ilya is really fucking good at hockey. Ilya would like to make more money, Shane's pretty sure. So where's the disconnect?

Sighing, Ilya rolls off Shane and pulls the covers up over their chests. Lying on his side facing Shane, Ilya says, "My adoptive father was old and dying of cancer. I was living with him. Taking care of him, because my adoptive mother died when I was in high school. I got cut from the BU team before senior year because I was skipping too many practices. He died a week before graduation." Ilya doesn't say it with grief, more kind of a sad detachment.

Shane never knows what to say in situations like this. With a lump in his throat, he strokes Ilya's arm. "I'm really sorry."

"It's okay," Ilya says.

It still feels like there's something Shane's missing. "After graduation, didn't you want to go back to playing? You love it so much. If you'd done an amateur tryout with an AHL team, I'm sure they would have signed you." Maybe Ilya was "bad" on the BU team in the sense of not practicing enough, not knowing plays, but Shane cannot believe he wasn't talented. "Or was it . . . because you wanted to be out? As bi?"

Ilya turns onto his back, stares at the ceiling. For a long time, he lets Shane keep petting his arm, yet says nothing. "I don't know," he says at last. "I had a head injury. Fall on the ice. I don't remember a lot from college or afterward."

All the post-orgasm bliss vanishes from Shane's body, replaced with ice-cold fear. "What? Are you okay? Did you have to have physical therapy?" Memory loss is no fucking joke; Shane has known people who've had some bad blows to the head in his time, so he has a decent idea of how it works. If Ilya lost memories, he was really hurt. He had a *brain injury*. That usually comes with physical effects, too, which makes it all the more shocking that Ilya is so skilful on the ice.

"Hey, hey." Ilya's squeezing Shane's hand, rubbing his thumb over the back of it. "I am fine. It's fine. Is not a big deal."

Shane's heart cracks. "It is a big deal. It's you."

Ilya's face crumples a moment before he turns his head away from Shane. Shane can't take it: he touches Ilya's cheek, bringing his face back to meet Shane's, and kisses him.

With his girlfriends, in the past, Shane was never like this. They never talked about the painful memories and feelings under the surface of daily life. So maybe Shane doesn't know the right way to do this, but he wants to try. "I'm so sorry all that happened to you," he says. "It's not fair."

His lips pressed together, Ilya shakes his head. "I don't want to talk about it any more."

"Okay," Shane says. "Just tell me one thing. Are you safe to skate now?" Sometimes, after severe head injuries, people aren't supposed to ever risk another concussion. As much as Shane loved seeing Ilya skate and being with him on the ice, Ilya's safety is more important.

"Yes," Ilya says without hesitation. "Promise."

"All right." Shane's faith in Ilya wasn't misplaced before; he'll trust him again. They seal the promise with a kiss and share a few more soft kisses before Ilya gets up to shower.

As much as Shane wishes he could stay all night, he can't; the Raiders are flying out to Pittsburgh the next morning. So he drives back to his Beacon Street penthouse and gets cozy in bed to read and catch up on a few emails. The pleasurable aches in Shane's body are a reminder of Ilya, as are the love bites on his chest that definitely won't have faded by tomorrow. Shane's going to get chirped for that, and he doesn't care. He wants it, in a sense, because it's the only way he can talk about his connection with Ilya to his friends.

Shane's just about ready for an early night at nine-fifteen when an email comes in from Reilly. Subject line: Rozanov BU tape.

Awake again, Shane clicks on the email.

Hi Shane,

I got my hands on some tape of Rozanov from BU. You can download it here.

Curious what you make of it. I see talent but nothing like the guy who played today. Still, we're going to see if he wants to go down to Providence to talk to the farm team. The guy's 27 but skills are skills even if he's got less time left in him. If he can keep up the standard we

saw, it'd be crazy not to at least get him a tryout deal in Providence for the rest of the season.

- Des.

Giving up on any hope of keeping to his normal bedtime, Shane downloads some of the videos and watches.

An hour later, he's . . . perplexed. Reilly was right: the talent in Ilya is obvious, but the Ilya in the tape is simply not the same player Shane saw, and the difference isn't just practice. Their skill level is chasms apart. And his presence—Ilya today was totally comfortable and commanding on the ice, reading Shane and the other guys' intentions like he was psychic. The Ilya Rozanov who played for BU was a good NCAA player, nothing to be ashamed of, but he'd probably never make it to the MLH.

How did Ilya level up so much while he wasn't even on a team? Has he even been playing casually with friends? On Ilya's Instagram, Shane only remembers seeing reels of Ilya practicing alone.

Shane opens up Instagram and scrolls through Ilya's reels. They go back to March 2017, a year and a half ago, and there's nothing about Ilya practicing or playing with a team.

Ilya's photos likewise don't have evidence of Ilya being on a hockey team of any kind. But there's something that Shane never noticed: unlike the reels, the photos date way farther into the past, all the way to 2014.

Ilya is Shane's age, meaning that he would have graduated BU around 2012 if he started at 18. So it's not surprising that there's no evidence of the BU team here. Shane already has evidence of that in the tape.

What is surprising, now that Shane's really looking, is the difference between Ilya's photos before and after spring 2017. Ilya's a frequent poster, posting images several times a week, but between late February and mid-March 2017 there are no photos at all.

Before this turning point, it's pretty clear that Ilya was not trying to be an influencer. His photos are casual, silly snapshots with his friends. No blatant shirtless thirst traps, though Ilya is sometimes shirtless at the pool or at a pride parade. No pictures with a hockey stick at all.

And no golden chain around Ilya's neck. Shane scrolls down and down, but he can't get a single glimpse of Ilya's gold cross anywhere before March 2017.

After March 2017, the golden cross is never absent. Not once.

After March 2017, a lot of the friends who used to be in Ilya's photos are gone instead. He's alone in many of the pictures until Svetlana appears in the autumn.

Shane gets up, makes himself some decaf tea, sips it in the kitchen. Going down an internet rabbit hole is not going to help him sleep. He should just ask Ilya tomorrow what happened in February of 2017. It can't be Ilya's head injury because Ilya's very first reel is him skating

smoothly at Victory Ice Arena in March, which is not something that a guy with a serious brain injury could or should be doing. Right?

Shane puts the mug in his dishwasher and heads back to his bedroom. The change in friends, the gold cross, the missing reels—he can't get them out of his head.

It's obvious that February or March 2017 was when Ilya decided to become an influencer. Did Ilya just never make any Instagram videos in the three years before then? Or was there something in those older reels that he didn't want people to see? What happened in that blank stretch of days that made Ilya decide to change his life?

It's so easy to type *ilya rozanov* into the Google search bar and start sifting through the results. Come to think of it, maybe Shane should have done this before inviting the guy into his life and falling in love with him. The results aren't that helpful, though, just pages and pages and pages of Ilya's own videos and of people on various social platforms saying the same things Shane's heard before: Ilya's hot, he's an expert ragebaiter, he's funny, etc.

Maybe something more specific would be better, like: "*Ilya rozanov" "boston university."*

That brings up way fewer results, mostly mentions of Ilya as a hockey player in the school paper or discussion boards. Nothing scandalous.

There's a video from the BU school newspaper's YouTube channel, too. **Students weigh in on meal plan requirement** is the title.

Curious to see a young Ilya, Shane clicks. He has to sit through several other students giving their opinions before a familiar man with a head of dark blond curls appears. It's definitely Ilya: more baby-faced, but still possessing the moles that Shane knows so well now—the larger one on his cheek and the smaller ones all over Ilya, like the two on his neck that Shane kissed a couple of hours ago. Ilya has a curly version of that early-2010s Justin Bieber-style haircut, and he's wearing a polo shirt with a popped collar. Even Shane can tell that it's awful fashion. It's also so sweet to see this version of Ilya who Shane never got to meet.

Then Ilya starts speaking: "It's ridiculous. I live off-campus with my dad and I can make both of our dinners for like a buck, buck-fifty. Five [bleep]ing thousand dollars, are you [bleep]ing kidding me? It's exploiting the student body and it just [bleep]ing sucks, man."

Every word is in a broad Boston accent. Only the faintest trace of Russian remains in his consonants.

Chapter End Notes

I am so nervous posting this. I hope you enjoyed it, but if you didn't, please don't tell me 🥲 it's okay to just ghost . . . And thank you for coming along on this ride with me this far ❤️

If you did enjoy, I'm interested to hear about any clues that you are seeing in retrospect. I hope that what happened is understandable but if not, don’t worry, there will be more discussions that hopefully will make it perfectly clear. Thank you as always ❤️

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s early September 2018, and Ilya Rozanov is walking westward along Beacon Street.

He completely cleared his schedule today, expecting to drown his regrets in alcohol after leaving Shane Hollander’s apartment. After working and planning and hoping for so long, he hadn’t really believed it would all pay off.

But it has. Somehow, Ilya’s walking in the warm September air with the taste of Shane in his mouth and the memory of Shane’s kiss on his lips.

As Ilya goes through the heart of Beacon Hill, he takes his phone from his pocket and sends the playful messages he’d planned to send. Funny Ilya, asshole Ilya—that’s what Shane likes.

Ilya hadn’t known what was waiting for him up in that apartment. Yes, he’d been very close to certain that “Sean” was Shane. But who was Shane Hollander, captain of the Boston Raiders? Who was a Shane Hollander who had never met Ilya Rozanov?

The same, it turned out. So much the same. He’s earnest, straightforward, a little awkward. Pleased to be chirped, longing to submit. The best hockey player in the world. Beautiful, with exactly the same freckles. And a man who loves sex, though this Shane has obviously never given himself permission to be that before.

After a year and a half of seeing Shane Hollander in magazine spreads and on billboards around Boston, speaking to the real Shane, touching him, was a high better than lifting the Cup. Coming down from that high, Ilya feels fragile. Both joyful and sad.

It’s hard to love someone so much when they don't know you at all. If Ilya told Shane how he really felt, Shane would think he was crazy. So Ilya will have to pretend it doesn’t matter so much to him. Well, that’s nothing new: Ilya has plenty of practice at pretending not to love Shane Hollander.

Ilya’s feet take him onward by the grand brown-brick houses of Back Bay, then through Fenway. Not driving fucking sucks, but parking and gas are so fucking expensive, and it’s hard enough balancing the time and costs of working, skating, and posting on Instagram. Ilya’s car is embarrassing, anyway—a 2006 Toyota he wouldn’t have been caught dead in before.

He can’t deal with the slowness and confinement of a T carriage right now, though, so walking is what’s left.

At last, Ilya gets to St. Mary’s Street, where the C line comes out of the ground like the dead being resurrected. He sits on a bench there, puts his bag at his side, and leans forward, his forearms on his thighs.

It worked. Ilya caught Shane Hollander's interest. The question now is what Ilya can do next. Yeah, not having a Russian passport is like shedding a massive boat's anchor from around his neck, but the other parts of this life are not tolerable to him. Ilya is not going to waste his life telling people to cycle harder and try one more rep. He was meant to be burning and brilliant. He was meant to *play fucking hockey*. That's why Shane liked him: because they were equals. Ilya doesn't want to be a figure of pity to Shane. He wants to stand at Shane's side again.

*

It's July 2018, and Ilya's just escaped from the miserable humid heat of a Boston summer into the slightly cooler air of his doctor's cramped office in Brookline.

He enjoys this place. It's not some fancy high-tech space with abstract art on the walls; the chairs to wait in are wooden, and the room is lined with filing cabinets filled with paper files, as though Ilya's stepped in a time warp back to the 1990s or something. The receptionist and his doctor are murmuring to one another in Russian.

"Ilya Rozanov," the doctor calls. It's the first time he's heard his name pronounced correctly in . . . what, months?

Ilya goes in, sits on the exam table with the paper cover.

"Your family is Russian?" the doctor asks him in hearty, accented English. She's an older Russian lady with a brusque, grandmotherly air, a pale complexion, and a short, curly perm that's either blonde or white. For the life of him, Ilya cannot tell whether she's fifty, sixty, or seventy.

"I am Russian," Ilya says in Russian. "Born in Moscow."

"So was I," his doctor says approvingly, switching to Russian too. She taps his shoulder. "Take off your shirt and turn your back to me . . . yes, I see it. The mole looks completely normal, you know."

"Yes, but it's rubbing against the strap of my bag," Ilya says. "Annoying me." It's such a relief to be able to talk about his health in Russian rather than English, which makes him feel stupid every time, and leaves him uncertain that he's grasped everything he needs to know.

"Okay, I'll take it off if you're sure. Just local anesthetic—you can tolerate it, right?"

"Of course." Ilya's eyes are welling up; what's wrong with him?

Indeed, Ilya doesn't feel a thing as he lies on his stomach and the doctor cuts off a little part of him.

"I'll send it for testing just in case," she says, "but I'm not worried. You'll hear back in a week or two." She pats his shoulder. "All done. You can put your shirt back on. So what

brought you here from Moscow?"

Ilya pushes himself up into a sitting position and looks at the wall. "My parents died in a car accident. I was eight." He knows it's true, or true *now*; he just doesn't remember. He doesn't know what the last thing he said to his mother was. He doesn't know where her necklace went, whether it was lost in the car wreckage or sold or what. All he has is a stupid American duplicate that he bought with his own money.

"Ah," his doctor says. No platitudes; he appreciates that. "You know, your insurance covers eight sessions of therapy, if you want to talk to someone."

Shocked, Ilya turns to look at her. "What?"

"Too many young men hold all their grief in," she says.

"I'm fine. Thank you," Ilya says.

"Okay, then. You're all done. Change the bandage morning and night and keep it dry for the next three days. I'll give you a pamphlet." With a clang, she opens yet another filing cabinet, retrieves a bit of folded paper, and hands him instructions that have surely been photocopied five times over.

"Thank you," says Ilya again. He doesn't want to see a therapist. For one thing, he can't tell anyone the truth about his life, or they will truly believe he's mad.

He's been thinking of going to the shelter and getting a dog, though. He's always wanted one. It's like buying love, isn't it, getting a dog? Stupid, and embarrassing, but better than coming home to an apartment that's always empty.

*

It's February 2018, which in Boston this year is still deep winter, though not as bad as the legendary snows at the start of 2015. Ilya comes in from shoveling the path outside by the illumination of streetlights and curls up on his couch under the woolen blanket of a woman he doesn't remember: his adopted grandmother who died years ago.

It's time to make another Instagram post, but it's fucking cold both inside and outside—Ilya needs to get warm before he takes off his shirt to record. So he spends some time doing another duty: sifting through his recent followers, looking for something that might never be there.

Lots of names, pop culture references Ilya probably isn't getting, blah blah—

NewYorker1990.

Ilya sits up. Shane was born in 1991. It would be like him to change the year by one and think that made him anonymous.

Okay, but *New Yorker* could mean a person from New York rather than that magazine Shane likes, or that he says his father loves.

Ilya taps the name.

NewYorker1990's posts consist, in their entirety, of six very badly photographed plates of food.

Really fucking boring food, like chicken breasts with no visible seasoning—but in large portions, and with macros Ilya recognizes. Lots of protein. Like a man would eat if he was a weightlifter. Or an athlete.

It's him. Nobody else on the planet would have such an unbelievably boring account with a boring name. It's Shane, he can't prove it but he knows it. He knows it.

"Fuck," Ilya says. He presses his hand to his mouth.

*

It's October 2017, and Ilya is painfully aware that his home is not like the luxurious homes Sveta is used to. It's small, with a narrow, creaky staircase and cheap unfinished pine furniture. It's all he has, though, so it will have to do.

Ilya opens the door; Sveta is there outside wearing soft earmuffs and a fluffy coat he's pretty sure he's seen before.

For the first time in months, Ilya feels himself smile a real smile. "Sveta," he says. "Come on in. How are you?"

"Very well," Svetlana replies, also in Russian, stepping out of one of her shoes onto the top step. Standing on one leg, she gracefully slides off her other heel. "How are you?"

Ilya has to remember that to this Sveta, he's just a memory of a boy she knew when she was a child. There's no easy teasing between them. She's forming her real impression of him as an adult for the first time right now.

"Good." Ilya smiles wryly. "This is weird, yes?"

Svetlana laughs. "Yes, it is. My papa couldn't believe I was meeting Ilya Rozanov."

Ilya leads her up to the living room, where he's set out her favorite foods for them to eat as they watch tonight's game. The Raiders are away in Montreal; in another life, Ilya would be looking forward to this game for a different reason.

Today, he's only a spectator.

"Soft pretzels," Svetlana says, her eyes lighting up. "And mustard. I love these. Are they homemade?"

"Yes," Ilya says. "Please help yourself." Cooking day in, day out is one of the many fucking annoying things he's had to get used to doing. His small repertoire of sandwiches was not enough. But making the pretzels for Sveta was pleasant. It's nice to know he did something that made her happy, and that might help him regain the friendship that's so deeply a part of him..

It might never be the same; Ilya knows that. Once, he and Svetlana learned the shape of the world together. They discovered themselves together, they suffered together, they strode through chaos hand in gorgeous hand. All that time and intimacy between them has been lost.

Still, he wants his best friend back as much as possible.

"So you've been keeping up with hockey?" Sveta asks him, taking a seat on the couch.

Ilya sits next to her. "No matter what happens in my life, I'll always care about hockey."

"Good. There are far too few fans in this city." Sveta takes a paper plate and chooses a pretzel. "You know, when the Raiders win the Cup, people are out in the streets partying, but when the season starts in the fall, where are they?"

"You're a Raiders fan?" Ilya asks her.

"Aren't you? There's never been a better time. Hollander is a legend already. Beautiful hands. And so handsome, too."

Ilya takes a deep breath. In this life, he's already out; that's one of the few benefits of it. And photos of him at Pride are everywhere, so he couldn't go back in the closet even if he wanted to. "Yes, I think he's very handsome," Ilya says deliberately. "He's my type. I like boring men, it seems."

As he'd expected, Svetlana doesn't make a big deal about it, though she obviously registers what he's saying and what it means. "You're calling him boring?" She raises a playful eyebrow. "The most famous hockey player in the world?"

Ilya grins. This is better, more how it should be. "You know what his hobbies are? Real estate and reading books about hockey."

Svetlana dips a piece of pretzel into the mustard on her plate. "Sure, but did you see him in the Cup final last year? That was *artistry*."

Ilya wasn't here to watch the game when it was live, but he's seen video of it since then. "That's true. It was."

The ad that's playing on TV finishes, and the Raiders and Metros logos appear in its place. The game's about to start.

*

It's March 1st, 2017, and Ilya is still dreaming.

Or . . . whatever this is. When Ilya first woke up in this nightmare, or fantasy, he thought it would dissipate soon. Then he thought it would end after 24 hours, like some magic spell out of a movie. When that deadline passed, he told himself—maybe a week.

But the dream didn't end then, either. Today, eight days have gone by since Ilya woke up flat on his back on a municipal ice rink near Boston Harbor when he should have been in Moscow. In his pocket was a wallet with only one credit card and a driving license bearing the wrong address: a cheap apartment in Allston, instead of the modern house in Newton that should be his. These possessions seemed slightly familiar, in the illogical way of dream-things, which are often true and familiar one moment and not the next. But he knew they weren't *real*. Right?

Now Ilya's sitting on the sagging couch in the apartment that is not his, mentally exhausted from trying to do a job that is also not his so he can pay rent that's not his, because the dream is still not over. He doesn't remember how to lead a spin class, and everyone thinks he has a traumatic brain injury that's caused him to gain back a Russian accent he'd supposedly lost. He doesn't know the people who keep messaging him on his phone. Thank fuck he was able to open it with his fingertip, or else he'd be forever locked out. It's all like some kind of sick comedy, a massive cosmic joke with Ilya as the punchline.

At first, Ilya wasn't that pissed off because . . . it was obviously just a dream, right? But he can't seem to wake up from it. He doesn't know how to get back to his real life, and he *hates* this, hates how people he's supposed to know stare at him when he talks, hates his ugly cheap clothes and stupid car.

More than that, he misses playing hockey like he'd miss food or oxygen. Every day he doesn't skate feels *wrong*. He turns on the TV and Boston is in the playoffs and he should *be there*. His body is wrong, too—his face is the same, and he's strong, but he can tell from his quads that this body doesn't skate, at least not often. *This isn't me*, he wants to plead with the world, but of course he can't. People will think he's lost his mind.

Who can he turn to? Anyone he trusts doesn't know him. Marly and St-Simon and Carmichael and all the Raiders, they're strangers to him. If he tried to tell them the truth, they'd think he was an obsessed fan.

Sveta's name isn't even in Ilya's phone. He googled her and managed to find her profile on a website called LinkedIn, which he's never heard of before. It seems to be a site where people find jobs, which he never needed because he's had the same fucking job since he was 18.

And Shane. Shane, who listened to Ilya pour his heart out over the phone even though he didn't understand a word. Shane who took Ilya in his arms in Tampa and let him cry. Shane,

who Ilya loves with all his rotten heart.

Shane is a stranger to him too.

Ilya sits on his couch, sits and sits while the time on his (cheap) phone's face ticks later and later. Midnight. One a.m. Another day stuck here.

Fucking . . . fine. Ilya won't give up. He's fought all his life, one way or another. He's going to send a message to Sveta, and then he's going to get back what's his: a place in the MLH, and Shane.

For the skating, training will have to come first. Ilya needs to build up the muscle in this body to match what he used to have.

For Shane . . . it's more complicated. Growing up, Ilya's father—the one he remembers—often told Ilya how stupid he was. As captain of the Raiders, though, Ilya was at least wily, you could say, if not exactly intelligent. So he can come up with a strategy to do this.

By the time the sun's rising, Ilya has a plan.

Shane loves two things: hockey, and Ilya's body. Ilya's going to use both to get Shane's attention on Instagram.

*

It's February 2017, and Ilya already misses Shane, who said goodbye to him only a few seconds ago.

Walking through the snowy night in Moscow, Ilya feels like he's being torn in half. He can't keep loving Shane. Yet he can't stop—he's tried so hard, for so long, but his heart seems to have made up its mind.

"I wish you were here," Shane had said, with lovable, forgiving sincerity that Ilya did not deserve.

And Ilya wished, just as much, to be with Shane. But not *just* to be physically with him. To be someone who could love him safely, freely, without shying away from police cars or fearing he'd lose his job.

The snow is getting deeper now. And when a siren starts up just behind Ilya on the street, he jolts—twists—

And slips on a patch of ice, knocking his head on a low concrete wall as he falls.

Chapter End Notes

📣 IMPORTANT: please don't spoil this twist for others!

For me and I think many readers, the twist is a huge part of the fun so it would make me sad if a post started going around that gives it away before people can experience it for themselves. Thank you ❤️ Also a reminder that bookmarks are public unless you make them private, so people can be spoiled that way.

I know some people are re-reading from the start now that they know the twist (and i love that!!). If you do this, I would absolutely love it if you can comment with any clues or hints you spotted in earlier chapters. I tried to pepper a lot of tiny hints in there!

Some notes:

Ilya’s walk from the Common to St Mary's Street is about an hour. It's a nice walk.

Sveta is eating a soft pretzel because I really wanted a pretzel writing this 🥲

I don't remember whether any of the Boston Raiders are Evil in canon but if they are, pretend they're not in this story.

Of course Ilya is not stupid, but this is his narration, so it's what he thinks.

And one thing I want to get off my chest: Ilya’s pendant is not a crucifix. A crucifix has a little guy on it (or a big guy if it's a big crucifix). Ilya’s pendant has a flat surface, no guy, therefore not a crucifix.

Thank you for all the AMAZING comments on the last chapter ❤️❤️❤️ they definitely fueled me to write this one!

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It’s exploiting the student body and it just [bleep]ing—”

Skip back.

“—thousand dollars, are you [bleep]ing kidding me? It's—”

Skip back.

“I live off-campus with my dad—”

Shane has never heard Ilya refer to his adoptive father as his dad. He barely mentions his adoptive parents, but when he does, it's exactly that formal: “my adoptive father” pronounced carefully in a Russian accent.

The moles on this Ilya’s face and neck are the same ones Shane kissed just a few hours earlier. That’s the only reason Shane can be sure that the Ilya he’s looking at now and the Ilya he saw this morning aren’t two different men. Yet they *aren’t* the same, and that certainty is nausea in Shane’s stomach: *this isn’t the Ilya he knows*. The Ilya in the video even holds himself a little more freely, less tension in his shoulders. It just doesn’t make sense, it doesn’t make sense. Shane trusts Ilya, the Ilya he trusts can’t be some—fake persona—

Why would Ilya even do that? To manipulate Shane? To get views on the internet?

Ilya really is Russian, though, right? He was talking with Varkov in Russian today, so Ilya does *speak* Russian—and his name was Ilya Rozanov when he was on the BU hockey team, so that’s true too—unless he changed it legally—

Shane’s chest is tight. He's cold but sweating, and he can't breathe, and he never thought he’d be picking apart everything Ilya ever told him, trying to find the lie.

Alone in his big, expensive apartment, Shane puts his face in his hands and rides it out—the shakes, the breaths he has to drag out of himself, the tears on his face.

When the storm has passed, Shane is exhausted. He gets in the shower, lets it run over him for too long, crawls into bed.

He wishes Ilya was here. The sheets do still smell like him, just as Shane had wanted. And that’s the only thing that has comforted Shane all night, which is fucked up, but Shane can’t help it.

Once, Shane was with one of his girlfriends at a farmer's market; he’d chosen the location after reading a list online of cute date activities. She bought a sandwich from one of the stalls, decided she didn't like it, and simply dropped it right on the ground. On purpose, wrapper and

all. Shane asked her whether she was going to pick it up, and she answered: “Why? Someone else can get it.”

In a weird way, Shane had felt relieved at the time. Because if his girlfriend was a bad person, it was okay that he didn’t really love her.

Today, there’s no “thank goodness” feeling. It’s more like during a game when Shane is hurting from a hard hit or even a fall, and he *could* say it’s too bad and sit out with an injury, but taking up that option never crosses his mind, because sitting out wouldn’t be a relief. It would be awful.

It’s not that long until bone-deep tiredness draws Shane down into sleep. When it does, weirdly, his dreams are happy, so happy that Shane’s heart aches: he dreams of Ilya in Raiders gear grinning at him, exuberant, perfectly in his element on the ice.

After Shane’s alarm wakes him, he lies on his back for a while, his forearm over his eyes. He needs to get up for the team flight to Pittsburgh. Ugh.

For a few minutes, he flicks through notifications on his phone. At six this morning, Ilya sent him a message: a photo of Anya looking up at the camera so sweetly, imploring.

Shane has never really thought of himself as particularly being a dog person, but Anya is just such an adorable dog. He might love her already, even though he hardly knows her.

Rubbing his face, Shane likes the photo and then gets up to shower.

On the team plane, Shane secludes himself in a window seat and, angling his phone away from the empty seat at his side, googles whether a person’s accent can change overnight.

He expects the answer to be that it can’t. Instead, Google tells him that it can in several situations—*including after head trauma*, when a person can lose later language abilities but retain their first language pathways.

When Shane clicks on related links, suggested further articles, they also tell him that head trauma can cause changes in personality. He never knew that was a real thing.

Shane closes his eyes, breathes in and out. It’s okay; it really might all be okay. There is an answer here that means Ilya hasn’t been lying to him, that means the person Shane has come to like so much is real.

And the “dad” thing—it makes sense if Ilya’s lost most of his memories of his adoptive father, right? Ilya said he couldn’t remember most of his college years. Perhaps Ilya didn’t start feeling close to his adoptive father until then, or until he was dying.

The biggest problem that’s nagging at Shane is timing. If Ilya really did have his head injury that February, he almost certainly shouldn’t have been skating again in March, especially not even wearing a helmet. Shane’s pissed off at him for that—and the smoking, too. Ilya’s so bullheaded sometimes.

“Ohh, you’re smiling, Hollzy,” Marleau says, plunking his giant self down in the seat next to Shane. “Texting a girl?” He tries to peek at Shane’s phone, which is still showing search results about head injuries.

Quickly, Shane puts the phone against his chest anyway, hiding the screen. “Maybe,” he says.

Before the plane ride’s over, Ilya makes Marleau’s assumption come true, kind of, since he’s still in Shane’s phone as Lily. *You have your own hotel room tonight?* he messages Shane.

Yes. Why? Shane replies. He doesn’t necessarily want to assume Ilya has phone sex on his mind if he actually just wants to talk.

Maybe you will need help winding down after the game.

After games, I’m usually pretty relaxed, Shane says. In fact, he’s usually pretty ready to crash, although he goes out with the guys sometimes to be sociable.

I mean winding down 😈

So Shane was right after all. *Okay*, he writes, putting his left hand over his mouth and chin to hide his smile.

The game goes pretty well, if not super excitingly. Shane gets one goal and two assists, so he’s happy with his performance. He’s more antsy to get back to the hotel room afterward, and fortunately the team isn’t planning to do anything afterward anyway.

Heading back into the hotel off the team’s bus, Shane takes a last look back at the city. He’d read once that Pittsburgh was one of the most gay-friendly cities in the USA. If he wasn’t a hockey player, if he could be himself, maybe he’d be heading out to a club or something.

Instead, Shane turns back to the hotel doors and heads in out of the cold.

This is a day when Ilya is teaching spin class until late, so Shane occupies himself for a while by looking at houses for sale further out in the suburbs. Shane can’t deal with reading any more head injury stuff—it makes him feel sick, thinking about Ilya being so badly hurt, and it’s still a little eerie to realize that the Ilya who existed before his head injury is gone. Well, not totally gone—the younger Ilya’s swearing and his confidence in criticizing authority clearly haven’t changed—but still, the Ilya Shane knows is a new person, kind of. If the whole head injury thing is true.

Shane’s getting that uneasy, buzzing feeling as he’s going over all this again. He’ll have to just wait until he can ask Ilya what he needs to know.

So: real estate.

Shane’s been wanting to move out of the city, to create his own space exactly how he likes it. The problem is that nowhere is really convenient for getting to TD Garden; Victory Ice Arena isn’t so bad.

Shane would like to feel like he's building a life in Massachusetts, starting with building his own home. And maybe one day—maybe after he retired—he could also have a Pride flag outside. He's never really wanted one before, never really connected with Pride tape and jerseys. For some reason Shane can't quite put into words, it's been different since he saw Ilya's neighbors' flag. Maybe it's that he never thought of *Pride* as related to *home* before.

At nine, Shane's phone vibrates: it's Ilya. Quickly, Shane sits up in bed and accepts the call. He's sleepy, but he knows Ilya will chase his drowsiness away soon enough.

"Hi," Ilya says in the Russian accent that's become so precious to Shane. "Nice goal." He's sitting shirtless in bed, with that gold cross shining on his chest, as always.

Nice goal. That's all it takes to make Shane want him. It's ridiculous. "Thanks," Shane says. "How are you?"

Unexpectedly, Ilya's face breaks out into a wide smile. "Your coach is not as stupid as I thought. He invited me to go down to Providence to talk to the coach there."

"What?" Shane says, breathless. "Fuck, you mean the farm team?" Ilya on an AHL team—yeah, it's not the *Boston* Raiders yet, but if he can keep playing like he played yesterday—

"Yes, the farm team," Ilya says. "We'll see what they say, but . . ."

"They'd be crazy not to want you," says Shane.

"You have only seen me play for four minutes."

"Doesn't matter. I know." Hockey is a game most often played in shifts of less than a minute; Shane didn't need more than four minutes to understand Ilya's brilliance.

Ilya's obviously on exactly the same page as Shane, because he says, "Fuck, Shane. Take your shirt off."

Shane's slipping it off before he finishes his sentence. The hotel room air is cool against his already-heated skin. "And?" Shane asks.

"And touch your chest," Ilya says. "Yes, like that."

Shane closes his eyes, tilts his head back against the headboard. He still has some questions he needs to ask Ilya. But they can wait a little while.

Chapter End Notes

First of all thank you SOOOO much to everyone who commented in the last couple chapters. I don't know whether I will manage to reply to them all but I loved your comments soo much ❤️❤️❤️

You’ll have seen that I changed the summary. Is the new one better? I'm open to feedback on that. I really don't want to give away the twist because it's so fun seeing people be surprised

Also if you haven’t left kudos yet I would love it if you did!

Thank you again everyone and stay strong in this horrible time!!

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

> Soon after posting the previous chapter (20), I did some little edits to hopefully make it clearer that Shane's suspicions/questions about the Ilya mystery weren't 100% resolved. Sorry! So yeah, he is less stressed about it but he still does have more questions to ask.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane's cleaning come off his abs in the bathroom. In the mirror, his flushed face looks happy. He's smiled a lot in photos, for ads and PR events and press, but those smiles aren't at all like the one he's wearing now.

In the bedroom, Ilya is waiting, still on their video call.

After washing his hands, Shane heads back to his bed. The hotel's bedsheets are scratchy now that he's not distracted; Shane puts his shirt back on before picking up his phone again. "Hi," he says to Ilya.

Ilya is slightly flushed too, both in the face and chest, and his expression is soft. He's so gorgeous this way. "You were loud today," he says, his plush mouth curling into a smile. "You think anyone heard through the walls?"

"Shut up!" Shane says, not wanting Ilya to shut up at all. Damn it, the idea of someone overhearing is kind of doing it for him. How does Ilya always know exactly how to get Shane going?

"No, it was you who didn't shut up. But it's good. I like you like that."

It's good. I like you like that. A warmth that's half re-igniting arousal, half simpler pleasure, washes over Shane. It's almost enough to make Shane not worry about Marleau and Carmichael, his neighbors, noticing who he was having phone sex with. His phone volume was low, and Ilya wasn't that vocal, so he's not *too* concerned about anyone hearing Ilya's voice. Or should he be?

"I like you like this too," Shane says. When Ilya's sitting there with his hair still damp from his shower, it's . . . closeness. As though Ilya doesn't need to pretend anything with Shane.

Shane wants to believe that.

"With no shirt?" Ilya says. "Mm, many people do."

"You know, I was wondering something," says Shane, plowing forward. He has to make sure he asks it normally, not making it a big deal.

Ilya raises his eyebrows flirtatiously. “Wondering what?”

“Are you religious? I mean, your pendant?” Shane gestures awkwardly to his own chest.

Ilya’s smile disappears. “Not really. Maybe a little. My mother—in Russia—used to have necklace like this. I don’t know, I don’t remember where it is now. This is just one I bought that is similar. To remember her.”

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry. That’s awful.” Another piece added to the puzzle, though Shane’s not totally sure yet what it means. “I’m sorry you lost it.”

Ilya shrugs one shoulder. “My fault for forgetting.”

“What did you, uh, have your head injury? When you forgot?”

“February 2017. Why?” Ilya’s expression is almost too neutral.

Shane’s anxious-sweating a little, hoping he’s not totally fucking this up. “Just curious. You were lucky it didn’t affect your, like, physical coordination at all.”

“Yes, I am,” Ilya says. “You have any other questions?”

“No. Well, yeah—one. Can I come over to your place before you leave for Providence? When are you going?”

Ilya sits up and turns his head to the side. “Hold on.” He puts the phone down, giving Shane a view of his plain ceiling, and comes back a few seconds later wearing a shirt and carrying Anya in his arms. She’s wriggling around trying to lick his face. “Sorry, Anya woke up.” Anya’s such a good girl: Ilya’s smiling again.

“It’s okay. So, uh, can I?”

“When do I say no to you?” Ilya’s stroking Anya’s soft head. “Yes, you can come over and see my poor Anechka. She will have to stay in doggy hotel when I leave. Svetlana is out of town, and my neighbors are going to a wedding. And I trust a kennel more than I trust some dogsitter from the internet—or my co-worker who says she’s so reliable and good with dogs, but she forgot to feed Anya the last time she watched her.” There’s clearly some resentment there, and Shane perfectly understands why. Anya is Ilya’s baby.

Shane pulls the bedcovers higher over himself; he’s getting chilly as his body cools down. “Will Anya be okay with that? The kennel?”

With a heavy sigh, Ilya keeps stroking her head, smoothing the fur on her floppy ears. “I hope so. I found one with good reviews. I don’t know any other option.”

“She could stay with me,” Shane says, mostly involuntarily. It’s just that he loves Anya, and he knows how deeply Ilya loves Anya and how devastated he would be if she wasn’t perfectly happy in someone else’s care.

“Aren’t you busy? Away from home most of the day, usually?”

“I’ll figure something out,” Shane says. “My teammate St-Simon has a regular dogsitter who stays at his place to run around with his border collie when we’re out of town. I can ask him for her number.”

Ilya’s face makes the complicated expression he sometimes wears when Shane is being nice to him. It’s as though this makes him sad as well as happy; Shane still doesn’t get why. “Maybe,” he says. “If the dogsitter is available, maybe.”

“I’ll ask him,” says Shane.

They arrange a time for Shane to come over tomorrow evening after he’s back in town and Ilya’s done with work. This is positive, right? Ilya didn’t respond super well to Shane’s questions, but it’s not unreasonable that his dead mother’s necklace and his serious injury are tough subjects for him.

As Shane brushes his teeth, he weighs Ilya’s answers. So Ilya’s head injury *was* when Shane thought it was. And Ilya, somehow, probably against medical advice, was skating again about a month later. If he forgot a lot of his time with his adoptive parents, it makes sense that he wanted more of a connection to his biological parents, doesn’t it? Ilya’s emotions when he spoke about his mom’s necklace—they couldn’t have been fake, Shane’s almost certain.

After the orgasm he had with Ilya, Shane thought he’d slip easily into sleep. Instead, the issue of the dogsitter weighs on his mind. He absolutely doesn’t want Anya to have to go into a kennel when she could be safe with Shane, and possibly with a professional who St-Simon’s known and trusted for years now.

The risk here is that St-Simon will ask Shane whose dog he is watching, and Shane is a bad liar, just as Ilya told him when they first met in person. More than that, Shane doesn’t want to lie. Why should he have to hide something as harmless as taking care of someone’s dog?

Ilya’s comments about his teammates overhearing have kind of sunk under Shane’s skin. Not because the idea is honestly hot, but in a larger way.

Countless times, Shane’s teammates have brought their girlfriends to meet the team and the other WAGs at a barbecue or other get-together. There’s usually a special quality to their pride, an unspoken happiness: “Here’s the girl I like. Isn’t she great?”

Shane has introduced two of his girlfriends to his teammates, but he’s never known that happiness. The closest he got was seeing Ilya so dominant on the ice a couple of days ago. It did feel really, really good, having so many of the people close to Shane in the same room, and watching his friends admire Ilya.

Would it be that terrible if they just *suspected* there was something between Shane and Ilya? Is it too much to ask to just be friends with Ilya in public, given that Ilya is openly bisexual?

Shane’s not ready to come out, or anything like that. He does believe, though, that most of the guys would be okay about it. They usually aren’t weird about Pride stuff, and Shane’s done his best to reduce shitty behavior in the room. Carmichael has a gay cousin and likes her. Marleau watches *Brooklyn 99*, which has at least one gay character, Shane’s pretty sure.

Over the years, Shane's noticed all this stuff, collected it in his mind, turned it over from time to time. Even though the signs are mostly . . . okay, the process of doing this, of calculating how likely it is for people to hate him just because of who he loves, never gets easier.

The one factor that keeps getting better is Shane's status. Every award and game he wins, every goal he makes, increases his value to the team. That's the cold, ugly fact of it. At a certain point, now that Shane is the undisputed best player major league hockey has to offer, Shane thinks even the more homophobic guys on the team might find a way to re-categorize him as "gay, but not like *those* gays."

Great.

So yeah, he's not going to come out to anyone, not even his closest friends on the team. If he can just be friends with Ilya in front of the team, though . . . it might be okay if Marley and the guys Shane knows well suspect it's not only friendship. As long as it's not *in anyone's face*.

Rubbing his eyes, Shane rolls over and tries to calm his thoughts with the grounding visualisation Ilya taught him. It helps a little.

In the morning, he anxiously heads to the hotel's breakfast area and serves himself a bowl of oatmeal with blueberries on top. He'll have some boiled eggs later, if there are any left. Just another way he gives everything to hockey, even eating stuff he doesn't really want because it's what his body needs to perform its best.

"Hey," Shane says, taking a seat next to St-Simon. Lots of the guys aren't around yet. It's a gray morning here in Pittsburgh, without much to make somebody want to get out of bed.

"Hey," St-Simon says. "Me and Mike were just talking about seeing *Venom* tomorrow night when we get back. You know, at that SuperLux place where you can have, like, a lobster roll and beer while you watch."

"Oh yeah? Sounds fun," Shane says, although it doesn't really.

St-Simon scarfs a forkful of scrambled eggs. "You want to come?"

"Shit, sorry, I can't." Shane stirs his oatmeal in what he hopes is a normal way. "That's why —I actually wanted to ask you something. I have a friend who's going out of town and needs a dogsitter. I'm gonna take the dog to my apartment, but I need someone to take care of her during the day. D'you think your dogsitter might be available?"

St-Simon scratches his head. "I think so. She's doing a Ph.D. at Tufts or something, so she basically writes her thesis wherever she is. But yeah, I can ask her."

"That would be great. Thank you."

"No problem." St-Simon finishes up his scrambled eggs and starts devouring sausage links.

And that's it. The sky doesn't fall.

The flight home goes as usual. Traffic in the Sumner Tunnel is slow, as always. It's nice to finally emerge and catch some sunlight before the ever-earlier autumn sunset comes.

That evening, Shane enjoys a slow shower, getting ready for what he hopes will be a good night with Ilya. When he gets out of the shower, there's a message on his phone from St-Simon saying that his dogsitter is available and can hang out in Shane's apartment with Anya during the day while Shane is gone.

Shane has to look at the message for a little while. Because it's getting more and more real with Ilya, and Shane can't pull himself back, and he doesn't want to. After so many years of being lonely and unfulfilled, he can't deny himself any more. He maybe loved Ilya right from the start.

At least Storrow Drive is pretty clear now, late at night. In the dark, and wearing his glasses for disguise, Shane has to walk carefully to Ilya's door.

Shane knocks. There's the quiet canine *boof*, the words in Russian—Ilya is telling Anya to go fetch her duck.

The door opens; Ilya lets Shane in and retreats one step up, as usual, to give Shane room to take his glasses, hat and coat off. Once that's done, Shane looks up to see an Ilya in a tank top and sweatpants, with damp hair. He smells of his shower gel.

Shane reaches out to him, awkward as it is with Ilya one step up. Then Ilya's hands are on Shane too, on the back of his neck and his chin.

Ilya's skin is warm from the shower, and his touch, like always, makes Shane want to fall to his knees, and kissing him is like coming home.

Chapter End Notes

Next update almost definitely tomorrow (Sunday).

I'm also like halfway through a new chapter for my Shane vampire fic so maybe that will come too!

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's Ilya who eventually breaks their kiss and takes Shane's hand to lead him up the stairs. As soon as Shane steps into the living room, Anya's there, excited to see him and holding her stuffed duck toy in her mouth. Of course, Shane has to crouch there for a while and pet her, tell her she's a clever girl.

Eventually, Ilya distracts her by lightly tossing a ball toward the kitchen area and telling her to fetch.

"She knows 'fetch' in English?" Shane asks, standing up. Today Ilya's apartment smells of tomato sauce, a nice scent that makes it feel lived-in. Sometimes Shane's apartment seems too perfect, as much the domain of Shane's cleaners and the private chef who preps food for him as of Shane himself.

Ilya nods. "All the important commands, she knows in English. In case I'm ever not there, she knows what to obey."

"That's smart," Shane says, feeling a little lost. He'd expected Ilya would be kissing him again or pushing him against the wall by now.

"Mm," Ilya says. "I want to show you something." He walks behind the coffee table to the couch, where he sits. Unusually, he's wearing a pullover sweatshirt: no bare arms or chest.

Shane joins him. On the table are a stack of printed papers and a laptop. "What's this?" It all feels too serious. Something is wrong.

"My papers from the hospital," Ilya says, passing them to Shane. He also gives Shane a piece of plastic that turns out to be a hospital wristband bearing the name *Rozanov, Ilya.* "Plenty of people thought my amnesia sounds weird, not something that happens in real life." He doesn't seem angry. But he won't look at Shane.

"You don't have to do this." Guilt and anxiety and, terribly, relief are twisting in Shane's stomach. Because he *did* doubt Ilya, and Ilya saw it.

"I'm also in a medical article." Ilya opens the laptop and turns it to Shane. "Go ahead, you can read it all. I'm going to take Anya out for the last time tonight."

Ilya attaches Anya's leash and leads her down the stairs. A few seconds later, the front door opens and closes.

Since Ilya has told him to read all this stuff, Shane does. First, he puts the hospital wristband down on the table and starts paging through the hospital paperwork, which has the Mass General logo on its header. Though Shane isn't exactly a medical expert, he can pick out the

relevant words here and there: *head trauma. Retrograde amnesia.* A speech and language assessment that Shane thinks comes down to the conclusion he already knew: Ilya's English fluency has decreased, while his Russian remains unimpaired.

Putting the papers down, Shane turns to the laptop. The language in the medical article on the screen is even denser and more technical than the hospital paperwork, but he thinks he can get the main idea. *Male aged 26, head injury while ice skating, referred to here as Patient R. His first language was Russian.*

The article notes that the patient it's describing experienced no problems with physical coordination after the head injury, despite the amnesia and changed language ability. *Unusual presentation*, it says.

Shane scrolls down to the conclusion.

This case, the article says, may be an example of an unusual type of head injury. The other possibility is that the amnesia and language ability loss are psychosomatic—created subconsciously by the patient's mind, perhaps as a coping mechanism for trauma. It is notable, says the article, that the patient has grieved for both of his adoptive parents as well as for his birth parents, who were his guardians until the age of 8. Either way, repeated tests made the researchers confident that the patient's symptoms were genuine. His Russian accent never slipped. His lack of recognition of his friends was not feigned.

The case of patient R serves as an interesting addition to the existing literature on brain injuries.

Carefully, Shane puts the laptop back on the coffee table. So—Ilya's not faking. Whether what happened to him was psychosomatic or caused by a physical blow to the head, it doesn't matter. Ilya as he is now is real.

Downstairs, Ilya's front door creaks; Anya trots up the stairs and into her round bed by the couch, pretty clearly following a usual routine.

Ilya follows her, bringing the scent of cigarettes with him. "It's raining a little outside," he says, running a hand over his curls. Still not facing Shane.

His mouth dry with anxiety, Shane stands and walks around the coffee table to meet Ilya. Shane doesn't know what he's supposed to say, but he has to say something. He just can't fuck this up.

"Ilya," Shane says. "I believe you." He licks his lips. Surely he should add something more—but Ilya's turning toward him at last. His eyes are red-rimmed.

Shane pulls him into a hug, and Ilya goes into it easily, tucking his face in the crook of Shane's neck. "I believe you," Shane repeats, more certain that this *is* the right thing to say. It's all that matters, and it's as true as gravity. Ilya teases and jokes, yes, but he's sincere about what really matters: his love for Anya, his joy in hockey, his tenderness toward Shane. Shane loves him, the real Ilya in his arms, who is crying right now into the cotton of Shane's hoodie.

Stroking Ilya's back, Shane lets him do it. It's awful to feel Ilya cry, but Shane has a warm feeling from being able to soothe whatever's hurting him. With tears welling in his own eyes, Shane kisses the side of Ilya's head and waits as the storm passes.

A minute or so later, Ilya mutters a hoarse "sorry" into Shane's shoulder.

"It's fine. Let's go to the bedroom?"

So they do, lying together on the bed over the covers. Rain is starting to patter on the windows, as Ilya had said. It only makes his home cozier. Shane has never had this before, lying entwined with the man he loves while autumn rain falls outside.

After a while, Ilya starts kissing Shane's neck where he's hidden his face. In turn, Shane lets himself run his hand through Ilya's hair more sensually, less calmingly. The sensation of Ilya's curls on Shane's skin is so endlessly nice. Shane could touch Ilya's head and pull his hair forever.

"I had an idea," Shane says.

"What is it?" Ilya lifts himself on his elbows above Shane; his eyes are a little swollen from the tears, but he doesn't look sad any more.

Shane's so relieved. "I thought I could ride you?"

Ilya smiles a warm smile with only a hint of wickedness. "Good idea." He draws Shane into a kiss that's gentler than usual. His mouth tastes of cigarettes, too, but Shane can't bring himself to care. He could keep on kissing Ilya until sunrise.

In between the kissing, they strip their clothes off piece by piece. It's all less rushed than it's been before; Shane gets to push down Ilya's pants this time, gets to enjoy undressing him. As Shane reveals each beautiful part of Ilya, he kisses and nips the familiar muscles—biceps, quads, obliques—that have been transformed into art because they're Ilya's. Ilya's body is warm and firm against Shane's lips, and maybe Shane likes the wiry hair on Ilya's strong thighs best. If he lets himself linger there with his cheek against Ilya's underpants that are stretched over Ilya's erection, breathing Ilya in, Ilya doesn't comment on it. He just strokes Shane's head, accepting of whatever Shane does.

Ilya takes his time sucking obvious love-marks onto Shane's skin, too, leaving hickeys all over Shane's torso again. The guys have already noticed. Shane wants them to, wants them to think about Shane and the person he's sleeping with, and he knows that's probably wrong, but fuck it—if they can't know Ilya's his, they can at least see the bruises that Ilya's teeth and full lips left.

As Ilya opens Shane up with slick fingers, too slow and easy for Shane's growing need, Ilya swallows his dick deep, too, only pulling off when he can tell Shane is becoming really worked up. Shane is a little jealous that Ilya gets to do this; he wants Ilya in his mouth always.

It’s worth going without it, though, when Shane finally sinks down onto Ilya’s dick. Ilya feels even bigger in this position than when they’ve fucked before, so hard and hot deep inside Shane. He quickly finds the right angle to hit his own prostate—fuck, it’s a shot of pure pleasure when he does. And doing this work well, making Ilya’s lips part in desire from Shane’s skill, leaves Shane glowing with satisfaction. Shane’s body learns fast despite its own arousal, sweating as it does on the ice, picking up the undulating motions that make Ilya moan as though Shane was always meant to ride Ilya. It's different being exposed this way, being so blatant in chasing his pleasure on Ilya’s dick, but maybe that’s why it’s so good. That and the deep drag of Ilya inside him, the slight burn in Shane’s muscles as he fucks himself on Ilya’s body.

Underneath Shane, Ilya is as tactile and sensual as always—he moves with Shane, kisses Shane hard when Shane leans to make their lips meet, and his callused, adept hands are all over Shane’s body, gripping his thighs and ass, toying with his nipple in a way that almost distracts Shane from what he’s trying to do. At one point, Ilya reaches for Shane’s dick, which is bobbing, totally ignored, and Shane bats his hand away. Shane came hands-free before, he can do it again. It’s a trophy he’s greedy for.

But Ilya’s clearly getting close, while Shane isn’t *quite* there yet. Ilya can sense it too—he makes a frustrated expression and rolls them over, pinning Shane under him and pulling Shane’s legs high around his waist, practically folding him in half. Ilya’s abs are brushing against Shane’s dick, but it still counts, it’s hardly being touched—

“Fuck! Oh, fuck, Ilya,” Shane gasps. Riding Ilya was great but—oh, yeah, this is going to get him there—being fucked into the mattress—at Ilya’s mercy—the bed is banging against the wall, and Shane is aching with arousal, digging his nails into Ilya’s back, moving with Ilya’s rhythm—

“You are so good,” Ilya pants, thrusting into him slow, hard and deep. Their lips are close enough for Shane to feel Ilya’s breath. “You feel so good. The best. The best ever, my Shane.”

Yes, that’s what Shane needs. He closes his eyes, focuses on the building pleasure within him. “Say it again.” Shane loves him, loves him so much, wants more of him even when Ilya is as deep in Shane as he can be—

“My Shane.” When Shane moans, Ilya goes on raggedly: “You are mine, only mine. Mine to keep—mine to fuck—*my* Shane. I am—only one to fuck you—because you belong to *me*—”

Shane grabs Ilya’s curls, tugs them to press Ilya’s mouth to his own, and comes.

Chapter End Notes

This was really hard to write so I hope you enjoyed it!!

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya's lying with his head on Shane's chest again, sleepy after orgasm the same way Shane is. The covers are pulled up high over them, keeping them warm as deep night brings colder air. The lingering smell of sex is keeping Shane's arousal lit, a small flickering flame that's not enough to make him more horny than drowsy.

What happened just then, when Ilya was fucking him—Shane didn't know he was going to say that. He didn't know Ilya was going to say that. The moment after Ilya came, when they were still kissing, the air was suddenly cold on Shane's shoulders. Shane was briefly afraid that this would be their last kiss, and he dug his fingers into Ilya's hair even more deeply, holding on.

Of course, he had to let go so that Ilya could dispose of the condom and come back with some tissues and a cloth to clean them up.

"Are you tired?" Ilya asked him softly. It was a question that definitely had another meaning, but Shane couldn't parse what that was.

"Yeah. I mean, the normal amount." Sweat was cooling on Shane's chest, his arms. "Are you?"

"Mm. I had my first training session at six-thirty."

Ilya went to get rid of the cloth and tissues and came back; Shane pulled back the bedsheets for him, and Ilya got in, and now they're just lying together, not talking about what it meant to them—if it meant anything to Ilya and wasn't just dirty talk.

You belong to me. Shane wishes he had taken the chance to say *you belong to me too*. He turns his face into Ilya's hair, breathes in Ilya's sweat and the fragrance of his hair products, the scents Shane loves when they linger on his pillows.

It's too soon to say *I love you*, right? And besides that—Shane has never pictured himself in a relationship with a man. Not that he didn't *want* one, exactly, but it never even seemed remotely possible, even after Shane came to terms with the fact that he's gay. Shane's secret fantasies were of going to a club and finding a man to kiss and grind against in a dimly lit corner where no-one was watching.

What does it look like if Shane Hollander, the #1 player in major league hockey, has a boyfriend—-especially a boyfriend who's already out?

"You need to go home? For something early tomorrow?" Ilya murmurs.

“No, I can take Anya to my place first thing in the morning. The dogsitter’s coming around ten. I can skip optional skate, but then I have some meetings and a charity dinner with the mayor. When do you have to leave to go to Providence?”

“Early,” says Ilya. “Maybe seven, to beat traffic.”

“Okay. I can get up at six and get out of your way.” Shane finds himself smiling, though it hurts too. These practical little conversations are a luxury Shane’s never been a part of. *I’ll take the dog for a walk if you can pack lunch. Pick up some laundry detergent while you’re at the store?* The kind of daily talk Shane’s heard in any number of houses, from his parents’ one to the pleasant, if chaotic, home where he was billeted in juniors.

It takes all of Shane’s willpower to wrestle himself out of the bed again to brush his teeth. Unlike his first night with Ilya, this time Ilya has a toothbrush in a new package for him. Shane sits on the side of the bathtub and brushes his teeth while Ilya does the same standing in front of the sink. Really, the bathroom is too small for both of them to be in it at once, but Shane doesn’t want to leave.

His heart aching, Shane falls asleep on his side with Ilya’s warm body embracing him from behind, and the sounds of Ilya’s slow breaths in his ear.

At six, Shane’s phone alarm wakes them both and Anya, who spent the whole night in Shane’s arms. Since Ilya has enough to think about with his trip to Providence, Shane refuses breakfast, taking only some morning kisses from Ilya by the staircase.

Ilya hands Shane a backpack full of Anya’s things, way more than she probably needs for one night’s stay, and gives Shane Anya’s plush, circular bed too; Shane tucks it under one of his arms.

Ilya leashes Anya and squats to kiss her face. “Be good,” Ilya tells her as she pants happily at him, enjoying the attention, not understanding at all. “I love you. I will come back tomorrow, okay?”

Anya licks his face.

“I promise I’ll look after her,” says Shane.

Ilya pushes himself to his feet. “I know you will.” He kisses Shane one more time, deeply, as a goodbye.

Anya is excited to lead Shane down the stairs and outside, where Shane lets her have a minute with the strip of grass near Ilya’s house. It’s only once Shane is telling her to get in the back seat of the car that she looks to Ilya’s front door questioningly, as though she’s wondering where her dad is.

“It’s okay. He’ll be back soon,” Shane tells her. He unzips the backpack; once he’s thrown her duck toy onto the seat, she hops in to follow it and hold it in her mouth again.

Rather than speeding down Storrow Drive to his apartment, Shane chooses the slower pace of Comm Ave. This early in the morning, it's still pretty empty.

In his apartment, Shane follows the directions that Ilya has written in beautiful script, giving Anya her kibbles for breakfast in a bowl he pulls out of the cupboard, having forgotten to buy or bring one specifically for her. She doesn't seem to mind. Ilya has packed everything for her in the backpack: toys, dry food in a big plastic container, a bag of treats, contact information for her vet, and a schedule of when he usually takes her out. Anya splashes her water bowl all over the kitchen tiles, but that's Shane's fault, not hers.

Once Shane has carefully checked that all the appropriate tasks are done, and Anya has curled up, sighing, in her bed by Shane's feet, he has to join a scheduled video call with his parents. For this, he puts his iPad on a stand on the coffee table facing his couch. He used to do this at his kitchen table, but that was kind of ridiculous, as though talking to his parents was a business meeting.

Sometimes Shane thinks his mom has never totally forgiven him for being drafted by Boston. Not that he had any control over it, not that she would *ever* have wanted him to be drafted second, even if it meant going to Montreal, where Korogyi went. But that one day has meant he's lived away from Canada for his whole adult life, and he doesn't see himself going back until he retires. He can't, can he? That's not what you do to the team that drafted you and made you captain.

So, one day when he's forty or so—he hopes not long before—Shane will leave everyone he's become close to in Boston, all of his friends, and go home to Canada. He *wants* to be in Canada, he *is* Canadian and always will be, yet—he's going to miss this place, shitty as it sometimes is.

The video call rings loudly on the iPad; Shane answers. There are his mom and dad, sitting on their couch in Ottawa in the home that was once his.

They talk over stuff from his brand deals, Rolex and Reebok and yes, Dunkin' Donuts, possibly the biggest betrayal of all.

In the middle of a conversation about Calvin Klein, Shane feels a nudge on his leg and turns to see Anya looking at him hopefully, standing with her front feet on the couch and holding a ball in her mouth. He should probably tell her to get down, but she's so cute. "Hi," Shane says to her instinctively. She is the sweetest dog he's ever seen.

"Is someone there with you?" his mom asks on the iPad.

Shit. "Oh no, I, uh, I'm watching a friend's dog," Shane says. Does his mom still know him well enough to tell that he's hiding something?

"One of the guys? Why don't they just hire someone?" his mom asks.

"Because it was kind of an emergency. And the dogsitter is coming over at ten. It's just for one night." Abruptly, Shane is exhausted, and it's not his mom's fault, it's the fault of . . . everything. What he's doing is good and kind, nothing wrong about it, so why does he have

to hide? “Actually, I should take her for a walk. Can we catch up about Calvin Klein next week?”

“They really need an answer before the 30th, Shane.”

“I’ll email you, then,” Shane says. “Okay?”

His dad starts to say something, but Shane says quickly, “I’m sorry, I gotta go, bye.” He ends the video call and flops back onto his couch. Anya takes the opportunity to jump up and sprawl heavily over his lap. “I shouldn’t be spoiling you,” Shane tells her as he runs his hand down her back.

Right on time, the dogsitter, Becca, arrives at 10. She listens carefully to everything Shane says, reads through all of Ilya’s notes, promises to send Shane photos throughout the day so he can be sure Anya is safe and happy. If she has questions about who Anya belongs to, she doesn’t ask.

If Shane’s honest, skipping optional skate this morning wasn’t as easy as he made it sound when he was talking to Ilya. Not that management cares—no, Shane’s in the weird position of being so valuable to the franchise that he can pretty much do what he wants—but his body physically misses the sensation of skating. His legs miss it, he needs to be out on the ice, and during his meetings he’s tapping his foot from unspent energy in his muscles.

At 5, Shane gets home for a quick shower before he has to change into a tux and head out again. Anya is happy to see him, though overall a little less buoyant than usual—probably missing her dad. Anya is lying on her side on the living room rug, and Becca is sitting cross-legged with her laptop on her lap and one hand resting on Anya reassuringly. Shane stops to pet her briefly; her tail thumps on the floor. He wishes he didn’t have to go.

But he does. Quickly, he showers, tries to rub a little gel through his hair to get it out of his face and look more formal. He’s never really known how to do more than that.

When Shane gets out of the bathroom, he has ten minutes before he needs to get dressed, so he sits on the side of the bed in his underwear and scrolls through his phone. By habit, he goes to Ilya’s Instagram first, but of course there’s nothing new there.

Then he heads to YouTube, wanting to turn his brain off by watching a stupid animal video for three minutes. He’s surprised instead to see on his homepage a new video from the Boston Raiders—featuring Ilya and Svetlana in its thumbnail picture.

Oh. Fuck, of course. Shane kind of forgot the whole point of the event, supposedly, was to film something for public consumption.

He presses play, then can’t face watching it yet. He pauses the video and scrolls to the comments instead.

That was the most intense scrimmage I’ve ever seen. 10/10.

Wow so Rozanov wasn’t full of it, huh.

Rozanov is a piece of work but I have to admit he was awesome here.

Never seen Hollander smile this much!

He's hot but mega boring usually.

Yeah, in this video I kinda get what people see in him.

Who is the Russian guy? Why isnt this man playing professionally?

Ilya Rozanov, Instagram influencer/ragebaiter

I swear I thought there was a Rozanov on the Raiders. Are there two? Is he a brother?

I thought so as well but I looked it up and there never has been. Mandela effect maybe.

This whole video was worth it for Svetlana revealing that Rozanov is a secret Hollander fan. Haha

He's a hockey fan. that IS being a Hollander fan

Is Svetlana an influencer too? Does she have a YouTube channel?

That moment when Hollzy came down from the seats and said he would compete reminded me of in movies where the theme song starts playing and it's like, aw yeah!

Can we have more Hollander and Rozanov content please? Please never do the stupid hats again. That was so dumb.

And more Svetlana

When I saw this video, I was baffled about why the Raiders invited this guy but now I get it.

Holly was so smiley. Has he been replaced by a clone?

Chapter End Notes

There is no way this is getting wrapped up in 3 chapters. I'm sorry I am not good at translating my outline into a chapter count 😔

I've had a huge surge in comments/hits/bookmarks etc recently, which i love because I LOVE comments, but I am curious about what's causing this. Is it because the story passed 40k words?? Comment if you have wisdom to share ❤️

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The commenters are right.

Shane does look happy in the video. He'd thought he was hiding it so well, but no. Whenever Ilya's around, video-Shane is wearing a real smile, not the one he wears for press and ads. The same smile he saw in that mirror in the hotel.

With anxiety prickling over his skin, Shane reads all the comments, scrolling down, down, all the way to the ones with no likes at all. He can't find a single comment that says anything about him being *gay* or in love with Ilya—just some suggestions that he, like plenty of the other Raiders, has a crush on Svetlana, and plenty of jokes about robo-Hollander loading an emotion module or whatever. And then instead of being stressed he's pissed off about the hockey robot thing again.

Why is it so hard for people to see him as a human being? Someone who likes to be touched and falls in love and yeah, has sex? When did that become the narrative about his life? From the minute he started being described as having amazing *hockey IQ* rather than *instincts* or *power* or *guts*?

Shane's phone alarm plays its annoying little song. As always, it's time for him to put away what he's feeling so he can do what his position needs from him—which in this case is making nice at the charity dinner so that the Raiders can continue getting some city tax break that Shane doesn't remember because he didn't care about it.

After putting on his tux, which is pressed and waiting for him in a garment bag, Shane starts writing a message to Ilya. He didn't want to interrupt whatever Ilya was doing with the Providence Raiders, but it's got to be late enough now that Ilya can check his phone, right?

Hope it all went well, Shane writes. *Anya is fine and having a good time with the dogsitter.*

No response right away from Ilya, so Shane puts his phone back in his pocket and heads out. They offered to send a car for him, of course, but he asked to drive himself. At least that way he can have fifteen minutes alone before he has to start performing again.

The dinner turns out to be pretty much exactly what Shane expected. His meal is too small and not in line with the macros he needs; he eats it and resigns himself to choking down some chicken breast and whatever carbs and vegetables are pre-prepared in his fridge.

When Shane ducks out to go to the bathroom, he has a message from Ilya: *Good. Enjoy your boring dinner. Send picture in tux when you get home.* 😉 *Also pic of Anya.*

"Boring" says the guy who's in Rhode Island, Shane texts back. In the bathroom mirror, he's wearing that same revealing smile. Shit.

There's also a message from Becca the dogsitter: *Took Anya out for her last walk of the day and headed out. Anya is fine and happy.* There's a photo of Anya gnawing on her chewable bone thing that's supposed to help clean her teeth.

Shane returns to his seat, and St-Simon, pink in the face from two glasses of wine, says to him cheerfully over the table: "Becca texted me that she loves Anya. Shane's friend's dog that she's watching," he adds in explanation to Oregan the goaltender, who's sitting next to Shane.

Anya. What if one of them knows Ilya's dog's name? Nausea rises in Shane's stomach. He's not ready for—

"Oh, yeah?" says Oregan, digging into the cheesecake they've been served as dessert. "Never been much of a dog guy myself. I had a cat as a kid."

Thank fuck. Oregan is super offline, to the point that it would be weird if Oregan wasn't a goalie and therefore expected to be weird. St-Simon never seemed to know or care about Ilya Rozanov the influencer, at least until before Ilya came to the practice rink and got everyone's attention, and Marleau, sitting on Shane's other side, is still deep in a conversation with Hammersmith about their respective vacation plans.

"A cat? Come on, man, cats are for girls," St-Simon says amiably. Or, he seems to think it's an amiable thing to say.

"Uh, I think Korogyi has a cat, and he was league MVP last season." Shane knows he should say more, but with MLH, this stuff is more than an uphill battle. It's a fight directly up a fucking cliff-face.

"That was such bullshit," Oregan says. "Shoulda been you."

"Yeah, fuck Korogyi," says St-Simon.

Swallowing, Shane pushes his fork into the cheesecake. He had no intention of eating it originally, but he can't talk any more right now. That was so fucking close.

Shane needs to talk to Ilya. If they're going to be friends in public, Shane needs to have, like, a plan. A way to explain it that doesn't sound suspicious.

He's tired of this. Twenty-seven years of fear and hiding. Twenty-seven years before he kissed a man and learned how mind-blowing it could be.

Once Shane gets home, he does send Ilya a photo of the tuxedo before peeling it off and changing into the pajama pants and t-shirt he usually wears to bed. Anya has come in to sleep on his bed, since he didn't think to leave the door closed, and Shane would be annoyed but he can't be mad at her. She chose his bed rather than a guest room for a reason, probably that it smells like him, someone she knows and likes.

Shane sends Ilya a picture of this too, a second before a message arrives from him: *Tuxedo looks good. But I like you better wearing nothing.*

I'm too tired for anything tonight, Shane says. It kills him to say that, but he's exhausted from all the hand-shaking and small talk over dinner, and it's close to midnight by now, and he still needs to get more protein into his body. *But you're coming to pick her up early tomorrow, right?*

I will drive from Providence at ten. I think I will be at your house by eleven, probably before. Early enough?

I have to be at Victory at 12, so yeah, that's fine.

Okay, writes Ilya.

Shane chugs a protein shake in the kitchen, brushes his teeth, sets his alarm for six, and gets into bed. Anya flops over his feet in a warm, heavy lump, and he falls asleep easily.

When Shane's alarm goes off, Anya wriggles herself awake, stands up on the bed and looks at Shane expectantly, tail gently wagging. Shane spends a few minutes petting her and talking to her before he gets up, pulls on some sweatpants and a coat and takes her out for a short walk.

The cloudy November day that Shane encounters out on the Common feels refreshing rather than depressing. Anya is a very good dog, and she loves Ilya, and Shane loves Ilya too, so of course they like one another. And soon Ilya will be coming to Shane's home again. If they lived together, they could see each other every morning.

Ilya likes Shane, doesn't he? He's tender in bed, kind, sexy. He wants to hear from Shane all the time, even when Shane's schedule is a pain in the ass. Shane can't be the only one feeling this way, can he?

When the walk is done, Shane starts some coffee brewing and sets a can of Coke out on the counter. The last time he was at the grocery store, he picked up this single can and then felt foolish about it.

Anya alerts Shane of Ilya's approach before he can even ring the bell: her head perks up and she starts barking with soft *boof*s. Shane rushes to find her duck and give it to her. But she's not interested in it until Ilya's voice speaking deep Russian comes through the door.

Shane lets Ilya in, and before Shane can touch him, Ilya is crouching, murmuring to Anya, soothing her as she tries to jump on him. "I didn't feed her yet," Shane says, "because your instructions said not to." Apparently it can be bad for dogs to eat right after they walk.

Ilya rises to his feet. "Thank you," he says.

He looks beautiful wearing his hoodie under a canvas coat, his curls tousled by the wind. Is it weird that, as much as Shane likes to see him shirtless, sometimes it's just as great when he's fully dressed? Because shirtless Ilya the influencer is for everyone, while Ilya in a hoodie and coat is only for Shane.

“No problem,” Shane says. “I have coffee, if you want. Or, uh, Coke.” He gestures to the kitchen.

In response, Ilya simply kisses him. Shane reaches up and tangles his fingers in Ilya’s hair, and it’s perfect, too fucking perfect.

“Driving on I-95 really gets you going, huh?” Shane says, smiling. He might even be grinning.

“Mm, it’s definitely that. Not you,” Ilya says before kissing Shane again.

Shane takes his hand, pulls him to his bedroom. Before Shane can shut the door, Ilya reaches around him to shut it behind him and then pushes Shane up against the closed door.

Yes, yes—-and Shane can finally give in to what he’s been wanting. He drops to his knees and opens the coat, pulls Ilya’s sweatpants down to suck his rapidly hardening dick. He’s needed Ilya in his mouth, missed doing this—even though he hasn’t blown Ilya that many times, has he? It feels like dozens or more, as though this is Shane’s favorite hobby that’s a familiar pleasure.

Whatever. Being filled up by Ilya, having Ilya’s dick in his mouth is so fucking good. Ilya smells and tastes good here, clean but like sex. Ilya’s hand as a gentle presence on his head takes it to another level, bringing him into that comfortable, floating place that only Ilya can show him.

Shane’s still just getting started, planning to give the best head ever, when Ilya starts making the noises he makes when he’s about to come. There’s nothing Shane is more in tune with right now than Ilya, so Shane starts to take Ilya deeper, speeding up his plans—

“Shane,” gasps Ilya, and Shane doesn’t pull off until he gets that burst of come in his mouth, salty and weird-tasting and turning Shane on even harder as he swallows.

Holding Shane’s arms, Ilya drags Shane up to kiss him against the door again, then picks him up and drops him on the bed.

How could there be a better sight than Ilya’s dirty-blond curls leaning down over Shane? Ilya’s hockey-calloused hands push down Shane’s waistband, take Shane’s dick out—and Ilya is reciprocating, probably doing better than Shane did but Shane can’t think because Ilya is reaching up and groping his chest, too, as well as sucking him so well, definitely deep-throating, fuck, his mouth—

Shane should probably be embarrassed that he came in only a couple of minutes, and he would be if Ilya wasn’t exactly as guilty.

Ilya’s crawling up the bed next to Shane now, laughing, and Shane’s laughing too for no other reason than that he’s happy.

“You didn’t even take your coat off,” Shane says, pulling up his sweatpants again and turning on his side to look at Ilya more. He usually wouldn’t ever wear outdoor clothes on the bed,

but with Ilya he'll do anything.

"I think *you* were the one who could not wait to suck my dick." Ilya leans over and kisses Shane hard.

"So you didn't jerk off to me in my boring tux?" asks Shane, pleased because Ilya definitely did.

"What do you think?" Ilya says in a low, sexy tone.

Shane kisses him again for a while until he remembers: "Oh, there's something I wanted to ask you." He checks his watch: it's 11:14, leaving plenty of time to talk.

Ilya sits up. "Sounds serious."

"Kind of." Shane needs something to do with his hands during this conversation. "Do you want coffee? Or soda?"

"Coffee is okay." Now Ilya's brow is creasing slightly.

Back in the kitchen, Ilya says he can feed Anya her kibbles while Shane belatedly hangs up his coat and makes their coffee.

Ilya can't go ten minutes without chirping him, of course. "You are feeding my dog out of this big bowl with bats on the outside?"

"It's a Halloween candy bowl. I didn't have any dog bowls. I'll get one for next time."

Ilya shakes his head and pours the kibbles into it anyway. While Anya is occupied with wolfing her breakfast down, Shane hands Ilya a mug and leads him to the couch. Although there's plenty of space, they sit close together, thigh against thigh, arm against arm. Ilya has unzipped his hoodie halfway, showing his necklace over the t-shirt underneath; his hair is more tousled than ever, thanks to Shane's hands in it.

"So. What is your important something?" Ilya asks. He's always even more handsome than Shane remembers. There's a gorgeousness about Ilya in person, about his physical presence and his expressive face and the tiny moles all over his skin, that can't be captured on camera.

Shane licks his lower lip, a nervous tic he hasn't fully extinguished. "Well, first, how did it go in Providence?"

"I don't know. Good, as long as they are not stupid," Ilya says. "A lot of the day, I was on the ice, demonstrating skills or practicing with the team. And I can see why the team is on losing streak. Embarrassing for them, but I said nothing. Afterward, the coaches and the manager took me to dinner at Outback Steakhouse," he adds with a scornful expression that shouldn't be as adorable as it is.

"You're so fucking picky!" Shane says, charmed for reasons he can't even explain. Perhaps he just finds every aspect of Ilya charming now. "Outback Steakhouse isn't bad. I've seen you eating McDonald's before."

“Is true. When I go to a restaurant, I want to eat either good food, I mean like a fucking good steak or lobster, or total shit, like McDonalds,” says Ilya, gesturing to emphasize what he means. “Nothing in the middle, that is what I don’t like.”

It’s hopeless; Shane can’t stop loving every single aspect of Ilya, even the parts that make no fucking sense. “That’s a good sign, taking you out to dinner, though, right?”

Ilya sips his coffee. “They had a beer, so I had a beer. I think it was a test. To see whether I am really an asshole in real life, same as on the internet. Don’t worry, I was very polite.” He gives Shane a little smirk. “Then this morning, they wanted me in the gym at 8, assessing my fitness. I think probably it was another test. Will I show up on time so early, will I complain. Very obvious. I passed this test too.”

“Did they tell you anything afterwards? Or this morning?”

“Not yet. Is that all your questions?”

“No.” Shane puts his mug down. He hasn’t been this anxious in years. “I was just thinking, you know, sneaking around is suspicious, right? And it’s easy for secrets to get found out. And I’m—not ready to be out publicly. Not yet.” He’s staring at a ring of coffee that his mug left on his table. He can’t look at Ilya right now.

“Okay,” Ilya says. “I didn’t think you were going to come out.”

That’s good, they’re on the same page, even if it’s a page that sucks. “Yeah, I’m not. Not right now, at least.” Shane takes a deep breath. This is terrifying. “But I. Want to be with you. I know it’s not fair, but I thought, maybe we can tell people that we’re friends. We can say we met when you came to the practice rink and we got along well. People might suspect something, a little, but I hope not a lot. Not enough to matter. And in private . . . we could be together.” As Shane’s saying it, he realizes how shitty it sounds. He’s asking Ilya, a guy who’s been out for years, to hide this. “Do you think you would want to try? Being . . . in a relationship?”

At last, he looks up. Ilya’s face is flushed, and he’s Ilya’s wearing that sad-happy expression that’s starting to break Shane’s heart. “Yes,” Ilya says, his voice rough. “I want to try.”

“You’re okay keeping it secret for now?”

“Yes, I’m okay.” Ilya takes Shane’s hand, holds it in his own, rubs his thumb over the back of it. The gesture is so tender, so loving, that it takes Shane’s breath away.

Shane puts his other hand over Ilya’s. There’s a blurring weight on his lower eyelashes.

Holy shit, he has a boyfriend, a guy, and it’s Ilya, one of his favorite people in the world. He loves Ilya. He can love Ilya, and in private he can be with Ilya just like most of his teammates are with someone they love.

“Shane,” Ilya says. “You know Providence has not offered me a contract yet. If they *are* very stupid, maybe they will not ever offer it. I’m too old, or just an influencer, or whatever.”

“Yeah, obviously I know that.” Shane holds Ilya’s hand more tightly. “And if that happens, I’ll be pissed off with them, but I’ll still want to be with you. Because you’re you.” What he doesn’t say is: *I can’t imagine wanting anyone more than I want you*.

Ilya shakes his head; there’s a gleaming line running down his cheek, and then he turns away, but Shane touches his cheek and turns him back. Why is Ilya always sad when Shane is nice to him?

Shane kisses him, and Ilya responds as he always does, giving back exactly as good as he gets. Shane’s perfect match.

In Ilya’s pocket, his phone pings. They both freeze before breaking the kiss.

Carefully, as though it’s a bomb, Ilya takes his phone out. Unlocks it. Opens a notification.

“Is it . . .?” Shane asks, his heart hammering. He can’t read anything without his reading glasses.

“Yes,” Ilya says, his voice thick. “A contract.”

Chapter End Notes

This was a loong chapter for me. I am tired. 😭 Next update hopefully Sunday (tomorrow) or Monday!

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A contract.

“What else? What does it say?” Shane asks. Why are his reading glasses so fucking far away in the bedroom?

Clearing his throat, Ilya scrolls through the email. “Amateur tryout contract, 25 games. What you would expect for an amateur contract in the AHL. I’ll probably be oldest guy there.” Though his words are dismissive, he’s starting to smile.

Shane shoves his shoulder. “Whatever, you’re going to be fucking playing professionally!” There was never any other kind of contract they’d sign him to at the start, they both know that. What matters is that Ilya did it, he’s as good as Shane knew he was. Does Ilya even know how hot that is? And Shane doesn’t believe it will stop here, either. Shane has a feeling, he knows in his heart—Ilya’s place is on the ice with him.

“You like the idea of dating professional hockey player, huh?” Ilya’s smile broadens.

Shane can’t stop himself: he pulls Ilya to him, kisses him, lets one of his hands caress Ilya’s body greedily while the other stays in Ilya’s hair. Somewhere at Shane’s side, Ilya drops his phone onto the couch cushions so that, as they kiss, Ilya can touch Shane, too.

“I guess we both do,” Shane says when they break the kiss. He’s giddy, and also starting to get hard again despite the fact that it hasn’t even been that long since Ilya blew him.

Shane’s just reaching for the growing hardness in Ilya’s pants, too, and thinking of getting into a better position for this when Ilya says, “Ah, wait, wait.”

Shane’s heart sinks; he lets go of Ilya immediately. “Sorry—”

“No—Anya.” Ilya points toward the kitchen. Shane turns to see and finds that Anya has finished her breakfast and is chewing on one of her toys at the edge of Shane’s open-plan kitchen. Yeah, Shane would also prefer a little more privacy here.

Hurriedly, Ilya locates Anya’s teeth-cleaning bone thing and her ball and tosses them into what Shane presumes is his bedroom. Once Anya has trotted after them, Ilya audibly closes the door and comes back into Shane’s view. “Okay, where were we?” he asks, sitting next to Shane on the couch again.

Shane straddles him. “Here,” he says, and Ilya looks up at him in wonder.

Shane has never done frottage with a guy before—of course—but he’s seen it in porn and he figures out the logistics of it fast enough, pulling down his own sweatpants as Ilya does the same. When Ilya guides Shane’s hand to his mouth and spits in it, Shane has a moment of

déjà vu—probably a memory of something from a mostly-forgotten video, though no porn could be as hot as this, Ilya kissing him, murmuring to him in Russian, losing his cool as they move together, Shane's hand pleasuring them both.

Shane comes first, Ilya close after. The mess between them almost immediately becomes gross, but Ilya's holding on to Shane tight, hugging him, and Shane doesn't want to leave. He lets their faces press together, cheek to cheek, while they catch their breath.

"I don't want to fly to fucking Columbus this afternoon," Shane says. He kisses Ilya's sideburn. "I want to take you to dinner to celebrate." To somewhere Ilya can have good steak or lobster like he wanted.

"Maybe I will allow you to show off your money. But I can't today anyway, I have spin class until late," Ilya says. He rubs his hand over Shane's hair, over the back of Shane's neck, making him melt. "How would this fit in your plan of being friends in public?"

"I'm not totally sure yet." He hadn't really wanted to plan it before Ilya said yes. It would have hurt too much if Ilya had said no. "My idea was to say we met and became friends when you came for the PR thing. Is that believable?"

"You're back from Columbus the day after tomorrow, yes? Let's think about it until then. No big rush." Ilya pulls at his own ear contemplatively. "But I think the best way is to pretend there's nothing unusual at all. No big deal, nothing to announce. You would be surprised if anyone else is surprised. You know what I mean?"

"I guess so." Shane isn't the best at predicting how people will react. Ilya seems better at that. "Yeah, let's think about it. And then when we get back, I'll take you out to dinner? We can ask Svetlana, too, because I think she'll want to celebrate you as well. Right?"

"Okay. And yes, she would probably want to come," Ilya says with affection. "She will figure it out, by the way. You and me. She's very perceptive woman. I'm pretty sure she already noticed something when she saw us together. But don't worry, she won't ever tell. She's a good person, first of all, but second, she likes you very much as a player and she knows how MLH is. She'll keep the secret."

"Okay." Ilya trusts Svetlana, so Shane trusts her. He has to; he's already asking Ilya to kind of go back in the closet. He can't cut Ilya off from his best friend as well.

The idea of another person knowing still makes anxiety thrum through him.

"With you and her at dinner, we'll talk about nothing but hockey all night," Ilya adds.

"You like it," Shane says.

"Of course." With a soft expression, Ilya strokes Shane's cheek.

Shane can't keep ignoring the disgusting sensation of cooling come on his pants and shirt, though. "Uh, do you want to shower quickly? I can lend you some sweatpants."

"You still have my sweatpants that you stole. But yes, I'll take yours. You can keep mine."

Sharing clothes. Another first, another thing they get to do now as a *couple*—not just hookups anymore. Shane is going to have to try really hard to keep their shower strictly cleanliness-focused.

He . . . mostly succeeds. Freshly dressed, Ilya retrieves Anya from the bedroom, packs her backpack of accoutrements, and stops at the door for a last, lingering kiss.

It's different. Different from kissing Ilya goodbye before, when Shane was trying to be a little bit cool and casual. And different from kissing Rose or Jess or any of his other girlfriends goodbye, when Shane was just doing what he thought boyfriends were supposed to do with their girlfriends. *Bye, babe. Miss you.*

This time, Shane can be tender as he never has been with anyone. And Ilya is too, surprisingly so, soft with his kiss and intimate as he brushes his thumb over the top of Shane's cheeks, where his freckles are.

Then, of course, Ilya has to make an unprovoked attack on Shane's sanity by saying, "Think of me when you sweat today."

For some unholy reason, this turns Shane on immediately. "I sweat like a million times a day," he says. And he's screwed if he starts thinking of Ilya during his workouts or . . . "You're an asshole," Shane says, not moving his hands from their home on Ilya's waist, the narrow part of his body that all the breadth and power of his shoulders tapers down to.

"An asshole you will be thinking about."

"Definitely not," Shane lies.

Victorious, Ilya steals a last kiss and finally heads out through the door, leaving Shane more worked up than he'd like to be first thing in the morning.

Shane's *boyfriend*. He's talking quietly in Russian to Anya as he waits for the elevator. It takes all of Shane's strength not to burst out of his apartment and take another kiss, just one, from those soft lips.

Shane is a little late to Victory Ice Arena that morning, but he doesn't care at all.

"Okay, *who* is she?" Marleau says while Shane is lacing up his skates.

Shane's fingers slip. "Who?"

"The girl who's got you grinning like a clown. I'm guessing the same girl who's been leaving hickies all over you, I mean, come on, Hollzy."

"It's still new," Shane says. He switches to his other skate. "Private." The fear of being found out mixes weirdly with, honestly, arousal at the concept of people seeing Ilya's marks, and shit, Shane needs to cut that line of thinking off right now.

"If it's so fuckin' private can you tell her to stop gnawing on you like a chew toy and making us all see it?" Hammersmith chirps him.

“Try getting laid, maybe it won’t bother you so much,” Shane says, and a round of laughter erupts from the guys around him.

He’s going to have to tell Ilya to stop leaving bruises on him, though; if Shane keeps showing up with them, the guys will get more and more curious. No, Shane will have to pretend it didn’t work out with the hickey girl. In their eyes, he’ll go back to being single.

After that, practice is normal, PT is normal, going home to pack for the flight is normal. The flight to Columbus is normal, too.

Except it’s not, of course. Because Shane is on his phone on the team bus booking a table for three at Atlantic Fish, yet again angling the screen so no-one else can see. Because in his hotel room that evening, Shane gets a message from Rose asking how he’s doing and thinks: maybe it’s okay if, the same as Ilya, he has just one friend who knows. Rose has already kept the secret about his sexuality for months, and like Svetlana, she’s a hockey fan who understands what a huge deal it would be for Shane to be outed.

Good, Shane writes, sitting on the edge of the bed. *How about you?*

Bleh, Rose writes. *Between you and me, my co-star just threw a tantrum about the hat he was supposed to wear and stormed off set. Guess I’ll be sitting in my trailer in full makeup and a ballgown until he comes back or the director gives up hope.*

Is that frustrating?

Very.

Shane swallows. *If you have a minute, I wanted to tell you some private news. And I hoped I could ask you for some advice.*

Please, yes, I need something to distract me from wanting to throttle this jerk I’m supposed to be filming a romance with! And I’m alone in my trailer, so no worries there.

His phone rings.

“Hey,” Rose says, sounding excited. “Am I right in guessing that this is love life news?”

“Yeah.” Shane feels slightly dizzy. He’s really going to do it. He’ll just have to hope his judgement of Rose’s character is right. “I have a boyfriend now.”

“Oh my god! Tell me more. Is he hot? He’s got to be hot if he’s dating *the* Shane Hollander.”

“Yeah, he’s hot,” Shane says. “Really hot.”

“Do you have a photo?”

Shane has plenty, but none that are appropriate to share. “He’s on Instagram, you can see him there. He’s, uh, IlyaRozanov81.”

There’s a pause. “Wait. Ilya Rozanov the hockey influencer?”

“You know him?”

“Shane, he’s gorgeous and constantly shirtless, there’s gifs of him *everywhere*. Holy fuck, you’re dating Ilya Rozanov? But isn’t he kind of an asshole?”

“No. No, he’s actually pretty great,” Shane says, his vision blurring just a little. “I love him.” It feels so good to finally say so.

Chapter End Notes

To be clear, there aren’t really gifs of Ilya everywhere on the internet. But Rose is a hockey fan so SHE is seeing a lot of gifs of him on social media like twitter. So to HER ilya is everywhere.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the end of his conversation with Rose, Shane has a plan. He's going to wait until a moment when Ilya comes up in conversation with the guys and casually mention that he's been in touch with Ilya as the team captain who's interested in Ilya's potential. From there, he'll continue to mention being in contact with Ilya, focusing on the idea that he finds Ilya's ragebaiting funny, until his friendship with Ilya becomes unremarkable.

Rose thinks this will work, and Shane's ready to take her advice as he always takes people's advice in areas that aren't his forte: interior design, nutrition, fashion.

It is a little bitter to have to frame his relationship with Ilya in terms of captainly interest and amusement. Yet the alternative is to come out, which cannot be an option—not yet, he's not ready—so he'll have to be satisfied with this.

It feels momentous when Shane renames *Lily* in his phone to *Ilya.* And deletes all the incriminating messages from their chat. He's saved the photos to his phone already anyway.

The next morning, Shane plays well. He almost always does. Columbus proves a surprisingly tough opponent but Shane is not going to let Ilya think that their relationship is weakening Shane's game, so he drags the Raiders to a win.

On the jet back to Boston, Shane checks his phone and sees that Ilya has posted a reel announcing his hiatus from Instagram. People have a lot of questions, of course, but as Shane reads, he sees some newer comments saying stuff like: *holy shit is it true? You're going to play for Providence?*

Shane immediately looks up the Providence Raiders on Twitter and yeah, there's the announcement. Ilya Rozanov, 27, will be joining them on a 25-game contract starting in three weeks' time, before the winter break. The replies here are a mix of bafflement (*who is this old guy?* and *Ilya Rozanov the shirtless dude from Instagram???*) and gossip (*didn't you see that video he did with the Boston team?* and *apparently he played for BU*).

Shane can't put words to the way he feels, seeing all these people talking about Ilya. They don't know Ilya, not like Shane does. They don't understand what a force of nature Ilya is on the ice.

They don't know how amazing it is to kiss Ilya, to have sex with Ilya, either. Ilya is Shane's boyfriend, after all. In that sense, Ilya belongs to Shane alone. The world can look at all the shirtless gifs of Ilya that are now filling the replies to Providence's announcement, but only Shane gets to touch.

A few minutes later, Shane's attention is drawn by someone saying Ilya's name: Marleau, talking to Reilly.

“I thought it would be cool to congratulate him, you know?” Marleau is saying.

“Sorry, Marl, I didn’t save it on my phone,” their assistant coach says. “It’d be in the computer back in the office.”

“Hey, no sweat,” says Marleau. He scratches the bristle on his jaw.

Shane’s chest is warm. Marleau wanted to say something nice to Ilya. He likes Ilya, sees how great Ilya is. And this could be the perfect opportunity to mention that Shane has Ilya’s number. It’s not weird for Shane to be friends with Ilya if Marleau wants to talk to him too, right?

When Reilly heads back to the area of the jet where the coaches sit, Shane takes the seat he had been occupying. “Hey, Marley,” Shane says, casually as he can.

“Hey, Hollzy,” Marleau says, leaning back in the plush leather chair. His long legs are sprawled out in front of him, ending with the massive, worn-out old sneakers he won’t replace because he thinks they’re lucky. “You finally got your phone unglued from your hand?”

“It wasn’t—fuck off, I’m not on my phone that much,” Shane says.

“Yeah, and you’re definitely not messaging Hickey Girl.” Marleau laughs, but it’s not a mean laugh. Marleau is almost always friendly. Yeah, he chirps and talks shit like all the guys do, but he’s chill, easy to get along with like a big Newfoundland dog. That’s why Shane likes him.

“Shut up,” Shane says. He clears his throat. “Were you and Des talking about Ilya Rozanov? You wanted to congratulate him?”

“Yeah, he just seemed like a cool guy.” Marleau’s fiddling with a beer cap. “Cocky asshole but funny, right?”

“Sure,” Shane says. Fuck, he should have asked for a drink. He doesn’t know what to do with his hands, and his mouth is dry. “Uh, I have Rozanov’s number, though. I figured he has a lot of talent. So, as captain, I should keep in touch with him.”

Marleau’s expression brightens. “I thought you’d say he’s annoying.”

“Well, yeah, but all you guys are annoying as well.”

“Fuck you too!” Marleau’s grinning. “So gimme the number?”

“Right.” Shane reads the number out to Marleau.

This is amazing. Now Shane won’t stand out as the only one who’s in touch with Ilya. It’s exactly what Shane has needed. In fact . . . Shane can use this.

“Actually,” Shane says, hoping against hope that he’s not making a huge mistake. “Rozanov said he’s going out to dinner to celebrate with Svetlana. He invited me. D’you want to come

too?”

Marleau raises his eyebrows. “The balls on this dude, inviting *you* to go congratulate him! But I guess . . . yeah, sure, I’ll go. When?”

Privately, Shane suspects that Svetlana’s presence is also a motivator, but he doesn’t bring it up in case he’s wrong. “It’s on Saturday. Atlantic Fish.”

The eyebrows go up even further. “He’s really going all out, huh? Yeah, I can make that.”

Shit, shit, shit! Marleau is right: Ilya *can’t* afford a place that expensive. “I guess it’s special,” Shane says. He clears his throat. “Anyway, did you hear back from the shop yet about your car?”

“Yeah. I might have to trade it in.” Marleau sighs.

As Marleau explains the latest problems in the saga of his Porsche, the electric anxiety coursing through Shane calms down. He hasn’t been outed. It’s fine.

Shane can only hope that if Marleau does find out, he won’t lose the best and oldest friend he has.

Through the following days, the weather gets colder and Ilya gets more and more tired-looking on their late-night video calls. It makes sense: Ilya’s trying to hand over all his personal training clients, find a decent dog-friendly place in Providence, sublet his Allston apartment, pack up his whole life, and prepare to start a brand new career, all by the start of December. Shane would honestly not be able to cope if he were in Ilya’s shoes, and Ilya hasn’t even been able to hire anyone to do some of it for him. He’s refused almost all of Shane’s offers of assistance as well, only agreeing to let Shane come over one night when they’re both free to help Ilya pack up. Or possibly “pack up,” meaning sex. It’s definitely going to be the latter at least, knowing Shane and Ilya’s track record at this point.

Shane would like to think Ilya won’t be in Providence for long. In all this excitement, Shane hasn’t had much time to regret that Ilya’s going to be leaving. If Ilya could come back and play in Boston . . . fuck, that would be the best feeling in the world.

When Shane, freshly showered after a home game, drives through the dark to arrive at Ilya’s apartment, he’s disturbed to see that it's lost some of its personality. Ilya’s personality. The walls are bare, and a lot of the objects around the kitchen area must have been stowed away in the cardboard boxes that are clustered next to one wall. Though it’s not Shane’s home, he misses what’s been erased.

They blow each other—Shane understands that Ilya is too exhausted for more, although he would probably fuck Shane anyway if Shane said he wanted it—and get to packing over a meal of pizza (Ilya), brown rice with chicken and broccoli (Shane), and a kong toy filled with peanut butter (Anya). If Shane had any remaining doubts about Ilya’s memories, they would be banished after that evening sitting there and watching Ilya sift through possessions he clearly doesn’t remember. Why is this movie ticket tucked in a drawer? Was it an important

memento or just stuffed there carelessly? Ilya doesn't know, and he's embarrassed not to know.

It's a little awkward on Shane's side, too, but for different reasons. Shane's never helped anyone else move house before. Since he was sixteen, his time has been way too valuable. Sure, his friends on the Raiders have moved, and he was aware of it, but nobody asked for his help. They're all wealthy enough to pay for a moving company to do it all.

And it's true that Shane is tired, and he's fucking up his sleep schedule doing this, and he probably shouldn't be. But he doesn't want to go home. He'd rather wrap Ilya's collection of weird mugs in newspaper and be interrupted by his boyfriend's soft lips kissing the back of his neck.

Fuck. He doesn't want Ilya to go.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry I didn't get to writing the dinner in this chapter. Work has been kicking my butt and I am a husk. 😞 thank you as always to my regular commenters who keep me fueled! Sorry I didn't reply to you I was busy working like 12 hour days 🥲

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane’s family has a Thanksgiving tradition. Well, two, actually.

He often can’t make it home to Ottawa for Canadian Thanksgiving. When that happens, he’ll try to meet up with his parents in Canada as close to the date as possible, as he did this year.

For American Thanksgiving, on the other hand, Shane’s parents drive to him, leaving before dawn to try to beat the holiday traffic. They don't do the conventional meal; Shane’s dad makes his signature chicken parm. What matters is that it’s a chance for Shane to spend time with his mom and dad, who used to be the people who knew him best.

This year, Shane was in a frenzy the day before they came, searching the apartment to ensure there were no signs of Ilya left visible. The dog bowls Shane bought for Anya. Ilya’s hoodie with the logo of his gym on it. Ilya’s Cokes and his shampoo for curls in the bathroom.

They had dinner. Shane didn’t tell them about the huge change that had happened in his life. His parents told him he looked happy.

Afterwards, when they were gone, Shane put every piece of Ilya back again. Then he sat on his couch with guilt and maybe anger churning in his stomach. For so long he’d tried to be perfect. And who could say he hadn’t succeeded? But it hadn’t made him happy. Only after he started breaking the rules did people—his parents and total strangers—start saying he looked happy.

Now, November is coming to an end and Shane’s driving through light snow flurries to a very different dinner. He’s happy, yes. And afraid of what might happen if he stops being perfect Shane Hollander. He can’t yet imagine that world. Will it hurt if his brands drop him, if people stop calling him a role model? Or will it be a relief?

Shane drives down into the parking garage under the Prudential Center. If Ilya was here, he’d make a comment about how expensive it is to park here. Shane hasn't really thought about his wealth that much before. Obviously it's nice to have a good apartment now and a nest egg for when he retires, but he didn't go into hockey for the money.

Ilya seems to have a complex about it, though. Shane’s wondering whether a lobster dinner, which Ilya literally said he liked and wanted during their conversation a while ago, is really the best idea, or whether it will set Ilya off more being gloomy about his “boring car” and modest life. What can Shane say to fix that? It's true that Shane has more money, which is exactly why it's no problem for Shane to pay.

Shane locks his car and walks to Boylston Street through the snow-speckled, cold wind and Back Bay’s persistent teeming crowds. The sun set ages ago—it sets before 5 these days—so

Boston’s shopping district is lit by streetlights and the headlights of cars in slow-moving traffic.

Ilya, leaning against the exterior of the restaurant, is a great sight, as always. He's wearing his usual black wool winter coat, the uniform of Boston, and no hat, probably because he’s gelled his hair back and doesn't want to mess it up. He’s absorbed in his phone, and his ears are red. Shane loves him.

“Hey,” Shane says, stuffing his own hands in his pockets so that he doesn’t touch Ilya.

Ilya glances up, smiles a sweet, private smile, puts away his phone. “Hey,” he says, also not touching Shane. They can only stand there, looking at each other.

“So,” Ilya says. “Marleau has such a big crush on Svetlana that he would come to this dinner just to see her? That's commitment.”

“No,” says Shane. “Well, yeah, a lot of the guys like Svetlana, but it's not just that. I think he likes you too.” He moves a little closer to get out of the way of other pedestrians.

“Well, he can't have me. I have a boyfriend,” Ilya says, leaning against the restaurant window in a classic Ilya I'm-so-arrogant-and-sexy pose.

“You know I didn't mean that kind of *like*,” Shane says. He has worried about this, though. “I don't think Marleau is, uh . . .”

“Mm, I think he would do threesome with a guy and girl, but would not fuck a guy,” Ilya says thoughtfully.

Shane has no idea how he’s supposed to respond. “What?”

“I am good at knowing this type of thing,” Ilya tells him.

Then Svetlana steps out of an Uber a few feet away and joins them, giving Shane a probing look as she shakes his hand again. “So kind of you to invite Ilya to dinner. As the Raiders captain,” she says.

“He’s going to play some good hockey down in Providence,” Shane says. It’s what he usually says when his teammates get traded. A cold soundbite that doesn’t communicate the complexity of Ilya at all.

Marleau arrives a few seconds later, also emerging from an Uber. Feeling on more solid ground, Shane nods and says, “Hey, Marly.”

“Hey, man,” Marleau says, taking his usual place at Shane’s side. He clears his throat. “Svetlana, Rozanov, good to see you two again.”

“Yes, it is,” Svetlana says elegantly.

“So you are big fan of my content?” Ilya says, mischief written all over his face. Oh no. “Is it my thirst traps you like, or the hockey tips? Probably the hockey tips, right? You need help

with wrist shot."

Grinning, Marleau says, "No, dude, it's you shit-talking other teams. Especially the fuckin' Metros. Bunch of dicks."

Ilya looks delighted. He extends his hand toward Marleau. "Fuck the Metros, yes?"

Marly shakes it heartily and echoes him: "Fuck the Metros."

"Ah, too bad he is already your winger," Svetlana says to Shane. "He would be good with Ilya. But you got him first, fair and square."

"You really think Ilya's gonna—?" Shane starts to reply.

Before he can finish, though, Ilya's clapping his hands and saying, "Okay, time to go in. Hurry, I am not missing out on my lobster."

Shane ends up sitting across from Ilya at their square table; it's the best way to prevent himself or Ilya from holding hands or something under the tablecloth.

When Ilya sheds his coat, he's wearing a nice twill shirt with a colorful, flowery pattern in red. It's something Shane would never think to wear—he has no sense of fashion—but even if a stylist handed it to him, he'd immediately think, *Is it too gay?*

Only a day after Ilya's contract with Providence was announced, Shane saw the first article: *Ilya Rozanov, first out queer player in the AHL*. Nobody's making a huge deal about it yet. Mostly the people who care are Ilya's fans and followers. He won't be in the major league, after all. Still, it's been noticed.

Ilya's going to have to work extra hard to be taken seriously. Well, Shane knows something about that. Yet he's glad, perhaps jealous too, that Ilya is remaining himself, not trying to go back into the closet.

Ignoring the unease in his chest that always accompanies these thoughts, Shane opens his menu and pretends to consider it. He already scoped out the dinner options online and chose the salmon.

Everyone else orders lobster. Marleau politely asks Svetlana what she does for work; she tells him she sells luxury cars. From there, the conversation catches fire—Marleau's leaning forward in his chair, eagerly discussing the merits of buying another Porsche to replace the one he's not happy with. Svetlana explains to him that the model he owns is a notorious dud: "You were unlucky. Most Porsches are an excellent investment."

Ilya chimes in occasionally—he seems to know a hell of a lot about luxury cars as well. Shane guesses he's learned about them from Svetlana? Shane speaks up, too, in favor of his Land Rover; Marly loyally supports him, while Ilya calls him boring, as expected.

It's all surprisingly comfortable. Shane's worries that this meal would be horribly awkward haven't come true at all. If someone looked at his table, they'd probably think Shane, Marleau, Svetlana, and Ilya were good friends.

It kind of feels that way, too. Shane doesn't know Svetlana, but when the conversation turns to hockey, he finds that he loves talking to her. She *sees* the game as clearly as he does.

Even the lobster doesn't cause any difficulties. Shane had thought that maybe Ilya wouldn't know how to eat it, since he's obviously the one in their group who's not wealthy, but he deals with it deftly. Maybe he's also learned about this from Svetlana.

By the time the plates are taken away, Shane is full of a warm contentment that's rare for him. He's been friends with the guys from the team for ages, of course, and that's great, but hanging out at their houses or going to clubs with them or going to formal dinners with them isn't the same as eating in a group that's small enough to have people who really know you.

Maybe what also feels good is that for the last two hours, Shane wasn't playing a part as much as he usually is. Although he couldn't hold Ilya's hand, he talked about hockey as much as he wanted, and he chirped Ilya and was affectionately chirped by him in return. For once, he got to stop being *the Shane Hollander* and just be Shane, at least slightly.

"You okay, Hollzy?" Marleau asks him.

"Yeah. Great meal, right?" Shane says. "You guys ready to go?"

"Hollander, they didn't bring the bill yet," Ilya says. He raises his eyebrows. "Do you dine and dash a lot?"

"No, I already paid the check when I got up to go to the bathroom," Shane says smugly. This is a lesson his mom taught him back when he was a kid, and it's always been useful. "I tipped, too, so we're good to go."

"Behind that handsome face is a devious mind," Svetlana says approvingly.

They head out of the restaurant, back into the dark evening and cold air that bites at the bare skin between his gloves and coat cuffs, and at his neck.

"Anyone want a ride home?" Shane offers.

"I'm only a few minutes away, thanks," says Svetlana. "But maybe Ilya wants one?"

Ilya shakes his head. "I'm all the way over in Allston," he says.

"I'll take a ride," Marleau says unexpectedly.

It sucks watching Ilya stride away down the street to a T station, becoming another coated figure in the crowd. Shane has to tear his gaze away to focus on Marleau and on crossing the street back to the Pru garage.

As they walk, they talk about their plans for the winter break: Ottawa and the All-Star Game for Shane, Montreal and video games with his brothers for Marleau.

The drive to Marleau's place isn't far. To be honest, Marleau's apartment in Beacon Hill was one reason Shane chose a home in the same area.

When Shane pulls into a spot around the corner from Marleau's building, Marleau doesn't make any move to unbuckle his seatbelt.

"Did you forget something back at the restaurant?" Shane asks him.

"No, it's fine." Marleau finally unbuckles his seatbelt, turns to the door. Doesn't pull the handle. Turns back to face Shane.

"Hollander," Marleau says. "You know you're my brother, right?"

This is not good, though Shane isn't sure why. "Yeah," he says. "You're my best friend too."

Marleau nods. "Is Rozanov Hickey Girl?" he asks.

Chapter End Notes

I have to ask again for people not to put critique or ratings out of 5 in comments or public bookmarks. Please make it a private bookmark. ❤️

I also updated my vampire fic if you want a story full of sad bad feelings 🥲

Chapter 28

“Shit,” Marleau is saying. “Hollzy? You okay?”

Shane’s forehead is resting on the hard steering wheel, which is probably going to leave a bruise right in the middle of it. “Fine,” he says, his eyes closed. “Just need a minute.” A minute with nobody talking to him, ideally. He needs to not puke right here in his Land Rover.

“Okay,” says Marleau.

Marleau has seen Shane being not-fine a few times before. Not that many. Shane hadn’t exactly wanted to repeat the experience, but he also hadn’t wanted to fucking out himself less than a month after getting his first boyfriend.

Eventually, the world turns down a notch, the horns and revving engines of Boston become less grating, and Shane can open his eyes again. When he does, he can’t look at Marleau. Can’t face what Marly might feel about him. Like a statue, he’s just staring forward at the license plate of the car parked in front of them.

“You want to come and sit in my place for a minute?” Marleau asks in what, for him, is a quiet voice.

Fuck. There’s no escaping this. Even if Shane drives away, he’ll have to face Marleau at practice tomorrow. “Sure,” Shane says.

In silence, Shane parks the car and follows Marleau into his building. Like Shane’s, it’s a grand Gilded Age townhouse that’s been divided into luxury apartments, one on each floor. From outside, it looks nice, but not exactly like a multi-million-dollar property. It’s only once you look at its location in Beacon Hill that you understand its value.

Unlike Shane, Marly doesn’t have the penthouse, so the elevator ride up is shorter. The inside of Marleau’s place is also unlike Shane’s. Though he probably had an interior designer—most people Shane knows did—you can’t really tell. Marly’s massive leather couch with built-in cupholders has a framed Goodfellas poster hanging over it and a massive TV on the wall facing it. There’s a case of Gatorade sitting by the couch and a rack of dumbbells next to the Gatorade because Marleau likes to do curls while watching TV.

Marleau’s hookups don’t seem to mind his home. Many of the guys hook up a lot, and Marleau is one of them, and that’s fine. Marly is nice to women, as far as Shane’s seen. He’s not a complicated man: he likes to have sex with women and drink beer and rack up points and win cups.

Shane has always stood out, just a little, because he didn’t hook up. It has never escaped Shane that some people would say Marleau was, in probably several ways, a more ideal captain. Except that Shane is better at hockey.

Shane slumps onto the couch, bends over his knees and pulls lightly on his hair while Marleau is in the kitchen for some reason.

Marleau comes back, and in the cupholder next to Shane he deposits a condensation-beaded can of Canada Dry. That . . . isn't nothing.

"Dude, I'm sorry," Marleau says. There's the snap-pop sound that probably means he's opened a Sam Adams.

It's way too late to deny what Marleau knows, right? The secret is out. Shane will have to trust Marly not to destroy his entire life. And he does trust Marleau, he does, but . . . he never wanted to have this conversation. He never wanted his relationship to be a big deal at all.

"It's okay," Shane says. He picks up the ginger ale, opens it, takes a sip. "How did you know?" That's what matters. How did Shane give himself away so fast to Marleau, who has never in his life been the first guy to notice something?

"Uh." Marleau clears his throat. "You know most of the team thought Hickey Girl was Svetlana, right?"

Shane chokes on his ginger ale. "What?" Finally, he turns to glance at Marleau, who is wearing the expression of a guilty dog.

"Well, yeah, it makes sense. You were the one who pushed first for Rozanov and Svetlana to do the PR shit. You were smiling goofy the whole time she was there, the same way you smile when you talk about Hickey Girl. Then you said you're going out to dinner with her and Rozanov, so—it seemed obvious! I mean, where the fuck else are you going to find a woman who's that beautiful and smart *and* knows fucking everything about hockey?"

Shane is reeling. Him and Svetlana? The thought never crossed his mind.

Of course it didn't. He's gay. As if he needed any more proof. Marleau is right: Shane and Svetlana would have been a perfect match. If. *If.*

"Okay," Shane says. "That doesn't explain how you figured out . . . uh." Marleau *knows*. Shane still can't quite believe this is fucking happening. He's nauseated.

Marleau rubs his bearded jaw. It's his usual gesture of embarrassment, Shane has learned. "That was because I expected to see you talking to her with all stars in your eyes, you know? But you didn't. Zero sex vibes. And then when you talked to Rozanov . . ."

"Oh, God." Shane puts his head in his hands and shuts his eyes again.

"Hollander, I swear on my Porsche I won't say a word, if that's what you're freaking about. I know I'm not the brightest bulb in the, whatever, but I can keep my fucking mouth shut."

"Your Porsche is fucked," Shane points out.

"My *new* Porsche that I'm gonna get from Svetlana, then," Marleau clarifies in more excited tones.

Shane might have some questions about that later. He can't deal with it now at all. "Right," he says.

"Shane," says Marleau. "You're my brother, man, like I said. You gotta know this doesn't change shit between us, right? And Rozanov is a cool dude. Hey, he could come over and we could play MLH15 together, you and me and him. You can't do that with a WAG," Marleau adds helpfully.

Actually, Shane would fucking love to play MLH15 with two of his favorite people in the world. "That would be great," he says. "If we could get Ilya before he goes to Providence."

"Oh, I forgot about that. Shit, that sucks for you." Marly sounds sincere, as far as Shane can tell.

Shane sits up straighter, turns his ginger ale can around in his hands. "Yeah. It does."

"I think he's gonna play with us one day for real, though," Marley says. "I have a gut feeling."

"The same gut feeling that told you the sausages at that breakfast buffet were cooked when we all told you they were raw?"

"Go fuck yourself, Hollander," Marleau says, grinning and knocking his shoulder into Shane's, and the check-like impact helps to calm the part of Shane that's still terrified.

I think he's gonna play with us one day for real, though. Marleau is the only person Shane's met who has the same faith in Ilya. Shane knows Ilya is meant to be on the ice with him. And if Marleau knows that, too, maybe he really is more perceptive than they all thought.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Marleau knows, Shane writes to Ilya after he gets home. *He figured it out. I don't think he'll tell anyone.*

I don't think he will either. So it's okay, right? Ilya writes back a moment later.

I think so.

Are you okay?

Shane has no idea how to answer that question. He's drained, as though he just finished a playoff game, but without the pleasure of aching muscles that comes with hard-fought hockey.

He wants to go to Ilya's place, to touch Ilya and hear his voice in person. But they already agreed they wouldn't meet in person tonight because Shane has to leave early tomorrow for a charity event and Ilya has a 6 a.m. training session. This is how it's going to be in the future, too: living their lives completely apart. They have one more night together planned, three days from now. On the day Ilya moves out, Shane will be in Colorado. By the time Shane returns, Ilya's cozy apartment will belong to someone else.

I'm fine, Shane types. *Good night*.

And then, feeling ridiculous, he adds: ❤️

As soon as he sends the message, he regrets it, of course. But not for long, because only a few seconds later, Ilya replies: 😘

Shane spends too long looking at that emoji, overcome by emotions he can't name, before he puts his phone away and goes to bed.

On their last night in Ilya's home, the first real snow of the season starts to coat the ground. That seems exactly right, given that Shane first came here during an unseasonably early snowfall.

The apartment is extra cold and drafty because of the freezing wind outside, and because it's stripped bare, with no more rugs underfoot to add comfort. Ilya's renting his furniture with the apartment—he got it all from the curb during Allston Christmas, he says, so it's no loss to him. That means that the bones of the apartment, the bed and the couch, remain, while everything that made it his is erased. They have to huddle under Ilya's comforter on the couch because the blanket that used to be there is folded in a box somewhere.

All that packing was a lot of work to do if Ilya's going to come back to Boston soon. Shane hopes he will anyway.

The cold doesn't matter, though, when they're as close as any two humans can be—when Ilya is deep inside Shane, and kissing him, and rocking into him with languorous thrusts, making him forget everything that's not Ilya, Ilya, Ilya.

Afterward, Shane's drowsing, comfortable and content, with Ilya wrapped around him from behind. It's moments like these that make Shane certain that his love for Ilya is not a mistake.

Now that their bodies are cooling down, Shane's bare shoulder is starting to prickle with goosebumps. "I wish we had a fire like during the first time we did this," he says, half asleep. It was warmer then: golden firelight and Ilya's hands steering them to a safe harbor. He closes his eyes; he can afford to steal a few minutes' rest.

"What?" Ilya asks.

"Mm," Shane says. Sleep is drawing him down, down.

But for some incomprehensible reason, Ilya's letting Shane go and shaking Shane's shoulder, breaking him out of his cozy almost-nap. "What do you mean, there was a fire? When?"

Annoyed, Shane rubs his eyes and rolls over. He wanted to fall asleep in Ilya's arms one last time. Why doesn't Ilya want that? "What?"

Looking more stressed than Shane's ever seen him before, Ilya says, "You said there was a fire first time we did this. What fire?"

Blearily, Shane tries to think back on the last minute's conversation. Oh, yeah, he might have said something about fire. There's a clear image in his mind of a post-sex, sweaty-haired Ilya in a bedroom that has a gas fire burning in a minimalist fireplace. It's no place he's ever been, though. "Sorry, I think I was dreaming," Shane says. It's a little embarrassing; he didn't meant to freak Ilya out. "You know, when your brain kind of starts the dream before you're fully asleep? I was dreaming of a fireplace. I didn't mean your house was actually burning or anything."

"Ah," Ilya says. "Do you ever have other dreams about me?"

This is more familiar ground: Ilya teasing Shane, fishing for compliments. "Sometimes," Shane says, smiling. When he's super tired after a game, his dreams are fragmentary, as though his brain is too worn out to come up with a proper narrative. At those times, he often has vaguely sexual dreams of Ilya, mostly smudgy impressions of sensation and desire. "Do you ever dream about me?"

"Yes, all the time," Ilya says. His brow is still furrowed.

"Hey." Shane pats Ilya's arm. "What's wrong?"

Ilya visibly adjusts his expression; his lips, which were thinned with perhaps worry or tension, become beautifully full again. “Oh, in Russia we believe that dreams of our lover are likely to come true. So will you tell me if you ever dream about me? Okay?”

Grimacing, Shane says, “Sure. But don’t call me your lover, it’s gross.”

Ilya kisses his cheek. “My *boyfriend*. Better?”

“Yes.” Shane takes a kiss from his lips.

Shane can’t quite fall asleep again then, but Ilya holds him for a while longer before he has to go. Anya’s awake by that point, too, so Shane gets to give her the gift he brought: a Raiders-branded dog toy, a plush version of the team’s logo. Too bad the Raiders don’t have an animal mascot like the Sharks—that would be much cuter.

“Now you have at least one Raiders thing,” Shane says. “Since you’re a Raider now too.”

Ilya rolls his eyes, but it’s playful. “A *Providence* Raider.”

“For now,” Shane says.

Ilya looks at Shane hungrily before he grabs him and kisses him again, making it so good that Shane almost can’t tear himself away.

The trip home along Storrow Drive, recently plowed, is quiet because it’s so late. For Shane, seeing the usual tail lights in front of him, and the snow lightly falling over the road, is eerie. This could be a winter day in any of the previous years Shane’s spent in Boston—all that time with Ilya living his life just half an hour’s drive away. Wasted years.

At least the pleasant ache in Shane’s muscles is a testament to the fact that Ilya is real and really Shane’s boyfriend now.

The next morning, Shane has to force himself to focus back on hockey. They have a week-long road trip ahead of them, and yes, the Raiders have been doing great so far, but a week away from home is always draining. And it’s still relatively early in the season, so they’re not so far ahead that they can afford to let themselves slip.

The team heads to Chicago first, where they squeeze out a late victory, 3-2. Trying not to bother Ilya, who has said he has a super busy last day in Boston, Shane goes out with the guys to a bar and has a beer. Marleau has four, and Shane’s watching him on high alert, ready to intervene if Marleau lets the secret of Hickey Girl slip. Fortunately, Marleau doesn’t seem to be thinking about Shane at all. Instead, he gets into a stupid argument with Carmichael about whether unicorn frappucinos, last year’s big craze, actually have some ingredient called “unicorn” in them. Marleau is aware that unicorns do not, in fact, exist, but he believes that there is a substance, perhaps a type of sugar or a fruit, that is referred to as “unicorn.”

It’s weirdly a relief to see that Marleau’s brief bout of perceptiveness is over and he’s back to being his usual self. Shane ends up laughing so hard that he has to put his head on his arms,

folded on the table, while Connors is pulling up the Starbucks ingredients list on his phone and trying to show it to Marly.

After a late bedtime, Shane has to wake early for the flight to Colorado. He sends Ilya a quick "good luck" text in the morning; in the evening, when Shane is settling down alone in his hotel room, Ilya sends Shane a photo of his plain, sterile-looking new condo, with Anya curled up in her favorite circular dog bed in the middle of the floor. Shane and Ilya sext a little, but Ilya has to do some late-night grocery shopping to stock his fridge before the grind of practices starts up the next day, so it doesn't go farther than that.

The game the following day is rough, as in dirty and physical, and it ends in a loss. Shane comes back to the hotel and bruised purple on his leg thanks to a Colorado defenseman's stick. He and Ilya finally get to video call in the evening: Ilya's settling in well with the team, he says. Maybe after a couple of weeks he might even get some time on the ice.

When Ilya tells Shane to take his shirt off, it feels like love Shane's giving to him rather than phone sex that's about nothing more than orgasming. And when Ilya tells Shane he is gorgeous and sexy, the way Ilya says it feels like love too. Shane's on posters all over the USA and Canada, sometimes shirtless and sometimes in his underwear only. Either way, he's a commodity, the Shane Hollander brand. Taking his clothes off for Ilya is so utterly different.

The final leg of this road trip is in Washington, DC. Determined not to let the journey end in a slump, Shane does his best to re-invigorate the guys and gives his all on the ice. It's enough to get them a win in overtime.

That evening, Ilya is out bonding with his new team, so there's again no call, only a picture of Anya making friends with the Providence Raiders. Lonely in his hotel room, Shane gives in to a guilty impulse and searches Ilya's name on Twitter, mostly hoping for gifs of Ilya shirtless. He'll never tell Ilya that he likes seeing other people talk about Ilya's hotness while knowing that Ilya is his alone.

What Shane finds is not quite what he expected. The idea that Ilya is the first male professional hockey player to be "openly queer" when he signed, as many of the tweets put it, seems to have caught a lot of people's interest. It's different from coming out after years in the league and winning a Cup like Scott Hunter. Shane thought you weren't supposed to say *queer*, but that seems to not be the case?

Some people are arguing that being on a minor league team doesn't count as "professional." Some are arguing that being bisexual doesn't count as "queer." Some people are being blatantly homophobic in a way that turns Shane's stomach. And a surprisingly large number of people are asking each other how they can watch Providence Raiders games online so that they can support Ilya.

Like Shane, Ilya is becoming a symbol. Shane shouldn't have been so offline, that always bites him in the ass—Ilya's definitely been following all of this talk, learning how being a role model weighs on you. Shane knows that weight too well.

The idea that an influencer has turned professional has garnered interest too. It’s a Cinderella story, in a way.

In other words, there will be a lot of eyes on Ilya’s first game, whenever that comes. The stakes are high. And Shane almost certainly won’t be there; this is a battle Ilya will have to fight alone.

Chapter End Notes

Allston Christmas explanation: a lot of Boston leases start on September 1st and there are a lot of college students in Boston which means that a lot of furniture gets left on the curb on Moving Day because students don't want to pay to take stuff with them. A large number of students live in Allston, so a thrifty person can browse the curbside there around Moving Day and pick up furniture and other discarded items for free. Thus, Allston Christmas.

Had some writer's block with this chapter but I think I'm ultimately happy with how it came out! Also I'm definitely not finishing this in 3 more chapters, don't talk to me about the chapter count 😔

Also I have a little hanahaki with a twist fic going on, take a look at my profile to see!

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's the middle of December, getting close to Christmas. Ilya's only been with Providence for a week; as expected, they haven't sent him out on the ice during a game yet. It's only been practice, learning plays, finding out where he clicks on the team. Ilya usually plays center—of course he does—but they want him as right wing to start.

Shane really wants to drive down to see Ilya play and support him, if he can make it work at all with his schedule. Svetlana does too, Ilya says, so they make a group chat for planning purposes: Ilya and Svetlana and Shane—and Marleau, who has been messaging Ilya stupid memes, Ilya tells Shane proudly. Shane honestly is still a little surprised by how quickly Marleau and Ilya have become friends, but Ilya is a charming guy. He guesses it makes sense.

After a good home game against Montreal—poor Korogyi, he did his best but the Metros are a mess—Shane gets his phone from his cubby, as usual, and unlocks it to see a bunch of messages from Svetlana in their chat. A few are in Russian; the last English ones are:

Do it show them

YES Ilyusha!!!

YES!!!!

I told you!!

It's an adrenaline shock to Shane's body. He opens up Twitter and searches Ilya's name again—that has to be the fastest way to find out what happened, right? Did Ilya finally get to play?

Yes, he did. Shane scrolls down Twitter fast—the Providence Raiders were down four goals to zero and, obviously having given up on winning, sent out Ilya to get him some low-pressure time on ice.

The Providence Raiders' own account has a tweet with a video that won't load, which is infuriating, but the hashtags with it say enough: #IlyaRozanov #TwoMinutesTwoGoals.

"*Fuck* yeah!" Shane says to his phone, so light he could fly away. He knew Ilya is fucking amazing, he knew it, and Ilya *is*. Shane needs to see that video or he'll die. Then he needs to drive to Providence and ride Ilya till his thighs give out.

Marleau, a few cubbies away, says, "Hell yeah, fucking sweet!"

"Uh, you two want to share with the class?" St-Simon asks them curiously.

"Rozanov kicked ass in his first AHL game!" Marleau says, grinning and waving his phone.

Varkov grabs his own phone. Less than a minute later, he's saying, "Oh, is beautiful one-timer!"

A few guys cluster around Varkov, peering at his screen, and Shane's frozen for a minute—so proud of Ilya, so happy, and wanting so badly to boast about him instead of letting Varkov do it as a fellow Russian.

A foot away from Shane, Marleau's phone buzzes again. As soon as he reads whatever's on it, he throws his phone into his cubby, finishes stripping off his underpants, and rushes into the showers.

Are Marleau and Svetlana . . .? Shane will have to ask Ilya. Marleau is clearly busy.

Once he's at home, Shane manages to pull up a decent quality video of Ilya's goals. They're as beautiful as Varkov said. In the two minutes he played, Ilya completely stood out, though not in the way someone would expect. Despite the fact that he's new to the AHL, Ilya is simply so much better than his teammates or his opponents: faster, defter, more accurate, slipping through gaps in their defense as though he's using cheats in a video game. He truly looks like a major league player, a *good* one, who's playing for the farm team as some kind of stunt.

If only Ilya had stuck with hockey after BU. It's true he wasn't at this level then, but of course he was focusing on caring for his dad, so it makes sense. After his dad passed away, Ilya could have spent a year or so in Providence developing his skills and then joined Shane in Boston when he was maybe 23. How amazing it would have been to play with him all that time.

Are you home? Shane asks Ilya.

Out celebrating with the team, Ilya says. Shortly afterward, he sends a picture: himself surrounded by smiling guys, mostly several years younger than him, at what seems to be a restaurant or bar table.

I will be home at 11 if you want to call, Ilya says.

You know I do, Shane writes back.

He doesn't want to call, though. Ilya gave Shane a key to his condo specifically so that they could meet up more easily.

Shane eats dinner at home, reads his emails, agrees or disagrees to questions from his sponsors, the Raiders PR team, his agent, and his mom. He's going home for the winter break soon; his parents want to know when to expect him.

At nine, Shane has a long shower and packs an overnight bag. He'll have to get up at like five tomorrow; he doesn't care at all.

At ten, Shane gets in his car and puts Ilya's new address into his phone. I-93 and I-95 are pretty clear because it's so late, so Shane's Land Rover fits easily into the fast flow of traffic

curling around the city and then zooming southwest.

At almost exactly eleven, Shane pulls into the visitor spot at Ilya's condo complex. From a real estate point of view, it's nicer than Ilya's old place; rents are significantly lower in Providence, as Shane knows because he browsed property listings when Ilya was looking. At the same time, Shane misses that pride flag from Ilya's lesbian downstairs neighbors. It's not as pleasant to go into Ilya's condo while having no idea how the people living next door or below Ilya would feel about two guys dating. He has to hope that nobody will recognize him in the night with his toque on. There are no lights in the small parking lot.

Inside, the condo is small, tidy and still real-estate-listing plain, and unlit until Shane flicks a light switch on. The air smells of wood from the new Ikea furniture Ilya's been assembling.

It seems that Anya was asleep in the kitchen, near the front door: she wakes up, gives half a bark, catches Shane's scent and goes crazy with delight, jumping up on Shane's legs. Shane has to kneel down in the entryway and pet her, kissing the top of her soft head. Ilya has said he's wheedled his way into bringing Anya to the rink with him most days, and she's enchanted everyone there too.

As soon as Shane has calmed Anya down, there's the sound of a key in the front door, which sets her off again.

"Shane?" Ilya says, closing the door behind him. Shane was worried he'd be drunk, but his eyes are completely focused and alert. He's smiling the rare wide smile that Shane loves.

Shane stands. "Yeah, it's me."

Ilya murmurs something to Anya, crouches to scratch her ears, without averting his gaze from Shane at all. "You know it's only AHL goals. Not worth this kind of trip." He gives one long stroke along Anya's back and tells her something in Russian. She goes to her bed, where she was sleeping before.

"Shut up," Shane says.

Ilya raises his eyebrows. "Oh, the captain of the Boston Raiders is telling me to shut up? Who knew Shane Hollander is such an asshole."

"Oh my god." Shane is going to lose it. "Come here."

"No, I am the one who tells you when to come." Ilya walks over, takes Shane's chin the way he always does, and Shane melts into a kiss with him. He tastes spicy, like hot wings, maybe.

Ilya picks up Shane by his thighs and carries him into a bedroom Shane has never seen before. When he takes his shirt off, it's glorious. Shane missed him so fucking much and it hasn't even been that long.

"I need you," Shane says, burying his fingers in Ilya's curls.

"I'm here," Ilya says, pushing Shane back onto the bed, crawling over him. "Now tell me, what did you think of my goals?"

Shane's grinning. "Fuck you!"

"Ah, if you want me to fuck you you will need to tell me." Ilya's pushing down Shane's sweatpants, his hand lingering on Shane's hip rather than going where Shane wants it. "Tell me what you thought of my goals. Did you like them?" He squeezes a little meanly.

Shane's going blissfully light-headed. "They were amazing," he says. "Like you."

Ilya kisses him hard, and oh yes, the drive was worth it.

At midnight, they're curled up together, panting and sweaty, with Ilya's head on Shane's chest. Shane doesn't understand him sometimes. Ilya is impossibly perfect, exactly the perfect man for Shane. Every single thing about him drives Shane wild.

"What are you doing for Christmas?" Shane asks Ilya, leaving a soft kiss on his forehead.

"Not much. In Russia we mostly don't celebrate on the twenty-fifth. For me, growing up, New Year's Eve was the big holiday." Ilya yawns. "It's hard to explain. I will send you link in the morning."

"It's okay, I'll look it up." Shane clears his throat. He's going to Ottawa for Christmas, of course, that's not changeable. "I'm going up to be with my parents in Canada for Christmas. I'm coming back on the twenty-seventh. If you wanted to come to Boston after that, and stay with me in between your games maybe, we could do what Russians do on New Year's Eve."

In his arms, Ilya twists to look up at him. He's too close; Shane can't read his expression without his glasses, which he didn't think to bring with him. "You don't have plans with your friends for New Year's Eve?"

"We usually do, but I can skip it. They won't mind. I mean, Marleau and Hammer and Connors will complain but it'll be fine."

For a couple of seconds, Ilya doesn't say anything. A cold sweat starts on Shane's skin. Was something that he said wrong? Fucked up?

"Okay," Ilya says. "I will show you good Russian New Year's celebration. Maybe Svetlana can come over?"

"Yeah, of course. Not the whole time?"

"Yes, not the other days. I have lots of ideas that are for us only."

"Oh yeah?" Shane says.

Ilya wriggles upward and turns so that he's facing Shane, nose to nose. "Yes," he says, and then they're kissing again.

Chapter End Notes

Comments mean SO much to me, so thank so much to all my regular commenters, and if you haven't commented before, I would love to hear from you! ❤️

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Shane's 5 a.m. drive back to Boston, in the winter darkness and quiet before the rush hour starts on I-93 and I-95, he returns to an apartment that's . . . missing something. His penthouse has never felt inadequate before, but now there's an empty place where Anya's bed should be. And an empty seat at Shane's kitchen island where Ilya should be drinking his morning coffee and making horrible innuendos and generally being a pest.

God, Shane is so gone on him. It's a vulnerability he can't fight or disguise. He loves Ilya so completely, with all his heart, and the strength of that love after twenty-eight years of being miserably in the closet is terrifying sometimes. Two years ago, before Shane found Ilya on the internet and before Scott Hunter came out, Shane would never have been able to accept even being out to Marleau only. It was easier to suppress this side of himself when loving a guy was no more than an abstract idea. Ilya is so much more than Shane ever could have imagined. His hands, his kiss, his smile when he chirps Shane . . . Shane is either weaker or braver than he'd thought. Perhaps both.

Shane makes his breakfast, oatmeal with fresh blueberries and a mix of other stuff his nutritionist recommended, and eats it at his own chair at the kitchen island as he browses his phone.

The guys spent a while talking about Ilya's goals in the group chat last night. It's all positive, as far as Shane can tell. Any shit-talking about him is friendly—Shane's pretty certain—and Connors even suggested having the main Raiders account retweet the farm team's #TwoMinutesTwoGoals tweet. Nobody has said anything about Ilya's sexuality; they're mainly talking about how shocked they are that Ilya has the skills to back up all the criticism he dished out as an influencer.

The guys like Ilya. Some part of Shane, deep down, is envious. Shane doesn't have Ilya's capability with people.

At the same time, though, this friendly attitude is what Shane had deeply hoped for, so he can't be mad. Shane had some idea of his teammates' views on homosexuality, and he didn't *think* most of them were homophobic in a heartfelt way, beyond the usual comments you'd hear in any locker room—we fucked them, made them our bitches, don't be such a f—

Yeah. So this is good. They definitely all know that Ilya is bi, and they don't care. That's what Shane has always wanted: for his sexuality to be a non-issue.

That path won't be open for Shane, though, will it? If the great Shane Hollander came out as gay, he'd have to be a Queer Icon, probably. Is it bad that he feels resentful about that?

Shane finishes his oatmeal, rinses his bowl, and puts it in the dishwasher. He's not coming out any time soon, anyway. The Raiders have a real shot at the Cup again this year, and

Shane's not going to do anything to throw off their rhythm.

December rolls on, continuing its inevitable march to the winter break and the New Year. Ilya gets moved into fourth line center position, which he refuses to be excited about. "First line by the end of the season," he says to Shane on a video call.

Shane manages to drive down to Providence only once more before Christmas, in between his packed schedule of duties: tape to watch, conditioning, physical therapy for a mildly sprained elbow. At least he doesn't have to manage the endless treadmill of compulsory #sponsored #ad social posts on Shane's social media; he pays someone to do that for him.

He filmed a particular jewelry store commercial back in the summer, and now it's on TV a lot ahead of Christmas: Shane kneeling in front of a beautiful model, offering her a diamond ring. The guys tease Shane about that a lot: when is he going to lock Hickey Girl down? He could probably get a ring for free—it would be the ultimate advertisement in real life.

"We're not seeing each other any more," Shane says to them, a towel wrapped around his waist. He gestures to his torso, which is now free of any marks.

"I don't believe him," Carmichael says, pulling his socks on. "I think he just told her to stop chewing on him. I still see him smiling at his phone all the time."

"Fuck off," Shane says, though there's no bite behind it.

And then, abruptly, the games in Shane's calendar run out, and he's packing up his stuff to go to his parents' house in Ottawa. After his last game in Boston, Shane makes the drive to Providence, bringing with him some Christmas gifts. For Anya, a new brush, since Ilya said the old one broke, and several sets of gourmet treats.

For Ilya . . . Shane agonized over his gift for days. What object could be as good as Ilya deserved without being *too much*, too intense or weird on Shane's part?

In the end, Shane went to Copley Place and got Ilya a really good quality carry-on suitcase, since it was something he'd need now for work, and the one he was using at the moment was old and battered.

When Shane gives it to him—unwrapped, since it's large and Shane didn't see the point—Ilya seems appreciative. He teases Shane about it, of course, saying of course *Mr. Biggest Star in MLH* had to buy a designer bag.

"It doesn't have logos all over it or anything," Shane says.

Ilya kisses him. "Is very good gift. Thank you. I will remember you every time I use it."

That wasn't Shane's intention, but the idea of it immediately turns him on so much that Ilya almost doesn't get to give Shane his own gift.

Which is a flash drive. Shane stares at it until Ilya says, "I think you liked the workout video I did for you. So I recorded some more. So you don't miss me too much while you are in Canada."

Suddenly, the tiny object in Shane's hand holds infinite promise. "Shit, really?"

"Yes, really. What, you think I would lie to you?"

"Shut up." Shane kisses him hard. "I know you wouldn't." He just about remembers to put the flash drive safely on a shelf before he sinks to his knees in front of Ilya, doing what he won't be able to do while they're apart.

In the morning, they sleep in together for the very first time, waking up in the weak winter-morning sunlight and exchanging sleepy kisses until Ilya has to go take Anya out. By the time he's back, Shane has figured out Ilya's coffee maker and is waiting to warm Ilya up with his own warm arms. Ilya removes some kind of awful microwave breakfast sandwich from his freezer and heats it up; Shane chirps him for eating processed junk, which results in them play-wrestling until Anya intervenes in alarm, and then of course they have to both pet her and tell her she's a good girl.

It can't last forever. After getting satisfyingly fucked into Ilya's mattress and blown in Ilya's shower, Shane drives directly to Logan Airport, checking about ten times that the flash drive is safe in his jacket pocket before he boards his flight to Ottawa. Meanwhile, Ilya will be getting on his team bus soon for a game in Springfield, MA that evening.

It's always a little odd being back home. Shane's more famous in Ottawa than in his own city, which takes Shane by surprise every time. And he's lost his familiarity with the pattern of his parents' lives. He walks into the living room and finds a new couch, which isn't new to his parents because they bought it months ago.

Shane is deeply grateful that Christmas isn't a big deal for his family. He's been to Carmichael's house when every inch of it is decorated with bows and wreaths and fake holly, and he knows a lot of the guys on his team have huge family events with fifteen, twenty, thirty people, which sounds nightmarish.

When Shane was little, they used to have relatives over, he vaguely remembers. But by the time Shane was in high school, his grandparents had passed away and his only aunt had moved to France with her family. Since then, the holiday season has been low-key for the Hollanders. His parents usually attend a Christmas party or two at the homes of their friends, leaving Shane to play one of the MLH games or read a book or just go for a walk in the snow.

So Shane should be looking forward to this time. And he is. The stupid jewelry ad is still playing on the TV here though, making the room awkward when it comes on while Shane and his parents are watching the news together. And the image of Ilya, a double orphan, alone in his sterile new condo in a new city, is making Shane feel like shit. Ilya insisted that he was fine, said that most Russians don't even celebrate on the 25th—it's New Year's that's important for Ilya—but Shane still feels bad.

In the afternoon, Shane has to drive to Canadian Tire Centre for his last game before Christmas. The Centaurs pose basically no challenge, as usual; and then Shane is waving goodbye to his teammates as most of them head onto the bus taking them back to the airport

and subsequently the USA, while the Canadians on the team disperse in their own to go home.

Shane does try to watch one of Ilya's gift videos that first night he's in Ottawa. With his earbuds in, he looks at Ilya, beautiful and shirtless, sitting cross-legged and talking to the camera just for Shane, and has to turn the recording off. If Ilya was a girl, she'd be welcome here for Christmas rather than staying alone in Providence. If Ilya was Lily, his parents would be so thrilled, so pleased that their son had finally reached this next expected step in his path of life. Meet a beautiful girl. Settle down. Have kids.

It's at breakfast the next morning that all these feelings come to a head.

"Shane, you've been glued to your phone since you got here," his dad remarks, not unkindly.

"Oh. Sorry," Shane says, putting his phone in his pocket. He'd been looking at a picture of Anya from that morning's walk.

"Is it Svetlana?" his mom asks.

Shane fumbles his glass of orange juice, though he doesn't spill it. "What?" His mom watches all the content the Raiders social channels put out, so—

His mom shares a glance with his dad. "We watched the video where she and her friend got a tour of the Raiders training facility, and did the trivia contest. You seemed really happy, and she clearly loves hockey, so it would be a good match there. And you've been a little distracted lately . . ."

"My stats are great this season. So far," Shane says.

"Of course," his dad says. "We just thought maybe something was different."

Shane simply can't tell them that nothing is different. That couldn't be less true. And, as Ilya told him, he's a hopelessly bad liar.

"Honey, are you okay?" his mom asks him.

Chapter End Notes

Copley Place is a luxury indoor mall. Think Balenciaga, Gucci etc.

Urgh in the original posting of this chapter I forgot that in the previous chapter Shane already said he was coming back to Boston for NYE 😭😭😭 I'm sorry! It is changed now.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

> Hi all, when I first posted the previous chapter it said that Shane was returning to Boston after new year's, when previously I had said he was going to spend NYE with Ilya in Boston. Sorry! That's fixed now, and we are sticking with the original idea: Shane and Ilya already have plans to spend NYE together in Boston.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Is Shane okay? Yes, he's more okay than he's been in a long time: he's in a relationship that doesn't leave him prickling with discomfort, that often leaves him amazed by how lucky he is. And no, he's not fucking okay, being interrogated by his parents at what he thought was a normal breakfast just because he was—what, texting someone and looking happy?

"I'm fine," Shane says. The orange juice he just drank is acidic in his throat. "Svetlana, she's a friend. I, uh—can we talk later? I want to go for a run before it starts snowing."

His parents share a glance again. Shane sometimes really hates that. "Sure, of course," his mom says.

Shane changes into his running gear and heads out, phone in hand. Fifteen minutes later, in the park that's been his favorite running spot since his parents moved here during his teen years, he winds down to a jog and, finally, stops. In the afternoons, this place is often bustling with dog walkers and parents with toddlers, but at nine-thirty a.m., it's practically empty. The only other people Shane spots are a pair of runners, both wearing earbuds and looking intensely focused, at the other end of the park.

Perfect.

I think I might come out to my parents, Shane writes to Ilya, taking off his glove to tap his phone screen even though the glove is supposed to work with touchscreens. His skin stings from the cold wherever it's exposed. It's comforting; icy air means home, means hockey, means Boston and Ottawa for like half the year.

Are you alone? Ilya replies almost instantly. Usually this means Ilya is going to call him.

Yes.

Ilya does call; Shane answers.

"This is a big change for you," Ilya says, his tone questioning.

"Yeah." Shane huffs out a tense laugh.

“Do you not want to come out? Will they not be good about it?”

Shane walks away from the main path toward a bench that he’s never seen anyone using. Although there’s no-one nearby, he keeps his voice low anyway. “No, they’ll be fine. They’ll probably buy, like, books telling them how to support me.”

“But . . .” Ilya says softly.

“But I know it’s not what they’d choose for me if they could.” That knowledge is a knife in Shane’s ribs, one that’s been there for years.

And there’s nothing he can ever do to change how his mom and dad feel. They’d probably couch it in practical terms: *life would be so much easier. Trying for children would be less complicated*. And yes, that’s all true. Fuck, until he met Ilya Shane himself would have done anything if it could make him love a woman.

He wouldn’t now.

So his parents are going to find out sooner or later, aren’t they? When Shane is thirty, or forty. Or fifty. He wants that with Ilya—as many years as they can get. God, it’s crazy that they haven’t even known each other for that long, but when Shane pictures a happy future, Ilya is there.

“Shane? Did we get cut off?” Ilya is asking, his beautiful voice tinny through the phone line.

“No.” Shane rubs his face.

If he can’t avoid his parents’ questioning—and he definitely can’t—he can at least enjoy the good parts of being honest along with the bad. He doesn’t have to spend his precious break like this, hoarding scraps of Ilya’s time and traces of his presence until they’re separated by the schedules of their teams again.

“Look,” Shane says, buzzing with the same adrenaline he gets after he shoots and before the puck makes it into the goal—or the goaltender’s glove. “If I book a flight for you, can you come up and stay with me until the 27th? Then we can fly down to Boston together on the 27th and still do New Year’s with Svetlana.”

There’s a pause. “You mean I could stay in AirBnb? Or hotel?”

“No, at my parents’ place. Anya can come too, of course. I’ll tell them, and—if you were my girlfriend they’d invite you here, so—and if they’re not fine with it I’ll fly back to Boston today.” Shane’s pacing now, under the boughs of a huge, leafless oak.

“Shane, this is . . . a lot, very suddenly.”

Shane kicks an old, fallen pine cone on the frosty grass. “They were asking me what’s going on with me. Saying I'm acting different. I said we'd talk about it later. And if you knew my parents, you’d know they’re absolutely fucking not gonna let it drop. So I won’t get a choice. Either I lie or I come out. And I know I'm a shit liar.” Another kick. He’s literally getting

close to thirty, a captain in major league hockey, and as soon as he walks into his parents' house he feels like a teenager again in the worst way.

"But you don't have to come to Ottawa if you don't want," Shane adds, perhaps a beat too late.

"No. I will come," Ilya says.

Shane's heart soars. "Really?"

"Yes. I won't fly, though. Probably no tickets are available, and I won't put Anya in a cargo hold anyway." Ilya croons something soft in Russian, ending in *Anechka*; Anya must be in his lap or nearby. "So I will drive."

"No way. That's like . . . seven hours driving or something? Plus, you said Anya doesn't really like the car, right? I can get a shared charter flight. And don't argue and say it's too expensive. That's not a problem."

"Oh, don't argue? Just shut up and get on the plane?" Ilya says, and Shane can't tell whether he's play-acting offense for flirting purposes or whether he's truly offended.

"Ilya," says Shane. "Please? I don't want you to arrive here exhausted from driving all day, with a million stops to keep Anya happy." He's not sure whether he's asked Ilya for anything before, not like this. He's always hesitated, not wanting to demand more than Ilya is willing to give. Maybe it's a mistake asking now.

An exhalation. "Okay," Ilya says at last. "You can book me a flight out of Logan this afternoon. As long as Anya can stay in the cabin with me."

"All right. We can stop at McDonalds after I pick you up from the airport," Shane says, trying to extend an olive branch.

"Mm, this is not the type of bribery I am looking for." Ilya's voice sounds warmer.

Shane quickly scans the area around him again. Still empty. "Fine. A blow job every day you're here." It's a pretty worthless bribe, given that Shane both loves sucking Ilya's dick and would most likely do it every day anyway.

"It's a start," Ilya says flirtatiously. God, Shane needs him here right now.

After a brief discussion of logistics like documentation of Anya's rabies vaccine, and a promise from Ilya to email over his passport number within the hour, they say goodbye. "Anechka, you are going to see boring Canada!" Shane hears Ilya say distantly before the call ends.

Despite it all, Shane finds himself smiling.

He puts his glove back on, slips his phone into his pocket, starts walking again to warm up his muscles before he launches back into a run. When the foundation of Shane's world is growing unsteady, the burn of a good run is a familiar comfort.

An hour later, Shane is back at his parents' house. Sweaty, he rushes past his parents in the living room, saying that he's going to have a shower.

The shower only buys so much time, though. Shane towels off his hair, puts on one of the linen shirts his mom bought him—which is both too formal and not warm enough for December in Ottawa, but it feels right to wear somehow.

Dressed in the shirt and a pair of dark slacks, Shane makes his way downstairs again, holding the banister tight because he doesn't trust his legs. His parents' home with its nice wood floors and tasteful art has never been less real or normal to him. If this doesn't go well, Shane might never be able to look at oak flooring ever again.

Shane's mom and dad are in front of the TV, where they were when he came in from his run. His dad is reading *The Economist*; his mom is reading a magazine too, *Canadian Gardening*. Their home is decorated mostly in light, cool tones, with lots of cream and blue. Shane has always favored blue, too, maybe because it's supposed to be calming. That doesn't seem to be working now.

"Hey," Shane says. He takes a seat in the single armchair that's been "his" ever since they moved into this house when he was sixteen. Well, it was his during the summers. He has more memories of his billet family's house during his time in juniors.

"Hi, Shane," his dad says, and both of his parents put their magazines down like actors in a play.

Shane takes a deep, shaky breath. He's looked up a lot of scripts for coming out to your parents, both in the past and after his shower just now. He was mortified just reading them; he couldn't imagine saying those words out loud. So he's just going to have to do his best on his own.

"I *have* started dating someone," Shane says. "But it's not Svetlana. It's, uh. A guy." There it is. No going back now.

"Thank you for telling us. We support you," his mom says, almost too quickly. "And we love you no matter what. You know that, right?" Her voice loses its steadiness as she speaks.

The area rug under the couch and armchair has a gray and navy pattern. Shane has never really looked at it before. His vision is narrowing a little. He cannot let himself pass out, that would be ridiculous. "Yeah, for sure," he says.

"We're so proud of you, Shane," Shane's dad says. His dad means well, of course, and in his rational mind Shane knows that and is happy to hear it, but a less reasonable part of Shane is angry. He doesn't *want* this to be a conversation anyone would be proud of, a conversation that could ruin his fucking life if the wrong person overheard. He wants it to be *no big deal*.

"So," his dad says, filling the silence. Belatedly, Shane realizes he was supposed to thank his parents or something. For not being homophobic? "Will you tell us about him?"

Oh, God. "Uh. It's, uh. Svetlana's friend? Ilya Rozanov."

“Oh! The influencer who just signed with Providence?” Shane’s mom says. “I saw some clips of him in AHL games on Twitter. It’s wild that he’s never played professionally before.”

For the first time, Shane looks up. “Yeah,” he says. “Ilya’s really good. He played for BU, but he was taking care of his dad at the time—his dad was really sick from cancer—so Ilya got cut from the team.”

Both of his parents make sympathetic sounds, and they seem sincere about it. That’s good, right?

“So Ilya is the reason you’ve been looking so happy,” Shane’s dad says gently. “That’s great.”

“I guess so.” Shane takes his phone from his pocket, turns it over in his hands. “Did you know that he’s an orphan? Twice. As in, his parents in Russia died and then his parents in the USA also. Passed away.”

“Jeez,” Shane’s dad says. “Poor guy.”

His mom nods. “That’s awful.”

Shane licks his lips. “Yeah. So he doesn’t have anyone to go to for Christmas.” He doesn’t try to explain the details of how Russians celebrate Christmas; that’s too complicated to put into words right now.

His mom raises her eyebrows. “You want him to come stay with us?”

“If he was a girl, you would invite him, wouldn’t you?” Shane says.

“No, that’s not—” she says, her expression twisting.

“Of course he’s welcome here,” Shane’s dad says.

Fuck, his mom is tearing up and taking Shane’s hands. “I—we—don’t want you to think it’s any different from if he was a woman. We’re so happy you’re happy. I’m sorry if—we didn’t make that clear before. If you didn’t feel safe telling us.” A tear rolls down her cheek. “We love you.”

Shane made his mom *cry*. “I’m sorry,” he says desperately. “Because I was trying not to—I really did try.” He tried harder than he’s tried at anything in his life. Trying to be straight might be the only thing he’s completely failed at.

Shane’s dad gets up and sits on the arm of his chair to rub Shane’s back. Shane takes his hands out of his mom’s, only so that he can wipe his own tears away.

“You have *nothing* to apologize for,” his mom says.

But he does. He *did* lie to them. He’s hurt them now.

“We want to meet Ilya,” his dad says after a few moments. “I think your mother meant we’re surprised because you’ve never mentioned bringing anyone else you’re dating here for the holidays, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” Shane says. *That’s the point*. It’s only with Ilya that he wants more and more.

“Right.” Shane’s mom sniffs and straightens her shoulders. “When do you want Ilya to come? Does he need anything special to eat?”

“Uh, later today? Oh, and he doesn’t have a special diet or anything, but he needs to bring his dog. We still have some of Kelly’s stuff, don’t we?” Kelly was the big golden retriever his parents had when Shane was little. She died when Shane was eight, and his mom and dad never got another dog after her. It was too hard, losing a good dog that they had loved so much.

“Yeah, we still have, I think, Kelly’s old dishes, and we can go to the store and get anything else Ilya’s dog needs,” Shane’s dad says.

Shane turns on his phone and flicks through his photos, extremely grateful that he keeps all of Ilya’s not-safe-for-parents pictures in a locked folder. “She’s a nice dog. See?” He hands his phone to his parents to show them one of his favorite photos of Anya.

They love it—of course they do. Anya is the sweetest dog ever.

Shane’s phone vibrates: it’s a message from Ilya with his passport number.

Ilya is coming to Shane’s parents’ house. He’s going to meet Shane’s parents and then they’re going to have whole days living together.

Shane looks at the number on his screen—another piece of Ilya, so freely given—and thinks his heart might burst.

Chapter End Notes

The AO3 curse has definitely descended on my house and we are dealing with some medical problems and scary tests, so I hope you can forgive my continuity snafu 🥲 there's a lot on my mind

As a note, of course Shane's views are not my views, this is just his POV and he's not at 100% self-acceptance yet

Hope you enjoyed this chapter ❤️❤️❤️

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rest of the morning before Ilya comes to Ottawa is . . . weird.

At one point, Shane is heading into his bedroom and passes by his dad, who's holding a heap of bedding in his arms. His father goes down the hall and turns into the guest room, at which point Shane follows him and says, "Dad?"

"Yeah?" his dad says, turning to look at Shane with the same affectionate attention he's always given Shane. Shane's been the center of his parents' worlds for his whole life. He didn't ask to be. Or, well, maybe he did by telling them he wanted to be a professional hockey player.

"Uh, you know Ilya's staying in my room, right?" Shane says. He can't and won't sleep in a separate bed from Ilya. He'll go to a hotel if he has to.

"Oh," his dad says, looking at the guest bed as though it's appeared out of nowhere. "Sorry! Of course. I was just thinking—the last time you had a guest over for Christmas was Jason, and he slept here, so . . ."

It's nothing like when Jason stayed here. Shane doesn't even need to say that, it's so obvious. Jason was a friend, a teammate whose parents were going through a rough divorce and who needed a safe place to stay for the holidays before he went back to his billet family. A friend whom yes, maybe, in retrospect, Shane had been a little bit in love with. But Shane hadn't known that at the time. Jason certainly hadn't.

While Shane's mom is laser-sharp-focused, his dad tends to have his head in the clouds, so it's not unusual for him thoughtlessly to do something that doesn't really make sense. And Shane's made this type of mistake too: assuming that the correct action in one situation is the correct one in another situation that's similar.

"No worries," Shane says, smiling.

But Shane wonders. Whether some part of David Hollander, maybe a part he wasn't aware of, was uncomfortable with the idea of a man sharing his son's bed. When Shane's parents visited Boston for that charity event and Shane's girlfriend at the time stayed over at his place too, his mom and dad had no problem with Laura sleeping in Shane's room.

While Shane's dad spends the rest of the morning tidying their already-tidy house, Shane's mom is glued to her phone, watching Ilya's videos. During lunch, she says, "So Ilya is—bisexual?"

That barely noticeable pause before *bisexual*. In all honesty, the word still doesn't come naturally to Shane either.

“Yeah,” Shane says. She might be asking about Shane’s own sexuality, which he is absolutely not going to talk about. Or she might be asking—

“It doesn’t mean he’s, like . . . unfaithful,” Shane says, cringing at himself as he says *unfaithful*. All the other descriptors that came to mind, the words he hears in the locker room all the time, aren’t exactly ones he can say around his parents.

“No, of course not!” his mom says.

And again, there’s that oh-so-slight jab of doubt: the shitty *not knowing* that Shane’s already too familiar with. A little comment that might be totally benign, but he’ll always wonder what exactly they meant and what they were really thinking. The reporters who call Shane *polite*. The writer who said that Shane’s *not a powerhouse like Lemaire*. Shane’s the top fucking scorer in the league and has been for the past five years, how the fuck is he not a powerhouse?

Shane nods and cuts into his salmon.

The afternoon comes, and with it a text from Ilya asking whether Shane’s parents drink whiskey.

Sure, sometimes, Shane writes back. *They actually prefer vodka, though.* He thinks. *Are you buying something in duty free?*

There’s no reply until fifteen minutes later, when Ilya replies, *I did. Boarding now* 😘

Shane sends back his own ❤️ quickly, so Ilya can see it before he turns his phone off. Sometimes Shane wonders how he survived so many years without getting kissy-face emojis from Ilya every day. Seems impossible.

The drive to the airport isn’t too bad, although the traffic is obviously getting worse as more and more people make the trek home for the holidays. It’s bitterly cold, though, especially when Shane is idling his car in the parking lot with nothing to do but watch Ilya’s location dot as it comes closer and closer.

And then Ilya’s outside Shane’s car, smiling at him with a face reddened by winter air. Ilya ushers Anya into the back seat; she starts yipping and wriggling with joy as soon as she realizes Shane’s in the car, so Shane has to pet her soothingly while Ilya clips her harness somehow into the seatbelt.

They’ve agreed they won’t do anything romantic in the car. If they’re spotted together, the story is that Ilya is a sad orphan who was invited home for the holidays by the generous Raiders captain.

Shane hopes they aren’t seen, regardless. But it’s hard to worry as much when Ilya gets into the car, all wrapped up in his winter outerwear, with a few curls peeking out of his hat.

“How was the drive here?” Ilya asks, buckling his own seatbelt.

“Good,” Shane says, reversing out of his parking spot. He wants to touch Ilya so bad. “How was the flight?”

“Also good. Only a couple other people on there. Anya fell in love with an old guy who walked past us. He was petting her for like half an hour.” Ilya casts a warm glance toward the back seat.

“That’s good,” Shane says. For a few minutes, he has to focus on getting out of the chaos of the airport. Once they’re safely on the road, he says, “I’m happy you’re here.” It’s important that Ilya knows that. Although today might be a little awkward, given that his parents only found out that Shane had a boyfriend yesterday, it’s worth it.

“I’m happy too,” Ilya says. He puts his hand on Shane’s, over the gearstick.

Yeah, it’s worth it.

“Even if this place is fucking freezing,” Ilya adds.

Shane turns up the heat in the car. “Come on, it’s not that much colder than Boston.”

“I will need you to warm me up when we get to your house,” says Ilya suggestively. “Though maybe not right away. I should take Anya for a walk, I think.”

“I hate being a celebrity in Canada,” Shane says. “In Boston, people don’t stare at me as much. I’d be able to pull into a side street somewhere and . . .”

“Oh, and?” Ilya asks suggestively.

Flicking the indicator on, Shane says, “Take Anya for a walk. What did you think I was gonna say?”

Ilya laughs. “I think I remember a promise you made me. Don’t tell me you forgot?”

“I didn’t forget,” says Shane. He’s been thinking about getting his mouth on Ilya's dick since yesterday.

It’s strange to realize that they’ve never actually been in a car together before. They’ve only been driving in and out of each other’s lives.

When Shane pulls into his parents’ garage, the Ilya who gets out of the car seems like a different person. He’s holding himself differently, not loose-limbed as usual, but straight-backed, with his arms close to his sides. Ilya puts his backpack on and holds his duty-free gift bag in one hand and Anya’s leash in the other; Shane wheels Ilya’s carry-on luggage, going in first, showing Ilya through the mud room. Shane’s trying to keep it together, since Ilya is in the more awkward position here. It’s not easy. But when Shane hangs up Ilya’s hat and scarf on their hooks next to his parents’ coats and Shane’s . . . their home is complete in a way it’s never been before. Ilya belongs here next to the other people Shane loves most.

Ilya’s wearing a plaid flannel shirt, open over a navy t-shirt, and jeans. It’s unusual for him: usually he’s in athletic wear, and then when they went to dinner he had that red patterned

button-down that was more dressy.

“You look good,” Shane tells him in a low voice. God, if only they were at home in Shane or Ilya’s place, Ilya could push him against a wall right now. “You dressed Canadian for me?”

“I dressed boring for you,” Ilya murmurs, stepping closer into Shane’s space. He taps his finger on Shane’s chest; Shane looks down to see that he himself is, indeed, wearing a plaid flannel shirt also. His is in blues and grays, unlike Ilya’s rust-colored one, or else they’d be unbearably matching.

“Oh, fuck off,” Shane whispers. He glances toward the door to the rest of the house—it’s still closed—and then they’re kissing. He’s missed Ilya’s kisses so badly.

They part and both take deep breaths, trying to relax and get back into meet-the-parents mode. “Good?” Shane asks Ilya.

With a brisk nod, Ilya says, “Fine.” He pushes his shoulders back again, standing upright the way photographers always tell Shane to stand in photoshoots.

Shane’s parents are watching a movie in the living room. As Shane and Ilya come in, Anya’s dancing on her leash, excited, furiously wagging her tail. Quickly, Ilya crouches and speaks softly to Anya in Russian, and, miracle of miracles, she sits, looking imploringly up at Shane and Ilya.

“Mom, dad, this is Ilya,” Shane says with a tongue that feels thick in his mouth. “And Anya.” He didn’t completely realize until this moment how badly he wanted them all to like one another; she’s not sure whether they do. Or will.

“It’s so lovely to have you,” his mom says. She shakes Ilya’s hand. Is that normal? Oh, fuck.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Ilya says. He shakes Shane’s dad’s hand, too, and then holds out the gift bag. “Shane told me that you like vodka.”

Smiling, Shane’s mom says, “We do.”

His dad takes the bag and slides out the bottle inside. “This is good vodka! Thank you, Ilya. We’ll have to have a drink together tonight.”

“Yes. I would like that. Thank you,” Ilya says.

“Can we say hi to Anya?” Shane’s mom asks him.

“Oh, yes. She is very good girl. Her biggest fault is that she is too friendly. I think if I was robbed she would kiss the robbers while they took my TV.”

Both of Shane’s parents laugh at this; some of Shane’s stress ebbs away. Thank fuck for Anya’s cuteness and Ilya’s famous charisma. Shane still hasn’t totally figured out how he got the whole of the Boston Raiders team to be his fans.

Shane's mom crouches to greet Anya, stroking her ears. "Hello, Anya," she says in a soft voice. Anya licks her face, and Shane's mom doesn't even really try to dodge it.

"Do you want anything to drink? Water, coffee, or we might have some orange juice left?" Shane's dad says to Ilya.

"Ah, no, thank you. I will take Anya for a walk soon," Ilya says.

"That's a good idea, after the plane ride," says Shane's mom.

It's all pretty much . . . normal. Shane sinks down into the armchair, leaving Ilya's carry-on leaning against its side. This might be okay. They're getting along. His head's still swimming with stress, but . . . the worst part is over. Hopefully.

As promised, Ilya does go out almost immediately, giving Anya the exercise she deserves after the long plane ride. After he's gone, Shane's parents look at him. They're pleased? Maybe?

"He's cute," Shane's mom says archly. "Anya too."

"Oh my god." Shane covers his face.

"I hope she likes the food we got her," Shane's dad says. "Shane, you think Ilya really won't care that we're not having turkey on Christmas?"

"I looked up holiday celebrations in Russia," his mom says. "For New Year's, they eat a lot of fish."

Shane has to escape up to his room and lie on his back on his bed, staring at the ceiling, for a while. His eyes are stinging.

This is how Ilya finds Shane when he returns from his walk with Anya. Ilya's standing in Shane's doorway in his socked feet, wearing his flannel shirt, with his curls a little mussed from his hat and cheeks pink from the cold again.

"You okay?" Ilya comes in, closing the door behind him.

"Fine," Shane says. "Waiting for you. You took so long. Wait, were you smoking?"

"No, I have patches," Ilya says, baring his arm to show one. "You don't have to tell me not to be guy who makes your family's house stink of smoke. Why, you miss me?"

For some reason, this makes Shane's heart hurt with love. Ilya got nicotine patches for him.

"Yeah, I missed you," Shane says.

"Mm. I can fix that." Ilya clambers onto the bed, lowering his winter-chilled, heavy body over Shane's, and kisses him.

Shane’s mind goes blissfully blank. After a few minutes of deep, perfect kisses, he scrapes together enough awareness to say, “We can’t do it here, my parents might hear.”

“This is why I told them I’m going to have a shower. To get clean from the plane,” Ilya says, his lips almost touching Shane’s.

“Oh.” Shane runs his hands through Ilya’s hair again. It’s a sensation he’s becoming addicted to. “Fuck, yeah.” He can blow Ilya in the shower. He’s needed Ilya in his mouth so bad for days now.

Ilya kisses him again. They’ll get up to go shower in a few minutes. But they have time now to do this first. For once, there’s no practice to run to or flight to make. It’s just Shane and Ilya, together, in bliss.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone for your kind words after the last chapter 😭❤️❤️❤️ I'm sorry I haven't been able to respond to most comments but I absolutely do read and appreciate every one!

I've upped the chapter count again but we all know it might go up more later . . . don't worry, I promise that this fic will have a proper end, questions will be answered, and there won't be a cliffhanger or anything like that! ❤️

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At dinner that evening, Ilya looks happy, Shane thinks. And at the same time, for some reason, slightly sad. It can't be the conversation, which is mostly basic stuff: how do you like Boston, when did you start playing hockey, what did you study at BU? (A Bachelor of Science in Health Studies, Shane learns. It's the precursor to a physical therapy degree Ilya never pursued.)

In bed that night, when Ilya's resting his head on Shane's shoulder, Shane asks him: "Do you miss your family?" As soon as he says it, he realizes that it's a stupid question. Surely Ilya does.

"Yes and no," Ilya says. "I don't have many happy memories of Russia. And in America—I don't really remember."

Hurting for Ilya's sake, Shane cards his fingers through Ilya's hair. "I hope you can make some happy memories this Christmas."

Ilya breathes out a rough exhalation. Shane leans down to kiss his forehead. He doesn't know what to say to make it better, but Ilya always seems to be comforted by touch. So they fall asleep that way, with Ilya half sprawled over Shane—a warm, Ilya-scented weight that keeps Shane deeply asleep until morning.

Shane is awoken at six by Ilya slipping out of bed, murmuring in a mix of English and Russian to Anya—he's taking her for her walk.

Shane usually gets up around this time anyway, so he decides to sit up against the headboard and scroll through the messages he was ignoring yesterday. Rose wants updates about how Ilya's introduction to Shane's parents went; Marleau, who's home partying with childhood friends in Montreal, has left Shane a drunk-off-his-ass voicemail about how much he loves the Raiders and his captain; the Raiders group chat is full of chirping mixed with photos of people's immaculately decorated houses and big plates of food.

Then Ilya comes back and flops annoyingly onto the bed, making the mattress bounce, and the day is totally perfect. Just for a moment, the world's eyes aren't on Shane, and Ilya is here kissing down Shane's neck.

"If you give me a hickey in my parents' house I'll kill you," Shane informs him.

In response, Ilya dives under the bedcovers. Shane's not sure what he's doing until Ilya has pushed up Shane's pajama pants uncomfortably high so that he can suck a hickey into Shane's inner thigh instead.

The only thing for Shane to do is to pull the duvet over his head, too, and meet Ilya in this hot, stuffy, private world that's all theirs for now. No cameras, no commentators, no social media, no fans. Only Ilya's warm skin under Shane's hands and his lips against Shane's.

During breakfast, reality intrudes a little more.

"I've watched some of your games with Providence," Shane's mom says. "I can see you getting called up to play for Boston." They're all eating oatmeal with blueberries, the usual breakfast in the Hollander home. The air smells of coffee. Anya is under the table, not begging for scraps—oatmeal has no appeal for her—but wanting to be as close to all of her favorite people, new and old, as possible.

"Thank you," Ilya says. "Yes, I hope so."

"What will you do if they want you in Boston?" Shane's mom asks.

"Ah. I will probably sign a contract, whatever one they offer me." Ilya sounds hesitant. Maybe he didn't understand the question; Shane didn't really either.

"Are you going to tell the team that you're—together?" Shane's dad asks, or maybe clarifies.

"No. I mean, not now," Shane answers for Ilya. "There's, uh. Marleau knows. He has something with Svetlana, Ilya's friend, so."

"But we trust him," Ilya adds.

"Well, I think you'll end up playing for Boston sooner rather than later, Ilya," Shane's mom says, matter-of-fact. "I hope you're ready to support Shane when that happens."

"Mom," says Shane.

Shane's dad adds another spoonful of honey to his oatmeal. "It's something to keep in mind, Shane. It can be hard, working together as a couple. I've seen that in my office. Especially if one of you is at a higher level."

"I know," Ilya says, unusually serious. "Shane and hockey are very important to me. I will do my best for both of them."

Under the table, Shane reaches for Ilya's hand and holds it. "Ilya's important to me too." It's the first time Shane's said this much. He wants to say a lot more. "You already know how I feel about hockey, I guess."

That brings brief laughter from all around the table, cutting the tension.

"So, uh, you guys are going to Denise and Fred's party tonight? That's my mom's best friend and her husband," Shane adds for Ilya's benefit. It's not the most subtle way he's ever changed the subject.

"Yes. You boys will have the place to yourselves for the evening," Ilya's dad says.

Shane clears his throat and scrapes another trace of oatmeal from his bowl. How could he forget?

After they load up the dishwasher with the breakfast dishes, Shane leads Ilya and Anya down into the den, which is what his family calls their finished basement. It kind of is Shane's den, his underground burrow: couch, TV, and gaming setup on one side of the room, and home gym on the other. All still decorated in the pale shades his parents favor rather than the rich tones of Shane's penthouse.

Neither Shane nor Ilya can afford to slack on their strength, flexibility, and cardio routines. After a few days off the ice, Shane's feet always get an aching, longing feeling in them. His muscles miss the motions of skating.

It's nice, anyway, to be working hard on the rowing machine while Ilya is running on the treadmill nearby, and vice versa. They shower in the downstairs shower—which is too small for both of them at the same time, to their regret—and then, full of post-workout endorphins, settle in on the couch for a session of playing MLH15. Another slice of a perfect day.

"All right," Shane says, turning on his Xbox excitedly. "Prepare to learn, young padawan." Anya settles on his feet with a sigh.

Ilya bursts into delighted laughter. "Since when are you fan of Star Wars?"

"It's what Connors always says, fuck off." Shane elbows Ilya as he loads the game. If he plays his cards right, maybe he can get Ilya to wrestle with him, pin him down on the couch.

Grinning, Ilya leans way too close to Shane's face. "Do you know what a padawan is?"

Shane grabs the game disc case and holds it up. "I know who *this* is," he says. He glances at it, and—

MLH15 has always had Shane on its cover. Right? So why—

Why did he expect to see Ilya?

"Shane, are you okay?" Ilya's touching his shoulder.

Shane's still staring at the case. His memory—or the image in his mind—of Ilya on the cover, in Boston Raiders gear, was so vivid. That's insane. That's fucking nuts. "Yeah, no, I just. Uh. I'm gonna kick your ass. Hope you're prepared."

"Dream on, Hollander," Ilya says. His brow is still a little furrowed as he picks up his controller. "I'm going to be a Raider."

Everyone keeps saying that. Shane's mom, Marleau, plenty more of the guys in the group chat. Everyone seems to have the same feeling: that Ilya belongs on the Boston Raiders. Isn't that weird?

As Shane flips through the teams on the screen, looking for a different one, he pauses on the Metros. If Ilya's a Raider, then it would . . . make sense for Shane to be a Metro?

No, he hates the Metros. What is he thinking?

Shane picks San Francisco instead.

For a while, he can't focus on the game, too disturbed by whatever just happened in his own brain. But eventually, the happiness of kicking back and wasting time with Ilya, chirping him as they end up pretty evenly matched, washes away most of Shane's worries. His imagining Ilya on the cover of the game was just wishful thinking, that's all. And yeah, the Metros are the Raiders' main rivals, so it would make sense theoretically for Shane to pick them as an opposing team.

By five, Shane is full of anticipation and low-level arousal at the prospect of having the house to themselves all evening while his parents are away. Shane and Ilya are both on their phones on the den couch together, touching toes, with Anya in a huge lump on Ilya's lap, being kissed and doted on by Ilya. In between showering affection on his dog, Ilya is arguing with Marleau about random bullshit in the chat with him, Svetlana, and Shane—kind of like a workout for Ilya's ragebaiting muscles. It's cute.

Shane wants this. Fuck, he would give almost anything to have Ilya move into his apartment and do this every night.

"It's five. I should take Anya for a walk," Ilya says, putting his phone in his pocket. Clearly understanding "walk," she hops down and trots up the stairs, her tail wagging. "Your parents are leaving at six, yes?"

"Yeah," Shane says. "I guess I'll go upstairs in a little while."

Ilya types some more on his phone, and Shane thinks it's the same argument with Marly until Ilya's message pops up in their individual chat: *Wear your Canada jacket from 2014 Olympics. You still have it?*

"It's a fleece, and fine, but I don't want to get come on it," Shane says. "I like that fleece."

"Okay. All my come will be inside your mouth or condom," Ilya says. "You will have to try hard not to make mistake and come on it yourself."

"Go to hell," Shane says. Before Ilya can make his own retort, Shane gets up off the couch and kisses him.

"Mm," Ilya says after a while. He caresses the side of Shane's face. "Go. I want to be fucking you whole time your parents are gone."

"That's literally impossible," Shane says. He can't say more because he has to focus on calming down his body before he goes upstairs, and he can't do that while he's looking at Ilya sprawled over the couch, head leaned back over the arm of it, smirking at him upside-down.

Shane's parents are just heading out the door while Shane passes by; Shane spends a little time upstairs in his en suite, taking a quick shower and making sure he's ready to, hopefully,

be fucked into whatever surface Ilya chooses.

He gets dressed again in his usual black boxer briefs and then pauses. Ilya didn't specify what else Shane was supposed to wear.

So Shane digs in his closet and pulls on the fleece. And nothing else.

By this point, Ilya's location marker on Shane's phone is slowly making its way back to the Hollanders' house. Shane wouldn't put it past him to be slow on purpose specifically to leave Shane frustrated.

I'm getting started without you, Shane texts him, reclining against the pillows on his bed by the light of his bedside lamp. Shane doesn't want to actually jerk off to completion before Ilya even gets here, so he doesn't open up the Ilya dick pic/thirst trap folder on his phone. Instead, he opens his folder of favorite gifs taken from Twitter. It's a feast of Ilya shirtless on Instagram, plus a few shots of that perfect one-timer from Ilya's first AHL game.

Slowly, teasingly, Shane slips his hand under his waistband and starts touching himself.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so so much to everyone who recced this fic!! 😭❤️❤️❤️

I've tried hard to depict Yuna in a thoughtful, complex way in this fic, insofar as that's possible given her brief appearances. I think she is aware of the higher standards her son is held to vs white guys, and it's not wrong of her to want to communicate frankly with his partner about how they'll handle working together, given that she is also involved in Shane's professional career. So I hope that came across.

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This bedroom is Shane's, technically, but there's not much of him there. His parents moved to this place when he was in his later teens and already giving most of himself to hockey. He stayed with a billet family because it was a rite of passage, because it was the normal thing to do.

So his mementos and trophies are mostly in his apartment in Boston. No decade-old posters of idols are taped on the walls; instead, framed photographs of himself with his parents and his teams are hung there. The bedsheets are a plain pale blue shade he didn't choose, although he doesn't mind it.

Now there's Ilya's hoodie on the back of his desk chair, Ilya's curl cream on the dresser next to the mirror, Ilya's charger plugged in on the other side of the bed. The scent of Ilya's body wash and shampoo on the pillow at Shane's hip. Shane resists the urge to bury his face in it, instead flipping between watching his gifs of Ilya and watching the little dot that is Ilya move rapidly closer down the street toward home.

Fuck, Ilya's puck handling, his speed, his deep edges are all so beautiful. He has the skill of knowing where his opponents will be in five, ten, fifteen seconds' time. And those goals: they'd be considered impressive in any MLH game.

So the gifs of Ilya's thirst trap videos, his sweaty weightlifting and rowing, are all the better because his strength is *real*. It has a purpose.

Shane's getting fully hard now, and he has to bite his lip to stop himself from reaching for the lube he's left out on the nightstand and start stroking his dick for real. But he doesn't want to take off his boxer briefs. He wants Ilya to do that.

The click of the lock downstairs, the rattling of Anya's collar as she shakes her head after having her leash removed. The tap-tap of dog feet going further into the house.

A low murmur in Russian. Shane has to take a steadying breath.

Socked human footsteps coming up the stairs. Opening the door.

Shane can't play it cool: he smiles as Ilya takes him in, wide-eyed.

"Fuck, Hollander." Ilya pulls his flannel button-up and his t-shirt over his head in one smooth movement and crawls over the bed in only his jeans. "Look at you." Kneeling in front of Shane, with Shane's thighs between his legs, he strokes Shane's cheek before capturing his mouth in a kiss that's softer than Shane expected. "You're greedy. Could not wait for me."

Shane goes light-headed. "You took too long," he says.

With a sure grip, Ilya pulls Shane's hand out of his underwear. "No, no more. This is only for me." Ilya is whispering in Shane's ear now, his other hand running up and down Shane's side under the fleece. "You are only for me. So pretty in your nice Canadian fleece. They don't know you are like this, not only winning medals in hockey."

"What?" Shane's holding Ilya's waist, almost too turned on to think. Ilya is naturally a master of touch. His hands are deft, never too rough and never too hesitant either. "What else do I have medals in?"

"So many things," Ilya says, kissing the corner of Shane's mouth tantalizingly. "Being needy. Nobody is needier than you, too impatient for me even to walk down the street. Gold medal." His hand fucking finally slips into Shane's underwear, but it's only to grab Shane's ass, hard enough to bruise. "Taking me deep, gold in this too, nobody loves being fucked more than you. But in sucking dick, you only get silver medal. You know why? Because I am the b—"

"You are such a fucking asshole," Shane says, burying his fingers in Ilya's hair, pulling him hard into another kiss. And that's exactly why Shane is starting to drift away, floating to that place where he doesn't care about anything but Ilya's body and Ilya's voice. "Come on," he says. He's fucking hard and Ilya's so close, yet—

"Oh yes," Ilya says. "You should have one more medal, I think. A gold medal in begging me for my dick." One of his fingers makes its way to Shane's asshole, touching there thoughtfully.

Shane makes a sound, only a small one.

"Show me," Ilya says in a low voice.

"Please." Shane swallows. "Please fuck me."

Ilya raises his eyebrows. "You think that is a gold medal performance?" He slides his hand out of Shane's underpants to unzip his own jeans, maybe giving relief to his erection that's still in his own briefs. "Show me," he murmurs again, dragging a kiss against Shane's cheek, and a shiver runs through Shane from head to toe.

Two points of contact with Ilya, his lips and Ilya's weight on Shane's thighs—he's overwhelmed by Ilya, Ilya's only focus. Ilya's hard too, only a few inches closer and they'd be touching—

"Please. Please fuck me, I need it, your dick in me, I need it now," Shane pants.

"Mm, getting closer to podium," Ilya murmurs into Shane's neck.

"Please! I need you to fuck me." Getting himself worked up ahead of time has left him desperately hard and aching, and Ilya's not even *trying*—"Please, Ilya, please fuck me! I need you in me." No, that's not totally it. The heart of Shane's need, the barest truth is: "I need you."

For a second, the world tilts. But then Ilya is grabbing his chin, tilting Shane's head to kiss him, and everything is right again.

"See, gold medal," Ilya says in a rough voice, pressing a thumb over Shane's lips, where it's welcomed in briefly. "Beautiful. Perfect."

"You too," Shane says as soon as his mouth is free. Through his fraying thoughts Shane needs Ilya to know: "You're perfect too."

In the lamplight, Shane thinks he sees Ilya's eyes gleam. "Take these off," he says, pulling at the waistband of Shane's underpants, and then a soft Russian word Shane doesn't know.

So Shane is wearing only his fleece and nothing else when he follows Ilya's orders after that: *move down the bed. Touch your chest while I take off my pants. Put this pillow under your hips*. Unzipped, the fleece falls to Shane's sides as Ilya sucks him off, working slick, clever fingers into him and holding him down when his hips buck.

Ilya swallows Shane's come, grins, flushed with exertion, and says, "Was I right?"

He doesn't complain, though, when Shane doesn't have words to answer. Shane just reaches for him, and Ilya moves closer, kissing Shane, rubbing a soothing, rough hand over his thigh. Pressing into him, fucking him slow and tender, kissing him in little dots, like speckles of snow.

Afterward, when they're cleaned up, Shane says, "I wish you had been there. At the Olympics. It would have been fun." If only he could go back and knit Ilya into the history of his life, fill in all those Ilya-shaped spaces with kisses and chirps and mind-blowing sex.

"Would have been fun?" Ilya says. He's being the little spoon in Shane's arms, so Shane can't see his face. "Russian hockey team lost badly that year."

"Obviously you would have been playing for the USA." Shane leaves a kiss on Ilya's shoulder. He can—he can envision Ilya in a Russian uniform. But why think of that when he could picture Ilya on a happier team?

"Yes, that would be better." Ilya sighs. "So, what were you looking at on your phone before I came in?"

Shane smiles to himself. "Shot compilations. Of Marleau."

As expected, Ilya rolls over in instant outrage. "You dare—take that back, Hollander!"

"I dunno, Marly's game-winner against Houston two years ago was—" The words dissolve into laughter as Ilya starts viciously tickling him.

By the time Shane's parents return at eleven-thirty, the bedsheets are washed and dried, Shane and Ilya are in respectable sleep clothes, and Anya has even been given one more walk around the block. If Ilya and Shane got in another orgasm apiece in the shower at ten, no-one will ever know.

This is the start of perhaps the happiest few days in Shane's life. Ilya's there when he wakes up, there when he works out, there at dinner, there in his bed at night. Shane did worry a little that they would get tired of each other's company, that some of the shine would wear off with the mundanity of seeing each other every day.

That doesn't happen at all. Ilya is endlessly sexy, endlessly funny and good to be around even when he's scrolling on his phone or sitting around the dining table working on a puzzle with Shane's family. Shane's waiting for Ilya to call the puzzle boring. He doesn't.

On Christmas Day, the Hollanders eat mashed potatoes, stuffing, baked chicken thighs, and roasted vegetables. It's kind of a family secret: none of them likes turkey, so they don't make it. They don't do much that's different on the 25th, either, mostly sticking to the usual routine of Shane-at-home days: breakfast, work out, relax, dinner, and family time, which is often quiet reading or crossword-completing in the same room together. That evening, as snow falls outside, Shane reads a book his parents gave him and Ilya, with one earbud in, rests his head on Shane's shoulder. Anya's sleeping on Shane's feet, her favorite place for some reason, and Shane's parents keep glancing at Shane and sharing little smiles they seem to think Shane doesn't see.

The best Christmas gift Shane could have asked for is his parents coming to like Ilya. And he thinks they do.

It helps that Anya has stolen his parents' hearts, and she's Ilya's dog, so naturally Ilya gets their approval for adopting the best dog in Boston and training her to be a sweetheart. And if Ilya himself is sometimes a sweetheart—he quietly watched *It's a Wonderful Life* with Shane's family and teared up at the end—Shane will never tell him so. Ilya would deny it. Ilya's still a pest too, of course, repeatedly waking Shane up in the morning by licking his cheek, and telling Marleau and Svetlana fantastical lies in their group chat, and ending almost every Xbox session with a wrestling match over who did best. Shane wouldn't have it any other way.

Everything is almost perfect.

If only—

Ilya's face on the game cover.

A mental image of Ilya in a Russian Olympic uniform.

Then, on Christmas Day, Shane's mom asks Ilya to share some photos he took on his phone. Ilya says, "Of course, I'll text them to you"—and, for an instant, Shane sees Ilya in a tuxedo saying the same words. Shane's never been with Ilya when he's wearing a suit.

Shane tells them he's going to the bathroom. In the downstairs half-bath, he looks at himself in the mirror, as though whatever's wrong will be written on his face. But he looks completely normal. Everything's normal. And this vacation has been so good, so healing to a part of Shane's self that he didn't even know was hurting. The last thing he wants to do is ruin it by . . . what, fantasizing about his boyfriend?

Around lunchtime on Boxing Day, Ilya and Shane are alone in the den while Shane's parents wander around a Christmas market. They've already taken advantage of the empty house to have sex and are in the luxurious, sleepy period afterward, where they're enjoying touching each other without necessarily needing to do more right away.

So Shane flips through channels until he lands on *The Matrix*, a childhood favorite, and they starts nominally watching the movie while making out.

On the screen, a cat meows. A few seconds later, Trinity says a line Shane remembers well: "A deja vu is a glitch in the Matrix. It happens when they change something."

Shane grabs the remote and turns the TV off. No, it's not—this isn't sci-fi, and Shane hasn't been having deja vu anyway.

"Oh," Ilya says, excited, and he starts pushing Shane's shirt up. That's what Shane needed—to forget whatever bullshit is going on in his mind.

And it works for a while.

On the 27th, Shane and Ilya pack their bags and pile into Shane's mom's car with Anya and with Shane's parents, who will drive them to the airport in Ottawa so they can pick up another shared charter flight home. While Ilya pets Anya's ears and tells her not to fall in love with too many people on the airplane this time, Shane watches the snowy, admittedly not very scenic scenery of Ottawa pass by outside the car.

They stop at a red light next to a garage where someone has tried to cover up graffiti with thick gray paint. But the graffiti is still showing through, a ghostly image that's not quite comprehensible.

As Shane looks at it, his stomach twists.

Ilya is fucking ridiculously good at hockey. It absolutely doesn't make any sense. It would make more sense—in an impossible way—if he *was* a professional player, and then that life got . . . painted over.

Everyone says Ilya belongs on the Boston Raiders.

Shane is fucking losing it.

On Ilya's lap, Anya starts squirming, wanting to lick Shane's face. Shane lets her. All that matters is that he cannot fucking lose his mind when Boston has a good chance at the Cup again this year. And when Ilya, the object of these delusions, is actually Shane's fucking boyfriend, Shane *has* him, Shane cannot, cannot, cannot fuck this up.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone, all will be explained soon. But I suggest reading the end of Chapter 19 again and looking veeery closely at what happened! 👀❤️

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane is great at compartmentalizing. He spent his entire adult life until last autumn first telling himself he was going to find a wife and settle down, and then telling himself he was never going to know real love and that was fine, totally fine with him. He won three Cups like that.

So Shane can put this . . . phantom memories weirdness, whatever it is, aside for now. He's stressed, or overthinking, nothing more. He's been playing great this season, and Boston is in a great position this year for the playoffs, and Shane is gonna make that Cup run with the Raiders and show the world he's still the best. So there *can't* be anything really wrong with him. There isn't.

"You okay?" Ilya asks him while they're on the plane. By mutual agreement, Ilya won't hold his hand here, where someone else can see, but his warm expression is almost as good as his touch. Well, it isn't, but Shane can't have Ilya's hand, so he'll take what he can get. A few months ago, it would have been amazing to Shane that he was sitting next to Ilya, his boyfriend, on a flight. It still is. And it's amazing, too, that Ilya has agreed to stay in Boston with Shane as much as possible until the New Year.

"Just thinking about the playoffs," Shane says.

"Not worrying?" Ilya asks him.

"No," Shane says. "Not exactly." They've already discussed the playoffs plenty at his parents' house: Svetlana and Shane's mom are both certain that it's Boston's year again, and Ilya says Svetlana is always right about hockey. Shane's mom usually is too.

Shane takes out his phone and messages Ilya: *Now I'm thinking of you. And me. Alone.*

Reading the message, Ilya smiles wolfishly, and Shane knows that smile. It means—

Back in Shane's apartment, it does indeed mean that. After giving Anya a walk, food, and praise for being so good on the plane, Shane and Ilya shut themselves away in Shane's bedroom and make the most of having exactly zero other Hollanders within hearing distance.

And that helps. When Ilya's skin is against Shane's, it's easier for Shane to forget about the whatever-it-was that came over him a few times in Ottawa. And if Ilya's rummaging around in Shane's kitchen to cook something for them during a sex intermission, and Shane imagines him saying, *You like tuna melt?*, Shane just pushes Ilya against the cabinet and slides down to suck his dick. It's fine. This is his precious time with Ilya, and he's going to fucking enjoy it before Ilya goes back to being a little image on Shane's phone or iPad screen most of the time.

In the afternoon, Ilya has to drive back to Providence for a game in Connecticut, but he's in Boston and in Shane's bed again by the following morning, so they're both sated enough to take a break and invite Marleau and Svetlana over after Shane's home game on the 28th. Shane had originally envisioned having Ilya all to himself until the New Year, but that was before he intended to invite Ilya to Ottawa. Now, after such a wealth of days in each other's company, Shane can be generous and share Ilya with their friends for a little while, since Ilya's been wanting to see both of them.

Plus, Svetlana can't come to their New Year's Eve celebration because she's flying out on the 29th to celebrate Novy God, the Russian new year holiday, in Moscow. This information makes Shane even more glad that he decided to be with Ilya over the holiday season, rather than leaving Ilya with only Anya for company in his bland condo in Rhode Island. Shane can't claim that his own penthouse is truly without blandness—Shane's interior designer might have been a little frustrated by his lack of vision for his own space—but at least it's a place that's been lived in. Shane has a few odd remnants of past sponsorships around his home: fridge magnets from that seltzer water brand, a shot glass from the amaretto commercial he was in.

Now there's also Anya's fur on the couch, although Ilya does his best to vacuum it, and a bread bin that just got delivered because Ilya devours bread at an alarming rate, even for a hockey player who's trying not to drop weight.

When Svetlana and Marleau arrive at Shane's penthouse, Svetlana on time and Marly five minutes late as usual, Shane welcomes them in with way more happiness than he usually feels when guests arrive. Because this isn't inviting all of the Raiders over to his place for beer and video games; this is the kind of hangout where you get to actually talk with people beyond asking who wants another drink or explaining where the bathroom is. Even more importantly, Ilya is here in the kitchen, getting Sveta and Marly drinks, playing the role of host alongside Shane.

Anya is delighted to see the newcomers, especially Svetlana, whom she recognizes. With a swelling feeling in his chest, Shane hangs up Svetlana and Marleau's coats and watches Svetlana crouching in front of Anya, doting on her, while Ilya hands Marly a Sam Adams and tells him he has boring taste in beer.

"I thought I was the boring one," Shane says, not really jealous. Mostly not.

Ilya's eyes are affectionate when he says, "Of course you are the most boring of all." He flicks Shane's cheek, Shane responds with a gentle kick to Ilya's shin, and then Svetlana is sitting on the couch arm and laughing her ass off at them while poor Anya jumps up on Shane and Ilya's legs, trying to break up what she thinks is a fight.

"I thought you guys were dating," Marleau says, perplexed.

"They are. This is foreplay for them," Svetlana informs him without embarrassment. "Come on, here, Anechka, don't worry, it's only playing. Come sit with the winning team."

Anya does, lying at Svetlana's feet at one end of the couch. And no-one says anything more than that; Marleau arrived hungry, it seems, and all his attention is on the assortment of

Doritos Shane bought for today. Shane keeps waiting for more questions or comments, but they don't come.

He's surprised. Sure, both Svetlana and Marleau already knew that Ilya and Shane are boyfriends, and they've all mentioned it in their four-person group chat, but it's different being open about it in person. Today, Shane and Ilya are a couple in front of their friends.

And it's no big deal. That's all Shane has ever wanted.

Shane doesn't remember much about the game session that followed. They started with his favorite, MLH15, which he won at. Then they moved to Mario Kart, which Svetlana and Ilya were best at; Shane was mediocre, though a little better than Marly.

But Shane can't say exactly how many wins each of them racked up, because for once he wasn't thinking about the goal right in front of him. He was trying to take in what was happening around him: one of the happiest days of his life. Ilya sitting next to him, warm and beautiful, and their friends around them, knowing what Shane and Ilya were to each other and not caring. Even the . . . memory thing couldn't ruin it.

Svetlana does look a little somber, though, when she slips on her coat to leave. "Ilyusha, you want me to bring tea back from Russia for you?" she asks him.

"If you have room in your suitcase," he says. "Then yes, thank you."

"For you I always have room,' is her reply. She gives Ilya a hug, which he returns, but this seems oddly somber too.

After thanking Shane for his hospitality, she puts on her earmuffs and follows Marleau out into the hallway of Shane's building, to the elevator which will take her down into the snowy misery of a Boston winter.

"Does Svetlana not want to go back to Russia?" Shane asks Ilya.

"No, she's looking forward to it. Her parents love her very much, and she loves them," Ilya says. There's a small furrow in his brow. "I think she is at a, a 'crossroads in life.'"

"What do you mean?"

Ilya moves a snack plate out of a sneaky Anya's reach, to the middle of the coffee table, and sits on the couch. Shane sits next to him.

"You have never gone clubbing a lot, right?" Ilya says.

"I did, I do sometimes. You kind of have to as captain of a hockey team. But yeah, I wouldn't call it a lot."

Ilya sighs. "Sveta and me—we didn't meet again until last year, but we were both the same until recently: clubbing a lot, partying a lot. When you're awake at four, five a.m. with people, you're talking and smoking in the snow or watching the sun rise, you make friendships that are very close, yes? But, you know, you hit twenty-six, you can't shake off a

hangover so well, you want to have real career, maybe you stay at home more. Then what happens to the friends you made before? Do you still have something to connect with them?" Ilya rubs at the nicotine patch on his arm. "I think this is what Sveta is feeling now."

"Like, loneliness?" Shane puts his hand over Ilya's, stilling it. Soothing it, hopefully.

"Something like that. Some of her friends are happy to go to brunch and see movies instead of going to the club. Some are not. I think she will be okay. Is just sad."

"Well, she has us," Shane says, meaning it as a promise as well as a statement of fact. "And Marleau, possibly?"

"I don't think they're dating," Ilya says thoughtfully. "But I won't ask. That's her business." He smiles. "Like you are my business."

"Oh, am I?" Shane asks, hoping Ilya will do exactly what he does next: pin him against the arm of the couch.

Ilya has to go back to Providence again to fly out the next evening, but neither of them really wants to be apart for longer than necessary, and Shane's longing to see Ilya on the ice again, so Shane texts his coach asking whether he can bring a friend to skate with him ahead of the scheduled team practice in the morning. After breakfast, he gets his answer: *Of course, Shane. You didn't have to ask. We trust you.*

That means a lot until, in the shower, Shane realizes: LeClaire probably has the impression that Shane is bringing a girl for a private ice skating date. He lightly bangs his head against the shower wall; it never stops, does it?

Freshly dressed and damp-haired, Shane wanders into the kitchen, where Ilya is giving Anya her breakfast. It's nice to see Ilya in his hoodies, tanks, and sweatpants again, although his flannels-and-jeans era in Ottawa was good too.

"Hey," Shane says. Why is he nervous? Ilya's his boyfriend. "Do you want to come with me to Victory, and skate ahead of the team session? LeClaire just said it's fine."

That makes Ilya's head snap up. "Don't you think your teammates will be suspicious?" He learned this word a few days ago while watching TV with Shane's mom and dad. It's a little part of the vacation, and therefore of Shane, that will always stay with Ilya.

"I don't know. Maybe." Shane starts hand-washing the inner parts of his smoothie blender that can't go in the dishwasher. Then it hits him that washing blades is probably not smart to do when he's unfocused, so he turns off the water again. "I talked with Rose a while ago about us. I mean, about us being friends publicly. She said we should act like we're not doing anything wrong. Like there's no reason to hide."

"Mm." Ilya makes a face that seems to suggest he doesn't fully buy this. "It's no problem for me. I'm already out."

“I know.” Shane’s holding on to the edge of the counter; Ilya comes up behind him and wraps his arm around him.

“We could ask Marly to come early too. Makes it less obvious,” Ilya says.

“I know,” Shane says again. He turns around in Ilya’s arms. “I don’t want to. Fuck, I don’t wanna be out—it’s different for Scott Hunter, he’s at the end of his career. I just want to skate with you.”

“Okay. Then we skate together,” Ilya says. “We tell people we’re friends. You’re being good captain, making sure this guy with so much talent stays loyal to Boston until I can get signed here.”

Shane laughs a little. “Or we could just tell them we wanted to play together. I do. Want that.”

“Me too,” Ilya says. He strokes his thumb over Shane’s cheek. His face is open and sincere.

So they put Ilya’s skates in a duffel—he can borrow a helmet at the arena, and all of Shane’s gear lives there with the equipment team—and drive to Victory Ice Arena together through a freezing winter rain. The arena building is mostly empty, so their voices echo as they walk in, go up the stairs, and put their skates on. It’s a shame that the big, bright windows in the arena itself have been dulled by the gray weather, but that’s Boston for you.

Shane has enough sunlight inside himself when he gets on the ice with Ilya. As much as they joke around, they’re also both deadly serious about hockey, so they end up doing drills to help keep Ilya in condition for his upcoming games. If an image of Ilya in some hockey team uniform Shane doesn’t know quickly comes to mind, Shane pushes himself harder, faster, until he’s dripping with sweat and Ilya tells him, “You know this is practice and not a playoff game, right? Why are you burning so much energy?”

Shane glances around them. The whole arena is still quiet. There’s nobody here but Raiders staff whose careers are centered on keeping Shane happy.

“Will you take off your helmet?” Shane asks Ilya.

Smiling, Ilya does, holding it in one hand and his stick in the other.

Shane kisses him, kisses him again while the icy downpour outside rattles against the windows. They can’t have a public kiss after winning the Cup—and Ilya would rather die than copy Scott Hunter, anyway—but they can have this.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on threads now as tocsincall although I still don't rly understand how threads works.

I really cannot emphasize enough what a weird building Warrior Ice Arena is. From the street, it looks like an office building. They put Warrior Ice Arena in huge letters on the side visible from the commuter rail. Which, first of all, the commuter rail SUUCKS and I think most passengers spend their time wishing to not be on the commuter rail rather than gazing out of the window.

I hope you are all happy with this chapter! It has been a SHIT week (hospital, work stress).

And don't worry they won't be outed because of this kiss.❤️

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

> I want to give you the option to read a little extra warning for this chapter. It's very mild in my opinion, nothing there is even a tag for, but I wanted to be sure my readers can be safe. So if you want to see this warning, head to the end note.
>
> Another announcement is that I realized these guys need to be playing more hockey, so the practice that Ilya has crashed is now a real practice rather than an optional one, and Shane will have a game in the evening. Ilya will have one the following day. This is inconsequential to the plot, just added for accuracy's sake.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After their kiss has cleared his mind a little, Shane has to admit to himself that Ilya was right: Shane can't burn himself out like this during a normal practice.

So, leaving Ilya to continue his drills, Shane goes to the side of the rink and stretches for a while before sitting in one of the seats supposedly to read emails on his phone, but really to enjoy the sight of Ilya on the ice. Behind Ilya, the window-wall of the arena carries a ghostly reflection of him against the gray, rainy day outside: an Ilya Rozanov skating on air.

Right on time, Shane's teammates start to filter in around a quarter to eleven. Carmichael, as usual, is one of the first in. He looks well-rested and happy; he said in the Raiders group chat that on Christmas Day his wife told him she was pregnant.

"Hey, captain." Carmichael takes a seat by Shane. "Is that . . . *Rozanov* over there?"

"Yeah, he wanted some ice time," Shane says, casual. He has to force his hand flat on the seat next to him. "And I wanted to see again, up close, what he's capable of."

Ilya speeds over to the boards and steps out, grinning. "Hey Hollander, you want me to stay and give your guys a lesson?" He walks over to a seat and starts wiping his blades with the microfiber towel he left with his gear.

Pretending not to be charmed, Shane rolls his eyes. "Thanks for the offer, but we're good."

"Rozanov, you're lucky our captain's the nicest guy in hockey." Carmichael amicably slaps Shane's back. "Except maybe Scott Hunter."

"Wow. This is what you call loyalty?" Ilya says. "Saying some middle-aged guy from New York is better than Shane Hollander?"

“He’s not—you’re a pain in the ass,” Carmichael says with a smile. It took Shane a while, as a kid, to learn that usually chirps meant guys liked you. Polite formality was definitely a bad sign in hockey.

“Yeah, he is,” Shane says. And Shane wouldn’t change a thing about him.

“Rozanov!” A Russian accent: it’s a bright-eyed Varkov. “Why are you here? You got called up?”

“No, not yet.” Ilya is unlacing his skates now. “Today, just practicing. I was in town and I didn’t feel like driving back to Providence early. But I didn’t want to skate on the shit city rinks either. So I told Hollander how sad it was being Russian orphan and he folded like a paper towel.” He winks at Varkov.

“Oh, bullshit!” Shane says, laughing. “That is not what happened.”

The double doors bang as they swing open again, and Ilya says, “Okay, I’m getting out of here before I have to answer same question a third fucking time.” Ilya pulls his second skate off, stretches the soaker over its blade, and drops it in his duffel. “Happy New Year,” he says to the group genuinely, and with perhaps a touch of wistfulness.

“Happy New Year, Roz,” says Carmichael.

“*S nastupayushchim*,” Varkov replies seriously; he gets a smile and a similar response in Russian from Ilya as Ilya puts his bag over his shoulder.

It’s lonely, hearing those doors close behind Ilya.

But Shane and Ilya got away with it, didn’t they? Sure, everyone doesn’t think they’re friends, exactly; they believe that Shane has a professional interest in Ilya and that Ilya charmed his way into some free ice time. But the point is that nobody suspects he and Shane are boyfriends.

So why is Shane pissed off?

Shane turns this question over in his mind during practice and afterward, where, instead of going home to Ilya, he heads up a flight of stairs to run alone on a treadmill in the team gym. Alone, in the still-plasticky smell of the sleek, gray-and-silver gym, the answer comes to him: he’s not angry that he and Ilya weren’t outed. He’s angry that Ilya *is* out, was *able* to be out and still chat so easily with Shane’s teammates.

Ilya can do this because *it’s different for Ilya*, in more than one way. He isn’t a hockey star; he doesn’t have a legacy to lose. He can’t fall from grace. He had the benefit of entering professional hockey in 2018, when gay marriage is legal throughout the USA and Scott Hunter has already kissed a man at center ice, rather than as Canada’s favorite eighteen-year-old in 2009. More than that, Ilya isn’t a role model for Asian guys old and young throughout Canada and the USA. *Everyone’s looking up to you*: Shane can never forget that, never has.

Shane stops the treadmill and, panting, leans against the control panel.

Being gay is nothing to be ashamed of. People shouldn't be disappointed to know this about him, it shouldn't disqualify him from being a role model or tarnish his legacy or make people think he's weak. He'll still be Shane fucking Hollander, who has led his team to three Stanley Cups by the age of twenty-eight.

Yeah, Scott Hunter set the precedent: you earn the right to be out by winning a Cup, proving that you're still strong and *everything a man should be*—except that you're gay. Of course, Shane sees Hunter called slurs in hockey forums and on social media all the time, despite the hockey world's superficial acceptance of him. How many Cups would be enough to earn Shane that same level of acceptance, let alone total forgiveness?

Shane knows the answer to that, really: he could never win enough Cups to make his sexuality not a problem.

So there is no perfect, correct choice when it comes to being openly gay or not. Shane wouldn't be morally wrong to stay in the closet. But more and more, every day, keeping this secret feels like poison to him.

In the corner of Shane's eye, on the mirrored gym wall, he sees Ilya pedaling hard on a treadmill. A surge of desire is attached to the memory—the daydream—

"Fuck!" Shane slaps the machine in frustration, in misery. Why are these—delusions—attached to Ilya, one of the best things in Shane's life? Why does it make more sense to think that Ilya *was* once a professional hockey player somehow than that some perfect guy appeared out of nowhere to play hockey like an all-star and fuck Shane like a fantasy and kiss him like the love of his life?

Is Ilya real at all?

Shane's phone buzzes.

Are you okay? Ilya has messaged him.

No, Shane wants to say. *I'm losing my mind, and all I want to do is ruin my own life so I can hold your hand in public.*

Instead, he replies*: Yeah, just did some conditioning after practice. I'll cool down, shower and come home now*.

About forty minutes later, when Shane steps into his apartment, Anya is dozing on the couch: a sign that she's been on a long walk. But after Shane sheds his wet winter outerwear and drops his bag of dirty clothes by the door, she hops down to greet him anyway, her tail wagging furiously.

With a funny similarity to his dog, Ilya is in the bedroom, also napping. He likewise wakes up when Shane opens the door.

"Hello," Ilya says muzzily. He's shirtless, sweetly vulnerable under Shane's comforter and surrounded by Shane's pillows, which he hasn't moved off the bed. His curls are unstyled and

squished on one side, as though he's been in bed since his hair was damp.

"Hello to you too." Shane sits on the side of the bed and kisses Ilya, closing his eyes as relief washes through him. Ilya smells good, recently showered, as Shane would have expected, given that he was skating earlier. "Are *you* feeling okay?"

"I don't know. How do I feel?" Ilya says flirtatiously. He lightly tugs Shane's waist until Shane topples onto the bed next to him, then takes Shane's hand and pushes it over his own chest and abs.

Blissfully, that weightlessness starts to come over Shane. And he needs it so much, desperately. It's probably weird that Shane *wants* all the time, that he's longing for sex now, when everything else is wrong. But being with Ilya has always felt right to him.

"Feels okay," Shane says. No, the muscled curve of Ilya's pecs, warm from being under the blankets, is bliss.

"Just okay?" Ilya's hand covers Shane's own over Ilya's heart.

Shane smiles. "Just okay."

"Oh, I see." Ilya takes Shane's chin and kisses him, gently holding him in place. When the kiss ends—too soon—Ilya says, "Get under the covers."

Shane does, scrambling a little awkwardly to join Ilya in his place there. Once they're side by side in the soft comfort of the bed, and Shane can tell Ilya's only wearing underpants, Shane reaches down to unbutton his own jeans.

Ilya grabs his wrist and says, "No."

"No?" Oh, Shane is getting hard fast; Ilya's never refused to let Shane take his pants off, Shane's pretty sure. Especially not with so much feeling in his eyes and that smile that's as tender as it is mischievous.

Ilya tightens his grip on Shane's wrist and leans closer. "No."

Closing his eyes—he has to, or else he'll float away—Shane says, "Okay." Thank fuck—Ilya always, always knows what Shane needs. He can read him like a book.

A rough hand rubbing over the stiffness in his jeans—then, more cruelly, leaving him alone. "We are going to kiss first," Ilya says. He lowers his body over Shane's, pushes Shane's shirt up to leave a kiss on Shane's abs. Finally moves to drop a kiss on Shane's chin, his nose—his mouth.

The rain is tapping against the windows again; there was a cold wind outside, too, and Shane can hear it. But in his bedroom, right now, everything is safe. The blinds are closed against the weak midday sun, so no-one can see Ilya kissing Shane, caressing his chest as Shane rubs his hands over the muscular expanse of Ilya's bare back.

Ilya's erection is flush against Shane's own, of course. Ilya grinds his hips in slight motions as they kiss—giving Shane no real friction, only a reminder that he's hard and can't do anything about it.

"You want to come?" Ilya murmurs in Shane's ear.

It's a trick. "No."

A kiss on his cheek. "You are still a really bad liar." Ilya moves off of Shane to the side of the bed where he leans over toward the nightstand, maybe to get lube, and—

Maybe it's because the weight and warmth and fresh-shower smell of Ilya are gone. Without them, what was really good, a good frustration, tilts and becomes something hollow and bitter. Shane's going to have to jerk Ilya off—distant—not allowed to touch.

Ilya's next to Shane again, stretched out alongside him. "You will—" Ilya begins. He doesn't finish the sentence. Instead, he drops the lube among the bedsheets and says, "Shane."

"Yeah?" Shane isn't crying, he knows he's not. His face is dry, there isn't any weight on his lower lashes.

"You can do whatever you want now," Ilya says. His expression is fragile. "Okay?"

"Okay," Shane repeats. But when he reaches within himself for *what he wants to do*, the space is empty.

Ilya smooths a hand over Shane's shoulder. He wriggles up to sit against the headboard, pulls the covers back to reveal his lap.

Shane rests his head on Ilya's thigh, with his face pressed against Ilya's softening dick, and closes his eyes. Ilya's fingertips scratch through his hair, steady, ever-present.

The rain has stopped by the time Shane sits up and says, "Fuck." He licks his lips. "Sorry."

"Why are you sorry? There's no problem," Ilya says. Are his eyes redder than usual? "If there is, it's my problem, not you."

"No, it's. No problem. I should, uh. Eat lunch." That's probably something Shane can do: microwave something his meal service prepped, sit at his breakfast bar eating it, and try not to massively fuck up more than he already has.

"Okay," Ilya says. "I should get ready to go to Providence." His hand strokes down Shane's shoulder again, as though he's confirming that Shane is still here.

Desperate to fix *something*, Shane leans forward. Ilya does too, and their lips meet in a gentle, dry kiss.

The knot in Shane's heart loosens a little bit.

It really fucking sucks that this is how they have to part for a little while. Shane has his home game tonight; Ilya is flying out to fucking Scranton, PA, of all places. But they'll be together again on New Year's Eve.

That evening, and during his subsequent trip to Detroit, Shane researches traditional New Year's Eve dishes in Russia. He prepares himself to try a few bites of each, because he is not going to tell Ilya that his traditional food is gross. Shane hasn't experienced that much himself—his school lunches were always a sandwich, carrot sticks, apple slices, and yogurt—but he saw it happen to other kids, and he's seen it plenty in adulthood too.

All this plotting doesn't matter in the end, though, because when Ilya arrives back at Shane's penthouse, he says there's no need to make much Russian food for the holiday. Champagne, tangerines, and caviar on sliced bread will do. The only thing they end up cooking is toshikoshi soba, a simple, fragrant noodle dish that's one of the few Japanese traditions Shane's family follows.

Shane's prediction about his friends turns out to be mostly accurate: Hammer, Connors and a few other guys are a little disappointed when Shane tells them in the group chat that he's not going out with them to celebrate New Year's Eve. Kane texts Shane numerous times trying to persuade him to come and get fucked up; Marleau tells them all to leave Shane alone. Their captain needs to rest up before kicking more ass in the spring, he says.

No-one bothers Shane beyond that.

In the early evening, Ilya has a video call with Svetlana to wish her a happy new year. Then Shane and Ilya have a quiet meal at Shane's seldom-used dining table before migrating to the couch to watch the day's Buffalo/Houston game and whatever's happening in Times Square.

When the ball drops at midnight, they kiss: Shane's first-ever new year kiss that means something to him.

Shane doesn't know how to repair anything that's broken in his life at the moment. He knows how to play hockey—thank fuck he can still do that—but everything else is as far out of his control as a kite caught by the wind, doomed to fly untethered until it crashes alone somewhere.

Shane and Ilya have sex one last time ahead of Ilya's departure back to Providence for good. It's slow, steady, face-to-face sex. It's good, because with Ilya it's always good, but . . . it's not the vibrant joy that sex with Ilya normally is.

On January 1st, Ilya packs up his car and drives away with Anya in his back seat.

Chapter End Notes

Little warning: there is a very mildly kinky foreplay scene during which Shane suddenly starts having a bad time. Ilya immediately pivots and helps him to get in a better

headspace.

The lesson here is: don't do kink if you're in a really bad headspace. That's not healthy for you or your partner. The More You Know

Thank you to everyone who shared lovely supportive messages about my AO3 curse ❤️ I'm sorry I've been unable to reply to most comments but I absolutely do read them. And they have absolutely helped me to get through a very tough time. ❤️

I have added mentions of a few more totally irrelevant hockey games into the preceding chapters. For example, the hangout with Marleau and Svetlana now is described as happening "after Shane's game." I don't think there is any need whatsoever to reread, but just sharing this for transparency.

We are truly getting into the endgame now!

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

> Huge thanks to ao3 user gravollet for hockey advice and suggestions, and general advice, for this chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jan 10 2019

r/mlhockey 5h ago
u/hollanderhatty

Raiders are heading for the Cup again. Prove me wrong.

Evidence:

1. Hollander is on fire (but when is he not)
2. Best forward group in the league
3. Johansson great draft pick, maturing into strong player
4. Kovalev also maturing great all-around, w/ ability to hit, block shots and get pucks on net
5. As always, top-tier goaltending from Oregan
6. Great roster depth
7. Nobody on IR, few serious injuries so far this season
8. Probably will be top seeded = home ice advantage

⬆️1k ⬇️ 💬3k

goguardians-guy 5h ago
You realize you just jinxed the fuck out of your team.

> **proud_skirmish_4932** 5h ago
> Yeah it's only January. The Raiders seemed in good shape til Feb last year and then they were dropping like flies with injuries

_censeless 4h ago
Idk Hollzy looks stressed out to me. He might burn himself out early.

- 23 more replies

Feb 2 2019

r/providence_ri 4h ago
u/free_habitation_9231

Does anyone go to hockey games here?

I've just moved here from Europe (don't ask how I ended up in Rhode Island) and am wondering whether the hockey is any good here? I know it's only the minor league but is it worth going just for fun?

⬆️240 ⬇️ 💬35

swan__point 2h ago
It kinda sucks but lower your expectations and you'll be okay.

nominalnomad 3h ago
It's interesting right now because the Providence Raiders signed this influencer a couple months ago and he's doing not just good but insanely well. Look up Ilya Rozanov.

> **athenasjudgment** 1h ago
> Wait, the perpetually shirtless guy?! I wondered why I wasn't seeing any new clips of him on Twitter!

Feb 13 2019

r/shanehollander 10h ago
u/allforraiders80

Shane spotted attending a Providence Raiders game with Cliff Marleau and Svetlana Vetrova on Feb 12

[image]

So Shanelana are definitely dating, right?

⬆️2k ⬇️ 💬2k

Raiders-Princess80 8h ago
100%. The Boston team is on a road trip from the 13th to the 16th so this would be his only

chance to spend time with Svetlana around V-day. And Shane knows she loves hockey and her gay BFF Ilya so he gave her the best possible gift. I'm verklempt.

> **sweet_surprise2463** 8h ago
> Isn't there a sub rule against talking about Svetlana since she's not a public figure? We all know they're probably dating given that Shane is so private and has been seen with her like 3 times, but she deserves some privacy too.
>
> **bright-landry-brite** 7h ago
> Rozanov has been super clear that he's bisexual, come on.
>
> > **Raiders-Princess80** 7h ago
> > A lot of guys are in denial. He reads as gay to me.
> >
> > - 14 more replies

perpetual_pepper_0273 4h ago
Did anyone else think Shane looks really tired in these pics? I hope he gets a good sleep on the plane to LA.

March 1 2019

r/ilyarozanov 12h ago
u/boston_rainboww

Ilya just got moved to the first line on the Providence Raiders!!

I used to go to the gym where he worked. So fucking proud of him now.

⬆️103 ⬇️ 💬50

mod_yoga_queen_RI 12h ago 📌
Standard reminder that homophobic comments get you banned. Why even come to an Ilya Rozanov sub just to make homophobic comments? Go touch grass.

myreputation_1989 5h ago
Signed in November to first line center in March is mind-blowing! Can't wait to tell my grandchildren I was a Rozanov fan back when he was a normal guy posting thirst traps on Instagram every day.

brighton_bostonian 2h ago
This guy plays like a major league pro. I literally don't get it.

March 17 2019

r/mlhockey 1h ago
u/hollanderhatty

Todd Kane has personally screwed the Raiders' chances at the Cup this year and I will never forgive him.

It's one thing to be driving drunk on St. Patty's Day. It's another to crash into a pole with two other players in your car and injure them too. Where is our depth at center now? Fucked. I hope he never plays on MLH ice again.

⬆️2k ⬇️ 💬3k

_censeless 1h ago
Dude, the crash was four hours ago and we only JUST got a statement from Raiders management saying that Kane, Johannson and Feller are expected to make a full recovery by summer. We all love hockey here but let's keep in mind that players are people too. Also, driving drunk is always a dick move.

> **drillersdrillers** 3h ago
> He is right though. Boston is fucked.

Chapter End Notes

> Don't worry, we will catch up with Hollanov in the next chapter and see what this was like in their eyes!
>
> Realistically, I think a Shane sub would likely be awful to Svetlana in this situation but I didn't want to write that.

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

> Hockey terminology for this chapter: "A Black Ace is a player that is added to a team's roster during the Stanley Cup playoffs. They are often minor league players in the team's organization, and practice with the team during the playoffs in case of any injury or otherwise to players in the lineup."
> From: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Ace_(ice_hockey)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At 9:30 p.m. on St. Patrick's Day, most of the city is still out celebrating. Most of the Raiders are, too. The holiday fell on a Sunday this year, so the festivities are especially festive compared to other years when it was on a weekday.

For team morale purposes, Shane was with his teammates earlier in a bar on Newbury Street. Exhausted, he bowed out at 8 and, rather than waiting for an Uber, opted for the twenty-minute walk home, weaving through groups of revelers on the sidewalk. The streets aren't heaped with snow any longer; these days, the temperature is sometimes slightly above freezing, sometimes slightly below. Uncertain, teetering on the brink. Like Shane.

The Raiders have a game the day after tomorrow, and Shane is—not at his best. Sure, he's still leading his division in points earned, but he's never worked so hard for those numbers. Stepping onto the ice for his shift feels like walking through quicksand.

Shane just has to keep it together until the playoffs. He can't be benched under any circumstances, or he'll lose his chance to get the fourth Cup win that everyone's predicting for Boston. If he tells anyone that he's . . . remembering events that never happened, he might never play again.

He's supposed to have a FaceTime call with Ilya at 9:30. He knows it's going to help. And hurt. Video call sex with Ilya helps because Ilya always turns him on, gets him to come, and that clears his mind. Ilya's voice just saying "hi" makes Shane feel good on days when nothing else does.

It also hurts because Shane is more likely to—imagine stuff—when he's around Ilya. And because ever since Shane froze up that day at his apartment, Ilya's been different: careful, gentler, as though he thinks he did something wrong. Ilya did nothing wrong; it was Shane who buckled under the weight of everything else on his mind and ruined the beautiful experience right in front of him.

So Shane's going to see Ilya's face in a few minutes, and Ilya will tell him he's beautiful and ask him what he wants to do, and Shane will long for the days when Ilya simply told him to

take his shirt off or touch himself or whatever. In between long hours filled with the duties of captaincy, Shane's time with Ilya was supposed to be the time when he didn't have to decide. Shane used to be able to drift away, to float into that blissful place where all he had to do was follow Ilya's lead and feel pleasure.

After his calls with Ilya, sometimes Shane puts on one of the videos Ilya made for him for Christmas, purely for the experience of following instructions from the Ilya on the screen. They were so happy then.

Shane's phone rings, which is weird because Ilya was supposed to video call him, not normal-call him. But the call isn't from Ilya at all. It's Johansson, their promising rookie.

Twelve hours later, Shane has a whole new set of troubles on his shoulders.

Okay, he tells himself, sitting on a bench by a miserable little patch of grass outside Mass General and wishing, for the first time in his life, that he fucking smoked. The Raiders still have their iron defense. Shane can still rely on St.-Simon and Carmichael, their fantastic first defensive pair. Boston still has both of their goalies too, thank fuck. Shane hasn't lost Marly or Hammer, his linemates, or Varkov and Connors on the second line.

But losing Feller, their second line right wing, to a broken arm is . . . not good. Kane likes partying a little too much, but as their third line center he's been a fantastic grinder with strong offensive capacity. And Johannson has been tireless on their fourth line as a center. Now all three of them are out on LTIR.

In short, the Raiders' offense and ability to wear down their opponents are indeed fucked, as so many people were saying online when Shane checked Twitter a few minutes ago.

Shane thought he was tired *before*. Now he's had about four hours' sleep in between comforting Johansson in the ER last night, stressing out while lying awake in bed, and coming back here at the crack of dawn to be captain again. Shane isn't naturally nurturing, but he tried his best to calm Johannson down when the kid was freaking out about his career being ruined. It's probably not: his breaks are clean, his concussion is mild. And Johannson's parents are flying here from, uh, Norway(?) at the moment, so Shane can leave his rookie to them once they arrive.

Talking to Kane's girlfriend, Ashley, was worse. She understood that her boyfriend was facing a DUI, possibly more charges, and the bitter hatred of every hockey fan in Boston. A trade to some shit team like Buffalo is the best case scenario for him. More likely, they'll put him on waivers, and no other team in the major league will want him after he's screwed over the Raiders so badly.

Ashley wanted Shane to promise to protect Kane from the consequences of his actions. Shane couldn't. But, to be fair, he also didn't tell her that he personally wanted to fucking murder Todd Kane himself. The crash wasn't Johannson or Feller's fault: they trusted Kane when he said when he was good to drive, and Kane's good at looking way more sober than he is.

Whose fault it is doesn't really make a difference, though, does it? The bottom line is that the Cup, which felt so close, almost within Shane's grasp, is suddenly a lot more distant.

What's next is the question of who will fill the gaps in their roster. 23 on their active roster, 20 needed to dress for tomorrow's game in Houston, so they could get away without calling up another guy ASAP—but they won't, obviously. That would be cutting it too close.

The Raiders have a long reserve list, and the natural choice for one of the center spots will be Harlow, a Black Ace from last year who ended up with a decent amount of time on ice as injuries wore the Raiders down in the conference finals.

Then there's Ilya. He's still so new as a professional, only in his fourth month. He's proved himself, though. Hasn't he?

Fuck, Shane shouldn't be thinking about this when he has three players in the hospital. But he's hoped for it so badly. He'd thought his best chance of practicing and *maybe* playing with Ilya would be during the playoffs, if Ilya was called up from the AHL then. This is so much more.

Shane's phone buzzes.

Ilya already messaged him at 8, saying, *I heard the news. Are you okay?*

Not the happiest, Shane wrote.

After some time, Ilya sent him a heart emoji. Shane hadn't fully expected one; he sent his own back right away.

This new message is a lot less enjoyable: it's LeClaire telling the whole team to get their asses to Victory Ice Arena by 11. The original schedule for today, smartly anticipating hangovers among the players, was relatively light in the morning before their flight to Houston. Like everything else, that plan is fucked now.

At Victory Ice Arena, Shane heads to the locker room and finds exactly what he expected: a lot of teammates who are worse for wear, plus Alex Harlow and another guy who played a game or two with them in the 2018 playoffs after Varkov got concussed.

Two men.

As Shane is lacing his left skate, his phone buzzes again. Maybe his mom or dad, but Shane checks anyway.

It's Ilya, asking, *Is that dogsitter still available?*

Shane stares at the message for a moment before it hits him. *Are you fucking saying you're coming to Boston?*

Yes. I am getting in the car with Anya right now 😘.

"Holy fuck," Shane whispers to himself, light-headed. He's going to fight through the playoffs with Ilya. Staying in the same hotels as Ilya, on the Raiders jet with Ilya, saying good morning in his bed to Ilya. Winning the fucking Cup with Ilya. He can see it, Ilya lifting

—oh, fuck—the point is he knows that *Ilya can do it.* They can do it together. They can win, fuck everything else.

"Hey, St.-Simon," Shane calls across the room.

Looking a little haggard, St.-Simon turns to him. "Yeah, captain?"

"Is your dogsitter still free?" Shane racks his brain. "Becca?"

St.-Simon rubs his head. "Depends when, I guess. Like, not tonight, 'cause we're gone, so she'll be with my dog."

"No, I mean, do you think you'd want to double up? Have another dog stay with your dog and Becca?"

"Huh? Did you get a dog?"

Shane's heart is soaring. "No, it's Rozanov. He's coming here."

Ilya's name sparks a hubbub of excitement in the room. Mostly. Harlow, who actually played with Ilya, says, "Hell, yeah! You guys don't know, he's a beast!" But a few of the guys—like Lewis, who got traded to the Raiders in February—are sitting quietly and looking around, as though they either don't know who "Rozanov" is or aren't sure how to react.

Shane's been lucky that the Raiders are a fairly decent group of men. Not perfect, but not vile like Dallas Kent and the Guardians, or like the Metros, with Comeau and Drapeau who got recorded by a fan giving one of the most homophobic rants of all time. There are countless instances, however, when guys on the Raiders have said vaguely homophobic stuff that's totally normal for a locker room in hockey, and Shane hasn't always been the best at telling them to stop. He didn't want anyone to ask why he cared; he didn't want anyone to start saying he *didn't fit in*. He both understands why his past self did that and regrets it, because what if there was another closeted guy on the team who was also feeling every word like a knife?

Now, though, it's different. It's different because the Cup is hanging in the balance and because it's Ilya and maybe because Shane isn't who he was a year ago.

Shane cups his hands around his mouth. "Hey! Listen! Hammer—someone take his earbud out—all right, listen." The room is silent now; he's their captain, *the* Shane Hollander, so what he says goes.

"We all know what happened last night fucking sucks," Shane says. Adrenalin is thrumming through him. "It sucks for Kane and Joey and Feller, and it sucks for us. But we are not screwed. We're still the great team we were yesterday, and we have good guys who had our backs last year coming to us from Providence again. We can make it. *If* we keep our shit together and work as a team. That means nobody gives anyone else shit. We all know Rozanov is, like—bisexual. Doesn't matter. What matters is, can he do his job. And I think he can. Management thinks he can. His stats say he can. So that's it: from right now, we focus,

we stay strong together, and we are going to win this fucking Cup and show them that one car crash is *not* enough to keep the Raiders down!"

"FUCK yeah!" says Marleau, who was chugging a large iced coffee throughout Shane's speech. He slams his empty cup into his stall for emphasis, but the sound of it is drowned out by a wave of approving shouts as like three different guys throw their arms around Shane's shoulders in the rough hug that means love in hockey.

When the Raiders skate out onto the ice a few minutes later, a weary LeClaire says, "You guys are surprisingly cheerful."

"We have a great captain," Connors says.

It's the best Shane has felt in months—with the exception of the times he's in bed with Ilya, of course.

They spend an hour trying to figure out how Harlow and Green, the other guy from Providence, can fit in the gaps in their lines. And then, at noon, the double doors to the rink area bang open.

Next to their assistant coach is Ilya: joyful, grinning, and looking fucking gorgeous in Raiders gear. It's all Shane can do not to skate as fast as he can to him and kiss him.

Chapter End Notes

THANK you to ao3 user Juliusalad who checked over the hockey-dense section of this chapter for me at short notice after I posted on Discord! And for others who also volunteered ❤️ and to the person on tumblr who guided me to the Discord!

Thank you also to everyone who has not spoiled the story!! I'm still getting lots of comments on chapter 19 saying it was a total surprise so that's perfect 🥹

Boston lore: In Boston, March 17 is also Evacuation Day, which is when the British left the city or something. And that's why March 17th is an official holiday in Boston 😉

If you can't leave a comment, or even if you can, come say hi to me as lyricghost on tumblr or tocsincall on threads!

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Ilya skates over to the team, Shane has to keep averting his eyes from him. There's no other way to prevent that telling smile Shane apparently always wears when he looks at his boyfriend, the man he loves. However, Marleau and, surprisingly, Hammer, have no such hesitation in showing affection for Ilya. They grab him, call him *Rozy*, are visibly delighted to have him on the team.

As though they already knew him. From years earlier.

"Hollander! You hungover too?" Dubek asks sympathetically.

"No, I left the bar early," Shane manages to say. The windows along one edge of the rink are faintly reflecting the people on it again. One real Raiders team on the ice, and a group of dream hockey players outside.

Then LeClaire whistles to get their attention, and it's back to work trying various configurations of their roster, except this time Ilya's in the mix too. They try Ilya as third line center, Harlow as second line right wing, and vice versa; Ilya is great in both positions, of course.

Eventually, what's best is perfectly clear: Ilya will be on the second line. Twitter and Reddit, or at least the hockey fans on those sites, are going to melt down when they hear that Ilya Rozanov went from nobody to winger on the second line on one of the best teams in the MLH in four months' time. It does seem unreal.

At one-thirty, LeClaire finally lets his players leave to shower, eat, rest, and pack for this evening's flight to Houston. "Rozanov," he says, "hang back and Reilly will talk to you about your accommodation in the city. You got rid of your old place when you moved to Providence, right?"

"Yes, I subletted it." Briefly, Ilya's eyes meet Shane's. They both know that Ilya is going to stay at Shane's apartment; they didn't even have to discuss that. Should they try to hide it?

"Is there a place where I can keep my dog?" Ilya asks.

LeClaire sighs. "Good point. The extended stay hotel we booked might not allow pets. Christ." He rubs his forehead.

"Uh, Rozanov can stay with me. For now, until you figure something else out." As soon as Shane finishes saying it, he can't believe he just did. His clothes are suddenly way too hot, clinging to his sweaty skin unbearably.

“You sure?” LeClaire asks, taken aback. That’s fair: Shane has never offered to open up his home to anyone, not even a rookie, before. It’s his sanctuary.

“I like dogs,” Shane lies. “I like Rozanov’s dog. If I have to house this guy too—eh, that’s the price I have to pay.” He smiles as best he can.

LeClaire laughs. “Okay. Well, if you’re sure, that works for us. Thanks.” In LeClaire’s pocket, his phone rings, and he swears quietly to himself when he sees the screen. “I need to talk to PR. Hollander, can you take care of him, then, get him to the airport?”

“No problem, Coach.”

Behind LeClaire’s back, Ilya gives Shane a suggestive look that’s almost definitely related to the phrase *take care of him*. Ilya’s going to argue that this entitles him to sexual favors, definitely. Shane loves him so much.

Maybe Shane can do this. Maybe he and Ilya can get past his freakout and he can get over his memories that aren’t memories and it can all go back to the way it was.

“Where is your dog, anyway?” Shane asks Ilya as they head back to the locker room. Though he can’t see anyone nearby, he doesn’t want to risk seeming to know too much about Ilya’s life if anyone happens to overhear.

“With a very beautiful lady in the social media department upstairs.”

“Oh, yeah?” Shane says, trying to sound neutral rather than charmed. He’s missed the rage-baiting side of Ilya.

Ilya smiles. “Yes, a very beautiful golden retriever named Daisy who belongs to social media guy. Whelan, I think.”

“You’re an asshole,” Shane murmurs to him. So much love is spilling out of Shane that it seems impossible for no-one to notice.

Once they enter the locker room, they have to walk a little farther apart. Shane can’t let himself glance at Ilya in the showers, either. Not like when Shane first saw Ilya’s body and learned what it was to want—

Under the water, Shane rubs his face hard and tries to think about what he’ll pack for the flight tonight. This imaginary shit has to stop, it *has to stop*. He has four hours alone in his apartment with Ilya this evening before they have to head out to Logan. He just needs to focus on that.

After finishing up his shower, Shane’s getting dressed in fresh clothes while Ilya is joking around with Marleau.

“So you think I will score, but I can’t get *assists*?”

“I’m just saying, Roz, you were kinda a puck hog in Providence.”

“I was top scorer in the team, Marly! Why pass to guys who will fuck it up? Okay. Let’s make a deal. If I—”

Shane doesn’t hear the rest.

Here, in their raucous locker room that’s warm from the body heat of so many guys, he’s engulfed by the memory of another place: a quiet, air-conditioned bathroom where intermittent speeches and applause are faintly audible in the distance. In the memory, Shane’s seething with a wounded anger that hurts more because it’s intertwined with love: his love for Ilya.

Shane rests his forehead on Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya tells him *no*, dousing Shane’s anger with the pleasure of his attention, his touch, the push-pull magnetism of this game Ilya has set up between them. *Please suck my dick; no.*

Let’s make a deal, Ilya says. Not *go away* or *we are nothing*, but *let’s make a deal*, a promise sealed by a kiss—

Someone’s sitting next to Shane. It’s Carmichael, one of the few guys who didn’t go out last night. “Hollzy, you sure you’re okay?”

Shane blinks. He’s sitting here half-dressed: sweatpants, no shirt, one sock on and one in his hand. Half of the team is already gone. Ilya is lingering in a corner of the room.

“Yeah,” Shane says, a little late. He clears his throat. “Yeah, just sleep-deprived from being at Mass General, taking care of Joey and the others. I’ll be good by tomorrow.”

“Okay, bro.” Carmichael gets up. “See you later, captain. Roz.” He slings his bag of clothes over his shoulder and heads out.

As the locker room empties, Shane slowly puts his remaining sock on and, with clumsy hands, digs in his bag for his clean t-shirt. His body goes through his post-practice routine automatically at this point, which is good because Shane’s mind is chaos—or, actually, chaos turning into order. The fragments that Shane’s been seeing are connecting, merging into one long story that’s whole years of a life, starting with a glimpse of a brilliant player on the ice and flowing on into seasons of Shane’s captaincy of the Metros in Montreal.

Not dreams or hallucinations. Memories.

They’re real memories with depth and grit, they’re mixed up with happiness and betrayal and regret and desire and self-hatred and *sensation*, the smell of cigarettes in a parking lot in Saskatchewan and in a hotel room in Las Vegas, the taste of fries in a restaurant in Montreal and tuna in a house in Boston, the spray of a communal shower in Toronto and a sudden sprinkling of pool water in Tampa—

In comparison, don’t some of Shane’s memories of captaining the Raiders seem a little . . . flat?

“Shane, you are scaring me.”

The room around them is silent now. The only people in it are Shane, standing frozen-still in front of his stall, and Ilya Rozanov.

Ilya Rozanov. Shane's rival since he was 18. Shane's first desire. Shane's fuckbuddy, Shane's friend, Shane's deepest longing. The man who's been an irreplaceable part of Shane's adult life, both a thorn in his side and the person who made his world more beautiful by being in it.

Would the Ilya who was captain of the Raiders be looking at Shane with this tender concern in his eyes? Would that Ilya have agreed to be Shane's *boyfriend*?

"Sorry," Shane says. "I'm just—really tired. Like I told Mikey, I was at Mass General helping our rookie, and then back again this morning."

"Mm." Ilya's expression is still unhappy. "When was your last concussion?"

Shane finishes throwing his dirty clothes in his bag. "Uh. First round of the playoffs last year."

"That was a mild one," Ilya says.

"Yeah, I was only out for two games." Shane wants to shove Ilya and tell him he's an asshole for ghosting Shane after he fucked Shane for the first time. And Shane wants to grab him and kiss him and never let go, because the idea that Shane met Ilya and didn't know he loved him is terrifying. If this man even is Shane's Ilya? He has to be. Shane can't bear it if he's not.

Before they leave, Ilya needs to go up a floor in the building to pick up Anya from Whelan. Promising to be back as soon as possible, he gives Shane a protein bar from his bag and leaves Shane to sit on one of the benches outside the rink area, near the counter where normal people pay to skate.

Ignoring the protein bar, Shane takes out his phone and flicks through his gallery. Playoffs last year: those feel real. Shane's broken left pinky finger, the horseshoe-shaped bruise on his thigh, the gross wet mushroom pizza they ate that night at Shane's house when they were drinking their sorrows away.

Flick. Flick.

Shane stops at random on photos from his Cup win for the Raiders in 2016. He won the Cup for Montreal in 2016 too.

He remembers his Cup parade in Montreal: the sunburn over his cheeks and nose that left him with more freckles. How hungover he was, because all the guys were, and how hard he worked not to show it. He spent the parade sucking on a ginger candy that Hayden said Jackie swore by.

Whereas in Boston . . . the pictures show Shane smiling, hugging his teammates and being hugged by them. There's a sense of happiness connected with the images. He remembers people cheering, the shock of winning for the second time. But if he puts the two sets of memories side by side, there's no question as to which ones feel more true.

Shane stares at the photographs of something that, maybe, never happened and tries to breathe.

This whole thing centers on Ilya. The difference between Shane's two sets of memories is whether or not Ilya was in the 2009 MLH draft. Shane's been thinking for months that Ilya's hockey skills are impossibly good given his level of experience.

Does Ilya remember too?

A little yip draws Shane's attention: sweet Anya, wiggling as she walks in her eagerness to get to Shane without tugging on the leash, which she knows not to do. Shane puts his phone away and welcomes her with open arms, lets her lick his face.

"She missed you," Ilya says.

Shane smoothes his hand over her soft head. "I missed her too."

"You feeling better?"

"Yeah. It's fine." Shane stuffs the protein bar in his pocket, throws his bag of clothes over his shoulder, and walks with Ilya to the staff-only staircase winding down to the parking lot in the back of the facility. Shane's only option is to be fine; the rhythm of the hockey season doesn't stop no matter how much you want it to. Right now, he's the captain of the Boston Raiders. He just has to take this step by step. Down the stairs.

And one last memory comes to him, clicking into place like the final piece of a puzzle.

Shane was in a different stairwell, one in a hotel. He was talking to Ilya, listening intently to words in Russian that he didn't understand. He ended the call and kept sitting there on the stairs, looking at the name *Lily* in his contacts list because he had nothing else of Ilya to hold on to.

And then, for the tiniest shard of a second, there was a terrifying void within him, because he didn't remember who *Lily* was and he knew he was supposed to and he—

Shane stumbles. Ilya grabs him, arms around his waist, and pulls him back so that they both fall on their asses on the hard staircase.

"Fuck! Shane, are you okay?" Sprawled next to Shane, Ilya hasn't let go of him. Shane doesn't want him to.

"Yeah," Shane says. Anya has run up the steps toward him, is whining and licking his hand. Distantly, Shane takes stock of his body in the way he usually does during games. He's good to play, only bruised. "You?"

"Yes, okay." Ilya strokes Shane's arm. "I am calling LeClaire. Only because I don't have number for med team."

"No, you're fucking not." Shane pushes himself to his feet. He might not know exactly where his feet are, his soul might still be trembling from the terror of having the person he loves

erased from his mind, but he is getting on that fucking plane.

Ilya stands, too, and puts his hand against Shane's back. It's gentle; is this Ilya really the man Shane has loved since he was nineteen? What will Shane do if he's not?

Shane turns to face Ilya. "Vegas," he says. His mouth is dry, his tongue feels thick. "After the MLH awards. The bathroom."

Ilya's face goes white.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to MANY kind people on Threads who encouraged me and gave advice. It was truly unexpected and so lovely.

More questions will be answered in the next chapter, I PROMISE!

Lastly, please, as I said on chapter 19, if you don't like the story or the chapter, it's okay to just ghost. No need to tell me.

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

> Reminder to not write spoilers on socials or in a public AO3 bookmark! People really love getting surprised by the twist (see comments on chapter 19!) so I want others to get that same enjoyment. Thank you ❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of all the memories that have come back to Shane, that moment in Vegas during the MLH Awards has reverberated in him the most. At first, it shocked him because he had never known Ilya—the Ilya who was an influencer from Boston—to be so harsh and cold. And it's stayed in the forefront of his thoughts because it was one of the turning points of that life. Shane could have told Ilya to fuck off after his shitty behavior over the past six months. That would have been a natural endpoint for their involvement.

But in those seconds when Ilya was finally getting close to Shane again, Shane found that he didn't want to tell Ilya to go away, because Shane's deepest self wanted Ilya's presence more than it resented his cruelty. And, in a way, the game Ilya had started between them wasn't completely cruel. Maybe other people wouldn't understand it—maybe Shane himself didn't fully understand it—but Ilya's firm hand on Shane's jaw, his little slap on Shane's cheek, were things that Shane loved, at least sometimes. Ilya knew that because he *knew* Shane as nobody else did in that life.

I did not answer your boring texts was Ilya turning his back. *Let's make a deal* was Ilya reaching out.

All the same, it's hard to reconcile that stone-faced Ilya with the mostly sweet Ilya in front of Shane now. Though both Ilyas like to ruffle people's feathers, this Ilya has been more careful with Shane's heart.

This Ilya looks like he might pass out, actually. Before Shane can touch him to steady him, he's sitting down on the steps again. Anya is whining and licking his face; Ilya mumbles something in Russian to her, probably trying to calm her down.

Trying not to think of a night when he was holding his hoodie to his chest, listening to Ilya say *such a good trick*, Shane sits on the step next to Ilya.

After a few deep breaths, Ilya asks, "You remember?"

Oh fuck. It is real, then. If Ilya has the same memories, then Shane has to be right, doesn't he? Somehow, his time in Montreal was *real*. "*You* remember? For how long?"

"Always. Since I woke up here," Ilya says.

“Since you woke up—what, after we were talking on the phone, when you were in Russia?”

“Yes. Jesus fucking Christ.” Still pale, Ilya’s leaning back against the wall. “How long have you remembered?”

“About ten minutes, I guess! You remembered this whole time?!” A lot of what Ilya has done recently is suddenly cast in a very different light. Ilya showing up at Shane’s penthouse, having guessed who Shane was; Ilya perfectly anticipating all of Shane’s desires in bed. All along, Ilya was playing the part of a stranger, but he *knew him*. “Holy shit, we were *dating* and you never fucking said—”

“What the fuck was I supposed to say, Hollander?” Ilya’s voice is loud, echoing in the stairwell, and his lips are thin. “You would think I am some crazy fucking fan and do restraining order, no? You are saying you would have believed me?”

Are those footsteps clanging on the stairs higher up? Hurriedly, Shane says, “We can’t do this here. We can talk at my apartment.”

“Okay,” Ilya says. Anya’s whining again; Ilya pets her comfortingly. “It’s okay, it’s okay. Papa is sorry for yelling.” He presses a kiss to her head. His eyes are glossy with unshed tears.

Oh god. It’s all too much. “Meet you back at my place,” Shane says. It’s way too casual, he knows. But it’s a phrase he’s used to saying, and sometimes in times like this he can’t come up with new words. He does manage to add, “Don’t drive down Storrow.” The last thing he wants is for Ilya to drive distracted and get in a crash with some Masshole going 30 miles above the limit.

“I know, Shane,” Ilya says, softer than before.

In accordance with his own advice, Shane takes the slower route of Brighton Ave to Comm Ave where it’s a peaceful boulevard through Back Bay. Of course that doesn’t mean the car behind him isn’t honking at him for going slow, but fuck them; Shane’s entire body is shaking from adrenaline. It’s only halfway down Comm Ave that Shane realizes he definitely should have called an Uber. Then again, the thought of having to talk to a stranger and breathe in someone’s artificial car air freshener makes him want to be sick.

Somehow Shane makes it back to his apartment in one piece. Once he’s there, he strips off his clothes, leaving them on the floor for possibly the first time in his life, and gets in his en suite’s shower, turning off the waterfall function and turning the showerhead spray to maximum force and heat. Obviously he doesn’t need to be cleaner, since he showered less than an hour ago, but he needs this sensation or else he might—lose it. The water beating hard over his body—sometimes it helps when the world is overwhelming and Shane needs to stop thinking and just *feel*.

Shane doesn’t know how long he spends in there, wasting water, but he hears his front door unlock while he’s still in the shower. He turns it off, towels himself dry rapidly, and pulls on the first sweatpants and sweatshirt that his hands meet when he opens a dresser drawer. He’s sweating a little already from the warmth of the shower.

Ilya is giving Anya some fresh water in her bowl. “I took her for short walk on the Common. Because she has not had a proper walk all day,” he says, straightening up as though Shane has caught him doing something wrong. “I texted you.”

Ilya is as beautiful as he’s been in all the forms Shane’s known him in: cocky rookie, powerful rival, gorgeous influencer, brand-new teammate. His face is slightly flushed, which could be from exercise. His curls are soft, unstyled around his face.

“Sorry, I was, uh. Showering.” Shane licks his lips, pushes his wet hair back from his forehead. “Should we talk? In the bedroom?”

Silently, Ilya nods and follows Shane there. After Shane closes the door, Ilya sits on the edge of the bed, resting his forearms on his thighs and looking at his own feet. Shane follows suit.

Shane’s peaceful bedroom, with his neatly made bed and his reading glasses folded on the nightstand, is a bizarrely mundane place to be having the weirdest fucking conversation of his life. “Shit. I don’t even know where to start,” says Shane.

A brief huff of laughter. “Me either.”

“Do you know what the fuck happened?” Shane asks at last. “So you were in Russia after your dad passed away. You called me. We talked. And then right after I hung up, I—forgot you. I forgot everything, and suddenly I was the captain of the Raiders instead of the Metros?” It sounds ridiculous when Shane says it out loud.

“I think,” Ilya says in a flat tone. His thumb is rubbing over the back of his other hand. “After we talked on the phone, I think I made a wish. In my head, I wished . . . that I could ask you on a date without being afraid of police or losing my job. Right after that, I slipped, and I hit my head. When I woke up, I was in Boston, not Russia, and I was American citizen and a trainer at gym owned by two gay guys. Ta-da, no more problems,” he says sardonically.

Shane’s mouth falls open. It’s impossible to believe that their surroundings, the cotton comforter and the oak bed and the bedroom rug and the apartment and Shane’s entire *life*, are all the creation of a wish, a single thought.

It’s almost as impossible to comprehend that the wish in question was for Ilya to go on a *date* with Shane.

“You really think all this happened because of a wish? Your wish, like . . . rewrote the whole world? It erased my fucking memories and made up a fake past for both of us so that you could be a US citizen?”

“I don’t know. I think so. I didn’t fucking know it would do that, or I would have been more careful about what I wished for!”

“Holy fuck,” Shane says. “Wait. That’s why—your brain injury or whatever! Your accent, and your amnesia—”

“Yes,” Ilya says, awkward or frustrated, Shane can’t tell which. At last, he stops staring in front of himself and turns to Shane. “You said you got your memories back . . . when we were in locker room? You didn’t remember before?”

“I was starting to remember for a while,” Shane says. “But I thought I was—imagining stuff.” *I was terrified*, he doesn’t say.

Ilya nods slowly. “I knew something was wrong.”

“Sorry,” Shane says. It’s easy to say that. Much harder to not to drown under the flood of questions and realizations overwhelming him. “Fuck, did I not really win three Cups? When was it real?” The phone call with Ilya was in—what year?

“No, it’s okay. You won three,” Ilya says, touching Shane’s wrist in reassurance. “Two in fake Boston memories, but also two with Montreal, and one with Boston after the wish.”

Exhaling, Shane says, “Okay.” He turns his hand to take Ilya’s. “Thanks.”

Ilya’s hand is warm in Shane’s. “But I count this as only one Cup ahead of me, because I was not in the league for most of 2017 or after.”

“That’s fair,” Shane says, because it is.

In his Montreal life, Shane had never held Ilya’s hand like this. But . . . Ilya had wanted it, probably, given his wish and how he’s behaved in a world without Russia looming over them. And now they’re together, which is yet another unbelievable thing. Back then, Shane hadn’t even let himself try to envision what being in a relationship with Ilya would be like, because Ilya didn’t do relationships. Everyone knew that.

It’s been really nice being Ilya Rozanov’s boyfriend. Learning how good it could feel if they were a little truer to their own hearts.

Shane lets Ilya’s hand go, but only because he needs to turn to Ilya fully and touch his cheek. And kiss him.

Ilya melts into the kiss immediately, putting his arm around Shane, kissing Shane hard and deep. It’s a little sloppier than his kisses usually are, not that Shane minds. Then—Ilya’s crying, pulling back and trying to wipe his cheeks dry with his fingers, except they’re wet again too fast.

His own vision blurring, Shane pulls Ilya into his arms and maneuvers them both sideways to lie on the bed. Ilya’s face is hidden against the shoulder of Shane’s rapidly dampening t-shirt; he’s silently shaking with hitching breaths, and it hurts Shane like a stab wound. This wish, if it is a wish, was so fucking unfair: during that phone call from Russia, they were so close to letting themselves be something to each other for the first time. And then Shane fucking *forgot* Ilya. Ilya was all alone in an unfamiliar life, and Shane didn’t know he should be missing one of the most important people in his world. They spent a whole year apart.

Shane holds Ilya's solid, familiar frame tighter, breathes in the familiar scent of Ilya's shampoo. Thank God Ilya made a place for himself in Shane's life a second time. Shane can't imagine how terrible it would be to see Ilya on a billboard and understand that he was a stranger to Ilya, merely another face on the street. How hard it must have been for Ilya, that first time they met here in this remade world, to knock on Shane's door.

If only Ilya could have known that there was no way Shane wouldn't fall for him again, right from the very start.

As Ilya's breathing steadies, Shane strokes Ilya's back and says, "I love you."

Chapter End Notes

I have not changed anything important in Chapter 19 since it was published! Maybe a few typos, I honestly forget, but nothing substantial.

Again, if you are unhappy, please 👻 and thank you for reading this far ❤️

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

> Hi all, I have been struggling with carpal tunnel but I am still dedicated to this fic. I am on threads as tocsincall, come say hi if you like!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There can't be any doubt that Ilya loves Shane in return, right? Not after all this. Unless Shane is devastatingly, horrifically wrong—

"I love you," Ilya says to Shane's shoulder. He pushes himself up and, in a voice that breaks, says it again to Shane's face: "I love you." His eyes are swollen from crying, and his nose is red. He's beautiful. Ilya, the love of Shane's life.

Shane's tearing up too from hearing it in Ilya's own voice: that all the love Shane's been feeling wasn't too much or unreturned.

They've made it past so many misunderstandings between them, so much time lost. Shane had understood, since Tampa, that the fear of consequences in Russia was the biggest reason why Ilya felt they couldn't be together—Ilya had told him so explicitly—but Shane hadn't truly comprehended how deep that went. He hadn't thought that in a world where Ilya had an American passport and no more family ties to Russia, Ilya would want to be Shane's boyfriend. The most caring and devoted boyfriend anyone could wish for.

While still being an asshole, of course, because Ilya loves to needle people and chirp and tell obvious lies for fun, and Shane wouldn't want to change a single thing about him.

"I love you too,' Shane says needlessly, just because he can. Since Ilya first sparked a flame of desire in him in 2009, Shane's been telling himself he can't like Ilya, it's stupid, it's a mistake. It's a relief to finally let himself think and say what's been true for a long time. "It wasn't a bad idea."

Ilya, who has leaned in to pepper kisses on Shane's face, says, "What?"

"We kept saying this was a bad idea. Us," Shane says. "But it isn't. Or it shouldn't have been. It's a good idea. The best."

At last, Ilya smiles through his tears. "Yes. I had a good idea. Do the commercial together with this beautiful guy."

"And then jerk off in front of him in the showers, how romantic." But Shane's smiling so wide it probably looks ridiculous.

Ilya kisses him hard, as though he said something super sexy. When Shane looks at him questioningly afterward, Ilya, wearing a fragile expression, says, “I didn’t like lying to you. Or, not lying, but not telling you whole truth about us.”

“It’s okay. I get it.” Shane rubs Ilya’s back again. “It’s true, I wouldn’t have believed you, especially not when we first met.” He reflects. “Oh my god, you made your first video for me like that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Like what?”

Shane shoves him affectionately. “Horny!”

“Maybe,” Ilya says in that way of his where he’s acting playful to cover up how he really feels.

“That’s so hot.” It’s seriously turning Shane on, actually. He’s always loved how good Ilya is at hockey, and this is kind of the same: competence or whatever. “Wait, is that why you were on Instagram in the first place, since you weren’t making money for it? The whole thing was a scheme to meet me?”

Ilya kisses Shane’s neck. “If *scheme* means taking off my shirt and talking about hockey and waiting for Shane Hollander to slide into my DMs, then yes.”

“Oh my god,” Shane says again, his mind blown. All those fucking videos and photos, hours and hours of footage and hundreds of thirst traps, it was all to meet Shane? And it *worked*, Ilya knows Shane too well: Shane didn’t have a chance of not falling for a half-naked Ilya with a mean tongue and cocky grin.

Shane can’t hold back any more. He shoves his hand into Ilya’s pants, where Ilya is getting hard—

In Shane’s own pants pocket, his phone rings. “God fucking damn it,” Shane says, evoking giggles from Ilya for some reason. Without letting go of what’s important here, Shane uses his other hand to take out his phone and answer it. “Hey, Vic, what’s up?”

“Hey, Cap. You said something about Rozanov needing to leave his dog with someone? Becca, my pet sitter, said she’s fine with it, so he can stop by my place on the way to the airport if he wants. Sorry, I don’t have his number.”

Ilya is now desperately muffling his laughter in the muscle of Shane’s shoulder. “Oh, thanks so much, that’s great,” Shane says. “I’ll pass the message on to him. He’s staying at my place for now since they couldn’t figure out how the extended stay hotel would work with his dog.” Does that sound believable?

“Oh, okay,” St.-Simon says. Shane can’t tell at all whether this means that St.-Simon thinks this is weird, or that it seems normal to him, or that St.-Simon simply doesn’t really care. “Well, let him know he can come by any time this afternoon. I’m just gonna be throwing a ball around with Max on the roof terrace.”

“Cool. See you soon, then.” Shane hangs up. “What the fuck was so funny, asshole?”

Ilya’s features are flushed from laughing and relaxed, totally different from how he was barely, what, half an hour before? “No, no, not funny at all, I think you should have all your phone conversations while you’re holding on to my dick.”

“You’re the one who got harder, perv! Come here.”

God, there’s something about kissing Ilya now that makes it even fucking better than before. It was great when they were fuckbuddy rivals, and great when they were boyfriends, but to have the perspective of both those relationships and know they chose one another twice . . . Shane’s more addicted to Ilya than ever. Shane wants to kiss him and blend into one being with him and never ever let him go.

Two blow jobs later, Shane is packing his carry-on by habit alone, given that his mind is still post-orgasmic and swimming with the revelation that magic is fucking real apparently and half of his memories are fake. But he’s not crazy, thank fuck, and Ilya loves him, and his team might be down two centers and a wing but they’re up one Ilya Rozanov, so overall he’s feeling pretty good, at least right now. And as Rose once said, hockey is like theater: the show must go on, no matter what. They have a flight to catch later.

While Shane runs through his packing list on his phone to make sure he hasn’t missed anything, Ilya, who packed this morning, spends a few last minutes with Anya, kissing her nose and promising her that Papa loves her and will be back soon.

“At least she’s met Becca before,” Shane says, “so that should help, right?”

“Yes, I think so.” Ilya strokes Anya’s ears. “You remember Becca?”

Anya’s tail wags, but Shane can’t say whether she recognizes Becca’s name or is just over the moon as usual to be doted on by Ilya. Shane will have to ask Ilya at some point why he got a dog as a fitness instructor in Brighton, but he didn’t get one as a millionaire when pet ownership would have been a lot easier for him.

“Okay. We are ready,” Ilya says, taking Anya’s leash in hand. Anya’s wagging her tail though looking at Ilya with some confusion, as if to say, *didn’t we just go for a walk?*

“Me too.” Shane claims one last kiss from Ilya before stepping back to put appropriate distance between them: they’re just two guys who happen to be living together, and that’s how they head down to the elevator and out into Beacon Hill.

Since the weather is nice and they have time, they’ve decided to cover the short distance from Shane’s apartment to St.-Simon’s house on foot. It’s not far because St.-Simon lives in a Back Bay brownstone that he bought when he got married at the age of 23. Now, at 27, Vic is divorced with a young son who only lives with him for a few weeks during the summer. Both his house and his border collie, Max, are relics of the wife-and-kid lifestyle he used to have. To Victor’s credit, the divorce wasn’t bad; they both just got married way too young, way too fast.

But all this does mean that Shane has felt some sense of kinship with St.-Simon. They're both guys who haven't fit the image of the hockey family man. Not like Hayden—oh, fuck. Shane hadn't thought of Hayden at all until now.

Hayden doesn't know him any more. Nor does JJ or any of the other Metros. That's a really fucking weird thing. On the other hand, Shane now can count a whole lot of the Raiders as friends.

And speaking of friends, Svetlana is now excitedly messaging their group chat with Marleau, listing out advice for Ilya about tomorrow's game against Houston. As always, her insights are sharp and useful. But it is odd reconciling the phantom Svetlana whom Shane envied so painfully in fall 2016 with the real Svetlana who is now, Shane's pretty sure, his own friend as well as Ilya's.

So you'll be watching? Shane asks in the chat, just to have something to say.

Yes, I'm all ready. Svetlana follows this message up with a mirror selfie of herself, from behind, showing off that she's wearing a Hollander jersey. *Good luck boys!*

Walking next to Ilya and Anya on the way to Back Bay, Shane shakes his head. "She's just as big a rage-baiter as you," he says fondly.

Ilya grins. "Of course. Why do you think we are friends? But I think it's okay, Marly knows that she does not want to be his WAG."

"She likes him, though, right?"

"Yes, but she doesn't want to be . . . hm." Ilya rubs his chin. "She wants her life to be about herself. Like, her life is the main course, not side dish to someone else's life."

"I get that." Shane's very aware that having a WAG would have made his own life a hell of a lot easier for plenty of reasons unrelated to his sexuality. Someone to deal with all kinds of team logistics for him, host social events for him, remember stuff for him. That's why marriage to a woman is what's expected of him as a team captain. Being with Ilya instead, breaking that mold, is the more difficult choice. But it's worth it.

At St.-Simon's house, Shane leads Ilya up the front steps and rings the bell. A minute later, St.-Simon, looking a little less hungover, opens it and greets them. "I guess we should have made sure Max and Anya won't fight," he says, worried.

Turns out, it's not a problem. Max the border collie races down the stairs of the house, followed by a panting Becca, and immediately greets Anya with a play bow. Anya returns it, and then they're skipping and bouncing around each other with happy barks, amplifying one another's energy.

Becca greets Shane again, and shakes the hand that Ilya offers, saying, "Oh, you're Anya's dad! She's such a sweetheart." As the pair of dogs start to play harder, she adds, "I think maybe I should take these two to the Esplanade before they knock the house down."

It's a smart idea, so Ilya kneels, smothers Anya in kisses again, and passes over her little backpack with the same list of instructions he provided last time. Anya, unknowing, doesn't even look back as she follows Becca and Max out of the door.

The house is much quieter when they're gone. "Well, thanks again," Shane says. "Uh, I owe you one."

"No problem," St.-Simon says. He clears his throat. "And hey, I wanted to say—me and Carmy have you guys' backs."

"What?" Shane says. It's as though he's done that ice bucket challenge thing again: his whole body is in shock, freezing. Surely Vic doesn't mean . . .

"Obviously, yes—you are d-men," Ilya says. But he's gone very still.

"Yeah, exactly," St.-Simon says. He rubs the back of his neck. "I mean, you guys' private life is private, and that's cool. Just saying, you know, you're the best captain, Hollzy. And glad you joined us, Rozanov." He gives Ilya a friendly punch in the arm.

Ilya promptly returns it. "You are fucking lucky to have me, Vicky."

Shane is still unmoored. Oh god, *private life*, is this code for *you lied to me*, St.-Simon *knows* —

But St.-Simon is smiling. "Anyway, bring Anya over any time. Max is like, the Energizer bunny of dogs; if Anya helps wear him out I'll be buying *you* beers for it."

"We'll hold you to that, Vic," Shane says before realizing that he said *we*. Him and Ilya, a pair, inseparable.

St.-Simon doesn't react, only says, "See you in a little while, then."

They make it as far east as Berkeley Street before Shane has to stop and lean against a cast iron railing around the building on the corner. Ilya can't touch Shane in public, of course, so he can only watch as Shane closes his eyes and tries to center himself.

"It's good, right?" Ilya murmurs to him. "Marly and Vic and Carmy are all okay with it. This is three big, tall, top-tier players who are popular in the team. So even if someone else is not cool, we have good support."

Shane breathes in deep. "Did it freak you out too at first? Being out?"

"Oh my god, I was terrified," Ilya says, making Shane laugh just a little. "Used to stare at my neighbors' Pride flag as though it would eat me."

"Okay." Shane rubs his forehead and stands up straight again. "Let's head back and eat so we can leave for the airport by 4." A dull hunger is growling behind his ribs. He's not usually this careless about his food intake, but this has been an unusual day.

“Shane, the jet flies out at five. Drive from Beacon Hill to Logan is what, fifteen minutes? Why are we leaving at four?”

They start walking east again toward the edge of the Public Garden. “I don’t wanna get stuck in traffic in the tunnel.”

“Oh my god, Hollander, you are so boring.”

The tension in Shane’s body starts to ebb away. In his old life in Montreal, he never got to do this: wander around with Ilya and bicker and eat dinner. He won’t forget to treasure it.

Lunch, if you can call a meal at 3:15 lunch, is a classic prepped meal of chicken breast, veggie medley and a bulgur-rice grain mix. Even Shane can’t pretend that it’s interesting, but he is genuinely exhausted from being up last night at the hospital and then all the emotional upheaval of the day, so he’s barely paying attention as he chews through the macros he needs. He even accepts Ilya’s offer to drive them both to the airport.

On board the Raiders jet, they find that most of the other guys are feeling similarly muted. There’s a lot of dudes settling in to sleep already before the plane has even taken off. So, probably no-one will notice or care that Shane and Ilya are sitting together.

Well . . . maybe they will. Marly and St.-Simon and apparently Carmichael all noticed. But Ilya is warm and beautiful at Shane’s side—too far away, actually, in the plush leather seats of the Raiders jet—and Shane can’t make himself stop. Not after today, not when he and Ilya said they loved each other barely a few hours ago. Maybe Shane’s being stupid, trusting that everything will continue to be okay because it’s been okay so far. But so what if they sit together? They’re not even on different teams, so no-one can say anyone was throwing games. Why can’t they have this?

Plus, Shane’s loved Ilya for ten years but he’s never gotten to see what Ilya’s like when he's flying to an away game. It’s weirdly fascinating to see Ilya go through his own little air travel rituals: water bottle, spearmint gum, nicotine patch, earbuds. Ilya has an inflatable neck pillow and it’s so cute.

“Hey,” Ilya says, poking Shane’s hand. “When did you get this scar on your thumb?”

“I got it—” Shane says. But no, he didn’t, that doesn’t make sense: he hasn’t had this little shiny burn scar recently. When did it come back?

“I got it taking brownies out of Jackie’s oven,” Shane says blankly.

Chapter End Notes

Today's Boston fun fact: much of Boston is not laid out on a consistent grid, but Back Bay is. And the north-south(ish) streets in Back Bay have a certain pattern to them: Arlington

Boylston
Clarendon
Dartmouth
Exeter
Fairfield
Gloucester
Hereford.

Isn't that fun?

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hockey is a game of tough choices. Probably all sports are. Shane has learned, over the years, to make decisions fast: to check or not, to pass or shoot. Waiting too long to decide is the worst decision of all, because then everyone else will decide for you. These days, in those crucial split seconds, all extraneous thoughts dissipate and his mind becomes perfectly clear: sacrifice this chance for that one, or lose the game.

When Ilya asks Shane who Jackie is, that same clarity comes over Shane. Tomorrow is Ilya's first game in the major league, as far as everyone else knows, and the stakes have never been higher. To the public, Ilya is a bisexual influencer who's experienced a meteoric rise, meaning that he has plenty of people watching him and plenty of people ready to gloat when he fails. He needs to prove that he's not just some guy from Instagram; he needs to play like the Ilya Rozanov that was the nightmare opponent of 31 professional hockey teams, and to do that he needs *not* to get fucked up with worries and nerves. Shane can tell Ilya after the game.

What's more, fans will be watching the Raiders in general to see whether they're screwed after the car accident that took their active roster down three men. So Boston needs a win as much as Ilya does.

Shane's about to say that Jackie is an aunt or a cousin or something, but fuck, no he can't, because Ilya has already met his parents and might ask them about this. The only other option he can think of is: "Jackie's my neighbor." Shit, Ilya's still wearing a jealous expression. "I mean, my neighbor's grandma, technically," Shane adds.

"Why were you helping your neighbor's grandmother with brownies?" asks Ilya, unconvinced.

Shane decides that the neighbor in question is going to be Baseball Cap Man, the guy who lives on the third floor and has the name M. Waterford, according to the buzzers by the building entrance. "She was staying with Matt and he had a personal emergency—look, does it matter? It's not like I have a secret girlfriend or something."

That part, at least, must ring true, because Ilya's body language eases, and his frown softens into something more mischievous. "Oh really? Marly was telling me about last year, you and a girl they called, what was it . . . Hickey Girl?"

"Fuck off," Shane says in relief, shoving Ilya's arm before taking out his iPad. "Didn't LeClaire send you tape to watch?"

"Yes, but Houston are so bad, I will probably fall asleep." Ilya digs in his backpack and pulls out an older and obviously well-used iPad of his own.

Houston aren't that bad, actually. They're right in the middle of the league. But according to Ilya, most teams that aren't Boston are the worst ever, just as all guys who aren't Shane or Ilya himself are ugly, not sexy, and/or a million years old (in Scott Hunter's case). Ilya's tendency to be a tiny bit biased about this stuff is just one of the endless aspects of his personality that Shane loves so much.

After Ilya settles in to watch the recording LeClaire sent, Shane puts his noise-canceling headphones on and pretends that he's going to nap. Really, he's trying to come up with a plan.

Okay: Ilya made a wish to be able to date Shane without losing his job or getting in trouble with Russia. And now he's a US citizen who's out and not at risk of being fired. That all makes sense.

But the power of the wish seems to be falling apart. Though Shane isn't exactly a Disney movie connoisseur, he's been at Hayden's house while the twins were in their *Cinderella* phase, and he remembers what happens at the palace after midnight: as Cinderella flees, her silver carriage turns back into a pumpkin. The footmen turn back into mice. She got her wish to go to the ball, but the magic didn't last forever.

There's a lump in Shane's throat; he didn't realize before now how much he prefers the life he's currently living. Yeah, being away from Canada and his parents hurts. Shane is Canadian, he will always be Canadian, and frankly he prefers Montreal as a city over Boston. He misses Hayden and JJ fiercely, too. But, in general, the Raiders' locker room is a little easier to be in than the Metros' one. Fuck knows the Raiders are far from perfect, but Shane would never, ever have been able to say "I love you" to his teammates regularly after games in Montreal. That would have been way too gay.

Most importantly, there's Ilya. It's no fucking big deal if Shane and Ilya hang out together here. It's *normal*. The unbearable and constant fear of being found out and getting embroiled in a huge scandal is—well, not gone, but lessened. Scott Hunter and Ilya are already out; Ilya is Shane's teammate. If Shane's relationship with Ilya got exposed today, it definitely wouldn't be *good*, but it wouldn't be a nuclear fucking meltdown the way it would if Shane Hollander, Metros captain, and Ilya Rozanov, Raiders captain, were discovered to be in love.

And the stuff about Ilya's passport is equally important. Having American citizenship seems to have lifted a weight from Ilya's shoulders. *I don't want to find out*, Ilya had said in that hotel room in Tampa. Shane will never forget how Ilya's voice broke saying it. He had never seemed more vulnerable: not Ilya Rozanov, the ragebaiting monster on ice, but one man alone facing the hatred and power of a whole country.

So yeah, Shane would rather keep this life. Having known the pleasure of being Ilya's boyfriend, hell, of being able to chat with him in public without shocking everyone around them, he can't stand the idea of going back to how they used to live.

But how can Cinderella stop her carriage from turning back into a pumpkin?

The puzzle is that Shane's memories, and this scar, don't seem to have started to come back at any specific length of time after the wish. The wish happened in late February 2017. Shane

first started remembering, like . . . probably before last Christmas, if he thinks back. In other words, the wish didn't begin to fall apart after exactly one or two years or after any time period, as far as Shane can tell.

So if it's not a "magic ends at midnight" situation, then, what is the problem? Why is the wish's magic wearing off?

About halfway to Houston, Shane sits up in his seat. Ilya wished to go on a date with Shane, but . . . they haven't, really. Have they? Shane took Ilya to dinner at Atlantic Fish as part of a group—that doesn't count, right? Could any of the times they've met up really be considered to be a date?

Shane tries to think this over logically. What is a date? The classic options, as he sees it, are: going for coffee, going for drinks, going to dinner, and going to a movie. They haven't done any of those.

If they go on an official date, maybe that will fix it.

Shane looks up their Houston hotel on his phone; he's jogged in a park a block or so away from it before, so he's familiar with the area. Google says the coffee shop next to it closes at 6, which is no good, but the huge Hilton they'll be staying in has a Starbucks inside, and that one's open until 9:30. Not that romantic, and cutting it close, but hopefully they can make it.

Maybe, if they're lucky, a first date here will make the magic of Ilya's wish stay.

"I thought you were napping?" Ilya murmurs to him, with genuine care underneath his teasing tone.

"Yeah, I am," Shane says, putting the phone away. It feels as though a decade has passed since he got the call about Kane's accident last night. Re-adjusting his headphones, Shane sits back in his chair again, and given his state of sleep deprivation, it doesn't take long until he's out like a light.

They land in Houston a little after 8 p.m. local time and emerge from the plane to balmy weather, a perfect 72 degrees, very different from the New England chill they left. On the bus from the airport to the hotel, Ilya's showing some signs of nerves—tapping his middle finger against his thigh in a motion that Shane had learned means *I need a cigarette*—so Shane distracts him by texting him from behind the privacy of his iPhone's screen protector: *Hey, I need to unwind after this shit day. Want to go on a date with me to get some coffee and go for a walk in the park next to the hotel? My treat*, he adds, to make this date as date-ish as possible, and also because he is literally a millionaire and Ilya is not.

The smile that appears on Ilya's face when he reads the message is surprised and sweet. *Wow, you are big spender. Okay, I guess I will go on a date with you.*

The rest of the bus ride is taken up by captain business, including texts with their injured rookie and Carmichael's wife, Jen, who is organizing care packages for all of their teammates who were in the crash. Even Kane, who will remain a Raider until they put him on waivers.

Shane hasn't stopped kind of hating Kane for betraying his team in the worst way. At the same time, Shane is secretly, guiltily grateful that Kane's fuck-up brought Ilya to him earlier.

Once they reach the hotel, Shane antsily takes the elevator up to his room, dumps his luggage without a further thought, and speed-walks back to the hotel Starbucks, where, thank fuck, they're not closed yet. Ilya doesn't really have a favorite coffee drink, preferring to switch it up, so Shane gets him a classically Bostonian iced (decaf) coffee as a form of chirping. Shane orders a plain black decaf for himself.

"You are acting weird," a very familiar voice says behind Shane while he's waiting for their drinks.

"Hey," Shane says. Ilya's wearing the same hoodie and sweats he wore on the plane: nothing special, yet he's such a welcome sight. Ilya's *travelling with Shane on a roadie*; his favorite person, with him all the time, a luxury almost too good to be true. Shane can't let this go.

"I got you an iced coffee, Mr. Boston," Shane says.

"And you got what for you, boring black coffee?" Ilya says with barely-disguised tenderness.

Despite all the insanity and stress of the day, Ilya can still make Shane glow with happiness inside. "Shut up," Shane says.

"No," Ilya says, proud of himself. He glances at his watch. "I told Harlow I'm going out for a walk to clear my head. I am so sure he is jerking off right now. He always does this. So I need to be gone half an hour at least."

"No problem," Shane says. Ten years loving each other, and Shane has never roomed with Ilya on a road trip, while Harlow has done it often enough for Ilya to know his habits. Unfair. The only person who should be sharing a room with Ilya is Shane.

But there probably isn't a way to make that happen without outing them to LeClaire, and that . . . Shane prefers not to think about it. LeClaire's never been shitty about Pride or anything, though he's also never been, like, openly supportive of gay or bisexual people either. He seems to treat Pride Night as a box to tick, same as all the other paperwork they have to do and hoops they have to jump through. It's hard to know how he'd react to the revelation that one of his players is gay.

He'd probably be weirded out by two of his players dating. It's unprecedented, as far as anyone knows.

The barista calls out their drink orders, and Shane and Ilya take their drinks and stroll out into the evening warmth of Houston. Right outside the hotel is a main road, which is not super relaxing, but on the next block is Discovery Green, a scenic park that's more appropriate for a date. Probably would be more scenic in the daytime, but it's nice in the dark too.

"So what is really going on?" Ilya asks Shane.

Shane sips his coffee. “I just felt like . . . we’re both stressed, and . . . I wanted to spend time with you. I mean, it’s great that you were playing for Providence, but we didn’t get to see each other that much.”

“More than when you played for Montreal,” Ilya says.

“Yeah,” Shane says.

There’s a soft breeze, and they’re walking elbow to elbow. Both wearing athletic clothes, not holding hands or anything. Most people watching wouldn’t assume they’re on a date, but it’s right for Shane and Ilya, maybe. This is who they are, guys who are constantly working out. All the same, Shane would like, one day, to take Ilya to a formal dinner somewhere, just the two of them. It would be nice to go with Ilya to the SuperLux cinema and lay back in luxury while watching one of the car racing movies Ilya enjoys. Maybe one day they could even go to a club together. Shane doesn’t typically love clubbing, but it would be satisfying to know that, after all the people Ilya has ground on and made out with in clubs, Shane will be the very last one.

“I was a little bit stressed,” Ilya admits after a minute. “This is nice. Thank you.”

I would give you so much more if I could, Shane wants to say. Instead, he says, “Remember, you don’t have to be the best guy in the league tomorrow. As far as they know, you’re a call-up from the AHL. If you play as well as basically Dubek or our other second or third line guys, you’re good.”

Ilya cracks up. “Oh, Dubek would die if I told him you said that.”

“Don’t tell him, then!” Shane knows Ilya wouldn’t really.

“No, no, I won’t. He loves you. They all love you.” Since there’s no-one around, Ilya adds, “Me too.”

“Hopefully not in the same way,” Shane says dryly.

“If they do, they can go cry about it. You are *my* boyfriend.” Ilya gently shoulder-bumps Shane.

Shane returns the gesture. “I love you too.”

They head down a curving path surrounded by new springtime grass. Of course, since they’re in a city, the stars are barely visible above despite the dark sky. This summer, Shane will bring Ilya to his cottage in Quebec, if Ilya wants to come, and they’ll lie on the deckchairs in his backyard and look at the constellations.

Unless the wish’s magic breaks and Shane wakes up back in Montreal again.

“I want to fuck you,” Ilya says with a sigh. They’ve already agreed they won’t: they don’t want to cast any suspicion on themselves on Ilya’s very first night with the Boston Raiders, and Shane doesn’t do anal the evening before a game anyway. Well, not unless it’s a really terrible team like Ottawa. Or if he hasn’t seen Ilya in weeks and he really wants to.

“So do I. Want that, I mean,” Shane says. “Maybe you can come to my room and I’ll blow you quickly.”

“You know if I do that we will end up fucking all night,” Ilya points out.

“Yeah, I know. Never mind.”

In a low voice, Ilya says, “I will lie in my bed next to Harlow’s bed and write you text about what I will do when we get back to your place tomorrow night. Then you will jerk off thinking about me.”

Oh, that works. “What are you gonna do?”

“Jerk off in the shower, obviously.”

“Yeah, okay,” Shane says. Lit by the streetlights in the park, Ilya looks pleased with himself. Shane wants to kiss him maybe more than he ever has before.

On their way back out of the park, Shane asks, “Was it a good date?”

Ilya pulls at his ear thoughtfully. “I think this is the first date I have ever been on.” He smiles with genuine happiness. “So yes.”

It’s unbelievably hard to leave Ilya at the park entrance and watch him head into the hotel alone. So that they’re not seen coming back together, Shane stops by a convenience store next to the hotel and browses for a while before buying some gum. It feels like an insult lying in his pocket, yet another reminder that he has to keep his love secret.

On his own in his room, Shane orders pasta, vegetables, and chicken from room service, purely for sustenance, since he slept through dinner on the plane. What’s more enjoyable is that Ilya does text Shane later, as promised, and Shane does jerk off to it. This wasn’t a bad idea, since it helps fight all the stress and weirdness of the day to help Shane sleep.

The next morning, Shane looks over his whole body to find any other scars that are from his Montreal life. He used to have a big slice on his leg from a massive pile-on fight in Minnesota, and that hasn’t appeared. Yet.

The morning goes well. Normally. Shane has almost managed to put the whole wish thing out of his head until Svetlana texts their group chat while they’re in the locker room getting dressed for the game.

Go 24, go 81, go 7! Don’t forget what I said about their second defensive pair. And Ilyusha remember to PASS even if you are better player than Connors. He is still good, good accuracy

Marleau has replied: *Thank u we will kick their asses! But we don’t have a 24 right now. did you typo?*

Chapter End Notes

Reminder: Shane's jersey number is 80 in the post-wish world! This was a plot point in the trivia contest with Svetlana (which is a long time ago now, I realize!)

Since there's a lot of talk about AI in the fandom recently, I want to be clear that I totally reject and hate AI. I've never used AI for a single thing in this story and I wouldn't even know how to. I've never received any accusations of using AI, but I wanted to make my stance clear anyway. I talked about this more on threads (I'm tocsincall).

Also, a note about Boston. In this fandom, I feel that Boston/the Raiders are sometimes framed as the nice guys in contrast to Montreal and the Metros, who are the bad guys. I can tell you that's not true to reality in the case of Boston. It may have queer-friendly laws, but it is notoriously racist.

That being said, I imagine that the Boston of this universe is a less racist place, a place where Shane could be happy. I would never write Shane choosing to endure more racism for Ilya's sake. But if you would like to read more about the real Boston's racism, read this article series: https://apps.bostonglobe.com/spotlight/boston-racism-image-reality/

Chapter 44

In the Houston Drillers' visitors' locker room after the final buzzer, Marley, Hammersmith and Varkov are throwing themselves at Ilya the way a dog does when it's so incredibly excited to see someone that it knocks the person over. St.-Simon and Carmichael, who probably have too much common sense to ram their huge d-man frames into him too, are ruffling his hair and slapping his shoulders.

"Yes! Fucking yes, brother!" Marleau is saying.

"I told you, I fucking told you, Marley!" Ilya shouts, red-faced, ecstatic, half-buried under sweaty guys hugging him. "ONE goal, ONE assist, fucking pay up—"

"Dude, aren't you happy?" Connors asks Shane. "They can't say we've lost our chance at the Cup now." The Raiders won 3-1 over Houston: two goals from Shane, one from Ilya. Ilya's going to be pissed off tonight that Shane scored one more than him. It's gonna be great.

"Yeah, of course I am," Shane says. He's fighting himself, using all his mental strength to stay on the other side of the locker room rather than grabbing Ilya too and kissing him and telling him how much he loves him. Shane could have got away with a helmet kiss during the game like Ilya's at the All-Star Game except they're on separate fucking lines and never on the ice at the same time. Ilya would have had *two* assists if Shane was his center.

No, that's not fair. Connors is a fucking excellent player. He wouldn't be second line center for the Raiders if he wasn't. He's just not as good as Shane and Ilya—but nobody is. They're in their own class together.

God, Ilya is so fucking hot. Shane has to look away and focus on stripping his sweaty underlayers off so he can get into the shower.

"Rozanov!" LeClaire calls. "They want you for media. Keep it simple, okay? Happy to be here, great to work with the team, Houston are a great team to play against."

"Okay, coach," Ilya says seriously. He's smart enough to know that a twenty-seven-year-old Ilya Rozanov who just got called up from the AHL doesn't have the same leeway to be provocative and cocky that Ilya Rozanov, nineteen-year-old first draft pick, had. "No problem. I will keep it very simple."

"Good man. And hey." LeClaire smiles. "Fantastic job out there."

"Thank you, coach." Ilya is beaming, and possibly a little teary-eyed.

Shane swallows and heads into the showers. He's so fucking proud of Ilya. He just wants to show it.

And all this proves Shane was right to keep Ilya in blissful ignorance. He thought everything was ruined when Svetlana sent that text, which, fuck, he hasn't even begun to process

himself. But he managed to keep Ilya from seeing it by spamming the chat with a whole bunch of Anya photos that Becca the dog-watcher had sent to him and Ilya. Ilya scrolled up a little, saw the photos that he had already saved, and didn't scroll up all the way.

Shane's going to have to talk to Ilya soon, though. Because if Svetlana is *also* remembering . . . the date might not have stopped the wish magic from disintegrating after all.

Wait a minute. The Boston guys have been so friendly to Ilya, especially recently. Would they have celebrated a goal and an assist that way for the other guys from Providence? Do they, on some level, remember him too?

"Hollander, you okay?" Dubek asks him as they leave the showers together. "You were spacing out."

"Yeah. Got a headache, I think. Probably didn't hydrate enough," Shane says.

"Hollzy, you coming with us to partyyyyy?" Marleau is grinning. "I owe Roz a bottle of Dom Perignon. That motherfucker!"

"I hope so. I gotta take some Advil." Shane feels Ilya's worried gaze on him. As Shane gets dressed, he texts Ilya: *Come to my room before we go out*?

Okay, Ilya texts back.

Ilya waits about ten minutes after their return to the hotel before knocking quietly on Shane's door. He's carrying an ice bucket in his hand, for plausible deniability. His suit jacket and tie are gone, leaving him in just his suit pants and a white ironed shirt that's way less well-fitted to his body than his shirts used to be. He looks gorgeous anyway.

Shane hate, hates ruining Ilya's joy. But he can't lie to him either.

"Shane, tell me what the fuck is wrong." Ilya drops the bucket by the door and brushes his thumb over Shane's cheek. "You're scaring me. I thought you would be on your knees two seconds after I came in the door."

"I normally would be," Shane says. He licks his lips. "Can we sit?"

Ilya's face falls. He sits on the side of the bed next to Shane. Too far away. "Okay," he says.

The whoops of overly-excited hockey players echo down the hallway outside, not drowned out by the sterile hum of the room's air conditioner.

Shane's fingers trace along the outside leg seam of his own suit pants. "I lied when I said Jackie was my neighbor's grandma."

"I knew that. But I know you were not cheating, because you're gay, so . . ."

"I wouldn't cheat on you anyway. Never." Doesn't Ilya know Shane at all? "It was Jackie Pike. Hayden's wife." He holds his thumb out, showing the scar. "I got this helping her with brownies when I came over for dinner. When I played for Montreal."

His eyes widening, Ilya says, “Your scars from Montreal are coming back?”

“Yeah. And Svetlana texted the group chat calling me 24 instead of 80. That’s why I sent all those pictures of Anya. To distract you. I’m sorry. I just wanted you to have the best MLH debut possible. I didn’t want this to get in your head.”

“Fuck.” Ilya presses his knuckles against his browbone. “I have seen some similar things too. Before you remembered, Svetlana said stuff that made me wonder. I told myself I was imagining it.”

“I thought that maybe us going on a date would help fix it,” Shane says. “Like, make the wish stick, since that’s what you wished for. You would prefer for everything to stay like this, right? Even if it means you never won a Cup?”

“Didn’t win a Cup *yet*,” Ilya corrects with a trace of his usual cockiness. “Yes, of course, Shane, as long as I have you, I would stay here. I would love to be Canadian citizen, but an American passport is a lot fucking better than Russian. I don’t want to go back to how it was.”

“Me either,” Shane says with all his heart. He puts his hand on Ilya’s. “So we figure out a way to make the world stay this way. I just don’t know what else that could be.”

Ilya moves closer to Shane on the bed so that they’re pressed together, side to side. “Probably not a date, because . . . that is not actually what I wished.”

“*What*?”

“I’ve tried many times to think of exactly what was in my mind when I made the wish. I think it was something like: *I wish I could love him safely and freely, without being afraid.* Without holding back.”

Shane knows exactly the feeling that Ilya’s describing. Wanting to touch, wanting to kiss, wanting to say how important Ilya is to him, and always restraining himself. “Why didn’t you say that in the first place?”

Ilya shoots him a look of annoyance. “I didn’t know if you hated me then. I didn’t think it was the right time to say *love*.”

“I would never have hated you. You really think that about me?”

“I don’t know,” Ilya says. He chews on the inside of his cheek. “I don’t know how to make this world stay. Why did you think that going on a date would make the wish stick and not the opposite? Maybe properly doing what I wished for would have made this”—he waves his hand—“end.”

“Shit, I didn’t think of that,” Shane says. Fuck.

Someone hammers on Shane’s door. “Captain! You coming? And have you seen Rozy anywhere?”

“Uh—he said he was going to the vending machine to get a Snickers,” Shane improvises. “What floor is the vending machine on?”

“Fuck if I know. I’ll text him. But are you coming?”

Shane opens the door a crack. “I’m really sorry, my head is killing me, I gotta lie down. Buy the guys a round of shots for me, and I’ll pay you back?”

“No problem, Hollzy,” Hammersmith says sympathetically. “I’ll text you our location so you can join later if you want.”

“Thanks, that’d be great.” Shane forces a smile until Hammersmith leaves.

As soon as the door closes, Ilya is behind Shane, crowding into his space, kissing the back of his neck. “I know what is good for headaches,” he says.

Shane turns around in Ilya’s arms. “I don’t really have a headache, asshole. But you know you have to go out with them, right? It’s your first game, technically, and they’re celebrating you. You can’t get a reputation for not being a team player.”

Kissing Shane’s neck, Ilya makes a disappointed sound. “Then why aren’t you coming?”

“I need to figure out how wishes work. I don’t know how much time we have.” Because Ilya’s been alone in a room with him for two whole minutes and they haven’t kissed yet, Shane kisses him. It’s not the devouring kiss he wants to give, but Ilya can’t show up to the bar or club or wherever they’re going looking like he just made out with someone. “Text them and say you’re coming in five minutes.”

Ilya’s eyes light up. He takes his phone out of his pocket, but Shane can’t see what he does next, because Shane is already going down on his knees. He really does need to suck Ilya’s dick after that fucking beautiful game Ilya played today. It’s simply not optional.

Though the evening, the guys post glimpses of their partying in the group chat: Ilya swigging directly from the champagne bottle, a short video where they’re drunkenly pledging their love to their two fallen teammates who were hurt when Kane crashed into the pole.

Meanwhile, Shane’s googling wishes and getting a whole lot of nothing relevant. Ugly Etsy crafts about wishes, famous wishing wells, the Make-a-Wish Foundation (which Shane has worked with before).

Shane ends up renting a bunch of TV shows and movies about wishes—*13 Going on 30*, *Bruce Almighty*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, an episode of *The Twilight Zone*—and skipping to the end to see how the stories get resolved. It’s useless, because these stories’ protagonists always prefer their original worlds and lives. *Cinderella* is the only story where the wish’s magic fades over time; the other stories typically end up getting resolved when the protagonist wishes to undo everything they wished for, learning the lesson *be grateful for what you have*, if not *be careful what you wish for*.

The difference is that Ilya's wish wasn't greedy or naive. He didn't wish for massive wealth or power. He just wanted to be fucking safe.

It is kind of bittersweet that the wish fulfilled itself by changing Ilya's history rather than by changing the world to be less homophobic. Maybe eradicating homophobia was too big a change.

Eventually, after hours of staring at his screen, Shane truly does have a headache. And he has come to one horrible conclusion: *if* fulfilling the wish is what will make it stick, then Ilya needs to love Shane freely, and surely that means their relationship has to be public. Shane will have to come out.

Fuck, he doesn't want to. Maybe one day, but not yet. He's not ready. It's so fucking unfair that he has to come out at all, honestly. Hayden never had to come out as straight. Why does Shane have to make a fucking announcement about who he loves? Why can't he just fucking play hockey and date a guy he loves the same way all the other guys date women they love?

But Shane also can't do nothing. He can't let this world slip away like sand through his fingers. He wants to go out and celebrate with Ilya as his teammate. He wants Ilya in the seat next to him during all the tedious flights he takes all over the US and Canada.

Even if it doesn't work, he has to try.

At almost one in the morning, Ilya texts saying that he's coming back and wants to see Shane. The message is surprisingly coherent, given the champagne, so Shane agrees and even takes a shower to get ready, just in case.

When Ilya appears back at Shane's doorway, it's reminiscent of all of their hookups in the past, in their old life. Ilya doesn't seem drunk at all; his gaze is as alert and hungry as it is on the ice.

Shane tugs him in by the shirt and kisses him the way he wanted to kiss him hours earlier. Ilya's hands slide under Shane's shirt, then one of them grips Shane's chin in the way that always makes Shane's mind and body go quiet.

"Weren't you drinking?" Shane asks when they part so Ilya can peel off his shirt. Fuck, he smells of nightclub, sweat and perfume and alcohol—and cigarettes, damn it—but even that's good when it's Ilya. Shane will never, ever get tired of looking at his beautiful body, his full mouth.

"Yes, but not much, and I stopped early. I wanted to fuck you," Ilya says, his hands roaming over Shane's skin.

Shane smiles. He's reminded of the very first time Ilya said this: "Noo, I want to fuck you, Hollander!" For Shane, back then, that was nice to hear—Ilya really wanted him—even though the thought of doing anal was scary and overwhelming too.

It's not scary any more. "Come on, then, and fuck me," Shane says. "Slow, so nobody hears."

Ilya steps forward so they're chest-to-chest. "No problem, if you can stay quiet. No moaning or sex sounds."

"I can. Can you?"

Ilya answers him with a kiss and a hand groping his pec.

From there, time turns syrupy and luxurious, as it always does when Shane is with Ilya. Shane lets Ilya push him down on the bed and suck his dick; Shane often puts his forearm over his eyes because the sensation is so much, but now he has to lightly bite his own muscle instead to keep from making noise, since that's the challenge Ilya has issued. It's a competition between them, it always will be, even if they're on the same team. That's what nobody else will ever understand. They make each other better in the push-pull, the give-take, the endless game they love to play.

Ilya slides a lubed-up finger into Shane's ass, and Shane knows he's about to lose, so he pulls Ilya up to see him face to face. "You're my favorite player," Shane whispers into Ilya's ear as he tugs Ilya's hair and touches Ilya's dick. "I wanted you to fuck me on center ice today. While everyone watched."

Ilya almost groans, but stifles it. Playing it cool, he tells Shane to get on his stomach, and starts fingering Shane, kissing Shane's nape and curling himself against Shane's back so they're still in contact.

When Ilya slides in and starts fucking Shane, it is slow, so the bed isn't banging against the wall. They turn on their sides to make it more comfortable to stay together for a long time. There's no rush, no desperate pace, only the heartbeat-presence of Ilya next to Shane and the lazy pleasure of Ilya's dick filling him. The wish may be falling apart, but they have a whole night to spend now.

As Ilya twists to kiss Shane's chest, Shane says, "I love you." Not to make Ilya lose the competition, but because it's so true, as intrinsically true as gravity. The world might have changed, and Shane lost his memories, but he didn't forget to love Ilya.

Ilya says something in Russian that Shane suspects is *I love you,* and then he says it again in his beautiful English: "I love you. I will always love you."

"Me too," Shane says.

Ilya runs his fingertips along Shane's thigh that's pulled up almost to his chest, and Shane's head falls back in silent bliss. Ilya's sure, callused hands, moving him, molding him as Ilya fucks him leisurely, as unhurried as mornings at Shane's cottage when Shane touches himself, half-asleep. It's so good, Shane will never get tired of it, not in his whole life.

It only takes a few strokes of Shane's dick by Ilya's hand for Shane to come, and Ilya lets himself come shortly afterward. He stays inside Shane for a while longer, kissing Shane's neck.

After they've cleaned up, Ilya joins Shane in bed again, his naked body welcome and familiar in Shane's embrace. "I've been thinking," Shane says. "The only answer I can come up with is for me to come out. Then you can 'love me freely.' You know, openly."

"Do you *want* to come out?" Ilya's hand is rubbing over Shane's head. Not really carding through his hair, since his haircut is mostly too short for that. It feels good.

"No. But I want to try something. We have to try something."

"What if it does the opposite? Ends the wish?"

"It's ending anyway," Shane says. The words hang heavy in the air. "Svetlana's starting to remember. The Raiders are already calling you Roz and Rozy." It sounds natural from them, not something new but a nickname they're so used to saying that it's thoughtless.

After a few seconds, Ilya says, "Maybe we tell the team we are together first. I have been thinking too: probably they can accept us, but it will not go so well if we keep it secret for long time. Then they will feel like we were lying to them. You know? And then, if you want to come out later, at least they knew."

"That's a good point." Shane exhales. "Okay. Fuck. When we're back on home turf at Victory Ice Arena, we tell them then. Not right before a game, obviously."

"Okay," Ilya says.

Shane pushes his forehead into the meat of Ilya's shoulder as a comfort thing; Ilya strokes Shane's back, kissing his ear, his head, as though to reassure himself as well as Shane. They fall asleep holding each other, and wake to Ilya's seven a.m. phone alarm to get him back in his room before anyone else is awake. Ilya picks up his ice bucket again—plausible deniability once more—and slips out into the vacant hotel hallway.

Yeah. Coming out to the team will be terrifying. It might be worth it, though.

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the journey home, Shane sits with Marleau and listens to the latest updates in his saga of car trouble. Marly put the wrong type of gas, or maybe oil, in his new Porsche . . . ? Shane's not completely sure. He's thinking about the text Ilya sent earlier: *I had phone call with Svetlana this morning. She remembers. She remembered while she was watching me play last night.*

Automatically, Shane follows the next steps of his routine. Drive back from Logan to his apartment. Go running on the Common to unwind. Take a shower. The part about Ilya going to pick up Anya is new, but it slots in fine.

Shane has to take some photos for a sponsored Instagram post about the seltzer water he's currently sponsored by. He's never been less interested in it, but he takes the photos and sends them off to his mom, then flicks through his social media while Ilya's in their bedroom doing a phone interview for the Boston Globe.

Ilya got everyone's attention in Houston, that's for sure. There are tons of posts speculating about how he got that good. Some saying he's using PEDs—Shane forwards those to the Raiders legal team. Others calling him a gay icon, even though he's actually bisexual.

There are also a few posts positioning Ilya as a "challenger" to Shane on the Raiders, and that really pisses Shane off. Maybe it's another sign of their old life breaking through. Maybe it's just people on the internet stirring up drama. Maybe it's the same subtle racism that always has people leaping to say that Shane is faltering or falling off his pedestal. In any case, Shane responds by aggressively liking, re-posting and re-tweeting a bunch of posts supporting Ilya.

That night, they sit together on the couch, eating dinner, petting Anya, and talking their options over. Ilya still can't think of any better idea than going public with their relationship. Shane can't either. And Ilya's point about how the Raiders might feel if they learned Shane and Ilya had a secret relationship for a long time was valid.

So they do it the next morning: Shane and Ilya go to Victory Ice Arena a little early and ask to speak to LeClaire in his office. Despite the size of the Victory sports complex, his office is a small space. Or it feels small today.

"This looks serious, boys," LeClaire says. "I saw you went partying last night to celebrate the win. Did something happen?"

"No, not at all," Shane says. He doesn't know how to ease into what he wants to say, so he just says it: "Rozanov and I are dating."

LeClaire's eyebrows rise to the very top of his forehead. "Oh. Wow. Okay." He scratches his temple. "Well, fine. This is, uh . . . I guess you have to fill out the relationship disclosure

paperwork. I don't think the lawyers were thinking of our players when they drew *that* up."

"Can we rely on the Raiders' support?" Shane asks.

"Of course." LeClaire stops peering at his computer and takes his glasses off to look at his two visitors. "Shane, you know I'm a traditional guy. I don't get all this LGB-whatever stuff."

Shane's blood runs cold.

"But our team is built around you. You know that. I'll swear I never said this if anyone asks, but *you're* the guy who brings our Cups home. Frankly, I don't give a flying fuck who you date as long as you keep winning games and don't bring lovers' spats to work. Even more frankly, you're welcome to date a third guy if he can play like Rozanov."

"No. We are not dating other people," Ilya says. He's offended, Shane guesses. Shane is.

"Well, that's fine too. I guess you're going to tell the team today? I did wonder, after you said Rozanov was staying with you . . . are you planning on going public?"

"Uh," Shane says. He's supposed to say *yes*. He's not ready. "Not sure yet."

"Okay, fine. What about our staff here? Do I need to get them to sign NDAs?"

The meeting devolves into a load of questions along these lines, most of which Shane and Ilya aren't prepared to answer. Shane probably should have talked to his parents before he did this, but—again, he shouldn't *have* to. Hayden didn't have to talk to his parents before he told everyone he was dating Jackie; Ryan Carmichael didn't have to meet with LeClaire before he got engaged to Jen.

Once they're done, there's a little time to spare before practice starts. They head to the back parking lot of Victory Ice Arena; Shane leans against his car hood while Ilya, next to him, smokes. Shane, though he hates it, can't blame him.

"Was that fucked up?" Shane asks him. A strong, chilly wind is playing with the strings of Shane's hoodie and tousling Ilya's curls. On the other side of the parking lot fence, cars are zooming down the Mass Pike.

"Was kind of fucked up," Ilya says. "A lot fucking better than it would have been in Russia, though." He takes a drag of his cigarette.

"Do you think anyone enjoys coming out?"

"Hmm. I think some people do. I think I would have liked to celebrate coming out. If this world was real and my parents were okay about it. Without the League and Russian police, it's a happy thing for me."

"Really?" Shane asks.

"Yes. But I think it's also okay if you don't want that."

“I just want to play hockey,” Shane says. Does that mean he has internalized homophobia, a concept he learned about last night while he was looking up scripts for coming out? He doesn’t think so.

Dubek’s stupid Ferrari pulls into the lot, and Ilya says, “Showtime.”

They head up to the locker room—not separately this time. They’ll never need to go places separately to hide their relationship from the Raiders again.

Shane and Ilya get changed into their practice gear first, so they can only wait while all the other guys trickle in and get changed too. Once the last poor hungover rookie has crept in and started pulling his skates on, Shane stands up and says, “Hey. I have an announcement.”

“Don’t tell me someone else crashed their car,” Connors says, which is actually funny, if grim.

“No.” Shane doesn’t know what to do with his hands; he should have picked up his water bottle just to have something to hold. “I trust you guys to keep this private: Rozanov and I are dating. If you have a problem with it, go fuck yourself.” He tries to smile and make the last part a joke.

What follows is the longest second of silence Shane has ever heard. It breaks with, simultaneously, Dubek saying “Holy shit,” and the great Carmichael–St.-Simon defensive pair clapping politely as though Shane just did a trick.

“Go Cap and Rozy!” Marly yells, way too loud, and then the whole room erupts into chaos. Mostly positive chaos, as far as Shane can tell. Guys are slapping his shoulders, maybe not knowing what else to do in this situation, and like three people are saying something along the lines of, “Of course any guy Hollander dates is gonna be a beast at hockey.”

“Wait,” Oregan the goalie says. “Was Rozanov good at hockey before you two started dating, or . . .?”

“You mean did he give me hockey skills with his dick? Too bad, you will never know,” Ilya says.

“All right, get the fuck on the ice!” Shane shouts, and they do.

Practice is okay. It’s 95% normal, and nobody’s like muttering slurs or anything. The awkwardness hanging over them fades over time, and the shower after practice is fine, though Shane stares straight ahead throughout it. Perhaps having Scott Hunter as an example has helped; Shane isn’t even the first gay Cup-winning MLH captain in the Eastern division. Ha.

But the burn scar is still there on Shane’s thumb.

Shane doesn’t know how he’s supposed to feel that afternoon. He drives himself and Ilya home, back to the apartment that they share because they’re boyfriends; no secrecy any more. Ilya takes Anya for a walk, giving Shane some alone time to lie on the couch and stare at the

ceiling, and then Ilya brings Anya back and lets her cuddle with both of them while they watch tape to prepare for their game with Toronto tonight. It really does help, petting her. She doesn't know what *gay* or *bisexual* or *straight* mean. She just loves Ilya, and by association, Shane.

They have to face the super-asshole duo of Dallas Kent and Troy Barrett tonight. How fitting: the guys who are most likely to hurl homophobic slurs on the ice.

Shane's phone buzzes: it's Ilya in the Raiders group chat, betting that he's going to score *two* goals tonight.

"You really think that's helpful?" Shane asks him.

"Is it helpful if I score two goals? Yes, traditionally this is seen as good in hock—" Ilya doesn't get to finish his sentence because Shane is whacking him with a throw pillow. Of course, Ilya soon fights back; Anya, who is getting better at telling the difference between play fighting and real fighting, flops at their feet and sighs.

Afterwards, Shane feels better, more ready to face down the two most punchable men in the league.

A glance out at the arena seats in TD Garden that evening before the game shows Shane several Pride flags and bisexual flags, presumably in honor of Ilya. It's Ilya's first home game in over two years—and ever, in the eyes of the public.

Could Shane do what Scott Hunter did? Kiss Ilya on the ice after they win? Would that let him and Ilya keep this?

It's fair to say that Shane is distracted in the first period. Dallas Kent is in full pest mode and Shane found out magic existed and all his memories were a lie three days ago, so he's still a little off-kilter. Not that that's an excuse.

The upside is that Oregan, their goalie, and the Raiders defense are as solid as ever, so while none of the Raiders have scored by the first intermission, none of the Guardians have either.

The second period is . . . worse. A bunch of goals happen in quick succession: Shane for the Raiders, Barrett for the Guardians, Ilya for the Raiders—and this last one apparently is too much for Dallas Kent to handle, because he skates past the Raiders bench and says something to Ilya that's so vile it has multiple guys trying to jump on the ice to fight him.

Shane really should have seen this coming. He *would* have seen this coming on a normal day: Dallas Kent is a massive homophobe, Ilya is an out bisexual. Once Kent got mad that his team was losing, it was inevitable.

The next part is equally inevitable. Shane doesn't fight often, but when he does, he means it.

Shane drops his gloves and punches Kent hard in the mouth. It's a good, clean punch, and it feels great to see Kent drop like the loser he is. Naturally, this provokes one of the worst all-out brawls of the season and a misconduct penalty for Shane. He's fine with it. There are

definitely going to be a million thinkpieces online tomorrow about whether Shane went too far or Ilya's sexuality is a distraction, but fuck it. Kent needed to be punched. And, crucially, every single Raider backed Shane up. He's not alone.

Unfortunately, while Shane and several other Raiders are sitting in the sin bin, the Guardians score again, drawing the game 2-2.

LeClaire is not pleased with them, and he lets them know in the second intermission. "I don't give a shit about who's dating who or fucking who or whatever. What I care about is that you win games," he says. "No distractions."

There's no point in arguing. Shane flexes his sore right hand before putting his gloves back on for the third period. He saw this with Scott Hunter: you get tolerance and understanding if you win. If you earn it.

One minute into the third period, Ilya scores again with a beautiful slapshot that looks easy as a dream and brings screams of excitement from the Boston fans all around them. After that, the game turns into a messy struggle, since many of the top-tier players, including Shane, are playing a little bruised-up and worse for wear.

With three minutes left on the clock, Barrett also gets a second goal. That makes Shane's purpose perfectly clear: he is not letting this game go into overtime and he is not letting Ilya score more fucking goals than him. He is going to stay on the ice for as long as he fucking needs to until he hears that goal horn and his song.

Kent, now sporting a fat, stitched lip, spares no slurs as he and Shane battle it out. What Kent doesn't realize is that Shane's heard it all before, many times. He also doesn't realize that one of Shane's best traits is what his dad calls his *orneriness*: the tougher the game gets, the harder Shane fights.

Shane scores his goal with twenty seconds to spare, putting Boston ahead 4-3 and winning the game.

One of the trainers shoves a Gatorade into Shane's hand as soon as he walks into the locker room: that last shift of his was insanely long. His muscles are screaming, totally burned out, but he has no regrets. The guys are jubilant, even Marleau with what's going to be an impressive black eye. They pulled together, and fought together, and had each other's backs, and Ilya and Shane earned them victory against one of the best teams in the league. This is a game that people are going to remember for a while.

"Great goals," Ilya says, coming up to Shane. His curls are plastered to his head with sweat; his smile is soft.

"Same to you," Shane says, breathless, in return. Ilya's goals were glorious. The game they played together was glorious.

Behind Ilya, a bunch of the guys are congratulating both him and Shane, but Ilya's attention is on Shane alone. He touches Shane's cheek lightly, tenderly—maybe just in affection, maybe brushing away an eyelash or some piece of dirt.

And a weird shiver runs through Shane. He blinks; did he forget what he was just doing?

“Did you feel that?” Ilya asks him. “Are they blowing fucking A/C in here? Weird breeze.”

“Who gives a shit, man?” Hammer says, slinging his arm around Ilya’s neck. “We’re going to Carmichael’s house and ordering a zillion pizzas, you guys coming? We’ll get some chicken too, for the protein, Cap,” he adds to Shane.

“Sure.” Ilya grins, with a little sweet delight under his usual cockiness. “It’s my first home game, I have to celebrate, yes? Shane, you're coming too? Or was there something we were supposed to do tonight?”

“I don’t think so. Yeah, I’ll come, definitely,” Shane says. That feeling of having forgotten something is dissipating. It can’t have been that important.

Shane scratches his thumb. He had a little itch there for a moment, but the skin is totally unblemished. Whatever. He’s too tired to care.

After chugging the rest of the Gatorade, Shane sheds his gross, sweaty clothes and goes to shower, taking with him a smile at the sight of his 80 jersey on the bench. It’s funny that Ilya ended up getting a number so close to Shane’s: 80 and 81. They’re next to each other numerically too, as well as being boyfriends.

How the fuck did Shane end up with the most perfect guy alive, a secret hockey prodigy who’s also incredibly hot and nice and has a cute dog and loves Shane completely? It’s too much luck for one person. Shane’s more than grateful.

And now they’re going to eat that good pasta, spinach, and chicken that Shane likes, and Ilya will be there too, and Shane punched the MLH’s worst asshole an hour ago, and they fucking won their game. What night could be better?

Shane turns on the blissfully hot shower spray and closes his eyes as the grime of the game washes away.

Chapter End Notes

DON'T get mad until you read the epilogue!

It was important to me in this fic to show the ambiguity and complexity that comes with coming out and being queer. Even people who are mostly accepting can sometimes say stuff that makes you go "yikes."

I also wanted to be clear that nobody owes anyone a coming-out. Coming out can be a beautiful thing, but it's equally valid if someone doesn't want to.

Chapter 46: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I think this is the craziest thing I've ever done," Shane says, touching his wedding ring, enjoying the smoothness of it on his hand. It's been unexpectedly satisfying to be able to wear it all the time since he's retired. When he was in his twenties, retirement sounded pretty much like death, but it's not that at all. Shane loves coaching the Centaurs, loves being back home in Canada. And, of course, loves going with the Centaurs on roadies to Boston and seeing his and Ilya's jerseys in the rafters of TD Garden side by side. 80 and 81.

Plus, he has new projects like this one to keep him busy.

"Really?" Ilya says, taking the stairs down from their bedroom more carefully than he used to before his knee got bad. He's as gorgeous as always. At 45, he has a little silver in his curls, and the gold studs he's taken to wearing in his ears suit him well. Thank God, that TBI he got in his twenties doesn't seem to have had any effects on his cognition, although he never lost the Russian accent that the accident re-awakened in him, and he's never remembered his childhood in Boston. Sometimes Ilya gets frustrated about that. But as far as Shane's concerned, Ilya is perfect.

Even when there's a gleam of michief in his eyes and he's ragebaiting Shane with questions like, "The craziest thing? What about that time when you were in P-town for that photoshoot and you drove all the way to Boston with a—"

"What about being such a big fan of some athlete that you constantly post yourself shirtless and talking about hockey, hoping that he'll see?" Shane retorts, grinning.

"Yes, but it worked," Ilya says, still delighted with himself after all this time. "I got you."

Obviously, they then have no choice but to kiss for a minute or two before heading out to the car. Shane's driving, as always. Today they're going east, to Montreal.

During the drive, Ilya scrolls through his phone, sharing updates from the endless group chats he's part of via the Centaurs and the Irina Foundation, of which he's co-director with Shane. Retirement is certainly not boring.

"Oh, JJ is coming!" Ilya exclaims. JJ Boiziau, the Metros' best defenseman until his retirement a couple of years ago, is one of the many players Shane would never have become friends with if not for the Irina Foundation's hockey camps. Shane invited Hayden Pike, the only other non-awful Metro, to join as well, but Pike didn't have time because of his kids.

"Babe, speaking of JJ, do we have his restaurant opening in our calendar?" Shane asks.

"Yes, my beloved, it's in our calendar. Ah! Sveta is coming too. And Marly, and Rose, and Barrett and Harris."

“Oh my god, how many people are going to be in this fucking bookstore?” Shane says. “I mean, Rose brings like a hundred fans wherever she goes.”

“They are lining up down the street,” Ilya says with glee. “There are already pictures on Instagram.”

“Well, I guess it’s better than if nobody came at all.”

Following Google’s instructions via Ilya, Shane navigates into an underground parking garage, and they take the elevator up to a huge bookstore that, yes, is buzzing with chatter and packed with people waiting for today’s book launch.

Ilya and Shane have certainly surprised the public once or twice in the past. Long ago, Ilya stunned the hockey world by getting called up to Boston and promptly becoming the second-highest scorer in the league, right behind Shane. Then there was that time they got outed as a couple by a fucking intern on the Raiders—but by then, their friendship was so famous that to many people it wasn’t that shocking to hear they were boyfriends.

Still, probably no-one who knows them expected that they’d write a fiction book together.

It’s going to be weird seeing their novel released out into the world. The tale it tells is one they’ve woven together through the years: a mix of in-the-moment roleplays and idle fantasies and a deep longing to have known each other longer than they have.

What if Ilya never got adopted to Boston when he was a kid? That’s the core question of the story they’ve written. What unfolds is a tale of love and hurt and competition, a great rivalry that could very well have happened if Ilya was drafted at the same time as Shane.

Shane already knows that journalists will ask him why on earth they’ve imagined a barely-disguised past for themselves that’s sadder than their actual experiences. Their own real love story, a little bit sanitized for public consumption, is already the basis for three biopics. It’s the ultimate Cinderella story: Ilya was plucked from obscurity and became a star, and the lonely living legend Shane Hollander found in him a true love and an equal on the ice.

Why did they write a novel where they hurt each other? Shane can’t really say, that’s the problem. All he knows is that the book means a lot to him and to Ilya. It started with playful improvisation—”what if I am a rival team captain sneaking into your hotel room!” and blossomed from there. Rose finds it hilarious that they’ve written what she calls RPF of their own lives, and yeah, this is probably the craziest thing Shane has ever done, but who has the right to create a fictionalized version of their own histories more than Ilya and Shane themselves?

Despite all the heartache in it, they love the story they chose to write. Shane hopes other people will like it too, and that they’ll understand why the Shane and Ilya—sorry, “Sean” and “Mikhail”—of the novel acted as they did.

No, Shane’s only regret is the novel’s title. *Yearning Nemeses* doesn’t really roll off the tongue. But, as Ilya says: eh, the movie adaptation will probably change it anyway.

Chapter End Notes

The end!!!! Thank you for reading.

This project has taken up a lot of my weekends for half a year (omg), so it would mean so much to me to get a comment from you! Which part made you laugh, or cry, or scream? What themes stood out to you? I just love hearing from readers ❤️

Or come say hi to me on threads as tocsincall or tumblr as lyricghost. Since I've requested no spoilers in public, I created this chat on Threads for any spoilery discussion you would like to have: https://threads.com/chat/j/AbaxzecDafZJrKRV/

And one final note: "nemeses" is the plural of "nemesis"!

End Notes

Please comment and kudos if you enjoyed! Thank you so much to all my amazing commenters! ❤️

If you want to recommend or share my fic with someone else, I am SO happy and grateful - but can I please ask that you don't spoil the twist? For me and I think many readers, the twist is a huge part of the fun so it would make me sad if a post started going around that gives it away before people can experience it for themselves. Thank you ❤️ For those who are new to AO3 - just FYI, people can see what you write in a public bookmark, so they can be spoiled that way.

Lastly, if you enjoyed this, check out my other Heated Rivalry fics on my profile!

Works inspired by this one

cover for influential men by gravollet

COVER: influential men by lyric_ghost by Superbtyrantcat

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!